

Trouble at Rindo's Station

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Chapter 1

THERE WAS A TIME when Bonito might have fired at the rider far below on the road, and for no other reason than to test his carbine, since the rider was a white man. He had done this many times before—sometimes for a shirt, or a fresh horse, usually for ammunition, though a reason was not necessary. But now there was something on the Mescalero's mind. He held his fire and urged his pony down the pinon slope. From high up he had recognized Ross Corsen—the lank figure slouched in the McClellan saddle, head down against the glare, hat low over his eyes. And now, as the Mescalero closed in, Corsen looked up, though he had seen him long before, when Bonito was still high up the slope.

„Sik-isn,“ Bonito said. The word was a hiss between his lips. Strands of hair hung from the shadow of a high-crowned hat, thick, glistening hair accentuating the yellowish cast of his skin and the pock scars that roughened heavy-boned features. A frayed, sweat-stained shirt covered his chest, but his legs were naked, for he wore only a breechclout, and the curled toes of his moccasins hung beneath the pony's belly, ridiculously close to the ground. A carbine was across his lap.

Ross Corsen smiled at the Apache's greeting and studied the broad, ugly face. „Now you call me brother,“ he said in Spanish. „You must want something.“ He had not seen the Mescalero in almost a year, not since the four-day chase down to the border, and a glimpse of Bonito far off, not running any longer because he was safely in Mexico. Bonito had killed two Coyotero policemen during a tulapai drunk. That had started it. On the run for the border, he killed two more men, plus four horses that didn't belong to him. Now he was back and Corsen studied him, wondering why. The Apache spoke a slow, guttural Spanish and said, as if in the middle of his thoughts, „We have suffered unfairly from your hand; all of us have“—he used the Apache word tinneh, which meant all of the people and in its meaning described the blood tie which bound them together—„and from the other man, the one who directs you. You think only of yourselves.“

„And when did you begin thinking of others?“ Corsen said.

„Those are my people at Pinaleno,“ Bonito answered him.

Corsen shrugged. „I won't argue with you. What you do now is no concern of mine. I can't do a thing to you or for you, but maybe suggest you go home and get drunk, which is what you'll probably do anyway.“

„And where is our home, Cor-sen?“

„You know as well as I do.“

„At San Carlos, where there is little to eat?“

Corsen nodded to the Maynard carbine across the Apache's lap.

„Maybe in Mexico. You can't have one of those at San Carlos.“

„Yes, in Sonora and Chihuahua where it is a business of profit to take the hair of the Apache, the government paying for our scalps.“

Corsen shook his head. „Look, I no longer am in charge of the Pinaleno Reservation. The government man has discharged me.“ He thought for words

that would explain it clearly to the Apache. „He is the one, Mr. Sellers, who has taken your guns and decided that you live on government beef.“

„Some of the government beef,“ Bonito corrected. „He sells most of it to others for his own profit.“

„That is not true of all reservations. You know I treated your people fairly.“

„But you are no longer there and soon it will be true of all reservations.“

The words were familiar to Corsen. No, not so much the words as the idea: he had argued this very thing with Sellers three days before, straining his patience to explain to the Bureau of Indian Affairs supervisor exactly what an Apache is. What kind of thinking animal he is. How much abuse he will take before all the peace talks in the world will not stop him. And he had lost the argument because, even if reason was not on Sellers's side, authority was. He threw it in Sellers's face, accusing him of selling government rations for his own profit, and Sellers laughed, daring him to prove it—then fired him. He would have quit. You can't go on working for a man like that. He decided that he didn't care anyway.

For that matter it was strange that he should. Ross Corsen knew Apaches because he had fought them. He had been in charge of the Coyotero trackers at Fort Thomas for four years. And after that, for three years—until the day before yesterday—he had been in charge of the Mescalero Subagency at Pinaleno, thirty miles south of Thomas.

He didn't care. The hell with it. That's what he told himself. Still he kept wondering what had brought Bonito back. He thought: Leave him alone. If he came back to help his people, let him work it out his own Apache way. You tried. But instead he asked carefully, „Why would a warrior of Bonito's stature return now to a reservation? They haven't forgotten what you did. If you're caught, they'll hang you.“

„Then I would die—which the people are doing now on the reservation, under Bil-Clin who calls himself their chief.“ Bonito's eyes half closed and he went on. „Let me tell you a story, Cor-sen, which happened long ago. There was a young man of the Mescalero, who was a great hunter and slayer of his enemies. From raids to Mexico he would return to his rancheria with countless ponies and often with women who would then do his bidding. And many of these he gave to his chief out of honor.

„One day he returned from war gravely wounded and his hands empty, but he noticed that still this chief, who was the son of a chief and he the son of one before him, received more spoils than anyone, yet without endangering himself by being present on the raid. Now this grieved the warrior. He would not offend his chief, but he was beginning to think this unjust.

„On a day after his wound had healed, he was walking in a deep canyon with this in his thoughts and as it grew unbearable he cried out to U-sen why should this be, and immediately a spirit appeared before him. Now, this spirit questioned the warrior, asking him how a man became chief, and the warrior answered that it was blood handed from father to son. And the spirit asked him where in the natural order was this found? Did one lobo wolf lead the pack because of his blood? The warrior thought deeply of this and gradually he realized that chieftainship of blood was not just. It was the place of the bravest warrior to lead—not for his own sake, but for the good of all.

„You know what he did, Cor-sen?“ Bonito paused then. „He returned to the rancheria and challenged his chief and fought him to the death with his knife.

Two others opposed him, and he killed these also. With this the people realized that it was as it should be and the warrior was acclaimed chief of Mescaleros.

„That was the first time, Cor-sen, but it has happened many times since. When one is no longer deserving to be chief, then another opposes him. Sometimes the opposed chief steps aside; often it is settled with a knife.“

Corsen was silent. Then he said, „At Pinaleno Bil-Clin is still a strong chief. And he is wise enough not to lead his people in a war he cannot win.“

Bonito's heavy face creased into a grim smile. „Is he strong... and wise?“ Then he said, his tone changing, „Do you go away from here?“

„Perhaps.“ Corsen looked at the Apache curiously.

„It would be wise,“ Bonito said, „if you went far from here.“ He turned his pony then and loped off.

