

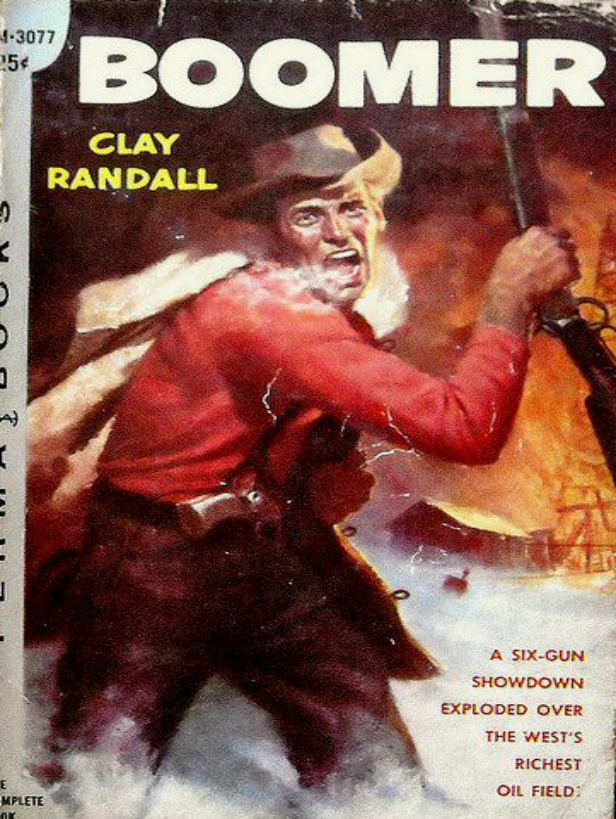
4-3077

25¢

BOOMER

**CLAY
RANDALL**

E
MPLETE
OK



A SIX-GUN
SHOWDOWN
EXPLODED OVER
THE WEST'S
RICHEST
OIL FIELD!

Boomer

Clay Randall

This page copyright © 2009 Olympia Press.

<http://www.olympiapress.com>

- [CHAPTER ONE](#)
- [CHAPTER TWO](#)
- [CHAPTER THREE](#)
- [CHAPTER FOUR](#)
- [CHAPTER FIVE](#)
- [CHAPTER SIX](#)
- [CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
- [CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
- [CHAPTER NINE](#)
- [CHAPTER TEN](#)
- [CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)
- [CHAPTER TWELVE](#)
- [CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)
- [CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)
- [CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)
- [CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)
- [CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

Ben Farley's Word Was Law!

No man challenged his gun or his oil-field roustabouts. Those who tried it saw their rigs burned, their supplies stolen, their men beaten.

Joe Grant knew this. But when his boss was killed and young Bud Muller was clubbed senseless, he had to fight back.

Farley's roustabouts rushed him, smashed his head with a gun butt, crashed their steel-capped boots against his ribs. Barely conscious, Grant rolled and went for his gun.

Farley smiled down at the prostrate man. Then he leveled the muzzle of his .38 at Grant's head.

CHAPTER ONE

A LIGHT SNOW had fallen the night before and Missouri had lain for a little while under a veil of white. Now the roads were glistening ribbons of black mud, churned up by farm wagons making their weekly pilgrimage to Joplin.

It was Saturday, and the streets of Joplin were crowded with farmers' teams and wagons, as they were every Saturday; the sidewalk was a mass of pink-cheeked, frost-breathing humanity. The invigorating tang of winter was in the air.

One man stood alone, apart from the crowd, oblivious to the activity that surrounded him. A fair, square-built man in his early thirties, he hunched into his sheep-lined wind-breaker, staring hard at the blank stone face of the bank building on the other side of the street. At last he reached into his windbreaker, took out a silver railroad watch and glanced with bleak satisfaction at the dial. "Almost four o'clock," he told himself. "Well, there's no use putting it off."

He waded through the ankle-deep mud of the street, stepped up to the sidewalk, and pushed his way toward the stolid stone building.

A breath of heated air struck him as he stepped inside the bank and closed the door. He raked the place with sober eyes, noting that most of the customers had become aware of the time and were leaving before the bank closed its doors.

The fair-haired man stepped up to a teller's cage and said, "I want to talk to Abel Ortway."

"I'm afraid Mr. Ortway is..."

"Tell him it's important."

There was something about the voice that made the teller frown. "Well, I'll see..."

But at that moment a stout, florid-faced man came up front from the vault. "What is it, Ransom?" Then, looking at the fair-haired man: "Oh, so it's you again."

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Ortway. Private."

"You know the banking hours," Ortway said with some irritation. "We close at four."

"But this is important. I just got to town."

The banker's eyes narrowed. "Did you get the money?"

"Let's talk about it in your office."

Ortway hesitated, looking vaguely worried. Thoughtfully, he drew a cigar from his vest pocket and rolled it unlighted from one side of his mouth to the other. "All right," he said at last. "But make it quick."

Ortway's office was bare of ornaments but comfortable in a solid, mannish fashion. He sat at a roll-top desk and nodded for the other man to take a chair. "All right. Now what is it that's so important?"

"I want to ask you for an extension on my loan."

Abruptly the banker laughed, the sound rolling out free and easy. "Now that's the damndest thing I've heard all day! Why on earth should I give you an extension?"

The fair-haired man smiled. "No reason, I guess, except that you

promised me one. Remember when you came out to my farm last spring and told me the place needed fencing on the south boundary? And a new windmill for the livestock? You told me to go ahead and make the improvements, and if I needed an extension on my loan you'd give it to me."

"That was last spring." Ortway smiled with heavy satisfaction. "Conditions change."

"But there've been hard dry-ups two years running. These things almost never run in threes. Next year I'll make a crop and pay off the loan, plus any fair interest you want to name."

Ortway shook his head, still smiling. "What kind of businessman would I be to listen to a story like that? I hear the same yarn fifty times a year from you hard-scrabble farmers. You can't make a go of it and you want somebody else to stand good for your failure."

For some strange reason the fair-haired man never lost his even temper. "I see. You're going to foreclose. You're going to take my farm."

"Put yourself in my shoes. It's the only sensible thing to do."

"Maybe..." He sat quietly for a moment, his thoughts turned inward. Then, "I want to tell you about that farm, Mr. Ortway. It's not so much, but it's something I worked five years to get and two years to improve. I trailed cattle, Ortway. Maybe five thousand miles I trailed them back and forth across Indian Territory. I saved my money and told myself that someday I'd stop killing myself working for other people and be my own boss. Seven years of my life, Ortway, that's how much I've got in that farm. I never would have gone into debt for those improvements if you hadn't promised to help."

"As time goes on," Ortway said easily, "you'll learn that promises don't mean a thing unless they're on paper."

The man sat lost in contemplation. "I didn't want to do this," he said finally, "but I guess there's no other way." Slowly, almost wearily, he reached into his windbreaker and drew out a well-used .45 revolver.

Ortway made a startled sound and then stared mutely into the deadly muzzle. "I've got it all figured out," the man said quietly. "I paid three thousand for the farm and borrowed another thousand from you to make the improvements. Now, I figure if you take the place over you'll be making two thousand dollars clear on the deal, plus the cost of the windmill and fencing. To say nothing of the two years' work I've put in the land. Twenty-five hundred dollars, that's about what you stand to make on the foreclosure, isn't it, Ortway?"

The banker could not take his eyes from the muzzle of the revolver. He licked his lips nervously. "What... what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to take that twenty-five hundred dollars. That's what your broken promise cost me."

Behind the fear in his eyes, the working of Ortway's brain was almost a visible thing. "Look," he said quickly, "I'll keep my promise! I'll give you any kind of extension you want! I'll put it on paper!"

"It's a little late for that, Ortway. I'll take the money."

"You'll never get away with this!" Ortway almost whined. "I won't be bullied!"

There were two metallic clicks as the fair-haired man thumbed the hammer back on the .45. "Call the teller," he said coldly. "The one named Ransom. Tell him to bring the money—that you've just made a loan."

"I won't do it!"

For a moment Ortway locked his jaws in stubbornness, but he began to swallow nervously when he saw the man's hand tightening on the butt of the revolver. Several seconds must have passed. Sweat formed in glistening beads on the banker's forehead as the hand drew tighter and tighter, the trigger starting to give under the pressure. A drop of sweat fell on Ortway's desk and the sound could be heard clearly in the silence of the room.

"All right!" the banker said hoarsely. "Only put that gun away!"

The man smiled slightly, then took off his battered Stetson and covered the revolver. But the muzzle was still leveled at Ortway's chest.

"Ransom!" the banker called. And when the teller appeared in the doorway, Ortway said, "Get twenty-five hundred dollars out of the vault and bring it to me."

The teller looked surprised, but evidently he was not one to question Ortway's wishes. "Very well, sir. How do you want it?"

The fair-haired man raised his head and said thoughtfully, "Bills, not too large. That will be all right, won't it, Mr. Ortway?"

The banker swallowed hard, his florid face almost crimson. "Yes, that will be all right."

The teller was well trained. He brought the money, placed it in front of his employer, and left quietly, closing the door behind him. "You'll never get away with this!" Ortway started. "You'll never..."

The fair-haired man stopped the banker's words quickly and expertly

with a sudden blow to Ortway's flabby jaw. Quickly he stuffed one blue bandanna into the lax mouth and secured the gag with another handkerchief. He took a length of pigging cord from his windbreaker and tied the banker hand and foot to his chair. At last he stood back and viewed his work professionally.

Not bad, he thought. He'll be good for an hour at least, if nobody finds him. He unbuttoned his shirt and put the bundle of bills next to his body, then he opened the door, nodding pleasantly to the teller on his way out of the bank. "Mr. Ortway's busy," he said. "He asked not to be disturbed."

"Thank you," the teller said gratefully.

The fair-haired man stepped outside and stood for a moment on the sidewalk, thinking. From this moment on, he thought, I am a different man. Never again can I be the man who just left Ortway's office.

This posed a minor problem, one that he hadn't anticipated. He had to have a name. A new name. One that would connect him in no way to the past—he smiled—or the present. It was almost like being born again, except this time he was allowed to choose for himself any name he wanted.

Grant, he thought, picking the name out of the air. He liked it. Joe Grant. That is my name. He was pleased with this decision. The name was short and comfortable, easy to get used to....

So it was Joe Grant who walked casually to the end of the block, swung lazily atop a shaggy bay mare, and rode with brazen unconcern out of Joplin that day. It was Joe Grant who grinned easily to a few acquaintances and pointed the bay north at a quiet, unhurried gait, until the town lay well behind. Then he nudged his shaggy mount to an easy lope, quartering cross-country along a well-

used trail to the northwest.

Everything had gone just the way he had planned it, right down to the last detail. Ortway had refused the loan extension—just the way Joe Grant had figured he would. Grant felt the uncomfortable bulge of twenty-five hundred dollars next to his body and grinned to himself. Ortway was going to raise a holler that could be heard clear to the Cherokee border when he finally got loose from that chair, but Grant had anticipated this, too, and was not worried.

After about thirty minutes Grant reined the bay up beside the road and let the animal blow. Maybe, he thought, Ortway was already hollering. Maybe a posse was already forming.

Calmly, he took a sack of makings from his windbreaker and methodically built a thin, compact cigarette, no trace of concern or worry in his lean face. All roads leading to Joplin were well trampled that day, and tracking would be a slow, tedious job at best. Sooner or later, though, he knew the posse would pick up the trail and head this way, so there was no sense being overly confident.

He rode for another mile along the muddy road, then swung abruptly across open country, leaving tracks in the snow that the greenest sort of dude could follow with perfect ease. He spurred the bay once more to a rocking lope, and his face sobered for a moment as he gazed straight ahead to the north. His thoughts sped far in advance of the grunting pony, across Boggy Creek and through the wild-plum thickets and over a familiar rise that he never expected to see again. And finally, in his mind, he was riding down the other side of the rise to where his farm lay in the shallow draw.

He smiled a bit thinly. "*Ortway's* farm," he corrected himself.

But this man who called himself Joe Grant was not one to dwell on

unpleasantry. The past, he reasoned, was the past. No use for a man keeping himself stirred up over a thing that couldn't be helped. Maybe he wasn't cut out to be a farmer anyway. Sometimes a cowhand could get some pretty queer ideas about what he wanted out of life.

Joe Grant shook his head, faintly puzzled at his own thoughts. By rights I ought to hate Ortway's guts, he thought. Another man would have squealed like a stuck pig if he'd been robbed the way Ortway tried to rob me. Maybe, he reasoned, it's just as well that I'm not the kind to get too attached to a piece of ground, like some men. If I was...

He let the thought drop. He had drifted from place to place, from job to job, all his life. Oh, he had liked the farm well enough, but it was a lonely life. To be perfectly truthful, he was beginning to get a little tired of being staked out in one place all the time.

Suddenly he grinned, exhilarated by the knowledge that he was no longer tied to anything. Maybe he and Ortway had actually done each other a favor! After all, the banker had got himself a good farm at a good price, and Grant had got back most of the money he'd put into it, not counting the two years of work and worry. What could be fairer than that?

Fair or not, he knew that the banker's reasoning would not run along the same lines as his own, and Grant kneed the bay to a faster gait as he raised Boggy Creek in the distance.

Carefully he put the bay down the sloping bank of the creek, reining up in midstream. Then he jumped out of the saddle, grunting at the shock of icy water. Quickly he stripped his rig from the animal's back. "This is where we part company, boy!" he said, cracking the bay sharply across the rump.

He stood for a moment watching the animal streak up the opposite bank and cut sharply toward the west. This, too, was part of the plan. Only the day before he had traded a strong mule for that stunted bay, hoping that the animal, set free, would head for his old home to the west. It was exactly what the bay was doing.

Grant smiled, then shouldered his rig and headed downstream through the hip-deep water. Soon his legs were numb and without feeling. He stumbled on rocks and stirred up mud, but he knew that the stream would settle by the time the posse reached it. The bite of the cold water almost took his breath away, but he waded on for several minutes, keeping always in the middle of the stream.

At last he spotted the shale outcropping where a sturdy little dun was tethered in a clump of willows. Grant climbed stiffly to the outcropping, rubbing his legs until feeling began to return, then hobbled to the horse and slapped the animal good-naturedly. "Don't look so smug, boy. You'll get a taste of it before long." He limped to the willows and drew a blanket roll from under a pile of dead leaves.

The dun cocked its head curiously as Grant stripped himself of shoes, trousers, underwear, and rubbed himself dry with a spare shirt from the roll. Puffing and grunting, he climbed into dry clothes, exchanged his soaked work shoes for riding boots. "That's better!" he said aloud, walking in a tight circle, stamping his feet to wedge them into the snug vamps.

There was just one more thing to be done. Joe Grant was a new man with a new name—it logically followed that such a man would need to *look* different.

First he propped a small metal mirror against a willow trunk, then from the roll he took out a pint jar filled with dark liquid—water in which he had boiled walnut hulls and wild berries. This, too, was part

of his plan.

With a small brush he began applying the liquid to his hair and eyebrows. He worked fast but cautiously; he had practiced it carefully. He knew exactly what the result would be. At last he held the mirror at arm's length, inspecting first one side and then the other. The fair-haired man now had glistening dark brown hair with a reddish cast. He knew from experience that the color would become dull and more natural upon drying.

All in all he was satisfied with the result. Perhaps his eyes looked a bit pale beneath the dark eyebrows, but he didn't expect to keep this stuff on his head forever. Just until he was safely out of Missouri. Soon he'd be headed for the Indian country, or Texas, or maybe Mexico, where the color of his hair would make no difference.

Now he repacked the roll and tied it. He threw his rig on the dun and lashed the roll behind the saddle. "Now it's your turn," he told the horse and he swung up to the saddle and reined into the middle of the stream.

Everything was working perfectly. Not even the most expert sign reader could find anything on that hard shale where the dun had been tethered. The posse, when it came, would follow the bay's tracks miles to the west. By the time they figured out what had happened, their man would be well out of Missouri.