ROSS CORSEN followed the road to Rindo's and the Mescalero's parting words hung in his mind like a threat, and for a while the words made him angry. The running of their tribe was no concern of his. Not now.

But it implied more than just Bonito opposing Bil-Clin. There was something else. Bonito was a renegade. He was vicious even in the eyes of his own people. Not the type to be followed as a leader unless the people were desperate. Unless he came just at the right time. And it occurred to Corsen: like now, with a man they don't know taking over the agency... and with unrest on every reservation in Arizona, I'd like to stay, just to handle Bonito... But again, the hell with it. Working under Sellers wasn't worth it.

He planned to go up to Whipple Barracks and talk to someone about a guide contract. He would leave his horse at Rindo's and catch the stage there, and while he was waiting he'd have a while to be with Katie.

Chapter 2

THE HATCH & HODGES' Central Mail section had headquarters at Fort McDowell. From there, one route angled northwest to Prescott. The Central Mail swung in an arc southeast. From McDowell the route skirted the Superstitions to Apache Junction, then continued on, changing teams at Florence, White Tanks, Gila Ford, and Rindo's. Thomas was the last stop, the southern terminal.

Rindo's Station had been constructed with the Apaches in mind. An oblong, thick-walled adobe building had an open stable shed at one end. The corral, holding the spare stage teams, connected behind the stable. And circling the station, out fifty-odd yards, was an adobe wall. It was thick, chest high. At the east end of the yard a stand of aspen had been hacked down and only the trunks remained. Beyond the wall the country was flat on three sides—alkali dust and heat waves shimmering over stubbles of desert growth—but to the east the ground rose gradually, barren, pale yellow climbing into deep green where pinon sprouted from the hillside.

Corsen had skirted the base of the hill and now he was in sight of Rindo's. He nudged his mount to a trot.

Someone was in the doorway. Another figure came from the dark line of the shed and moved to the gate which was in the north side of the wall. He could

make out the man in the doorway now—Billy Teachout, the station agent. And as the gate swung open there was the Mexican, Delgado, in white peon clothes.

„Hiiiiii, man!“

„Senor Delgado, keeper of the horses!“

Corsen reached down and slapped the old Mexican’s thin shoulder, then dismounted.

„God of my life, it has been months!“

„Three or four weeks.“

„It seems months.“

Corsen grinned at the old man, at the tired eyes that were now stretched open showing thin lines of veins, smiling at the sight of a friend.

Billy Teachout moved a few steps into the yard, thumbs hooked behind his suspender straps. „Ross, get in here out of the sun!“

„Let the keeper of the horses take yours,“ Delgado said, still smiling.

„We will talk together after.“

Corsen followed the station agent’s broad back into the house and opened his eyes wide to the interior dimness. It was dark after the sun glare. He pushed his hat brim from his eyes and stood looking at the familiar whitewashed walls, the oblong pine table, and Douglas chairs at one end of the room, the squat stove in the middle, and the repainted pine bar at the other end. Billy Teachout edged his large frame sideways, with an effort, through the narrow bar opening.

„You wouldn’t have beer,“ Corsen said.

„It’s about six months to Christmas,“ Billy answered, and leaned his forearms onto the bar. He was in no hurry. Time meant little, and it showed in his loose, heavy build, in his round, clean-shaven face that he most always kept out of the sun’s reach unless it was stage time. He had worked in the Prescott office until Al Rindo’s death two years before, then had been transferred here. Al Rindo had died of a heart attack, but Billy Teachout said it was sunstroke and he’d be damned if he’d let it happen to him. He had Katie to think of, his sister’s girl who had come to live with him after her folks passed on.

It wasn’t a bad life. Five stages a week for him and Katie; Delgado and his wife to take care of. Change horses; keep them curried; feed the passengers. Nothing to it—as long as the Apaches minded.

„You can have yellow mescal or bar whiskey,“ Billy said.

„One’s as bad as the other.“ Corsen put his elbows on the bar.

„Whiskey.“

„Kill any bugs you got.“

Corsen took a drink and then rolled a cigarette. „Where’s Katie?“

„Prettyin’. She saw you two miles away. After Delgado all week, you don’t look so bad.“

CORSEN GRINNED, relaxing the hard line of his jaw. A young face, leathery and immobile until a smile would soften the eyes that were used to sun glare, and ease the set face that talked eye to eye with the Apache and showed nothing. Corsen knew his business. He knew the Apache—his language, often even his thoughts—and the Apache respected him for it. Corsen, the Indian agent. He could make natural-born raiders at least half satisfied with a barren government land tract. The Corsens were few and far between, even in Arizona.

„Billy, I just saw Bonito.“

„God—he’s returned to the reservation?“

„I don’t know—or much care. I’m leaving.“

„What?“

„Sellers fired me day before yesterday. He’s got somebody else for the job.“

„Got somebody else! Those are Mescaleros!“

„I’m through arguing with him. Sellers is reservation supervisor. He can run things how he likes and hire who he likes. I should have quit long ago.“

„Who’s taking your place?“

„A man named Verbiest.“

„Somebody looking for some extra change.“

„He might be all right.“

Billy Teachout shook his head wearily. To him it was another example of cheap politics, knowing the right people. Agency posts were being handed out to men who cared nothing for the Indians. There was profit to be made by short-rationing their charges and selling the government beef and grain to homesteaders, or back to the Army. Even that had been done.

„Sellers has been trying to get rid of you for a long time. Finally he made it,“ Billy Teachout said. He shook his head again. „Your Mescaleros aren’t going to take kindly to this.“

„Verbiest might know what he’s doing,“ Corsen said. Then, „But if he doesn’t, you better keep your windows shut till he hangs a few of them and they calm down again.“

„Where you going? I might just close up and go with you.“

„What about the stage line?“

„The hell with it. I’m getting too old for this kind of thing.“

Corsen smiled. „I’m going up to Whipple to see about a guide contract.“

„So if you can’t nurse them, you fight them.“

„Either one’s a living.“

„Ross—“

He turned to see Katie standing in the doorway that led to the kitchen. His gaze rested on her face—tanned, freckled, clear-eyed, a face that smiled often, but now held on his earnestly.