CHAPTER TWO

BY SUNDOWN GRANT was well east of Joplin, heading south with the eye of his mind on Arkansas. From Arkansas he'd head into the Cherokee Nation where it should be a simple thing to get himself lost in the crowds and excitement. Oklahoma was preparing for

statehood, Indian lands were being cut up for individual allotments, there had been talk of oil strikes near Bartlesville and Dewey. With all those things to keep people worked up, Grant thought, it's not likely they'll pay much attention to another saddle tramp riding through.

Several times he had held up in draws and gullies while farm wagons rattled along the muddy roads. At last he felt that he was comparatively safe and decided to wait till dark to make his run for Arkansas.

In a gully, a few miles north of Monett, he opened a can of beans and ate with fine appetite. He chuckled to himself, enjoying the feel of twenty-five hundred dollars next to his body. It was a lot of money. His money. He had worked hard for it.

Maybe, he dreamed, I'll buy in on a small cow outfit in Texas. Or lease some Indian land and run my own brand. One thing he was sure of, he wasn't going to try farming again. Cows he understood. But bankers and crop failures and droughts were not for him.

He hunched into his windbreaker, chuckling again as he remembered Ortway's expression of outrage. "I'll bet he's still hollering," he said aloud. "His kind always holler."

Not until it was full dark did he set his rig and head south, skirting wide to the west in order to miss Monett. It would be an easy ride to Arkansas, even at night....

Perhaps he had been out of the saddle too long. Perhaps his hands and his mind had been too long occupied at plowing and his horseman's instinct had become dulled. Or perhaps it simply was the way that luck would have it when the sturdy little dun stepped into a gopher hole that night and snapped a foreleg.

It happened suddenly and without warning, the way hard luck usually happens on a man. One minute he had been riding peaceably across the snow-patched prairie gazing up at the pale moon and stringy clouds, and the next moment he was on his back gasping for breath. The stocky little dun lay on its side, kicking weakly, and a hard knot of sickness grew in Grant's stomach when he saw the animal's left foreleg hanging awkward and useless.

This thing he had not foreseen. A downed horse had not been a part of his plan.

Grant shoved himself to his feet. He knelt beside the dun and stroked the animal's neck, trying not to look at the swimming hurt in those dark brown eyes. For the moment he was more concerned with the animal than with himself, and he spent several valuable minutes stroking and calming the dun, crooning to it in a voice that was surprisingly gentle. "It's going to be all right, boy. Everything's going to be fine..."

The nervous quivering along the horse's withers began to subside slowly. The dun lay quiet for a moment, almost as though it knew what the inevitable end must be. Grant drew his revolver reluctantly from his waistband and aimed carefully.

The explosion mushroomed over the prairie, and Grant heard his own voice saying quietly, "I'm sorry, boy." He ejected the used cartridge methodically and reloaded from a carton that he kept in his windbreaker. He stood there for one long moment, vaguely bothered. "Arkansas's out," he said aloud. "Without a horse, I sure won't be able to make the border before morning."

Almost as though he were afraid of awakening the dead animal, Grant gently stripped the saddle from the dun's back. With a shrug of acceptance he slung the forty-odd pounds of wood and leather over

his shoulder. He walked south.

It was about an hour past sunup when Grant sat down beside a deep-rutted wagon road to rest. He had only a vague idea where he was—somewhere inside a triangle formed by Joplin, Monett, and Neosho. His feet, encased in tight riding boots, ached all the way to his knees, and he cursed himself for leaving his heavy work shoes in the saddle roll beside the dun.

The late-December wind was cutting, and he hunched deeper into his windbreaker as he tried to decide on what to do. He wondered where the posse was. He even began to wonder how he had ever let himself in for a fool mess like this in the first place.

It'll be five years behind bars if they catch you! he warned himself. Maybe more.

He shoved himself to his feet wearily and was beginning to hoist the saddle when he saw the wagon headed toward him from the north. His heart pounded once, like a hammer striking an anvil, and then seemed to stop. "It's too late to run!" he told himself. "That farmer's already seen me by this time."

It was a flat wagon loaded high with baled hay. Grant tried to reassure himself as the wagon drew nearer. It seemed better to hold his ground and trust to some kind of brazen lie than to arouse the farmer's suspicions by running.

The farmer, it turned out, was a young man in his early twenties. He hauled on the lines and called, "Give you a lift, mister?"

"That depends. Where're you headed?"

"Neosho," the boy said, beating his mittened hands together. "Takin' this hay down to some feeders." He glanced curiously at Grant's

saddle.

"Lost my horse a piece back," Grant said.

"Oh. That's hard luck. You must be one of the cowhands that was drivin' beef through here yesterday. I guess you're headed for Neosho, now that you're afoot."

"Neosho?"

"Sure. That's where most cattlemen catch the train for the Cherokee country."

The seed of an idea took root in Grant's mind.

"You're absolutely right! The sooner I can catch a train for the Nations the better I'll like it. I'll catch that ride with you, if you don't mind."

The youth took the saddle and Grant climbed atop the stacked hay bales. "What time do you figure to raise Neosho?"

"With a little luck I'll get you there in time to catch the one o'clock to Vinita. Your outfit run cattle in the Nations?"

Grant nodded. "That's right."

They rode along in comfortable silence for several minutes, and Grant smiled to himself, pleased with this unexpected turn of events. A cowhand with a saddle would attract no attention in Neosho; riders for the Indian-country outfits often drove beef to Missouri, sold their horses at a profit, and took the A & P back to home range. It was all so simple that Grant wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. While the posse scoured the vicinity of Joplin, he'd be boarding the Pacific at Neosho. At Vinita, in the Cherokee Nation, he could change to the Katy and ride clear to Mexico if he felt like it.

Joe Grant leaned back in the clean-smelling hay and admired the wide blue sky over Missouri. He felt fine.

Then the young farmer said, "Guess you didn't hear about the bank holdup over at Joplin, did you?"

A chill walked up Joe Grant's spine. "I guess I didn't."

"Posse came around to my pa's place last night," the boy said, chewing placidly on a straw. "Some farmer held up the banker and got off with five thousand dollars."

Five thousand dollars! Grant felt himself go rigid with anger. Ortway, that lying, thieving...!

"Hard to know what gets into folks," the boy went on. "Take this farmer; what good's all that money goin' to do him? The posse'll get him sure if he stays in Missouri. He hasn't got a chance of gettin' away!"

"Maybe," Grant said, "he's headed for Arkansas."

"Hard luck if he is. The sheriff's got a passel of deputies patrollin' the border down that way."

Grant swallowed with some difficulty. "What about the Indian country? The sheriff doesn't have any authority down there."

"Maybe not, but the sheriff didn't forget it, either. They wired the U. S. marshal's office in Tahlequah to be on the lookout."

Despite the cutting wind, Grant felt a cold sweat on his forehead. Yet there was little real danger. It would take a deal of time for the marshal's office to get the word and put deputies on the job, and by

that time Grant would have changed to the Katy and be headed toward Red River. Anyhow, in the confusion of statehood and oil strikes deputy marshals would be spread pretty thin in the Territory.

Grant made himself relax and tried to convince himself that he was worrying over nothing. He raised himself on one elbow and asked, "Did the posse say what this farmer looked like, the one that robbed the bank?"

The youth frowned. "Guess I didn't pay much attention. Good-sized man, I think, with yellow hair. That's about all I remember."

Grant brushed one hand over his temple and studied the brownish stain that came off on his palm. Yellow hair?

Around midmorning the blue sky took on a grayish cast and dark, flat clouds slipped in from the north. A light snow was falling when the hay wagon reached Neosho.

"Well," Grant said, "thanks for the ride."

"It beat walkin', I guess." The young farmer grinned. "The depot is over that way."

Grant was pleased to see several cowhands lounging around the big iron wood burner in the middle of the depot waiting room. Most of them had saddlesacks on the bench beside them.

Grant bought a ticket to Red Fork, although he meant to go only as far as Vinita, where the A & P crossed the Katy. He figured the extra money would be well spent if the federal marshals ever started checking on who bought tickets for where. He found a dark corner in the gloomy waiting room, pulled his hat down over his face, and

pretended to doze until train time.

Shortly after one o'clock they heard the shrill whistle and raucous huffing as the glistening tall-stacked locomotive pulled into the station with its two daycoaches and string of freight and cattle cars. Most of the cowhands made straight for the smoker, but Grant pushed on through to the regular coach, hoisted his saddle to the baggage rack, and settled down to see the last of Missouri.

A girl and her grips occupied the two seats directly across the aisle: a fair-haired girl with sober blue eyes. Grant glanced briefly in her direction, then around the car. There were a few cattlemen, three or four drummers, two austere Creek Indians, and several workers in soiled corduroy who appeared to be oilfield laborers. Grant pulled his hat over his face again and pretended to doze until the train began to move.

He rode for several minutes with his face hidden. I've made it! he thought, rejoicing to himself. They'll never catch me now, no matter how they try! He tilted the hat from his face, enjoying to the fullest this new sense of freedom.

As the train rocked on he stared for several moments at this bleak, cold country of rolling hills and scattered timber and definitely made up his mind to change to the Katy at Vinita and head for Texas. The sight of this frosted land chilled him and made him long for the warm spaces along the Mexican border.

At last he turned his attention to the other passengers. The girl across the aisle especially interested him, for it was not the usual thing for girls her age to be traveling in this country alone. There was something strangely foreign about her— somehow she looked out of place, but Grant didn't know exactly why. She sat erect on the red plush seat, her back ramrod straight, her blue eyes staring straight

ahead. Her dress was of heavy black material and severe in its simplicity; a plain pillbox of a hat sat squarely atop her yellow hair.

If she doesn't learn to relax, Grant thought, she'll fly all to pieces before she gets to wherever she's going!

From time to time his glance returned to the girl and he wondered where she was going and what was bothering her. Well, he decided at last, I guess it's none of my business. And he tilted his hat over his face again and went to sleep.

When he awoke, the first thing he noticed was that the sun had slid far to the west. Then he realized that the train had stopped and most of the passengers were out stretching their legs. Grant frowned. He and the girl were the only ones left in the coach.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The girl turned her head just enough to indicate that she had heard the question. "I believe the train has stopped for fuel and water."

"Where are we?"

"We have just entered the Cherokee Nation," the girl said, then turned to gaze out the window on her side of the car.

Joe Grant grinned to himself. Not exactly the most sociable woman I ever saw, he thought. He stood up to stretch his legs, and that was when he saw the small band of horsemen headed toward the train from the north, and for a moment his heart stopped beating. There were six horsemen and all of them were outfitted with saddle guns and revolvers.

Grant swallowed hard, started to run toward the rear of the coach, and then realized that that would be a fool thing to do. Through the

window he could see one of the horsemen talking to the conductor, and then all the other passengers came trooping back into the train. Sweat beading on his forehead, he realized that he was trapped. He had misjudged the speed with which the marshal's office could swing into action, and now he was trapped!

The conductor said, "Everybody take your places."

Grant realized that the girl across the aisle was staring at him. Then she turned to the trainman. "Who are those men out there, conductor?"

"Deputies from the U. S. marshal's office, ma'am. Seems like there was a bank holdup at Joplin."

"Do they think the robber is on this train?"

"Can't say, ma'am. They just want to look the passengers over; it won't take long."

Grant sank back into his seat. There was a roaring emptiness inside him; the sensation of defeat sagged like a weight in his stomach. It was now a matter of minutes before they caught him, and there was nothing he could do. In a coach full of passengers he couldn't start a gun fight. He couldn't run because there was no place to go.

He hadn't noticed that he had dropped his hat until the girl across the aisle picked it up and handed it to him. She smiled a sudden brilliant smile, but on a second surprised glance Grant saw that it wasn't a smile at all. It was like a mask smiling.

"My name is Rhea Muller," she said quietly, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Joe Grant blinked his surprise. "Grant, ma'am. Joe Grant." He took

the hat. "Thank you."

"You might as well go back to sleep," she said blandly.

Back to sleep? He frowned, wondering what had suddenly got into her. Then he heard the deputies coming into the coach from the smoker, and the thought hit him. Sleep! Quickly, he lay back in the seat and dropped the hat over his face.

It was a one-in-a-million chance that made absolutely no sense, but at that moment Joe Grant was in no position to demand logic. He froze in a position of sleep and prayed. Then he heard the measured clamor of spur rowels as one of the deputies moved down the aisle. From under the brim of his hat Grant could see that the lawman was a squat, stone-faced man in his early forties. He raked the coach with a flat glance, then nodded at Grant. "What about this one?" he said to the conductor.

"Got on at Neosho. Cowhand, I guess."

Then the girl said lightly, "His name's Joe Grant, Marshal. He works for my father. We've got an oil lease in Kiefer."

"I see." The deputy turned again to Grant, and Grant could see the snub-barreled Remington cradled in the officer's arm. "Well, his hair's not the right color anyway. No sense waking him, I guess."

Slowly, very slowly, Joe Grant started to breathe again. But he remained very still until he heard the deputies leave the train—until he heard them get on their horses and ride away—until he heard the conductor give the signal to the engineer and the train started to move. Only then did he allow himself to change his cramped position.

Why the girl had lied he did not know. How she had known that he

was the man they were looking for he could not guess. He did not care. A girl with that kind of nerve, he thought, I'm just glad she's on my side.

Gently, he tipped his hat off his face and glanced at the girl. She was staring straight ahead, just as she had been doing the whole trip. Tentatively, Grant cleared his throat, but she did not look around.

Grant wiped his forehead on his sleeve. Well, he thought, if this is the way she wants it, this is the way she'll have it! The least I can do is let her alone, if that's the way she wants it.

He lay back in the corner against the car window and pretended to doze, but it was not possible to dismiss this girl from his mind as easily as that. What if that marshal had searched him? The dark hair wouldn't have fooled the lawman long if he had given any reason for suspicion. Grant felt himself go weak when he thought of doing five years in a Missouri prison. That is what he owed the girl for what she had done. Five years of his life!

Once more he looked in her direction, and she seemed even more distant than before. She would not even consent to look at him, or even admit that he was in the car.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS WELL past midnight when the train reached Vinita. The conductor called, "Southbound passengers change trains for McAlester's and the Choctaw Nation."

The girl across the aisle said, "Conductor, is the lunchroom open?"

"No, ma'am, but passengers can get coffee in the station." The girl took up a small leather satchel as Grant moved into the aisle. "Can I give you a hand, ma'am?"

She looked at him briefly and coldly. "No, thank you."

For a moment Grant stood puzzled and frowning as she moved up the aisle and was handed down to the ground by the conductor. All women are puzzles of one kind or another to most men, but Grant had never met the equal of this one. He noted that she had left all her grips on the seat, with the exception of the leather satchel, which meant that she was continuing on toward Tulsa or Red Fork. He guessed he'd never find out what had prompted her to lie for him, as he meant to change to the Katy and head south as soon as possible.

With a shrug Grant hauled his saddle down from the baggage rack and headed toward the end of the car with the other passengers. He dropped stiff-legged to the cinders into a cutting night wind peppered with sleet. Drawing his head into the collar of his windbreaker, he shouldered his saddle and headed toward the yellow lamplight that flowed from the depot's windows.

He could see the other passengers on the inside, huddled around a big wood burner, drinking coffee from tin cups. The aroma of coffee was a welcome smell in the night and Grant hurried his pace a bit. Then he heard the warning chatter of a telegraph key inside the station, and his steps slowed and finally stopped. No telling what would be coming over the telegraph. News of the robbery, maybe. Possibly they had found his dead horse by this time, and his saddle roll. Maybe they'd even talked to the farmer who'd brought him to Neosho.

On second thought Grant decided that he'd rather not be where the lights were too bright or the crowds too thick. He slung his saddle to

the ground beside a baggage cart and pressed into a niche beside the semaphore tower. Anyway, he thought, I'm out of the wind. He could wait here till the crowd thinned out and then he could get his coffee and a ticket for Texas.

After a while two cowhands came out of the station and hunched against the depot to light cigarettes. Their heads ducked against the wind, they talked for a moment, then moved off into the shadows on the other side of the depot.