„Ross, I heard what you were telling Billy.“

„I can’t work for that man anymore.“

„Can’t you find something else around here?“

„There isn’t anything.“

„Fort Thomas. Why can’t you guide out of there?“

Corsen shrugged. „There’s a chance, but I’d still have to go through the department commander’s office at Whipple.“

„Ross...“ Her voice was a whisper.

It showed on her face that was not eager now and seemed even pale beneath the sun coloring. The face of a girl, sensitive nose and mouth, but in her clear, blue, serious eyes the awareness of a woman.

Katie was nineteen. She had known Ross Corsen for almost three years, meeting him the day after she had arrived to live with her uncle.

And she expected to marry him, even though he never mentioned it.

She knew how he felt. Ross didn’t have to say a word. It was in the way he looked at her, in the way he had kissed her for the first time only a few weeks ago—a small, soft, lingering, inexperienced kiss. She loved Corsen; very simply

she loved him, because he was a man, respected as a man, and because he was a boy at the same time. Perhaps just as she was girl and woman in one.

„Are you coming back?“

„Of course I am.“

„What if you're stationed somewhere far away?“

„I'll come and get you,“ he answered.

Billy Teachout looked at them, from one to the other. „Maybe I've been inside too much.“ To the girl he said, „Has he behaved himself?“

„Billy,“ Corsen said, „I was going to ask you. This is all of a sudden—“

Then, to Katie, „I'm taking the stage.“ He smiled faintly. „If I leave my horse here, I've got to come back.“

„THE STAGE!“ Delgado was in the doorway momentarily. The screen door banged and he was gone.

It came in from the east, a thin sand trail, a shadow leading the dust that rose furiously into a billowing tail.

Delgado was swinging out with the grayed wooden gate. Then the stage, rumbling in an arc toward the opening, and the hoarse-throated voice of Ernie Ball, the driver.

„Delgadooo!“

The little Mexican was in front of the lead horses now, reaching for reins close to the bit rings.

„Delgado, you half-a-man! Hold 'em, chico!“

Ernie Ball was off the box, grinning, wiping the back of a gnarled hand over his mouth, smoothing the waxed tips of his full mustache.

His palm slapped the thin wood of the coach door, then swung it open to bang on its hinges.

„Rindo's Station!“

Billy Teachout came out carrying a paintbrush and a bucket half full of axle grease. Ross and Katie were already outside.

„You're late,“ Billy told the driver.

Ernie Ball pulled a dull gold watch from his vest pocket. „Seven minutes! That's the earliest I've been late.“ He replaced the watch and dipped a thumb and forefinger daintily into the grease bucket, then twirled the tips of his mustache between the fingers.

„Ross, how are you? Katie, honey.“ He touched his hat brim to the girl.

Ross Corsen was looking past the stage driver to the man coming out of the coach—the familiar black broadcloth suit and flat-crowned hat. The man reached the ground and there it was, the bland expression, the carefully trimmed mustache. He carried a leather business case tightly and carefully under his arm. W. F. Sellers. Field supervisor. Southwest Area. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

„Fifteen minutes,“ Ernie Ball was saying, „for those going on. Time enough for a drink if the innkeeper's feelin' right. Hey, Billy!“ His voice changed as he turned to Sellers. „End of the line for you and your friend.“

Another man was out of the coach. He stepped down uncertainly and moved next to Sellers. Two others came down, squinting at the glare—thin-lipped, sun-darkened men in range clothes. They stretched and looked about idly, then moved beyond the back of the stage, walking the stiffness from their legs.

Sellers had not taken his eyes from Corsen.

„I thought you might have had the politeness of staying to meet your successor.“

Corsen looked at the other man now. „Mr. Verbiest,“ he said, „I hope you know what you’re doing.“

„I’ve instructed Mr. Verbiest on how the agency should be run,“ Sellers said.

„Then you both ought to make a nice profit,“ Billy Teachout said mildly.

Sellers stared at him narrowly. „All we want from you is a couple of horses.“

„What for?“

„None of your damn business.“

Verbiest said, smiling, „We’re riding north to the San Carlos Agency. I’d like to take a look at how a smooth-running reservation operates.“

„Sellers’ll learn you without riding way up there,“ Ernie Ball said.

„All you need is some spare weights to heavy your scale for when you’re passing out the Paches their beef.“ Ernie laughed and looked at Teachout.

„Hey, Billy?“

„You’re insinuating something that could get you into a great deal of trouble in court,“ Sellers told the stage driver.

„Insinuatın!“

Sellers turned on Billy Teachout. „I said two horses. Good ones!“

„I’m not the stable hand. Wait for Delgado or get them yourself.“

Sellers’s face showed no reaction. But he said quietly, „Mr. Teachout, you’re through here—as of the next time I get to Prescott.“

The station agent shrugged. „While I’m waiting, I’ll go inside and pour drinks for those that wants.“

Corsen relaxed, exhaling slowly, and watched them all go inside. It was a relief not to have to put up with Sellers anymore. Just seeing him had made his stomach tighten. He glanced at Katie.

„This is a poor way to say good-bye.“

„For how long, Ross?“

„Maybe a few months.“

The screen door slammed. Corsen remembered the two men in range clothes then. They must have just gone in. Then he was looking at Katie, at the expression changing on her face, eyes alive, looking at something behind him. He turned sharply.

Standing a few feet away was one of the men in range clothes. He stood with his legs spread, as if bracing himself, a short man in faded Levi’s, holding a pistol dead on Corsen’s stomach.

Chapter 3

„RAISE YOUR HANDS up.“ He motioned with the pistol. „You too, honey.“ He came forward slowly. „I’m not armed,“ Corsen said.

„Take your coat off and drop it.“

Corsen took off the worn buckskin and let it fall. He backed up as the man motioned with the pistol, then watched him trample on the coat to make certain there was no gun in it.

„Inside now,“ the man said.

His partner stood one legged, his left boot on a chair, leaning slightly, elbow on knee, hand holding the pistol idly.