Grant frowned, faintly puzzled as to why the two should prefer to stand in the cold rather than stay in the depot or return to the train.

Fairly soon the westbound passengers began coming out, one at a time, hurrying back to the coaches. Instinctively, Grant hunched deeper into the shadows when he saw the girl come out of the depot, and he smiled faintly. He'd never seen a woman just like this one, and he guessed he'd never see one again. Just the same, he thought, watching her hurrying toward the coaches, I appreciate what you did for me. More than you'll ever know, probably.

He started to step out of his hiding place when he saw the two cowhands racing out of the shadows toward the girl. "Just a minute, ma'am!" one of them called. The girl paused for just an instant, turning toward the man, then she wheeled and ran toward the orange-lighted windows of the coaches.

A short sound of surprise tore itself out of Grant's throat. He shoved himself away from the depot and started running as the girl tripped on her long skirts and fell into the gravel and cinders along the tracks. Grant and the two cowhands arrived at her side at the same instant.

One of the men, Grant noticed, was tall, long-faced, and gangly. The other was almost as tall as his partner, but thick and heavy. The

heavy one lunged at Grant with both fists swinging.

Grant saw the ham-sized fist looming in his face. The blow to the side of his face numbed him and he went reeling back against one of the cattle cars. His mouth tasted of salt and blood, his knees felt ready to buckle, but he shoved himself aside in time to escape the big man's second rush. He grabbed blindly, caught the man's sleeve, and with savage satisfaction pumped his own hard right fist into the man's stomach.

He glimpsed the thin man and the girl scrambling on the snow-patched ground for possession of the leather satchel, and then the heavy man came in again. Grant went reeling back under another blow to his face.

For an instant he was dazed; the world tilted sharply and he fell back on his side. All fight had been knocked out of him for the moment. He wanted to quit. Then he heard the girl scream and saw the thin man tear the satchel from her grasp, and suddenly Joe Grant remembered how much he owed her.

"Let's go, Bat!" the thin man yelled. "I've got it!"

But Bat was concentrating at the moment on something else. Suddenly Grant's world stopped its spinning, and he looked up and saw the man's big face grinning down at him. He saw the kick coming but could not move away in time to escape it. Instead, he grabbed at the big square-toed boot, pulled and twisted, and the big man came crashing down in the gravel.

The girl was still screaming. From the corner of his eye Grant glimpsed the thin man racing for the shadows at the end of the depot, and he thought: I guess this is no time to insist on fair play! He grabbed his heavy revolver out of his waistband and hit the big

cowhand across the back of the head while he was still falling.

The man called Bat was tough. He grunted, cursed, and started to push himself up to his hands and knees. Grant brought the revolver back again, but the girl shouted, "Let him go! The other one has my money!"

Still dazed, Grant staggered to his feet and leaned for a moment against the cattle car.

"Catch him!" the girl shouted again. "You've got to catch him!"

Grant stared at her. He looked up and saw the racing thin man. I owe it to her, he thought. I'll catch him if it kills me!

He began to run. His legs felt wobbly and he couldn't drag enough air into his lungs, but he kept running. The thin man rounded the corner of the depot and disappeared into the darkness, and Grant knew that he would never catch him this way. He lifted his revolver and fired once, twice, three times into the air.

Almost immediately the thin man returned the fire, and Grant felt himself grinning weakly. This was somewhat better. It might get him killed, but at the moment that possibility seemed better than running. He fired again, then ducked behind a baggage cart to reload.

The thin man was out there somewhere, waiting. At least he wasn't running. Suddenly a shot punctuated the darkness and Grant saw the cowhand's hunched figure briefly against the outline of a loading chute. He breathed deeply. All right, he told himself, it's time for more running.

He swung wide around the chute and opened fire again, hoping that the cowhand's revolver was empty and that he hadn't had time to reload.

He knew that he had guessed right when he heard the man climbing the pole cattle pen behind the chute. "Stay where you are!" Grant yelled. The man cursed as something hit the ground with a heavy thud. It was either his revolver or the satchel—either way, the cowhand wasn't stopping to recover it. He dropped on the other side of the loading pen with another curse and ran into the darkness.

It was the satchel. Grant breathed heavily with relief as he picked it up and headed back toward the depot.

The noise of the shooting had emptied the coaches, and now the passengers stood huddled at the end of the depot staring anxiously into the darkness as Grant returned.

"What's goin' on here?" the ticket agent called.

"Two cowhands tried to grab Miss Muller's bag," Grant said, surprised that he remembered her name so easily.

Rhea Muller came forward quickly, her eyes wide with panic. "Did... did they get away?"

"The thief got away but he left the bag." He handed it to her and saw the anxiety go out of her face. She took the bag, held it hard in her hands, and looked at him.

"Thank you," she said coolly.

"I'm sure you're welcome, ma'am," Grant said stiffly. She wouldn't bend, she wouldn't smile. It was clear that she hated his guts, yet she had lied for him and had accepted his help.

The ticket agent shot anxious glances at both of them and said, "Lucky you got the satchel back, lady. But I better call the sheriff

anyway.”

“No!” Rhea Muller said quickly. “The thieves got away; there’s nothing we can do about it now.” Then her face brightened with a brazenly artificial smile. “Thank you just the same, sir, but Mr. Grant and I must go back to the train.”

Grant made a small sound of surprise as she took his arm. When they were a few paces away from the curious passengers, Grant hissed, “I’m not taking this train; I’m waiting for the Katy!”

The false smile disappeared. “Very well, Mr. Grant, if you want to wait and talk to the sheriff.”

He glanced quickly at the ticket agent who was hurrying into the depot and knew that she was right. He couldn’t afford to talk to a sheriff; there were too many questions that he couldn’t answer. Still, he didn’t like the idea of heading west toward the Oklahoma country—civilization was too strong there, law enforcement too rigid for his liking.

“Well?” she asked when they reached the coach.

Grant looked cautiously into her blue suspicious eyes. “I can’t say this was in my plans, but it looks like we’ll be taking the same train after all.”

She nodded. “I thought we would.”

Grant handed her up to the coach and moved away from the excited crowd of passengers. “How long before the train pulls out?” he asked the conductor.

“Right away. We’re behind schedule now. Say.” He grinned. “That was some scrap! The young lady ought to be real proud of you.”

Grant then went back to the depot to recover his saddle.

The train started moving again as Grant hefted his saddle into the rack overhead. Rhea Muller was watching him now, coolly and speculatively, and as he settled into his seat she said, "May I talk to you, Mr. Grant?"

It seemed that she never ran out of surprises. He frowned, then stood up to let her move in next to the window. "I'd like to talk to you, too, Miss Muller. First of all, I'd like to know why you lied to that deputy marshal today."

She sat very erect as usual and stared straight ahead. "Perhaps," she said quietly, "it was my woman's intuition." She indicated the black satchel with a nod. "It was no surprise when those men tried to take this. I was afraid some such thing would happen and I needed the protection of a... a man like you."

"A favor for a favor. Is that it?"

"Yes."

But Grant was not satisfied. "I still don't understand it. It's clear that you don't like me, so why did you pick me to protect you?"

"Sometimes," she said blandly, "it takes a thief to catch a thief."

Grant felt the heat of anger rushing to his face. Sure, he had robbed Ortway at the point of a gun but he had never thought of himself as a thief. He had simply taken by force what Ortway was trying to cheat him out of. "How," he asked stiffly, "can you be so sure I'm a thief?"

I saw your face. I saw the fear in your eyes when you learned the deputy marshal was making an inspection of the train."

And maybe she was right. Maybe everybody could have seen it if they had bothered to look. They rode in strained silence for several minutes, and then Grant looked at her. "Would you mind telling me what's so important about that satchel you're carrying?"

For a moment he thought she was not going to answer. Then she said, "Money, Mr. Grant. A great deal of money, and it is very important to me." Then she looked straight at him, her eyes perfectly sober. "I want to hire you, Mr. Grant, to see that nothing else happens to it."

Grant started. "I'm a thief. Remember?"

"But we understand each other," she said evenly. "Do you want the job?"

"No."

"The pay is not very good," she continued. "But there is very little law where I am going, which should prove attractive to a man like yourself."

It suddenly occurred to Grant that Rhea Muller was a very handsome young woman. Stiff and distant, but in her way almost beautiful. "You think you've got me pegged, don't you? Bank robber, gun shark, thief...." He leaned back on the seat and nudged his hat forward on his forehead. "Where is this place that has no law?"

"A place called Kiefer, in the Creek Nation. Until a few days ago it was a Pacific flag stop. Then a wildcat on the Glenn ranch blew in a gusher and..." She saw the puzzled look on Grant's face and allowed herself a small, tight smile. "Oil, Mr. Grant."

He shoved his hat back and came erect. "What would a girl like you

know about oil?"

She appeared to give the question serious thought before answering. At last she turned to the window and seemed to speak to the night. "I was not born on a derrick floor, as my father is apt to tell you, but I did grow up in the oil fields of Pennsylvania—and Ohio—Tarport, Petrolia, Grease City. My father is a wildcatter, Mr. Grant; that's how I know about oil."

Grant had already noticed the strangeness of her speech and dress, and now he realized that Rhea Muller came from German stock, or Pennsylvania Dutch. Well, she's a long way from home, he thought. But Rhea Muller had that look of determined self-sufficiency about her; her own independence threw up a barrier against sympathy. Something in the back of his mind warned Grant to keep his distance. Here was a girl with ambition, and too much ambition always meant the same thing—trouble.

Still, Rhea Muller had the power and the looks to attract men, and Joe Grant was not immune to the attraction of pretty young women. He said at last, "You still haven't told me about the satchel, except that it has money in it."

"That's all you need to know."

"Not if I'm going to protect it," Grant said. "How do I know the money isn't stolen?"

Her face colored but her words were controlled when she spoke. "Perhaps you have the right to know. The money is borrowed—five thousand dollars. Everything my father owns went up for collateral: his leases, a small producing well near Bartlesville. But we had to have the money to buy tools and a rig; we were in no position to bargain."

Grant whistled softly. "It sounds like a big gamble."

"Wildcatting is always a gamble. But Glenn Pool is going to be the biggest oil strike in history; it's the once-in-a-lifetime chance that all oilmen look for."

Grant frowned, but the talk of oil interested him, if only because he knew nothing about it. "Well, maybe it isn't such a gamble. If your father's going to drill where he's sure there's oil, that seems like a pretty safe proposition."

The girl turned and fixed her cool blue eyes on Grant's face. "It isn't as safe as it seems. Our lease expires in thirty days unless we get a well spudded in within that time. That's plenty of time now that we have the money, provided we're able to get rig timbers, machinery, tools..." She paused for a moment, and Grant thought he saw worry in the faint lines about her eyes. Suddenly she looked away. "Mr. Grant," she said, "do you know what a 'top lease' is?"

"I never heard of it."

"It's used by land speculators, especially around new oil fields. Sometimes a man has a good lease but can't promote the money to drill. If it looks like he won't be able to get his well started in time to fulfill the contract, a speculator will buy a lease on top of his. Do you understand?"

"I think so; it sounds the same as betting against the shooter in a crap game. If the first man doesn't get his well started in time, the speculator takes over the lease." Then he thought of something else and suddenly understood why Rhea Muller was worried. "Does somebody have a 'top lease' on your father's land?"

She nodded, still looking the other way. "A man by the name of Ben

Farley.”

“Do you think this Farley had anything to do with what happened in Vinita?”

She did not have to answer. A drilling lease in a new oil field was at stake—a fortune for the speculator if he could stop the Muller well. Derricks and machinery cost money—even Joe Grant knew that much about the oil business. If the speculator could somehow get his hands on the money that the Mullers had borrowed...

Grant breathed deeply, frowning hard. He didn't like it; it smelled of trouble. And he was in enough trouble as it was.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUCH TOWNS AS Dodge, Wichita, and Abilene had not prepared Joe Grant for Kiefer. The depot was a shunted boxcar. The week-old town was a churning sea of black mud, working with animals and humanity. Mule skimmers turned the air blue with profanity as heavy freighters dragged through the axle-deep mud. The main street was already a mile-long double file of tents, clapboard and tin shacks. Horses and oxen bogged almost belly deep in the mud, wagons and hacks were stalled; only the long spans of mules were capable of pulling through this river of black slush.

The new town came in two parts, the railroad being the dividing line. To the west there were a few tents and tar-paper shacks which was Kiefer's meager residential district. On the other side stretched the boggy road leading eastward to the Glenn ranch and the new oil field. Shanties and shacks and sheet-iron buildings lined the road on either side. Here were stores of cardboard, banks of canvas, clapboard cribs and livery stables, dance halls and gambling rooms,

blind pigs and restaurants.

Kiefer was a boom town, born full grown, vicious and profane.

Saddle on his hip, Grant dropped down from the day-coach into the sucking mud that seemed to cover everything. He had never seen anything like it. No trail town that he had ever seen could compare with it.

Rhea Muller stood on the coach steps, gazing out at the crowds milling around. Suddenly she smiled and lifted her hand, and Grant saw a huge, square-built man and a blond boy coming toward them. He glanced up, and Rhea said, "My father and my brother. They'll take us out to the lease."

Old Midler's face lighted up when he saw the black satchel in his daughter's arms. "Rhea, you got the money!"

"Yes, but on the banker's terms."

"Who cares about terms!" the old man shouted. "Now we can get the well started!"

The old man and the boy made a pack saddle by clasping their hands. "Here, well carry you over to the wagon, Rhea. We'll stop by Kurt Battle's and tell him to load up our drilling tools."

Joe Grant grinned faintly as the old man and the boy swung Rhea down from the coach and plowed through the mud toward a rickety buckboard, all of them talking excitedly at once. A bond of affection seemed to pull them together; happiness showed in their faces. Grant was surprised to hear Rhea Muller's laughter roll free and unrestrained. It was a pleasant sound.

Only after they had reached the buckboard did she remember Grant

and motion for him to come over. "My father," Rhea said. "Pa, this is Joe Grant."

Joe took old Muller's hand. The big Dutchman grinned, but there was worry behind his pale eyes. "Rhea says you pitched in on a little trouble up at Vinita. I want to thank you. It was a big favor; bigger than you know, maybe."

Grant looked pleased. There didn't seem to be anything to say. Then he shook hands with Bud Muller, a sober young giant with a good deal of his father in him.

"I didn't think it would start so fast," the old man said thoughtfully, almost to himself. "Me and Bud was over in Tulsa trying to raise the money. We should have gone with Rhea."

Rhea smiled at her father, a very different expression from the smiles that Grant had seen before. "It's all over now. We'll get the well going and let's not hear any more about Ben Farley." She looked at Grant. "You can throw your saddle in the back."

He hadn't meant to go any farther. He had meant to say good-by and start moving south again, but when he looked at her he knew that it would not be that easy. She was a strange girl, headstrong and ambitious. She was trouble, and he knew it. Yet, he heard himself saying "Thank you." And he threw the saddle in and climbed up himself.

Rhea and her father rode up front; Grant and Bud Muller braced themselves in the back of the buckboard as it lurched and swayed in the mud.

"You aiming to work for us, Mr. Grant?" Bud Muller asked.

The suddenness of the question threw Grant off guard. "Why do you

ask?"

"Rhea said you might."

Grant tugged his hat down on his forehead to hide the uneasiness in his eyes. "What else did your sister say?"

"That's all. It won't be an easy job, and it might be dangerous. I guess you wouldn't want it for what we could afford to pay."

Grant wasn't thinking about the pay, or the danger that might be involved in fighting a land speculator called Ben Farley. He was remembering how fast the marshal's office had gone into action, and thinking how much safer he would be in Texas.

He glanced at Bud and said, "I wasn't exactly looking for a job."

He should have said no. He should have said it at the station and stuck to it. But Rhea Muller had a way about her; she was a hard girl to say no to. Well, he thought, I guess it won't hurt to go out and see what an oil lease looks like. Tomorrow I'll come back and catch a freighter for Tulsa.

A little way from the boxcar depot old Muller stopped the buckboard and climbed down in front of a sheet-iron oil-well supply building. Rhea handed him the leather satchel.

"This won't take long," Muller said, "but you better take the buckboard back to the field, Bud. Somebody ought to be at the lease. I'll catch a ride out on one of Kurt Battle's freighters."

Bud Muller nodded. "Don't let Battle cheat you, just because tools and rig timbers are scarce."

"And watch the money," Rhea said. "It's all we've got until we're

spudded in.”

The old man grinned, then tramped through the mud toward the supply building. Grant and Bud moved up to the driver's seat, young Muller taking the lines.

Two heavy dray horses dragged the buckboard back into the slush of East Kiefer's main street. The road was jammed with heavy wagons headed for the Glenn ranch, big freighters loaded with derrick timbers, drill pipes, boilers, and newly dressed bits. Twelve mule hitches churned the mud axle deep in the middle of the road, so Bud kept to the side as much as possible.

There was frenzied activity everywhere, there was urgency in the air and excitement on men's faces. Grant shook his head in disbelief. “Are all oil towns like this?”

“At first they are,” Bud Muller said. “Bartlesville was something to see when it started, but Kiefer's already bigger. Glenn Pool will be the biggest oil strike in history before it's over.”

Oil, in terms of money, meant little to Joe Grant. He was used to dealing in more tangible things—a herd of cattle, or a few acres of cotton. It was hard to believe that a thing like oil could cause so much excitement.

It was a long six miles to the Glenn ranch where the discovery well had been brought in. The road was lined with hundreds of shacks and shanties, and storekeepers were building their sidewalks on stilts so that customers would not have to wade in the mud. Grant felt his face coloring as they passed a long string of cribs, but Rhea Muller gazed at them briefly, then looked away. She had seen it all before, many times in many other Kiefers.

Most of Rhea's coolness had disappeared since they left the train. Grant felt strangely uncomfortable at the nearness of her as the three of them rode together on the buckboard's narrow board seat, yet he did not try to move away. He tried to look straight ahead, but he could not keep from glancing at her from time to time. Once she turned and smiled at him, knowing that he had been staring at her.

"I think you will find the oil field interesting, Mr. Grant. You won't be sorry for taking the job with us."

For a moment Grant was too flustered to speak, and he busied himself with building a cigarette. What had she meant? He tried to tell himself that he hadn't taken a job with the Mullers—he'd just come along out of curiosity, to see what an oil field looked like. But he could feel Rhea Midler's warmth beside him... and he couldn't be very sure of anything.

At last they topped a small rise and Grant came erect as he stared down into that strange basin. At first he saw only the hundreds of dirty flapping tents in a glistening sea of mud, and then he became aware of the derricks, scores of them, wooden skeletons being hammered together against a stark background of scrub oak and rolling hills.

So this was Glenn Pool—to that time the richest discovery in the history of wildcatting. There was an excitement here that would not be ignored. Grant felt it. So did Bud and Rhea Muller.

"Well, there it is!" Bud said.

Grant turned to Rhea and he could see the flash of excitement in her eyes. And it was in her voice, too, when she spoke. "Look at the derricks—and more going up all the time! Bowling Green, Bartlesville, Cygnet—they were nothing compared to this!"

A new town of tents and tin shanties had sprung up near the discovery well, a small replica of Kiefer. This was Sabo, a sprawling, shapeless collection of cheap boardinghouses, eating places, secretive saloons, and dance halls. Some of the cribs and gambling houses were already beginning to move in from Kiefer. Grant was reminded of Dodge City on the wrong side of the deadline—but not even Dodge had run as wide open as Sabo and Kiefer.

Bud Muller hauled the buckboard around to the east of Sabo to escape some of the congestion. He looked at Grant, grinning. “What do you think of it?”

“I don't know. I never saw anything like it before.” He reached inside his windbreaker for tobacco and was comforted at the touch of the .45 in his waistband. “How far is it to this lease of yours?” he asked.

Bud pointed to a stand of blackjack in the distance. “That's Slush Creek. Our place is just on the other side.”

They moved away from Sabo into a man-made wilderness of half-completed derricks. The sound of hammering jarred the winter air as skeleton rigs rose slowly against the sky. Heavy freighters tore and slashed the ground with their big wheels until the red earth appeared to be bleeding. Grant stared about in fascination but always aware of Rhea Muller sitting close beside him.

Bud Muller forded the oil-spotted waters of Slush Creek and whipped the horses up the gentle incline. When they broke through the brush Grant saw a partly finished cellar, a small dugout shack, and a dirty tent. Two men working with shovels waved to them, and Bud and Rhea waved back.

This was the Muller lease. Grant stared out at that bleak expanse of red clay and scrub oak and felt his enthusiasm sink with

disappointment. It was impossible to believe that riches might be found in such a place.

Rhea Muller looked at him as though she could read his mind. "The oil is *under* the ground, Mr. Grant," she said wryly. Then she turned to her brother. "Bud, you go over and keep Morphy and Calloway busy on the cellar. We want it ready to lay the foundations as soon as the rig timbers get here. Mr. Grant can drive me to the dugout."

Young Muller nodded and vaulted out of the buckboard. Grant took the lines and nodded uncertainly toward the half shack of blackjack logs and mud plaster. "Is that where you live?"

She smiled. "That is the Muller home, Mr. Grant. You and the other hands will bunk in the tent until a bunkhouse can be built."

Grant half-opened his mouth, then closed it. He cracked the lines and moved the buckboard to the dugout. "Miss Muller," he said stiffly, "I think maybe we ought to talk before this goes any further."

Her eyes widened. "Talk about what?"

"Well, I don't think I'm the man you want; I don't know anything about the oil business." He felt uncomfortable, and the words sounded awkward. He decided it was best not to look at her as he talked.

"You can learn about the oil business," she said. "My brother and father can teach you." Surprisingly, she laughed.

"Anyway, it makes no difference. We want you to see that Ben Farley doesn't get a chance to wreck our well before we're spudded in; you don't have to know anything about the oil business."

Grant swallowed. "It isn't that exactly. I ought to be moving on."

She studied him for a moment, her eyes clear and calculating. "You're afraid of the law, is that it?"

He shrugged. As she had said, they understood each other.

For another long moment she was silent, then she dropped her head and gazed at the ground. "Would it make any difference if I said I wanted you to stay?"

He wasn't sure how she meant it. "To watch after the well, you mean?"

She lifted her head and looked at him. "Not just the well, Mr. Grant."

Suddenly she turned and fled down the sod steps and into the dugout, and Joe Grant stood uneasily in the mud, wondering if her words actually meant what he had taken them to mean. Several minutes passed and he tried to tell himself that this was the time to leave.

But he kept remembering the way she had looked at him. Could a girl like Rhea Muller have a personal interest in him—an outlaw?

At last he called, "Miss Muller."

There was no answer from the dugout.

He descended the sod steps and knocked on the plank door. Still there was no answer. He pulled the latchstring and stepped inside.

The dugout was one large room, the lower half dug into the earth, the upper half built up of logs and mud plaster. There was only one small high window in the room, but the walls had been plastered with clay and whitewashed, so it was almost as light as any other room. The furniture was mostly boxes and packing crates, all whitewashed. An

iron cookstove stood against one wall; a folding cot fitted into the corner of the opposite wall, the bedding rolled neatly at one end.

Rhea Muller stood rigidly beside the stove, her back to Grant. "Why don't you go?" she said tightly. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"I guess I don't really know what I want," Grant said. "Once I thought I wanted to be a cowhand, then a farmer."

"Then a bank robber?" she asked stiffly.

"No. I didn't want that; it was forced on me."

She turned then, and he was surprised to see that she had been crying. She did not seem the kind of girl who would cry very often.

"Miss Muller..." The words sounded thick. "Is anything wrong?"

"No!" she said bitterly, "nothing is wrong. Just get out and leave me alone!" She turned away quickly when Grant didn't move, and after a moment she said quietly, "My whole life is bound up in this small piece of red clay and blackjack... in a lease that has just thirty days to run." She made a quick gesture with one hand that indicated the entire room. "Do you think I like this, Mr. Grant? Living in a hole in the ground like a wild animal, living out the good years of my life in towns like Kiefer and Sabo? Well, I don't like it, Mr. Grant, but I can live with it for a few more months if it will help my father get his well."

She wheeled back to face Grant and her eyes were hard with resolution. "I mean to have this well! Nothing is going to stop me from having it!" And Grant had the uneasy feeling that she had forgotten that he was in the room... that she was making the vow to herself alone. Then she looked at him and some of the hardness went out of her eyes. After a brief pause she went on, "I want to live like other people. I want to live in a decent town. I want to forget the smell of oil

and the feel of mud.”

Grant was seeing a side of Rhea Muller that he had not known existed. She seemed tired and defeated; her mask of self-sufficiency had fallen away, leaving the evidence of fear in her expression. He moved awkwardly. “You can have all those things when the well comes in. There’ll be plenty of money then for anything you want.”

Surprisingly, she laughed, and the sound was bitter. “There have been other wells, but something always went wrong. Fires, explosions, lost tools. This time it’s Ben Farley.”

“He can’t hurt you. You’ve got the money to start the well, what could he do to stop it?”

She smiled thinly, “A million things. You don’t know Farley.”

For one long moment they stood there looking at each other, and Grant could feel his resolutions deserting him. Without her mask she was even more attractive than before; no longer was she cold and ambitious, but she was afraid.

“Joe.” It was the first time she had used his first name and the sound was little more than a whisper. She came toward him slowly, and said his name again. “Joe, we need you! We need a man who’s able and not afraid to fight—with guns, if necessary. My father’s too old. Bud’s too young....” She came closer, her chin tilted, her eyes looking directly into Grant’s. “Joe, we need you!”

He did not know how it happened, but suddenly she was in his arms, her face pressed hard against his chest. For one brief moment he held her gently, as if she were a child. But Rhea Muller was no child. She was storm and fire, like no other woman Joe Grant had ever known, and suddenly he held her hard against him.

“Joe, will you help us?”

“Have I got a choice?”

He had the brief impression that she was smiling, but the moment he found her mouth with his all other impressions fled his brain. Almost too late they heard the tramp of boots near the dugout, and Rhea pushed away, breathless, with high color in her cheeks.

“Rhea, you down there?” It was Bud Muller, and his voice was quick and edgy. Then the door burst open and young Muller shoved inside, looking directly at Grant. “Have you decided whether or not you're working for us?”

Grant shot a quick glance at Rhea, but she had donned her mask again and he could read nothing in her eyes. “I guess so, Bud. For a while, anyway.”

“Then your job has already started. Come with me.”

Rhea's eyes widened. Grant frowned, then nodded quickly and followed Bud up the sod steps. “What's the trouble?”

“You'll see soon enough. He's over at the bunk tent.”

They heard Rhea coming after them but neither man slowed his quick pace toward the flapping, clay-spattered side walls of the bunk tent. Grant threw back the flap and drew up for a moment staring at the man sitting on one of the half-dozen canvas cots. “Who is he?”

“Name's Robuck. Pa hired him yesterday to help dig the derrick cellar.”

The man looked at them briefly, his eyes still dull and slightly glazed. There was a cut along the side of his head above the left ear, his left

eye was blue and puffed, dried blood was caked on the left side of his face, and his nose was humped in the bridge where it had been broken. Grant turned to Rhea, who had pushed into the tent.

"You'd better get some water, iodine, and clean cloths." Then to the man, "What happened?"

The roustabout laughed harshly. "What does it look like?"

"Was it a fight?"

"Call it that if you want to." He got unsteadily to his feet, dragged a kit bag from under his cot, and began throwing his few belongings into it. "You can get my pay ready," he said to Bud. "I'm not working for you and your pa any more."

"You'd better lie down," Grant said quietly. "From the looks of that nose, you could use a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor. All I need is a one-way ticket out of the Territory, and that's what I aim to get!" He held his hand out to Bud. "I'll take my pay."

The man was more scared than hurt and Grant could see that he would be of no use to anybody until he got away from the men who had beaten him. Bud peeled off four dollars from a small roll and handed them to the roustabout. "Can you tell us who did it? And why?"

The man touched his nose gently and winced. "There were four of them; that's all I know. They said if I worked on the Muller lease again they'd kill me. I like you and your old man fine, but..." He left the word hanging, then picked up the kit bag and walked unsteadily out of the tent.

Grant grinned tightly and turned to Bud. "Is that a sample of Ben Farley's work?"

"It has to be Farley," the boy said angrily. "Nobody else has any interest in what happens to our lease." He dropped to one of the cots, clinching and unclenching his lean, work-roughened hands. "We've got two drillers that have been with us since Bartlesville; they won't scare easy. But we've got to have rig builders and roustabouts to get the derrick set up. That won't be easy, with Farley's men beating up every hand that comes on our lease."

The last thing Joe Grant wanted was trouble, and now he could feel trouble gathering around like thunderheads. At first it had seemed so simple—he'd just wanted to get his money from Ortway and settle down somewhere quiet and peaceful. Maybe, he thought, he just wasn't the peaceful kind. Maybe he was the kind that was dogged by trouble wherever he went....

Then Rhea Muller, without the bandages and medicine, came into the tent and Grant felt the sensation of strange excitement go over him when he looked at her. She said everything there was to say with one word. "Farley?"

Her brother nodded.

She looked at Grant. "We don't have to worry about Farley now. Mr. Grant is going to take care of everything."

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS WELL past dark when old Zack Muller got back to his lease that night. Pat Morphy and Lon Calloway, the two drillers, had gone to Sabo; Grant and Bud Muller were getting ready for bed in the bunk tent when the old man came in.

"You stop off at Sabo?" young Muller asked. The old man nodded heavily, warming himself at the oil-barrel stove in the center of the tent. "I heard about our roustabout. But that's only the beginning of the trouble; we can't get our tools and machinery in Kiefer; we'll have to go to Tulsa after them."

Bud swore harshly. "That'll mean a two-, three-day waste! Didn't Kurt Battle have the equipment?"

"Maybe." Zack Muller smiled weakly. "But he's not selling anything to the Muller lease." He turned to Grant. "Ben Farley's a big man in the Territory; he's got maybe a dozen locations and as many wells. If he pulled that much business away from Battle—well, you can see where that would leave an equipment dealer."

The picture of Ben Farley was growing clearer in Grant's mind, and it was a picture that he didn't like. "I can hire a wagon and go to Tulsa after the equipment. I think I could make it in two days."

But the old man shook his head. "I'd better do it. I know the dealers, and tools are hard to get. I'll take Bud with me, though, if you'll stay and look after Rhea and the lease."

Grant nodded, although he wasn't sure just how a man would go about "looking after" Rhea Muller if she didn't want to be looked after.

Within an hour the old man and the boy began walking back toward Sabo, leaving the one Muller saddle horse on the lease. Grant stood outside the bunk tent watching the two figures disappear into the dark brush along the banks of Slush Creek, and he saw Rhea Muller standing in the orange lamplight in front of the dugout. After her father and brother had disappeared she did not look in Grant's direction. He thought of calling to her, but by that time she had gone back into

the shack.

Grant had no idea how much work went ahead of building an oil derrick, but the next morning he began to learn. A cellar had to be dug, then came the slush pit and provisions for storage. A line had to be laid to the creek, for oil wells had to have water; a bunkhouse had to be built, and a place for the crew to eat.

Grant and Rhea Muller were standing in front of the dugout watching Calloway and Morphy work on the cellar. "They're drillers," Rhea said, "and good ones, too. Digging cellars is not their work but they know it's got to be done. Are you beginning to see what we're up against, Joe?"

She used his first name again, deliberately, and he could not forget that moment of excitement when he had held her hard against him. He looked away. "I could give Calloway and Morphy a hand."

But she shook her head. "We need a dozen hands—carpenters, rig builders, roustabouts."

"Somewhere in Sabo or Kiefer there must be that many men who aren't afraid of Farley."

"Maybe. But that isn't the whole problem. Labor is always at a premium in a new field; some of the promoters are even shanghaiing cowhands from the Cherokee country and turning them into tool dressers and carpenters. Even if we could find men willing to work for a Muller, we'd have to pay them a bonus, and we can't afford it. Still..."