Billy Teachout was behind the bar. Ernie Ball, Sellers, and Verbiest stood in front of it, all with their arms raised. Three pistols were on the floor, along with the business case Sellers had been carrying. Ygenia, Delgado's wife, stood in the kitchen doorway, unable to move. The one on the chair waved Ross and Katie toward the others. They moved across the room and stood by the front window. „Buz,“ he said then, „round up that Mexican. He's outside somewhere.“

Ernie Ball was squinting at the gunman. „Your face is starting to ring a bell, but your name don't register.“

„How would you know my name?“

„You entered Ed Fisher in the book when you paid your fare at Thomas.“

The gunman shrugged. „That'll do... What're you carrying this trip?“

„Mail.“

„That all?“

„Swear to God. It's on the rack if you want to look.“

The one called Buz came in through the kitchen, pushing past the Mexican woman.

„He ain't in sight. Not anywhere.“

Corsen glanced out at the yard. Just the stage was there. The horses had been taken away, but the change team had not yet been harnessed.

„That's all right,“ Fisher said. „Hand me your gun and go through their pockets. We got to move.“

He watched Buz search them, stuffing bills and coins into his pockets as he went along. „About how much?“ he asked when he had finished.

„Not more than a hundred and fifty.“

„What about that satchel there?“ He pointed to the business case on the floor.

INSTANTLY SELLERS said, „Those are government papers!“ More calmly he said, „Bureau statistics.“

Ed Fisher said, „Buz, open it up.“

The gunman lifted the case and looked at Fisher with surprise. „If there's writin' in here, it's cut on stone.“ He carried it to the table and unfastened the straps and opened it. He brought out something folded in newspaper and unwrapped it carefully. A leather pouch. He pulled the thongs quickly, eagerly, and dumped the pouch upside-down on the table. The coins came out in a shower.

„Ed! Mint silver!“

Fisher was grinning at Sellers. „How much, Buz?“

„Four, five, six pouches... about two thousand!“

Corsen was looking out of the window. There was something, a movement high up on the slope. Then, hearing Buz, he glanced quickly at Sellers. That was it, plain enough. Sellers didn't make that kind of money with a Bureau job. It could only come from selling Indian rations. But now, as the others watched Buz at the table, Corsen's eyes narrowed, looking out into the glare again, and now he could make out the movement. Far out, coming down from the slope, reaching the flat stretch now, were tiny specks, dots against the sand glare that he knew were riders. They were coming from where he had seen Bonito that morning, and suddenly, abruptly, Corsen realized who the riders were.

Ed Fisher was saying, „Get two horses and run off the others. One’s saddled already.“ He looked at the men in front of him. „Whose mount is that in the shed, the chestnut?“

Corsen looked from the window as the screen door slammed behind Buz going out. „The chestnut’s mine,“ he said.

„Thanks for the use.“

„You’re not going anywhere.“

Fisher looked at him quickly, then smiled, his eyes going to Katie. „If you want to play Mister Brave for your girl, wait for when I got more time.“

„It’s not me that’s stopping you,“ Corsen said, „but I’ll tell you again—you’re not going anywhere.“

„You can talk plainer than that.“

„All right. Call to your partner.“

„What’ll that prove?“

„Just see if he’s still there.“

Fisher, yelled, „Hey—Buz!“

There was a silence, then boot scuffing and Buz was at the door.

„What?“

Fisher looked at Corsen, then back to Buz. „Nothing. Hurry up.“

Buz looked at him queerly and moved off again.

„Now what?“ Fisher said. „It’ll come,“ Corsen said. „He hasn’t seen them yet.“

„Seen who?“

And there it was, as if answering his question—the sound of running, boots on packed sand. Buz’s voice yelling, hoarse with panic.

Then he was at the door, stumbling against it. „Paches!“

„STAY WHERE YOU ARE!“ Fisher held his pistol on the men at the bar and backed toward the door. He glanced out. „How many?“

„Six of them! Let me in!“

„Keep watching!“

Through the window Corsen could now see the cluster of riders plainly, walking their ponies. They were in no hurry—not six, but five, coming across the flat stretch.

„They’re peaceful.“ It was Sellers who said this. „There hasn’t been a war party around here in over a year.“

Corsen looked at him. „They’re twenty miles off the reservation.“

„They’ve been known to wander, but when they do, they have to be taught a lesson. That was your trouble, Corsen—too easy on them. Verbiest, you come along with me and see how it’s done.“

Corsen said quietly, „Bonito doesn’t learn very fast.“

„Bonito?“ Sellers showed surprise. „He’s down in the Madres.“

„He wasn’t this morning when I talked to him.“

„And you’re just now telling me?“

„I was fired.“

Fisher glanced out the door again, then back, his eyes stopping on Sellers. „Have you got something to do with them?“

Sellers did not answer, but Teachout said, „He’s with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.“

„Then this is your party, mister,“ Fisher said, looking at Sellers.

„I’m not obligated to confront known hostiles. That’s common sense.“

Fisher moved out of the doorway. „You don't have a choice. Get out there and find out what they want.“ He waved the long-barreled pistol.

„Come on, all of you except the women. They stay here.“

In the yard Corsen glanced back once at the two outlaws in the doorway. Then they had reached the adobe wall and his gaze swung back to the five Mescaleros who had reined in a hundred paces beyond the wall.

Bonito was a pony's length ahead of the others. He did not resemble the man Corsen had talked to earlier. The flop-brimmed hat was gone and now his coarse face was paint-streaked—a line of ochre from ear to ear crossing the bridge of his nose, another over his chin. His headband was yellow, bright against long hair glistening with oil. Only one thing about him was the same—the Maynard across his lap.

Behind him were Bil-Clin, chief at the Pinaleno Agency, Bil-Clin's son, Sunshine, and two other Indians. All four were armed with oldmodel carbines.

Corsen's eyes remained on the Mescaleros, but he said to Sellers, „Let's see you go out and teach them a lesson.“

Sellers did not reply at first. He kept his eyes on the five Apaches, waiting, expecting them to make a move. Then he said, „All right. Ask him what he wants.“

Corsen hesitated. He wanted to make it hard for Sellers, not offer any assistance, but there was Katie and the others to think of. He boosted himself over the wall, then motioned to the Apaches to come on.

They moved forward, Bonito still in the lead, and when they were less than ten feet from the wall Bonito raised his arm and they stopped there. „Cor-sen, we speak to each other again.“

„But this time not by accident.“

„You told me before that you were not with this one now.“ Bonito's eyes shifted to Sellers.