She drew the word out, looking up at Grant. "When Bud and my father get back from Tulsa we've got to have everything ready to start building. Somewhere in Sabo or Kiefer there's a man named Turk

Valois; he's a 'runner.' Do you know what a runner is?"

Grant nodded. "At end-of-track towns, when the railroad was hard up for labor, a runner acted as go-between for the railroad and the workers."

"It's the same in an oil field; it's Turk Valois' business to round up labor for the lease owners, collecting a commission for each man that's hired. I want you to find Valois and talk to him. We've got to have workers and he's the only man who can get them for us."

There was something in her voice that made Grant frown. "Do you know this Valois very well?"

After a moment she nodded.

"Maybe it would be better if you talked to him. I could drive you over to Sabo..."

"No!" Grant was startled at the sudden viciousness. She stood ramrod straight, staring straight ahead. "I don't like Turk Valois, and he doesn't like me. But he's not tied to Farley, either, and he might be willing to help us if you talk to him."

There were other questions that Grant wanted to ask but he knew that he would get no answers. A coolness veiled her eyes as she turned toward him. "You'd better get started," she said brittlely. "I'll be all right on the lease with Calloway and Morphy." She wheeled and disappeared into the dugout.

Puzzled, Grant stood for a moment in front of the dugout. The name of Valois had thrown up a barrier of ice between them. Now, stronger than ever, he felt his instincts warning him of trouble ahead—and at the same time his notion of clearing out was getting weaker. When the idea occurred to him he remembered the day before when Rhea

had been soft and willing in his arms. It was a thing he could not forget. At one time or another in every man's life he toys with the thought of love—and Joe Grant guessed that was what he was doing now.

The Muller saddle horse was a claybank stallion that they kept in the dry grass along the banks of Slush Creek. Grant brought the animal up to the bunk tent, dragged his rig from under his cot and cinched it down on the claybank's back. The puzzle of Turk Valois still bothered him as he swung up to the saddle.

It was midmorning when Grant rode into the noise, mud, and confusion of Sabo. More tents and cardboard huts had sprung up overnight and the traffic of heavy freighters was heavier than ever. Grant swung over to the side of the road and called to a teamster. "I'm looking for a man named Valois, a runner. You know him?"

"Mister, everybody knows Turk Valois, but you won't find him in Sabo. You better try the Wheel House in Kiefer."

Grant lifted a hand in a vague salute and swung to the west on the main road to Kiefer. He rode along the edge of the congested road watching the endless chain of wagons headed for the Glenn ranch, and he began to notice how the men and even the horses looked alike in their urgency and greed. No one looked in his direction; they were too preoccupied to bother with strangers.

He had wanted to run for Texas, but now he knew that right here in the Creek Nation was the safest place he could possibly be. As he entered Kiefer, he observed the crowds working like ants along the stilted sidewalks. This man could be a killer, that one a thief—nobody cared.

He felt relief wash over him and suddenly had the impulse to laugh out loud. Nobody cared!

He rode the length of Kiefer's mile-long Main Street of shanties and shacks, stores and dance halls, illegal saloons and cribs, all wide open and brazen and noisy. They would never find him here!

For the first time in many hours he felt completely free and unhunted. He could let himself be caught up in this new kind of excitement and forget that he had ever known a man named Ortway or had robbed a bank in Joplin.

The Wheel House was part hotel, part gambling house and saloon. Grant tied up in the street and stepped up to the raised sidewalk; he shoved through the flow of humanity and into the interior of the Wheel House. The lobby was a mill of oilmen, strange men speaking strange languages, men clad in dirty corduroys and high-laced boots. The hotel desk was against the back wall; off to one side there was a long counter where cooks ladled steaming stew from an iron kettle; on the other side there were tables for gambling and drinking. The building was heated by several big oil-drum stoves against the walls and the air was rank and steamy.

Grant stood for a moment in the doorway thinking that this was Dodge all over again, except nowadays men wore their guns under their arms or in their waistbands instead of on their hips. He noticed the expressionless faces at the card tables—they were the same. And the easy-going drifters with the quick eyes. Everything was the same except for the dress and hidden guns, but it was on a larger scale than Dodge had ever known.

Grant moved inside and made his way back to the hotel desk where

a blunt-faced man said, "No vacancy, mister," without bothering to look at him.

"I'm looking for Turk Valois."

"He ain't here. You hirin' or lookin' for work?" It was a fair question; lease owners and roustabouts dressed alike in Kiefer.

"Hiring," Grant said, and nodded at a table. "I'll be over there."

He took the table and a waiter brought rotgut in a crock mug. Liquor was illegal in the Indian country, but that didn't bother the Kiefer businessmen; they served it from granite pots and called it coffee. It was a perfect example of boom-town law, and Grant smiled to himself.

But the smile froze. At first he didn't know what it was, he was only aware of a sudden uneasiness. He sat for a moment, wondering, then he shoved back in his chair and looked around. And there he was—the marshal.

The deputy marshal that had searched the train.

The marshal that Rhea had lied to.

And he was looking straight at Grant.

A squat, stone-faced man with a crooked nose and glazed blue eyes, the marshal shouldered through the crowd of oilmen and walked toward Grant's table. "I was trying to peg you," the lawman said bluntly. "I knew I'd seen you somewhere but I couldn't set the time or place."

Grant made himself grin, but words grew solid in his throat.

"I've got you now," the marshal said soberly. "You were on the train, the one we searched yesterday in the Cherokee Nation. You were asleep with your hat over your face, but I spotted that hair right off. You've got a peculiar-colored head of hair, mister, did anybody ever tell you that?"

Grant felt his belly fall and shrink. "Well..."

"You were with a girl. Her name was Malloy, wasn't it?"

Was this a trick? Was the marshal merely amusing himself before arresting him? Grant swallowed. "Muller," he said. "I work for her father."

"That's right; she told me. And your name's Grant."

Grant felt the rapid pumping of his heart. His hands were cold but there was sweat on his forehead. "That's right, Marshal, Joe Grant. Is there anything I can help you with?"

There was just a chance that this scare was for nothing. There was a chance that this was all coincidence and the best thing to do was to bluff it out.

The marshal smiled, but even then his face looked sour and the expression never reached his eyes. "I guess not... unless you happen to know a man named Fennway, Morry Fennway."

Stay calm! Grant told himself. Bluff it out, he might not know a thing. "Morry Fennway?"

"A farmer up Joplin way. Before that he was a cowhand, a drover." He leaned heavily on the table, gazing bleakly into the liquor-filled mug. "A big fellow—about your size, I'd say, only this Fennway had light hair."

Grant had an almost irresistible urge to pull his hat down over his ears to hide his hair. But he sat quietly and was surprised to hear his voice come out calm and unruffled. "Well, Marshal, if I happen to see such a man I'll let you know."

The corners of the lawman's smooth mouth turned up but the expression was as unreal as a smiling mask. "You do that. The name's Dagget; likely you'll be able to find me here in Kiefer." He nodded and turned away.

Slowly—very slowly—Grant felt his breathing come back to normal, but an iciness gripped him. The impulse to run was almost irresistible. "He doesn't know a thing!" Grant tried to tell himself. "He's just guessing!"

But the guessing was too close for comfort. Dagget was suspicious of all big men who fit Morry Fennway's general description, and suspicious men were dangerous. I've got to get away from here, he thought. Out of the Indian Nations, out of the whole Territory!

But thoughts of running were born in panic. He took control of his instincts and looked at his situation coolly, as an outsider would look at it. As Dagget would look at it.

Running, he knew, would be the worst mistake he could make. A show of panic would bring the marshal down on him so fast he wouldn't know what hit him. His big mistake had been the day before when he'd let Rhea Muller talk him into coming to Kiefer—but it was too late to change that now.

He was here. He'd have to make the best of it.

All right, he thought, as the chill began to leave. I'll bluff it out. After all, what did the marshal really know? Grant had been on the train, and

now a coincidence had brought him and the marshal together again in Kiefer and that had started the wheels to turning in Dagget's steel-trap brain. But what did he actually know?

Nothing.

This knowledge made Grant feel better—he felt almost good as he downed part of the rotgut from his coffee cup. Probably Dagget had a dozen men lined up that would fit Fennway's general description; it didn't mean a thing. The lawman was groping in the dark, grabbing at anything he could find....

Still, Grant hadn't expected the marshal's office to work quite so fast on a Missouri bank robbery. It was something to think about.

From the corner of his eye he saw Dagget leave the Wheel House, and Grant sat quietly for another hour before another man shoved through the crowd toward the table.

"I'm Turk Valois. The clerk said you want to talk."

He was a big man but most of his weight was in his shoulders and chest; his face was weathered and clean-shaven; he wore a gaudy mackinaw and the usual laced boots. "You want workers?" he said, kicking out a chair and sitting across the table from Grant. "Well, I'm the man to come to. You got your outfit spudded in?"

"No, we need rig builders."

Valois whistled softly. "Rig men are hard to come by these days. What lease you working for?"

"The Mullers," Grant said carefully.

For a moment Valois said nothing, showed nothing. It seemed

almost that blinds had been drawn behind his eyes to shut out what he was thinking. "The Mullers," he said thoughtfully. "Well, the old man's a fine old Dutchman and a pretty good wildcatter. The boy's all right, too. But Rhea..." He grinned thinly, showing a row of amazingly white teeth. "I'm sorry..."

"Grant. Joe Grant."

"I'm sorry, Grant, I'm afraid I can't help you." He started to get up and Grant reached out a hand and stopped him.

"Look, Valois, the Mullers need those rig builders pretty bad. Rhea says you're the only man that can help us—I want to know why you won't do it."

Small circles of color appeared high on the runner's cheeks. "It's none of your business, Grant."

"I'm making it my business."

Latent violence lay over the table like an electrical storm. Grant felt the rippling of thick muscles as he held Valois' forearm above the wrist, and he knew instinctively that the runner was not the kind to run from a fight. Strangely, he found himself liking the big man, even as he prepared to block the blow that he could see coming.

But in an instant something subtle happened, the electricity disappeared, and with calm deliberateness Valois took Grant's hand in his and removed it from his arm. "Maybe I was wrong," the runner said. "Maybe it is your business."

He settled back in his chair, his shaded eyes flicking about at Grant's face. "All right, I'll tell you why I won't help you. The Mullers are poison in Kiefer; Ben Farley's got his mind set to take the Muller lease, and that's the way it's going to be. If I tried to help, my business would be

ruined overnight. Anyway, the word is out that Muller's on Farley's black list—do you think rig builders are going to take a job that'll pay off in cracked skulls? You might as well forget it, Grant; you can't fight Farley on his home grounds."

"I've heard all that," Grant said. "It's funny, you didn't strike me as the kind of man to take bullying."

But in some quiet way they had come to understand each other, and Valois refused to be ruffled. "Call me a businessman. Going against Farley is bad business."

"I think it's more than that," Grant said gently. "I think it has something to do with Rhea Muller."

They looked at each other, quietly meshing their thoughts, judging each other's potential. At last Valois shook his head. "I'm sorry for you, Grant. I'm sorry for any man unlucky enough to fall in love with Rhea—I did it once myself."

Grant made a small sound of surprise and came erect in his chair.

"That was in Bartlesville," Valois went on calmly, "not so long ago. I was a land man then with a string of leases. Everybody thought I was going to be a millionaire, and Rhea was sweeter than clover honey—until all my wells came in dusters." He laughed, and the sound was not pleasant. "We were going to be married. We were going to move to Oklahoma City, and when statehood came we'd be one of the first families in Oklahoma." He pulled his hat down on his forehead. "But a few dry holes changed all that."

Grant did not move. He wanted to be angry but he could see that Turk Valois was telling the truth. The truth as he knew it.

"What does she want from you, Grant? Money? You don't look like you have enough money for Rhea, so it must be something else."

Mentally, Grant closed his ears, for he didn't want to hear any more. But he could not forget the day before when Rhea had come so willingly into his arms. What had she wanted? His protection? The use of his strength and his gun? Was that the way she got the things she wanted?

He got up and walked out of the Wheel House.

Hunching his shoulders into the bite of that December wind, he tramped numbly up the crowded boardwalk, past the noisy gambling houses and dance halls, past the shacks where the painted 49er girls lived and plied their calling, past clusters of tents and sheet-iron shanties. He cursed himself, and thanked Valois for showing him the truth.

He had known the truth all along, of course, but because of a pretty face and a softly rounded feminine form he had chosen to ignore it. He could ignore it no longer. He was an outlaw. What would a girl like Rhea Muller want from an outlaw?

Abruptly he stopped his pacing, turned, and headed in the opposite direction. He left the sidewalk and tramped through the mud toward the shunted boxcar that served as a depot. "When's the next train to Vinita?" he called up to the ticket agent.

The agent pointed to a chalked schedule on the side of the boxcar. "Nine o'clock tomorrow mornin'."

Tomorrow morning. Well, he could wait. Let Dagget think what he would about his leaving—there were worse things than jail, and being made a fool of was one of them.

It was Dagget who shook him awake that night, or early morning. Grant, sleeping at one of the Wheel House's corner tables, felt the hard hands on his shoulders shaking him steadily. He heard the toneless voice chanting as monotonously as a machine:

"Come out of it, Grant. Come out of it."

Grant opened his eyes and slowly unfolded himself from his cramped position. The lobby was as bright as day with gasoline lanterns, and somewhere in the town a voice yelled and a piano sounded harshly against the noisy background of the Kiefer night. The glare of the lanterns made him blink.

"Who is it?"

"Jim Dagget. Come out of it, I say."

It was the marshal. Vaguely, Grant wondered if he had somehow learned the truth and had come with gun and handcuffs to take him back to Joplin.

"You want some black coffee?" the marshal asked.

"I'm not drunk, I was just sleeping."

Dagget fixed a steady gaze on his face. "Seems to me you ought to be back at the Muller lease, if that's where you're workin'."

Grant started to tell him that he wasn't working for the Mullers any more, but then decided there was no sense making things worse. He licked his dry lips, wondering how much longer he had to wait till nine o'clock. How much longer before he could put Kiefer and its brief memories behind him. Providing, of course, that Dagget didn't take

him away first.

"What is it?" he asked, staring up at the marshal's expressionless face.

"You work for Zack Muller. Is that right?"

Frowning, Grant nodded.

"The old man's dead," Dagget said bluntly. "He was killed tonight while bringing some drilling equipment back from Tulsa."

CHAPTER SIX

GRANT WOULD NOT soon forget the day they buried old Zack Muller in the lonely hillside plot to the north of "Tulsa Town," as some still called it. There was the bite of steel in the wind and flurries of sleet slashed intermittently at the small group of mourners. The Methodist preacher was a small, thin man, thin-blooded and blue-lipped, and Grant could hear the chattering of his teeth as he rushed headlong through the final graveside service.

The sky that day was as dark as oil smoke, boiling in the north, and the ground was as hard as iron. All morning long Grant and Morphy and Calloway had hacked and gouged at the frozen ground, building Zack Muller's final resting place in a hard land. Now it was almost over. The wind howled along the hillside, whipping the tall grasses, snatching the words from the preacher's mouth.

Grant, hat in hand, ducked his head a little deeper into the collar of his windbreaker and let his gaze sweep over the hard blue faces that surrounded the grave. Morphy and Calloway had been Muller's friends, and their loss showed starkly in their eyes. There were several men whose names were unknown to Grant; they were strong,

square-built men in ill-fitting blue serge suits and sheep-lined coats with the smell of black oil and wild gas about them. They were foreign men, the wildcatters; they were men of Zack Muller's own creed.

These were the wanderers, the restless ones, the gamblers and the dreamers. Muller had been one of them, had faced the same dangers, had wandered with them from Pennsylvania to Ohio to Indian Territory, had tasted with them oil scum from many unnamed creeks and ponds, had followed the doodle bugger's bewitched hickory switch from one strange place to the other. And now...

Grant set his jaw and gazed hard at the boiling sky. The old man was dead. Grant hadn't known Muller long, but he could feel the loss.