„These are not ordinary circumstances,“ Corsen answered. „Tell me why you are here and I'll relate it to him.“

Bonito waited, then nodded toward Sellers. „There is the reason.“

„What would you have me tell him?“

„Tell him that he will come with us, until pesh-e-gar—many of them—are brought here tomorrow.“

„Rifles!“

„Enough for as many of us that could stand in line from here to the house there. And many bullets for the pesh-e-gar. This one“—he nodded again to Sellers—„will remain with us until they are brought and the ones who bring them depart again. Then he will be released and my people will go with me from Pinaleno across the Bravos and there we will fight the N'akai-yes.“

Corsen turned to the others. „He says he needs guns to make war on the Mexicans.“ Then to Bonito. „You would, of course, not use the guns on this side of the Bravos.“

Bonito nodded solemnly.

„The guns would have to be acquired at Fort Thomas. How do you know the Army would let you have them? Perhaps this man isn't worth a hundred rifles.“

Bonito's face barely moved as he spoke. „Killing this one would be a reward in itself.“

Corsen paused. „What if he refuses to go with you?“

„At Pinaleno you would find only the women and the children.“ He turned his head, indicating the dense pines of the higher slope. „The warriors are here, Cor-sen. You are six. Then two men in the house and two women. If he does not come with us, then we will come into your house there—“

Corsen concealed his surprise. „You observe our number well.“

Bonito said, „I have been here longer than a full day, waiting for this time. And you see I did not count the Mexican man. He has agreed to remain with us until this one comes to take his place.“

Corsen glanced at Billy Teachout. „He says they’ve got Delgado.“

„Oh-my-God—“

Sellers moved closer to Corsen.

„What else does he want?“

„He wants you.“

„Me!“

„We get you back in exchange for about a hundred rifles,“ Corsen added. „I don’t know what makes him think you’re worth that many.“

„Tell him,“ Sellers said evenly, „that if he doesn’t get back to Pinaleno by sundown he’ll be shot. Along with Bil-Clin and his boy.“

„Pinaleno has moved here,“ Corsen answered. „The braves are up in the pines. If you don’t go with them they’ll swarm down all over us.“

„They wouldn’t get across the wall,“ Sellers sneered. „There aren’t a dozen rifles among the pack of them.“

„You forgot, we don’t have any.“

Sellers was silent. Then, „All right. When the stage doesn’t arrive at Gila Ford this evening they’ll know something’s wrong and send help.“

Corsen said, „There are three men at the Gila Ford Station.“

„Then they’ll get more help!“ Sellers said angrily.

„In what—three or four days?“

„What’s the matter?“ Sellers taunted. „You scared?“

Corsen ignored the remark. „What about Delgado?“

Sellers shrugged. „One thing at a time. Tell him we’ll go back and think it over, and let him know.“

Corsen told him, and as they were turning to go he looked at Bil-Clin. „Now the chief of the Mescaleros follows the words of a bandit.“

Bil-Clin shifted his eyes and did not reply.

Chapter 4

KATIE CAME OUT from the kitchen, edging by Buz, who was in the doorway, and went to Corsen. She had served them food and had now finished washing the dishes. Corsen was at the front window, looking off to the east, watching for a movement to change the monotony of the plain. She stood close to him and he asked in a low voice, „How’s Ygenia?“

„She’s praying.“

He wanted to say something consoling that she could take to Ygenia, but there was nothing. The Apaches had Delgado. They would keep him until Sellers turned himself over to them. And that was not likely to happen.

KATIE'S FACE was close to his. Serious, searching eyes repeating the question he could not answer. She had been in the kitchen most of the time and she did not know all that had happened since the men had returned. Fisher was in the doorway, a silhouette against the faint outside dusk. Buz was by the kitchen door, holding his gun on the others at the bar end of the room, keeping an eye on Billy Teachout, who was in the kitchen watching the corral and yard. „Ross, why doesn't he force Sellers to go to the Indians?“

„Fisher would have to shoot him first,“ Ross said quietly. „This business about the rifles is the long chance. Bonito would like to have them, but I think he'd just as soon have Sellers—for one long day. Sellers knows it. You can't force him to go. No matter what he's stolen, he's a white man. Handing him to Bonito wouldn't be right.“

„How long will he wait, Ross?“

„Bonito? He'll send us a message tonight, most likely. And if we don't act on it he'll come at sunup.“

„The outlaw would have to give you guns then,“ Katie said.

Corsen nodded. „He's holding off as long as he can, waiting for a miracle. I feel kind of sorry for him. He can't fight off Bonito with just one man, but if he gives us guns he's through. He loses either way.“

They were silent then, standing close to each other.

Corsen's gaze would come in from the dim plain and go about the room.

Fisher, in the doorway, glanced now and then at Sellers. You have to give him credit, Corsen thought. Sitting on the edge of his nerves until the last possible minute.

Buz looks hard, but he leans on Fisher. He could never do this alone. They thought they had something good, and it turns out to be the worst jackpot they could fall into. Let them stew in it.

Billy and Ernie are men who know patience because they do more than just live here: they're part of the country. They'll sit through something like this and not show it.

Verbiest is afraid to open his mouth. His voice would give him away.

He's so scared, he can taste it.

And Sellers. He'll never believe he's through—and maybe he isn't.

He's got his life at stake, plus a government post and two thousand dollars in government silver. The money must have come from selling agency stores. He'll scheme, confident that he'll think of something to pull him out of this.

Bonito has nothing to lose. With a hundred warriors, and nothing to lose, he will probably win.

Strips of gray light crossed the room from the doorway and the windows. Outside, the moonlight showed the station yard in dim, unmoving stillness, bounded by the adobe wall, a pale line against the darkness beyond. Corsen looked out of the window again, then moved toward Fisher. He saw the dull gleam of a pistol barrel bear on him and he said, „Ed. A word with you.“

„Come ahead,“ Fisher said quietly.

„It'll be dark in a few minutes,“ Corsen said. „You'd better give us our guns.“

„I'll take my chances for a while.“

„You won't be able to watch us in the dark—and you're not going to use a lamp with Bonito outside.“

Fisher was silent. Then, „I'm trying to think it out,“ he said wearily.

„You don't have a choice,“ Corsen told him. „Those are Mescaleros. You're old enough to know how they behave when they're up.“

„No, I don't. Not the way I know what would happen if you people had guns. Buz and I would turn our backs once—“

„All right,“ Corsen said. „Then give back all the money you took.“

„Tell them I was just kiddin', eh?“

„I'm thinking about two women being here,“ Corsen said, „and a hundred Mescaleros out there. Make up your mind one way or the other—but do it before it's too late.“

THE SOUND CAME to them gradually. It came faintly, growing out of the darkness, at first a muffled sound, now the unmistakable clop of a horse moving at a slow walk. A chair scraped in the room. Fisher's voice rasped, „Quiet!“

In the stillness Fisher cocked his head, listening, then whispered close to Corsen's cheek, „It's stopped.“

Corsen waited. „At the gate,“ he said.

„It's a trick.“ Fisher was talking to himself. „A damn Apache trick.“

„Maybe it is.“ Corsen paused. „And maybe it isn't, Ed,“ he said quietly. „If I was to go out there, would you hold your gun that way?“

„You're crazy.“

„Let's find out.“ Corsen pushed through the screen door without a sound and was moving across the yard. He walked unhurriedly, because if Bonito was behind the wall, running would not make a difference; the yard was open, and gray with moonlight. He reached the gate and stood with his hand on the heavy latch. Fisher watched him tensely. He felt someone close to him and glanced to see the girl. Billy Teachout was behind her. They looked at Fisher, then out toward the gate, and they did not speak.

In the darkness someone said, „What is it?“ excitedly.

At a window Ernie Ball's voice hissed. „Shhhhh!“

They watched Corsen lift the iron latch. Then the shadowy figure pushed against the gate and the squeak of the hinges was a mournful screech with no other sounds in the night. Corsen went through the opening, and for the moment he was out of sight Katie held her breath.

Then the gate swung wide and he was there again, leading the larger, darker shadow of a horse. A rider was atop the horse, head down, swaying gently with the movement of the horse's shoulders and flanks.

Corsen closed the gate and came on, holding the horse close under the muzzle by a hackamore.

„Who is it?“ from inside the doorway.

Fisher was in the yard now. He looked at Corsen, then toward the rider, questioningly.

Corsen went to the rider, raised his arms, and said gently, „Come, viejo.“ The small figure toppled hesitantly, stiffly, into Corsen's arms.

He heard someone behind him say, „Delgado—“

They carried him inside to a bedroom and eased him down onto the bed. And when the lamp was lighted next to the bed, no one recognized Delgado.

„Mary, Virgin and Mother,“ Ygenia said, close to Delgado's cheek, kneeling on the floor and stroking her hand gently over his head.

When Katie came in with a basin of water, she mopped his face, washing the blood away. She moved the cloth over his eyes very gently and when she took it away she gasped and uttered the name of the Mother of God again.

Delgado's face was knife scarred, small marks crisscrossing his cheeks. His nose was broken, that was evident, and his right eye was no longer in the socket.

His head came off the blanket, then fell back as the thin lines of his face tightened. He said, almost inaudibly, „Ross.“

„I'm here,“ Corsen said close to his cheek. „Don't talk now. Say it in the morning.“

Delgado breathed. „Bonito did this to me. There were others who beat at me and stuck me with their knives, but it was Bonito who did this.“ His hand waved close to his face.

„As I gathered the fresh team, one of them broke away and I went after it afoot because this one was a friend and would come if I approached with gentleness. But this time he went a greater distance.

„When he was near the pinon he stopped and let me approach, and at that moment the barbarians came from out of the pines. Almost as if this friend had lured me to them—“

CORSEN SAID GENTLY, „Tell this in the morning.“

Delgado turned his head, opening his left eye. „If you are here to listen.“ He waved his hand again. „Bonito did this to me. He impressed upon me that when he comes he will take the remainder of my sight. I would not like that to happen. He said that you had failed him. Now he will enter this house with the coming of the sun...“

Silence then. Corsen rose as Ygenia began to stroke Delgado's head.

Fisher appeared in the doorway.

„Your guns are on the table,“ he said quietly.

Chapter 5

CORSEN PUSHED HIS gun belt lower on his hips and picked up the Winchester leaning against the support post. He heard the screen door close softly and peered into the darkness around the coach which they had pushed into the stable shed. A figure was moving along the front of the house toward him. It was Fisher. „There better be two of us out here. The east side of the house is a blind spot. And when the shootin' starts,“ he added, „I don't hanker to be in the same room with that thievin' government man. He could swing his barrel two feet and let go, easy as not.“ He looked at Corsen's carbine and holstered pistol. „You had them out here?“

„With the saddle,“ Corsen said.

„Where's your horse? It was here.“

„I took it around to the corral. I'd rather have it run off than hit.“

They rolled straw bales from the back wall of the shed to the front and piled them three high for some protection. There were no doors on the stable shed. It was built out from the station house four wagons wide. Ernie's coach was in the

first stall nearest the house. Corsen went to the small window at the far end of the shed and Fisher stopped near him, looking out into the night.

„Might they come before dawn?“

„I’ve never heard of it,“ Corsen answered. „But don’t put that down in your book as a rule. Bonito might have told Delgado dawn to put us off guard.“

„That was something, what he did to him.“

Corsen said quietly, „Delgado was lucky. Bonito’s showing off. He wants us to think he’s got full control of the situation. Even to letting a prisoner go, knowing he’ll get him back again.“

„He could convince me.“

„I’m not so sure he has.“ Corsen paused. „If I could talk to Bil-Clin—I don’t see how he could help but resent this renegade’s coming up and taking over. If we could get Bil-Clin alone...“

Fisher said nothing.

Sometimes when you wait, the time goes slow, Corsen thought, but now it is going fast, so fast it isn’t time anymore, but something else. That was a month ago that I told Katie I would come and get her. And Billy was surprised because he hadn’t known what was going on. It seems like a month, but it was yesterday afternoon. Now he pictured himself with Katie at night, her face in soft shadows. She was in the room with Ygenia and Delgado, and a pistol. The door was bolted. If they broke through the door, then she would fire the pistol until it was empty. Then, in a timeless time she would pray. Pray that it would not take long for Ygenia and for herself. She would not use the gun on herself to make it quick.