The preacher closed his book. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." And like two huge, awkward puppets, Morphy and Calloway took up their shovels and began filling the grave. So, Grant thought bitterly, this is where Zack Muller's wandering ends. With a bullet in his back he died. In foreign ground he is buried....

Carefully—very carefully—Grant had guided his thoughts around Ben Farley. He warned himself that he must be sensible and stay out of it. No matter what he had thought of Zack Muller, this fight was between the Mullers and Farley.

He would go back to Kiefer with them. He would see that the drilling equipment got to the lease, but there his obligation ended. With Dagget watching, he couldn't afford to stay in Indian Territory any longer than he had to.

But when he looked at Rhea Muller all his sensible resolutions grew soft and spineless. She stood there at the graveside, her eyes as

bleak as the day itself, as cold and passionless as some beautiful piece of ice statuary. And, as Grant looked at her, he forgot all the things that Turk Valois had said, and he wished only that there was something that he could do or say that might erase some of the chiseled bitterness from her face.

Grant watched as Bud Muller took his sister's arm and led her away toward the spring buggy that would take them back to Kiefer. Her expressionless face did not change. She shed no tear.

The rest of the small congregation began to break up. Grant turned stiffly and started toward the bottom of the hill when he saw a thick, squat figure coming toward him. It was the marshal.

"I want to talk to you, Grant."

That familiar sensation of uneasiness sank heavily in Joe Grant's belly. Was Dagget following him? Why else would the marshal make a trip to Tulsa on a day like this?

Dagget rubbed his hands vigorously and then plunged them into the pockets of his canvas windbreaker. "You going back to the Muller lease?" he asked.

Self-consciously, Grant pulled his hat down on his forehead and nodded.

"Keep an eye on young Muller. Don't let him do anything crazy."

"What makes you think he'll do something crazy?"

Dagget was studying him carefully without appearing to do so. He pulled up his collar and ducked his head into the wind. "I've seen it happen before," he said shortly, "after the shock wears off."

Then Grant saw Pat Morphy getting in the buggy with Rhea, and Bud was climbing the hill again heading in their direction. He stopped in front of the marshal and said bluntly, "Have you arrested Farley?"

Dagget narrowed his eyes, then shook his head.

"Are you going to?" There was something in the boy's eyes that Grant didn't like: a wildness straining to be unleashed.

"That depends on how the evidence turns up against him," the marshal said carefully. "Farley claims he was on one of his leases when the killing took place, and he's got witnesses to back him up."

"Witnesses can lie," Bud Muller said flatly. "Or Farley could have hired somebody to do it. It was Farley, all right, one way or the other."

"If it was, I'll get him."

The wind howled around them, and a scattering of snow appeared in the flurry of sleet. "You'd better get him, Marshal," Bud Muller said tightly, almost hissed, "before I do!"

It was near noon when Grant, Lon Calloway, and Bud Muller pulled out of Tulsa with a new team and a hired freighter. The town—a scattering of frame buildings and houses spread out along the banks of the Arkansas—fell behind them. They traveled in hard, bitter silence as the minutes and miles stretched out behind them, and at last Lon Calloway made an abrupt sound as they came in sight of an overturned freighter.

The big wagon was over on its side and heavy derrick timbers and machinery were strewn over the ground. This, Grant thought, was where it happened. This was where Zack Muller died.

Another big freighter loaded with boiler, donkey engine, and drill pipe stood unharmed in some timber. This was the wagon that Bud had been in.

In his mind Grant pictured the action as Bud had related it. The night had been black, and the two wagons had just begun to enter the stand of timber. From the high ground a voice had called out—a rifle spoke. The team of the lead wagon had bolted in panic; the freighter crashed into the deep ruts and overturned. Zack Muller, leaping away from the wagon, grabbed his shotgun and tried to fight the shapeless figures that milled in the darkness. The rifle spoke again.

That's all there was to it, the way Bud Muller told it. There had been four horsemen planted there to block them and destroy the equipment, but probably they hadn't expected a fight. And probably their instructions hadn't called for murder.

But the old man was dead. The fight went out of the attackers; they vanished in the darkness without bothering the other wagon. And that was the way Bud Muller had found his father, with a length of drill pipe across his chest, a bullet in his back.

Joe Grant could see it clearly in his mind's eye as they drew nearer to the overturned freighter. The vague shape of a nightmare snapped into focus and became reality, and he felt for himself some of the grief and rage that stared out of Bud Muller's pale blue eyes.

Three oilmen from Kiefer—friends of Muller—huddled around a small fire, guarding the scattered equipment. They got up and walked stiffly to the rutted road when they saw the wagon coming. Shotguns cradled in their arms, they stood for a moment looking at Bud, but they did not ask about their friend or the funeral which they knew was over. Lon Calloway climbed down from the freighter and stamped

some feeling into his feet.

"Well, I guess we might as well get this stuff loaded."

When they reached Kiefer the next day, they were stiff, red-eyed from want of sleep and half-frozen. Bud Muller pulled the lead wagon up in front of the Wheel House and motioned the other one on toward Sabo.

For several hours Grant had wondered about the bulge of a revolver under the boy's windbreaker, and now he looked at the cold savagery in Bud Midler's eyes and understood why the marshal had issued his warning.

"Since we're this close to the lease," Grant said, "don't you think we might as well keep going?"

"You can take the wagon if you want to."

Bud rose stiffly from the wagon seat and climbed over the wheel, leaving the lines in Grant's hands. There was trouble in the air, in the cutting wind; it had the taste of iron. Grant felt his brain numb with fatigue. Where Bud went, trouble was sure to follow. This much Grant knew instinctively, and he was afraid of it. The harder a man tried to steer clear of trouble, the harder it seemed to hound him.

With a weary shrug of defeat, Grant whipped the lines around the brake lever and climbed down to the frozen mud. He caught Bud Muller at the Wheel House door.

"This is my fight, Grant," young Muller said tightly. "Let me handle it myself."

Grant had the discomforting feeling that all his future was crumbling under his feet, but he was too exhausted and numb to care. "It may be more fight than one man can handle. Have you thought of that?"

Bud looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "All right, suit yourself."

They stepped into the hot, steamy interior of the Wheel House lobby and a kind of uneasy silence fell over the crowd of oilmen. Grant raked the room with a cautious glance and noticed Turk Valois sitting against the wall studying the scene thoughtfully. Then one of the oilmen, an old-timer with a full beard and a worried face, shouldered his way up to young Muller.

"We know how you feel, Bud. All of us were friends of your pa, but it won't help to go lookin' for trouble."

"I'm looking for justice," Bud Muller said shortly. "Where's Farley?"

The old man's eyes grew cautious. "What do you want with Ben Farley?"

"Is he here?"

Then, as if they had acted with one mind, all eyes turned toward the back of the lobby where a flight of plank stairs led up to the hotel half of the Wheel House. A man stood on the first landing gazing blandly down at the crowd, and somehow Grant knew that this was Ben Farley.

Bud Muller stiffened like a hunting dog catching its first scent of prey. Grant moved a bit to one side and tried to make himself inconspicuous as he loosened his windbreaker. Eyes darted from Bud to the man on the stairs, but for one brief moment there was almost complete silence. Gamblers forgot their cards. Drinkers

paused with cups halfway to their mouths.

A strange calm settled over Grant and thoughts of his own safety slipped from his mind as he studied Ben Farley.

Farley was not a man to be liked on first sight, if ever. There was an air of cold superiority about him that Grant found easy to hate; he smiled only with his mouth, his eyes never seemed to focus completely on any single point. For some reason Grant had expected a big man; Farley was short, compact, and bullish. With a show of polished arrogance he selected a thin cigar from his vest pocket and rolled it between his full lips.

"Did I hear someone mention my name?" he asked quietly.

Now something else happened that Grant didn't like. Two oil-field roustabouts began moving casually toward the back of the lobby and took their places near the foot of the stairs. These were Farley's men—there was no mistake about it.

Grant moved closer to Bud and said quietly, "This is the wrong time and wrong place. If you've got to have it out with Farley, choose your own ground."

Bud Muller didn't even hear him. He began moving forward, his gaze of rage never leaving Farley's face. He said hoarsely:

"I'm going to kill you, Farley!"

The oilman's expression didn't change, he didn't even blink. He bit the end of his cigar between amazingly white teeth and casually puffed until it was burning evenly. Then he sauntered down the stairs and stood between his two roustabouts. "Get out of Kiefer, son," he said lightly, "before you find more trouble than you can handle."

A slow, ragged sound like a wolf's snarl escaped from young Muller's throat and he sprang at Farley before Grant could stop him. Strangely, Grant was not dismayed. Without his knowing it, a violence had been building up inside him, and his mouth stretched in a thin, bitter grin as the boy grabbed at Farley's throat.

Almost instantly the crowd parted, pressing back against the walls. Farley stepped back quickly and knocked Bud to one side with a violent chopping of his right hand. One of the roustabouts grabbed the boy and sent him sprawling at Grant's feet.

The oilman looked at Grant. "I've got nothing against you, stranger. Take your young friend and get out of Kiefer."

Possibly it was the brazen arrogance in Farley's voice that struck the spark. Even as Grant lunged forward, he knew that it was a fool thing to do. He and Bud had no chance against Farley and his two roustabouts—besides, there was no way of knowing how many more of Farley's men were in the lobby. But in the back of his consciousness he stood once again on that windy, snow-swept hill outside of Tulsa. He saw Rhea Muller's face as they lowered her father into the rock-hard grave. Suddenly—for the first time—he actually connected the face before him with the man who had killed Zack Muller.

The anger that had lain cold inside him suddenly burst into violence. He lunged to Farley's left, driving his fist into the man's middle. He experienced a savage satisfaction on hearing the oilman's breath whistle between his teeth—but the satisfaction was short-lived. One of the roustabouts stepped in quickly and clubbed Grant to one side with a hamlike fist. The other roustabout spun him around and hammered him to the floor.

Grant fell, dazed, his violence gone. There was a ringing of a

thousand iron bells in his head. The lobby roared. A blunt, steel-capped boot slammed in his ribs as he attempted to gain his feet, and he went sprawling again.

He lay breathless for an instant wondering if Farley and his two roustabouts were armed.

It didn't matter. Farley and his men didn't need guns; they were equipped to do their job to perfection with fists and heavy oil-field boots. Now Bud Muller was on his feet again, snarling like a cougar, a small river of blood flowing from his nose and mouth. Grant rolled quickly, escaping another slashing kick of a steel-capped boot. He got to his feet, swaying, and met the roustabout head-on.

But the odds against them were too great. Farley himself, calm and unruffled, stepped in to furnish the quick, finishing blows to Bud Muller while the two roustabouts lunged for Grant.

For a moment a bright, futile savagery took hold of him and he felt the strength of two men flow through him. He jerked his knee hard into the groin of the nearest roustabout, then, turning, he whirled to meet the attack on the other side. For that instant, in his anger, he felt that he could whip the world—but the instant was soon over. Something hard, solid, crashed into the back of his head and he fell forward into blackness.

The blackness was lighted with bright pain that shot this time through his side and he knew that the roustabouts were again at work with their steel-capped boots. He tried to roll away, but the boots followed him. He tried to block the kicks with his arm and felt a blunt numbness spread over his shoulder.

He saw that Bud was down again, fighting for the revolver in his waistband. Unhurriedly, Ben Farley stepped up and kicked it out of

the boy's hand.

Farley himself was holding a blunt double-action .38—and Grant knew instantly what had struck him from behind. Instinctively, he started to grab for his own revolver, then realized that the oilman was waiting for him to do just that. Farley smiled and leveled the muzzle at Grant's head, waiting quietly for some slight excuse to pull the trigger.

It would not be called murder. Farley had not asked for this fight—it was a clear case of self-defense and he was waiting for Grant to make the wrong move.

Then something happened—something so surprising that Farley blinked and lost his smile. A voice said:

“That's enough!”

It was a harsh, edgy voice that cut through the uproar. The roustabouts stopped their methodical kicking, Farley turned his head slightly, a shade of anger falling over his eyes. Then Turk Valois stepped to the center of the lobby, holding a single-action .45 on Farley and the two roustabouts.

“Stay out of this, Valois!” Farley said shortly.

“I'm already in it,” the runner said, advancing. Then, quickly, “And don't get the idea you can outshoot me, Farley. You can't.”

Evidently the oilman believed him. After a brief hesitation, he shrugged, then casually slipped the .38 into a holster under his left arm. Only the tightness of his mouth and his shaded eyes betrayed his rage.

“You're making a bad mistake, Valois,” he said quietly.

"I've made them before." He motioned for the roustabouts to get back. "Get out, both of you."

They looked to Farley for orders, but the oilman said nothing. After a moment they turned and shoved their way toward the door. The corners of Farley's mouth twitched as he regained his expressionless smile. He looked for a long while at the runner, then at Grant and the boy. "Well all be meeting again," he said quietly, "one way or another."

Ramrod-straight, proud as Beauregard, he turned and walked out of the Wheel House lobby.

CHAPTER SEVEN

VALOIS KNEELED BESIDE Grant. "How do you feel?"

"All right. You'd better look after the boy."

An uneasy hum, a buzz of trouble, hung over the Wheel House lobby as the runner turned to Bud Muller and helped him sit up. "You're all right." Valois grinned. "You'll have to be careful how you sleep, and maybe eat out of the side of your face, but that's all." He looked at Grant. "I've got a room upstairs. You and the kid can come up there and wash up.

They made a sorry sight limping across the Wheel House lobby. Grant grasped a banister, staring up at the second-floor landing, and the top of those stairs seemed higher than the Rockies. Trouble! he thought wryly. Well, he was in it now, up to his neck!

His ribs ached from the kicking they had taken from the roustabouts' boots. His shoulder was still numb, and he tried to rub some feeling

into it as they dragged up the rickety stairs.

Valois' room was a bleak, naked box of raw pine planking with a folding cot and an unpainted washstand as its only furniture. But in Kiefer, where an eight-hour rental of a flophouse cot cost five dollars or more, this bare room amounted to a royal suite. The runner poured water from a pitcher into a chipped granite washpan and gave them a dirty shirt to dry on.

Grant and Bud Muller took their turns at the washpan, and the shock of cold water was a help; it made the world a little more real and a little less nightmarish than it had been before. Valois leaned against a plank wall, vaguely amused.

"That was a fool thing to do," he said, "jumping Farley here in the Wheel House."

Grant felt the knot on the back of his head. "It wasn't my idea."

Bud Muller turned slowly, his smooth young face set like concrete. "I should have killed him!" he said hoarsely. "I should have shot him before saying a word!"

"Do you think that would have been smart?" Valois asked quietly.

"He killed my father!"

But now that some of his anger had burned itself out, Grant was beginning to wonder about other things. He sat carefully on the edge of the runner's cot and fixed his gaze on Valois. "I guess we owe you a good deal for lending us a hand down there. Next time I'll be acquainted with Farley's rules and maybe I can handle my own trouble." He frowned. "Why did you do it, Valois?"

Bud Muller looked puzzled, too, and was waiting for an answer.

Surprisingly, Valois laughed. "Why does anybody make a fool of himself? Take yourself," nodding at Grant. "What good reason do you have for getting mixed up in this kind of trouble?"

Grant nodded but he was not satisfied. "You've got more to lose than I have. You said yourself that Farley could ruin your business, if you turned him against you. Did you think of that when you threw down on him?"

The runner's eyes narrowed. "I've got no cause to like Farley; not many people have. Yes, I thought about my business before I stepped in." He strode to the room's small single window and gazed down at Kiefer's muddy street. "If I had it to do over again, I don't know as I would do the same thing—but I'm not going to have that chance. I'll have to take my business where I can find it, whether Farley likes it or not. Do you still want those rig builders and roustabouts for the Muller lease?"

Grant and young Muller made small sounds of surprise.

"I think I might be able to rake up some men who'd be willing to work against Farley," Valois went on. "But they won't be the kind of men you want; they'll be hard cases, drunkards, the scrapings of the barrel."

Grant glanced at Bud Muller, and the boy nodded.