Even if he had asked her to, she would not. She doesn’t even show this.

There may be a little of it in her eyes, but it isn’t in her voice. You’re lucky, Ross. But how can you be lucky and unlucky at the same time?

But now more time had passed and there was an orange streak in the east and the sky was no longer full dark, and suddenly shadows were coming over the wall. Shadows that were the shapes of men, but without sound and without the gleam of weapons. They dropped and clung close to the wall. Now some were coming forward!

„Oh, my God!“ Fisher had seen them.

From the house, „They’re coming!“ and the hurried report of a rifle. A pause, now a staccato of rifle fire and suddenly the station yard erupted into wild sound—whining gun reports and the full-throated scream of the Mescalero war cry and the whinnying of horses.

Down the carbine barrel Corsen squinted at three warriors coming zigzagging toward the shed. Then the outside two were out of vision and he fired. The Mescalero fell in his tracks. As he levered, the other two tuned abruptly and were back to the wall as he aimed again. One of them was on the wall, and he brought the barrel up an inch and squeezed the trigger, and the warrior dropped to the other side. The third one was over, out of sight. And as suddenly as the firing had started, it stopped.

Corsen glanced both ways, surprised. Two, three, four of them were down and the rest had retreated. They’re feeling us out, he thought.

Seeing how many guns we have.

Fisher exhaled a long sigh. „We drove them off.“

„The first time,“ Corsen said. „Now Bonito knows what we have and he’ll scratch his head till something comes out of it.“

Fisher looked up suddenly. „There!“

It was the Apache Corsen had hit first, now crawling toward the wall, dragging his left leg. Fisher raised his pistol.

„Hold it!“ Corsen squinted hard at the Apache. „That’s Bil-Clin’s boy!“

Corsen waited until Sunshine reached the wall. Then, as the Apache raised himself slowly, painfully, with his weight on his right leg, Corsen raised the carbine and fired.

The bullet sang, ricocheting off the wall, and white dust spattered above the boy’s head as he sank down.

Corsen levered a shell into the breech, his eyes on Sunshine. Watch him. Watch him like a hawk. He’s got a broken leg, but he can be over that wall in one jump. The next moment Sunshine was pushing up with his arms and his one good leg. But it was a feint, for he lunged suddenly to the side.

Corsen was ready. He swung the barrel and placed the next shot a foot in front of Sunshine. Pieces of adobe splattered on the Apache’s hair, and now he sat down and stared toward the shed.

Corsen said, „Watch along the wall, Ed. I’m going out. You edge toward the house.“

Fisher said, „What?“

„If this works,“ Corsen said hurriedly, „I’ll give you a signal. When I do, bring the men out. Just the men!“

Sunshine had not moved, and now Corsen said, „Here we go.“ He handed the Winchester to Fisher and pushed over the straw bales. Going over them, he drew his pistol and walked out into the open yard with the handgun pointed toward Sunshine. When he was in the middle of the yard he stopped.

„Bil-Clin!“

There was no answer, though he knew they were on the other side of the wall.

He shouted again, „Bil-Clin!“ Then he said in Spanish, „My gun is on your son!“ His eyes shifted above Sunshine. Stillness. A bare line of adobe—and then Bil-Clin was standing a dozen paces to the left, head and shoulders above the wall. Corsen’s eyes went to him.

„Come over the wall.“

Bil-Clin’s arms came up and he raised himself to the top of the wall and dropped to the inside. He did not look at his son, but approached Corsen.

„Bil-Clin,“ Corsen said, „call Bonito and the others.“

The Apache said a word in Mescalero and suddenly his warriors were at the wall. They had stood up and were now a line of bare chests and war paint and thick blue-black hair with cloth bands over the foreheads. Bonito stood among them, but he was alone. He lifted his Maynard and rested it on the wall.

„Come in, Bonito,“ Corsen said. And when the renegade did not move he glanced at Bil-Clin, then cocked his pistol. „Order him to come in—if you’re still the chief.“

Bil-Clin looked at his son now, for the first time. The boy’s eyes, between stripes of yellow paint, were on Corsen. Bil-Clin spoke again in Mescalero and it was evident that his words were for Bonito. But Bonito did not answer.

Corsen tightened. He could feel it in his stomach, but he made his voice sound calm. „Bonito, you are now chief?“

Still the Apache said nothing.

„Yesterday you told me that chieftainship of the Mescalero is not a thing of heredity, but a position earned by the one most capable in war. In fighting. So, Bonito, are you chief?“

Bonito did not move. Corsen was looking at him now, but he glanced away momentarily toward Ed Fisher, and nodded to him.

„Let me tell you something, Bonito. There are others who live here now—some with authority that seems to contradict yours. How can you be a chief if you have opposed only this old man, Bil-Clin?“

HE GLANCED TOWARD the house and saw them coming out now.

„What about the government man, Bonito? He tells me you are a woman—a filthy pig of a woman with the diseases of animals. Unfit to live. And he has much authority. Perhaps he is the true chief here?“

Bonito's eyes had gone to Sellers as he appeared in the doorway. The eyes held on the man, narrowing, and then Bonito was over the wall.

„How would you have it, Cor-sen?“

„Whatever is customary.“

„With the knife, then.“

„I'll tell him.“ Corsen turned to the men in front of the station house. „Sellers, Bonito says you're afraid to fight him alone.“

Sellers was startled. „You're crazy!“

„Ask him.“

„Fight him with what?“

„Knives.“

„Now I know you're crazy.“

„You want to convince him you're boss, don't you? Beat him in a fair fight, the way they have to pick their chiefs sometimes.“ Fisher moved a step toward Sellers and, as he did so, brought the Winchester up and down in a short motion and Sellers's pistol was out of his hand. He looked at Fisher with complete surprise, watching the outlaw pick up the pistol.

„I'll hold it for you while you're teaching that red son a lesson.“

„Corsen! Tell him I won't fight him, that we don't do this in our government.“

„Bonito,“ Corsen translated, „he says he does not have a knife.“

BONITO REACHED behind him and drew a dull-gleaming blade from his waistband. His arm swung low. The knife scraped, bouncing over the sand to stop near Sellers.