"How soon can you get them to the lease?"

"Tomorrow morning maybe. It depends on how big a scare Farley throws into this town."

"Get them," Bud Muller said, but his face showed that he was worried. "There's just one thing, Valois, that you ought to know. I don't

think it's going to do you any good with Rhea."

The runner smiled. "I hope you're right," he said dryly. "I'm fighting Farley now—that's all the trouble one man can rightly handle."

The crowd in the lobby parted and stared curiously as Grant and Bud made their way down the stairs and out to the sidewalk. They were marked men. Every glance in their direction was a speculative one. How long would it be before Farley finished them? Suddenly they had become untouchables; their names were on Ben Farley's black list. Grant was just beginning to realize how strong a man Ben Farley was.

They climbed stiffly over the freighter's wheel and dropped heavily to the driver's seat. Grant breathed deeply, and as bright needles of pain shot through him he experienced the exhilaration of a new kind of anger.

For the first time he saw that fight with Farley as a personal matter. The throbbing at the base of his skull, the pain in his side, and the numbness of his arm—they would be with him for a long time to remind him of Farley.

And after they were gone he would still remember.

Silently, he took up the lines, and the horses strained obediently in the harness. Bud Muller rode like some mute stone god of hate, and Grant could only guess what went on inside the boy's mind. The freighter dragged slowly through the slush of Kiefer, forming another bulky link in the endless chain of wagons along that deep-rutted road between Kiefer and the Glenn ranch. The town had grown overnight; it was even noisier and dirtier than Grant remembered it from the day before, yet many of the business places were already leaving Kiefer, especially the dance halls, the crib girls, the gamblers. They were

picking up and moving on to Sabo.

Grant was getting used to it, the way he had got used to trail towns and end-of-track towns of the past. Still he didn't like it—and suddenly he remembered something that Rhea had said to him. *Do you think I like living out the good years of my life in towns like Kiefer and Sabo?*

Now, thinking calmly, he felt that he understood Rhea Muller a little better than before. Even the fire of her ambition and greed became more understandable.

Then caution stepped in to guide his thinking. It was all right to understand her, if he could, but nothing more. He must keep one thing clear in his mind—any argument he had with Farley was a personal one, it had nothing to do with Rhea Muller.

They rode on in silence, the jolting freighter starting new pains in Grant's head and side, then he saw a horseman coming toward them, quartering across an open field from the direction of Kiefer. Grant stared, then shrunk a bit into his windbreaker, as though he hoped to make his identity unknown.

Marshal Jim Dagget reined alongside the freighter, his eyes hard, his mouth a cruel slash across his blunt face. With a jerk of his head he motioned Grant to pull off the road, and then he sat for a moment, his anger fixed on Bud Muller.

"So you wouldn't listen, would you?" he snarled. "The law wasn't fast enough for you, was it! You had to take it on yourself to see that *justice* was done!"

The color of outrage mounted steadily in the lawman's face, and for the moment Bud Muller was his sole target. "There's one thing I want

you to listen to and I want you to get it straight: from now on I'll see that justice is done. I intend to catch the man who murdered your father, but I'll do it my own way, with no help from you. Do you understand?"

Young Muller hadn't been prepared for this outburst. He looked surprised, then angry.

"I said," the marshal's voice cracked, "do you understand?"

There was a savagery there that not even Bud Muller in his state of grief could fail to understand. Jim Dagget was a lawman; the law and its enforcement were his life. He was letting it be known beyond all doubt that he would allow no man to ride over him.

Bud understood. The marshal's anger was the only thing that had penetrated the hard core of his bitterness, and at last he nodded.

"I hope you do," Dagget said, and this time his voice was not quite so harsh. "Farley could have shot you dead on the Wheel House floor and he would have gone scot free, because he had the law on his side. That's what he would have done, too, from what I hear, if it hadn't been for Turk Valois."

Now he fixed his anger on Grant. It was more than just a look—it was something else as well, a look of suspicion. "And you," Dagget said thoughtfully, almost as if his mind were somewhere else. "I thought I told you to see that this kind of thing didn't happen."

"I didn't have much to say about it."

But a subtle shift of attention had taken place in the marshal's eyes. Then, abruptly, "You planning to stay on at the Muller lease?"

Grant nodded. There was nothing else to do.

Dagget's mouth turned up slightly in that smiling expression that was not a smile at all, and suddenly he reined his horse around. As suddenly as he had come, he was gone. Grant's mouth was dry, and beneath his windbreaker he was sweating. What was going on in that mind of Dagget's? What was he thinking, what did he suspect, and how much did he know? He couldn't know so very much, Grant reasoned, or he would have taken him back to Joplin.

Just the same, something was going on behind the marshal's shaded eyes; Grant could see the wheels begin to turn every time Dagget looked in his direction, and he didn't like it. He had the feeling that Dagget was amusing himself, toying with him like a cat toying with a crippled sparrow. If he ran, it would only focus the marshal's suspicions. If he stayed, Dagget would finally work out the answer in that methodical brain of his.

Grant smiled wryly, without humor. Damned if I do, he thought, and damned if I don't. Then he realized that Bud Muller was looking at him.

"Grant..." The word hung for a moment as the boy wrestled with his thoughts. "Now that my father is... gone, it's up to me to run the lease. Me and Rhea. We're going to need your help." He looked away, staring down at his big hands. "I guess I lost my head back at the Wheel House, and what Dagget said was right. He's a good man. Sooner or later he'll get Farley, but it will have to be done his way. That might not be quick enough to save the lease."

"Dagget strikes me as a man who doesn't overlook much. He won't forget the lease."

"But Farley won't be easy to break, not even for a man like Dagget. He wants the lease bad and he'll stop at nothing to get it. But if

Valois gets us the rig builders we'll have a chance. It'll be dangerous..." He paused and looked up. "I'm trying to say I want you to go on working for us."

"I haven't been much help so far."

"You were a help to Rhea back at Vinita." He smiled bitterly. "I guess we didn't do much against Farley and his two roustabouts, but I learned one thing, Grant—you were on my side. I guess that's what we need most, somebody like you that we can trust."

It would have been amusing if the joke hadn't had such a bitter twist. Grant became aware of the money belt under his shirt—twenty-five hundred dollars that legally belonged to a bank in Joplin. He wondered how long Bud would want him if he knew the whole story.

But that was in the past. He said, "Do you think you can depend on Valois to deliver the workers?"

Bud Muller nodded. "He's declared himself now; he'll have to fight Farley or be run out of Kiefer."

"How much does your sister have to do with Valois' decision to throw in with us?"

The question didn't surprise the boy, but he sat for a long while, his face blank, before he answered. "I'm not so young," he said finally, "that I don't know that my sister's attractive to men. I've seen you look at her... and others. I guess Turk had it pretty hard in Bartlesville."

"Did he get over it?"

Bud smiled thinly and shook his head. "I guess you'll have to ask Turk about that."

A thousand questions crowded into Grant's mind, but he could see that Bud had said all he was going to say about his sister. The boy asked, "Will you stay on the job, Grant?"

With Dagget looking over his shoulder, what choice did he have? He said dryly, "We'll try it awhile and see how it works out."

The next morning Turk Valois came with the workers and grinned when he saw the look on Grant's face. "They don't look like much, do they? Well, I warned you they'd be the scrapings from the barrel, and that's just what they are. I expect most of them are dodging the law in Missouri or Kansas. The rest of them are drunkards or thieves that nobody else would hire—not even in Kiefer—so that gives you an idea what you've got."

Valois had brought the workers from Sabo in a livery wagon, and a hard knot of caution formed in Grant's stomach as he looked at them. There were eight of them—bleary-eyed, whisky-soused, filthy, and mean. There was not a man among them who looked as if he had ever done a day's work.

Calloway and Morphy had stopped work on the cellar to stare at the disheveled crew. Bud Muller came toward them from the bunk tent, looking at the runner.

"Is that the best you could do?"

"They're the only men in the Creek Nation who don't know this lease is on Farley's black list, and that's only because they were too drunk to hear when I got them."

"Do they know anything about carpentering or derrick building?"

"I didn't ask them," Valois said dryly.

Bud frowned and looked at Grant. "What do you think?"

"They can't be as useless as they look; they'll have to do. Thanks for doing what you could, Valois. How much do we owe you?"

The runner grinned. "It's my pleasure. I've been waiting a long time to take a swing at Farley." Then he stared at something over Grant's shoulder, and when Grant turned he saw Rhea Muller coming out of the dugout. She wore baggy corduroy trousers, laced boots, and a canvas windbreaker, but not even the men's work clothes could disguise the fact that she was an attractive woman.

Valois nodded quickly to Grant and the boy. "I'd better head back to Sabo. If I can give you a hand, let me know." He turned on his heel and strode quickly to the wagon as though he were in a hurry to escape before Rhea came up from the dugout.

Rhea chose not to notice Valois' flight but called to her brother, "Send them over to the bunk tent. I'll feed them before they go to work."

If they go to work, Grant thought. Rhea was not dismayed but seemed pleased that they had workers of any kind, and Grant was amazed at the great stacks of flapjacks that she brought out of the dugout. "You'll have to eat in the open," she said, "until we get the bunkhouse built. Bud, bring the tin plates and syrup from the dugout; side meat and eggs will be ready in a minute."

There was a note of authority in her voice but she did not speak to the workers as if they were the "scrapings of the barrel." The men did not seem to notice or care how she treated them. They used the dugout as a windbreak, hunkering down against the log walls to wolf

whatever was put on their plates.

Grant regarded the scene with interest. In some mysterious way Rhea had locked her grief away in some secret compartment of her mind and, watching her now, it was difficult to believe that the day before she had seen her father buried, businesslike, manlike, she went about her job of seeing that the men were fed. When that job was done, she said, "Now there's work to be done. Follow me."

Surprisingly, the motley crew got to their feet and followed her to where Morphy and Calloway were working. "This is the cellar," she said briefly. "Here the derrick foundations will be laid and the derrick will be built. Over there is where the belt house goes, and beyond that the engine house. A slush pit will have to be dug over there and a pipe laid from the derrick to the creek. Are any of you carpenters?"

Halfheartedly, four men raised their hands.

"Have any of you had experience at building derricks?"

Two of the four raised their hands again. It was better than Grant had expected.

Rhea nodded to her two drillers. "Pat, the rest is up to you and Lon. What they don't know about derricks, teach them. Bud, you take the ones who say they're not carpenters and get a bunkhouse started. They can learn to saw and hammer well enough for that."

The air was charged with her energy, and there was no doubt in Grant's mind as to which of Zack Muller's two offspring had inherited control of the lease. She should have looked ridiculous in those men's clothes, but she didn't. She looked cool, businesslike, ruthless. She looked like a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and meant to have it.

She turned on her heel, sure that her orders would be carried out just as she had given them. "Mr. Grant, I want to talk to you in the dugout."

Her voice was commanding, and she turned her back to Grant and strode toward the shack. Grant felt a prickle of irritation that she had spoken to him with that same note of authority that she had used with Valois' derelicts.

After a moment of hesitation he followed her into the warm, whitewashed interior of the dugout. There was a dress hanging on a wall rack beneath the small window and Rhea Muller stood stroking it gently, almost as if she were caressing it, when Grant came in. It was a white dress with layers on layers of sheer organdy; it was some kind of ball dress or party dress, beautiful and feminine and expensive, and completely out of place in this mud hut.

Apparently she had forgotten that she had asked him there until he quietly announced himself by clearing his throat. She turned from the dress quickly, as though it had stung her, and vivid color mounted her cheeks for just a moment.

"It's a pretty dress," Grant offered.

"I didn't ask you here to talk of dresses, Mr. Grant." It was "Mr. Grant" now, not "Joe." Quickly, she took the dress from the rack and hung it behind a gingham-screened wardrobe against the far wall.

"Are you working for the Muller lease?" she asked briskly.

He frowned. "That's up to you, I guess."

"When you didn't come back to the lease the night my... father was killed, I thought you had run away." She choked for an instant, then quickly looked away. "You *were* going to run away, weren't you?"

"I can't say the notion didn't enter my mind. But there's no place to run, I guess. If you still want a hand that knows nothing about the oil business, I guess I'm ready to work."

CHAPTER EIGHT

GRANT'S JOB WAS to ride the boundaries of the lease, armed with carbine and revolver, and see that Ben Farley's men were kept away from the derrick. He built a windbreak of brush and blackjack logs to the north of the derrick site and from this piece of high ground he could watch the lease in the daytime. The nights were more difficult. Two riders had to circle line continuously; this job was divided up between Grant and Bud Muller, Morphy and Calloway.

It was now five days since Zack Muller had been laid away in Tulsa, and a lot had happened. The year 1905 had died a noisy death in Sabo and Kiefer, although the entrance of a new year meant just another workday on the Muller lease. Talk was growing that Indian Territory and the Oklahoma country would soon be admitted as a single state. New gushers came in every day on the Glenn ranch. New derricks were going up so fast that from a distance this shallow basin looked like some strange, outlandish forest. There was great excitement in the air that winter. This was the new Land of Promise, and every day the trains brought in fresh loads of eastern businessmen, drifters, organizers, harlots, politicians, gamblers.

Joe Grant did not like it. Boom towns and fast money attracted outlaws, and outlaws attracted more deputy marshals, and with every extra marshal in the territory his own chances for survival grew slimmer.

Why he stayed, he could not say. He had a strong horse and a good saddle; he would stand a fair chance of escaping to Texas, in spite

of Marshal Jim Dagget.

He wondered about this, hunkering down by his small fire in front of the windbreak. He could see the Muller derrick taking shape near the banks of Slush Creek, the intricate structure of girts and sway braces casting lacelike patterns over the barren ground. A long sheet-iron enclosure had been built to house the big band wheel and engine, and where the tent used to be there was now a new bunkhouse also sided with sheet iron. Working with a green, derelict crew was a slow business, but Rhea kept them on the job. Somehow she managed to keep them on the lease and away from the saloons of Sabo.

Grant grinned to himself. By the time they finished one of Rhea's workdays they were too tired to do anything but sleep, himself included.

He added more green wood to his small fire. The wind was razor sharp, steel flavored with snow, and at last he got up and walked in a small circle about his fire, stamping his feet against hard ground. Suddenly he came alert, reaching instinctively for his carbine. Far down the brush-lined banks of Slush Creek he saw a horseman break through the blackjack and head in his direction. It was Turk Valois.

Grant breathed easier and waited for the runner to come within calling distance.

"This is quite a job you've got," Valois said wryly, dropping stiffly from the saddle.

"It's not so bad with the windbreak. You come from Sabo?"

"Kiefer," the runner said, holding his hands to the dancing flame. "I heard something in town I thought you might be interested in. You

ever hear of a man named Kirk Lloyd?"

Grant shook his head.

"Over in the Oklahoma country," Valois went on soberly, "Lloyd's got a reputation as a gun shark. Usually he works on the side of the law, special marshal or something like that, when a town's filled up with hard cases and the city fathers decide to fight fire with fire. Usually, like I say, he's on the side of the law, but not always. It depends on which job pays the best."

The name of Lloyd meant nothing to Grant, but he had seen enough hired gunmen to know that they were full of trouble. "Does this gun shark have anything to do with me?"

"With both of us. I learned this morning that he's on Ben Farley's pay roll." Valois squatted down by the fire and looked up at Grant. "I own a gun, and I'm not such a bad shot, but I'm not in a class with Kirk Lloyd. Are you?"

"I never hired out my gun, if that's what you mean." Then his eyes narrowed. "Do you think Lloyd had anything to do with Zack Muller's murder?"

The runner shrugged. "Killing's his business, but he didn't show up in Kiefer till after the murder. I think it's you he's after—and me. Farley wouldn't have needed an expert gunman to bushwhack an old man like Zack Muller."

Grant smiled without humor. "Well, thanks for the warning."

They stood together on the windy slope, each man thinking his own thoughts. From below they could hear the hammering and see the derrick form slowly lifting on its four thick legs. Valois shook his head as if in wonder. "I never thought the Muller kid would get that much

work out of the hands I brought him.”