„Corsen, tell that savage—“

„Listen,“ Corsen said, „this started because of you and Bonito. So you and he are going to finish it.“

„He's fought this way all of his life. I wouldn't have a chance!“

Corsen shrugged. „You can't tell.“

Bonito was handed a knife and without hesitating he stepped toward Sellers.

Fisher stooped, picked up the knife at Sellers's feet, and put it in his hand.

„If you make it, I'll buy you a drink.“

„Wait a minute, Ross!“ Sellers backed up. „Ross, tell him I won't do it—“

But Bonito was in front of him now.

The Mescalero lowered his head, hunching his shoulders, and brought the knife up in front of him, looking up at Sellers's face through half-closed eyes.

„Ross!“

The blade flashed, a short swipe of naked arm that was out and in before anyone could see what had happened.

Sellers screamed. His left cheek was slashed from ear to mouth.

„Ross!“

Bonito fainted toward Sellers's head. Going back, Sellers brought up his arm, but the blade dropped. It flashed low under his guard and flicked a short arc across the sucked-in stomach. Sellers's vest opened from pocket to pocket and he screamed again and this time turned and started to run. But he came up short, pushed, jolted back to face Bonito by Teachout, who stood behind him.

„You're going the wrong way,“ Teachout said.

„Let me go!“

Bonito stood waiting.

Corsen's gaze went from him to Sellers. „Are you through?“

Sellers, blood smeared over his face, was breathing hard, holding his stomach. „Ross.“ He gasped. „Shoot him! Now, while he's still!“

„Are you quitting?“ Corsen said.

„God! Shoot him!“

Corsen said calmly, „Fight him, or else get out.“

Sellers looked at him strangely, taken by surprise. „Get out?“

„That's right. Ride out of here and take Verbiest with you. Forget you ever worked for the Bureau. There are seven people here to testify you're not fit for the job. Now, either fight him or write yourself off.“

Sellers hesitated, fingering the cut across his stomach, his eyes on Corsen. Then his gaze went slowly to Bonito, who stood unmoving, watching him. Gradually Sellers's grip loosened around the knife, and as it dropped from his hand he turned abruptly and walked to the station house. The screen door banged.

„Now,“ Bonito said coldly, „there is no more doubt.“

„It is still in my mind,“ Corsen said mildly. He lowered the pistol he'd been holding on Sunshine and turned to Bonito. He added, pointedly, „I have seen women fight before. Usually it proves nothing.“

Bonito's eyes narrowed. „Say your words straight, Cor-sen.“

Corsen stopped a stride from the Apache. He raised his hand and swung the open palm hard against Bonito's face. The Apache was taken off guard and staggered back, but he did not go down.

„Is that straight enough?“

Corsen looked back at Ed Fisher and swung the pistol underhand toward him, and as he turned back to Bonito he shifted his feet suddenly and came around with his right fist smashing against the Apache's face. And this time Bonito went down.

„Maybe that's a little straighter.“ Then, looking toward Bil-Clin, Corsen said, „Is this your chief?“ Bonito came to one knee. His mouth was half open with numbness, but he smiled and said, „All right. Corsen.“

Behind him he heard Fisher say, „Here's the knife.“ Corsen half turned as if to look at Fisher, but it was a short movement. He pivoted, swinging his left hand, and again caught Bonito on the face as he was rising.

The Apache went down, rolling away from Corsen's reach, but as he came up Corsen was there. He swung a right and then a left to the Apache's head to beat him down again.

Bonito looked up at him, propping himself with his elbows; his face was cut at both eyes and his mouth swollen. And now he considered what to do next—how to fight this man whose not using a weapon was an insult. He brought his knees up under him, then one foot, watching Corsen closely.

Corsen moved a step closer, clenching his fists. Bonito will pull something this time, he thought. Bonito was rising, then suddenly throwing himself at Corsen's legs. Corsen dodged and kicked out, but his boot caught Bonito's shoulder and now the Apache was rolling. Corsen started after him, then stopped dead as Bonito jumped to his feet.

Fisher yelled, „You want it now, Ross?“

Corsen shook his head. This was the way to beat him, if it could be done. He started toward Bonito, thinking: Carry it to him. Once he starts calling the play, you're through. Watch his eyes. They'll tell you a snap second before he moves. He moved close to Bonito, tensed, watching the yellow-filmed eyes, smelling the animal smell of the man, seeing the eyes now and not the face.

Corsen drew his arm back slowly, knotting the fist. He shifted his weight suddenly, swinging the fist—the eyes—then just as suddenly threw himself to the side. Bonito's knife jabbed viciously, but Corsen was not there. And as the Apache came around to find him, in that split second Corsen was ready. He went back on his left foot, his body balanced, and then his weight shifted and his boot kicked savagely into Bonito's loins.

The Apache gasped and stopped dead in his tracks, bending, holding his stomach.

And that was it. Corsen hit him with one fist, then the other, and as Bonito started to sag he caught the Apache's arm and drove his right fist straight into the paint-streaked face. The Apache went down, dropping the knife, and landed heavily on his back.

„There, Bil-Clin, is your chief,“ Corsen said. He went over to Sunshine and knelt beside him, examining the shinbone that his bullet had broken.

Bil-Clin was standing next to him now. It was hard for him to speak, even if it was not an outright apology, for he was Mescalero, but he said, „What would you have us do?“

Corsen rose and looked at Bil-Clin. „If you wish, we will get an American doctor for your son. But now go back to Pinaleno and take your dead.“

„And you will come, Cor-sen?“

CORSEN'S GAZE went over the line of Apaches at the wall. Immobile faces, streaks of vermilion and bright yellow, and looking at them he was angry. But he thought: These are Mescaleros. You know what they are. You know what they can do. You were lucky today, but don't push your luck, and perhaps because of it make some cavalry patrol officer, who isn't even out here yet, push his. And he nodded slowly, wearily, to Bil-Clin and said, „Yes. I will come.“

The others were standing almost in a line. Teachout and Ernie Ball, Ed Fisher and his partner and Verbiest.

Maybe this will straighten Fisher out, Corsen thought. He's a man you'd buy a drink for, even after he's robbed you. Verbiest made a mistake, but he knows it and he won't make it again...

And then he did not think of them anymore. Katie was in the doorway and he walked toward the house.