Grant said, “Bud's got nothing much to do with it. Rhea's the one who's getting the work out of them.”

The runner did not seem surprised. Then as they stood looking they saw Rhea come out of the dugout and stand for a moment gazing out at the derrick and the land that were hers. Even from the distance of the slope her energy and her ambition could be felt. There was nothing feminine about her from that distance, only a relentless, hurried urgency.

Grant found himself studying the runner's face. Valois was unaware of it, he had eyes only for Rhea Muller. And suddenly Grant had the answers to all his questions—why Valois had stepped into the Wheel House fight, why he had deliberately turned Farley against him, why he had brought them workers....

It was all written in the runner's face at that moment: he was in love with Rhea Muller. Still in love with her. Always would be in love with her.

Grant was faintly surprised to see it written there so plainly, for he still remembered Valois' bitterness when he had spoken of Rhea before. He was a proud man and Rhea had broken him—her ambition and greed had broken him, but they hadn't changed a thing. He still loved her.

An uneasy chill walked over Grant's back. Maybe, he thought, I'm looking at myself a few days or weeks from now. He, too, was proud, but if he let himself fall in love with a girl like Rhea...

He'd rather not think about it, and he looked away and tried to put his mind on other things. But in some dark part of his mind he knew that

it was already too late. A dart of jealousy, almost anger, went through him when he saw the runner looking at Rhea the way he was looking at her now. He liked Turk Valois but he did not like the things he saw in his face. With an abrupt movement he pulled up the collar of his windbreaker and said:

"Thanks again for the warning, Valois. I'll try to keep my eyes open."

"It's more than Kirk Lloyd that you have to worry about," Valois said quietly. "Well..." The two men shook hands two men much alike, big, strong, and proud. Both with eyes for the same girl.

That night the trouble started.

Grant had expected it from the outside, but it came from within. Bud and Lon Calloway were riding the lease boundary, Grant was in the bunkhouse when he heard the shrill, desperate scream pierce the darkness. It was Rhea's voice and it was the voice of despair, the voice of a person who sees her world suddenly crash down around her in ruins.

Grant was on his feet immediately. Grabbing his wind-breaker and carbine, he was out in the bitter wind before Rhea's first cry was dead. From the bunkhouse he ran into a world of black shadow and dancing red light and suddenly realized that the partially finished derrick was burning.

He heard Rhea calling out again, in the darkness, "Joe, the derrick's on fire!"

Even then, it struck him as faintly amusing that she should call him "Joe" again in this time of need. He rushed headlong into the flickering darkness, but Rhea was not there. He fired his carbine

three times into the air—a prearranged signal to the line riders.

Almost immediately he heard Bud Muller's big-footed clay-bank stallion pounding in from the north. And the sound of shooting also woke up the crew in the bunkhouse and they came staggering out in the shocking wind, bleary-eyed and sullen as they gazed unfeelingly at the burning derrick. Then he saw Rhea racing toward the fire dragging a heavy piece of canvas tarp through the mud.

Grant paused for a moment in his blind race and tried to get the complete picture in his mind and form a decision. It looked as if the fire had started in the partially completed belt house near the windward corner of the derrick floor, and now the bright flames were racing over the floor and up the stout legs of the structure. He knew that in a matter of minutes the fire would be beyond control. Everything about a derrick like this was soaked with oil—even before the well was spudded in, even before the structure was completed—it came from the grease and oil of the engine and drilling tools, from the oil-soaked wood of the reclaimed derrick timbers.

The ground was covered with mud and icy little ponds, and the bend of Slush Creek was less than a hundred yards away, still he knew that water was not the answer. Then he thought of the tent—the bunk tent that they had taken down when the bunkhouse was built—and he wheeled in his tracks and raced toward the shielded side of the dugout.

Now he could see Bud's claybank headed toward the derrick, and Grant raised his carbine once more and fired into the air. "Bud, over here!" Young Muller hesitated a moment, then wheeled the horse around and headed toward the shack.

"Get that crew over here!" Grant yelled. "I don't care how you do it,

use your gun if you have to, but get them over here!"

Now the boy saw Grant grab hold of the cumbersome mass of folded canvas and pull it out on the ground, and he understood.

As Grant worked he could see the blaze dancing higher about the derrick legs, and he could see Rhea beating frantically with her piece of canvas. Rhea had the right answer. Water was no good against an oil fire, even if they could get enough of it to the derrick. The fire had to be smothered if it was to be stopped at all; it had to be clubbed lifeless like some hungry monster.

Straining against the tough canvas, Grant tore it with the sharp heel of his boot and ripped the bunk tent into several pieces. Bud Muller was herding the reluctant crew toward the dugout, cursing wildly, threatening them with his revolver. When they reached the shack, Grant handed out the pieces of canvas.

"Get them to the derrick fast!" he shouted to Bud. "And get your crazy sister away from there before she gets hurt!"

By this time Calloway had ridden in from the far corner of the lease. Morphy, the other driller, had produced a shotgun and was helping Bud herd the crew toward the burning derrick.

There are enough of them to handle the fire, Grant thought to himself. Young Muller will shoot them if they don't. And if he doesn't, Rhea will.

Grant did not follow the others but moved back into the deep shadows, shielding his eyes against the glare of the fire as he raked the barren landscape with a searching gaze. Until now there had not been time to wonder how the fire had got started, but common sense told him that it had been no accident.

He moved deeper into the darkness, watching for some sign of

movement against the fire-splotched land. The night wind sliced through his windbreaker like an icy razor; a flurry of misty snow began to fall, causing a curious halo of light to form about the burning rig.

Several minutes passed and he waited, not moving. And then he felt himself go rigid as something flitted across the ground from one clump of brush to the other. The figure was not recognizable as a man, but Grant knew that it was a man. It was the man who had set the fire, the man Farley had hired to burn them off the lease.

Then he saw the movement again, a vague figure behind a gauzy curtain of snow racing toward the far bend of Slush Creek. He was now about a hundred yards behind the derrick and running to the right.

Grant reloaded his carbine. Farley needed a lesson, and this time he was going to get it!

At an easy, loose-jointed lope he quartered across the open field to head the man off near the bend. For a moment he lost sight of the fleeing figure in some brush. Then a rifle cracked in the darkness, the sound strangely flat and muffled by the light blanket of snow.

Grant crouched and ran quickly toward a thicket of blackjack; the rifle spoke again with its matter-of-fact voice, and this time Grant felt the burning hiss of the slug a few inches over his head and he dived for the ground.

For a moment there was silence. The fire from the burning derrick still lighted a great circle around the rig, but Grant and the rifleman lay in darkness. Then Grant began to hear his own breathing and the hammering of his own heart. This was not his kind of business. But now something in the darkness told him that tonight he would have to

kill or be killed. The last bullet had been mere inches above his head. The rifleman meant business.

It was a strange feeling, lying there in the darkness with an armed enemy a bare forty yards away and suddenly to realize that within a few minutes one of them would probably be dead. It hadn't been this way at Vinita when the two cowhands had jumped him. It had never been this way before.

But you're an outlaw now, he reminded himself. Maybe this is the kind of thing outlaws have to get used to.

Then he remembered the beating that he had taken at Farley's hands in the Wheel House, and a good part of his anxiety became anger. Slowly, he lifted himself to his hands and knees and began crawling away from the thicket. He heard movement ahead and knew that the rifleman was working his way toward the creek.

For one brief instant Grant heard the impatient stamping of iron-shod hoofs from the direction of the creek and immediately understood what the rifleman was trying to do. Somewhere down there he had a horse staked out. If he got to the horse there would be nothing Grant could do to stop him.

And he had to stop him. That was the thought that commanded Grant's mind as he shoved himself erect and began racing toward that dark, twisting bend of the creek. It was strange that he should think of Dagget at a time like this, but the squat, solemn marshal was very much in his thoughts. If this rifleman was working for Farley, Dagget would have Farley's skin, and maybe the Mullers would see the end of their troubles. Maybe, Grant thought bleakly, I'll be able to pick up and get out of here.

He did not let the thought go further than that; he did not let himself

think of Rhea. Every time he thought of Rhea Muller he did something crazy, and this was no time...

Suddenly he was stumbling in the thick growth of cotton-wood and blackjack along the bank of Slush Creek, and he saw a figure ahead of him go crashing down the brittle skin of icy water. Grant yelled, but the figure did not stop, and then he raised his carbine and fired once, twice, three times.

The rifleman scrambled out of the water and disappeared around an eroded buttress of red clay.

Grant wheeled quickly and ran along the top of the bank until he saw the horse standing nervously beneath the twisted limbs of a giant Cottonwood. Very quietly he slipped over the edge of the claybank, took up a position behind some driftwood, and waited.

He had had three clear shots at the rifleman and likely he would never get another shot like that again. Maybe I should have killed him, he thought. He's sure trying hard enough to kill me!

But in the back of his head was Dagget. The rifleman was evidence against Farley—but not if he was dead. Not even Dagget could make a dead man talk. So Grant had shot to cripple. He had been too careful and had not hit the rifleman at all.

Now, he thought, we're right back where we started.

There was not a sound along the creek except the nervous stamping of the rifleman's horse. From a distance Grant could hear Bud Muller's excited shouting and the other confused noises as they fought to save the derrick. It seemed a long way off and, for the time, insignificant.

The rifleman on the other side of the jutting claybank waited tensely.

as Grant waited. At last Grant pressed back against the bank and called:

"I'm between you and your horse, mister. You haven't got a chance."

"I've got my rifle," a voice snarled. "That's all the chance I need!"

Grant frowned, and wondered where he had heard that voice before. It was familiar but he couldn't place it. It didn't belong to Farley, nor to the roustabouts who had given him the beating in the Wheel House.

He called again:

"All I have to do is stay where I am and keep it a standoff till the others get through fighting the fire, and then you're through. After what you did to their derrick, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes if young Muller gets you in his sights."

"You're wastin' your time, Grant!"

The sound of those words rolled in Grant's brain, then fell in place suddenly like a roulette ball falling into the right slot, and he knew who the rifleman was.

He was one of the crewmen, one of the rig builders that Turk Valois had swept out of the gutters of Sabo and Kiefer. Well, Grant thought, it makes sense, I guess. Farley must have heard that Valois was making up a crew for the Muller lease so he got one of his own men on it. When you fought Ben Farley you threw the rule book away.

Grant tried to think of the man's name, and soon that fell into place, too.

"I know who you are, Jagger," he said quietly. "How much did Farley pay you to sign on with Turk Valois? How much did he pay you to

burn the Muller rig?"

The rifleman laughed harshly. "I didn't think you'd know me, Grant. From the way you gape at that Muller girl, I didn't think you knew anybody else was on the lease."

"I noticed you, Jagger. Now why don't you throw your rifle down and try to stay alive? It's Farley I'm after, not you.

Jagger laughed again, as though something were actually funny. "You think turnin' me over to that marshal will help you get even with Farley?"

"It might. Anyway, you haven't got much choice. Stay where you are and it will only mean a bullet in the gut when help comes from the well."

"I can wait."

But he was worried; Grant could hear it in his voice. "I can stand you off all night, Jagger, and you know it. Come on out and you'll get a fair trial."

Then both of them heard the sound of a horse picking its way upstream from the direction of Sabo. Grant glanced quickly at the sky and saw that the glow of the derrick fire had diminished considerably.

"Bud," he called quietly, "Bud, is that you?"

Suddenly, surprisingly, Jagger laughed, and Grant heard him scrambling downstream toward the horseman. Grant hadn't been prepared for this. He had thought that by putting himself between Jagger and his horse he had cut off the rifleman's escape. He shoved himself away from the bank and yelled loudly into the wind.

"He's headed down the creek toward you, Bud! Stop him!"

Almost before the words were out of his mouth he heard a .45 bark four times, one shot crowding on top of the other. Grant fought his way downstream after Jagger, stumbling in the darkness, falling over driftwood and brush. And then, by the edge of the water, he saw the form of a man sprawled in the frozen mud.

"Grant!" a voice called. "You all right?"

It wasn't Bud Muller's voice, after all, it was Turk Valois'. Grant snapped his head around in surprise and saw the horse standing on the lip of the creek bank.

"Where did *you* come from?"

"Sabo," Valois said, ducking his head into the peppery wind. "I saw the fire over here and guessed what had happened." He pointed down at Jagger's still form. "Is he the one that started it?"

Grant nodded, still surprised and vaguely worried. The runner swung down from the saddle and skidded down the bank to where Grant was standing. "That was a funny thing. When you yelled to stop him, he came running right toward me. He must have thought I was somebody else."

"Farley, maybe," Grant said flatly, his anger and violence suddenly gone.

Valois frowned and grunted. "You think he was working for Farley?"

"Who else would go to the trouble of getting a man on the Muller crew? Who else has an interest in the Muller well?"

Together they dragged Jagger out of the icy water. The body was limp and heavy, rolling lifelessly as Grant knelt and methodically went through the dead man's pockets. He hoped to find something there to tie Jagger with Farley but all he found was a tight roll of bills.

Valois whistled softly. "The Mullers don't pay their roustabouts that well, do they?"

"No," Grant said tightly. "But Farley may. It would have been a cheap price if Jagger had succeeded in burning the derrick."

Valois shook his head. "Too bad he can't talk. If I'd only known..."

Grant smiled with bitter humor. "When I yelled to stop him, there wasn't much time to explain."

CHAPTER NINE

DAGGET ARRIVED AT the Muller lease the next morning, bringing a buckboard to take Jagger's body back to Sabo. He studied the fire-blackened legs of the derrick and the charred derrick floor, and then like a hound on the scent of a wolf he picked up Jagger's tracks and followed them all the way to the creek. Then he picked up Grant's trail in the crusted snow, and finally Valois', and only then did he accept the story as he heard it.

"All right," he said to Grant. "It looks like a case of self-defense. But you have a habit I don't like, Grant, you have a habit of getting into trouble too serious and too often."

"I'm hired to protect this lease. That's what they pay me for."

"So I've heard, but did you have to kill this man? Is that the only way you know to settle an argument?"

"I killed him, Marshal," Turk Valois said. The three of them were hunkered down on the sheltered side of the belt house.

"I know," Dagget said thoughtfully, studying Grant from under his bushy brows. "But he told you to. He says so himself."

There was nothing Grant could say to that. Legally he was not in any trouble, but the suspicions that stirred in Dagget's mind could be more dangerous than if he had pulled the trigger himself.

The marshal stood up, still gazing thoughtfully at Grant. Then Rhea Muller came out of the dugout and his gaze shifted from Rhea to Grant to Turk Valois. Grant could almost see his mind adding up the facts as he saw them like some beautifully polished machine—and he did not like the answer the machine was giving him.

"There's one thing I haven't got straight yet," he said to Valois. "How did you come to happen up at such a handy time?"

"I told you I saw the fire and guessed the trouble. I thought maybe I could give a hand."

"I thought you ran a business. How did you happen to see the fire?"

The runner laughed. "I went out of business the minute I stepped into that fight in the Wheel House, Marshal."

"You don't like Farley much, do you?"

"I hate his guts."

Dagget sighed and turned away. He paused for just a moment before heading for the buckboard, and turned to Grant. "Don't forget what I said, Grant. I don't like men who get into this much trouble."

There was warning in Dagget's voice as well as his words, but Grant chose to ignore them for the moment. He looked at Valois and saw high color mount in the runner's face as he stared at Rhea Muller. He started to turn away, but Rhea called:

"Wait a minute, Turk!" Even in her men's clothing she moved as gracefully as a young lioness. She glanced first at Grant and then at Valois. "I heard what you said to Dagget," she told the runner. "Is it true what you said about your business?"

"I haven't got a business," Valois said tightly, "if that's what you mean. I'm as broke as I was in Bartlesville, when you broke off our engagement."

A faint spot of color appeared high on Rhea's cheeks, but she did not look away. "Are you looking for a job?" she asked.

Valois frowned. "You might say that."

She did not smile, but she looked as if she might. "You're on Farley's black list now, you'll never get a job in Kiefer or Sabo—unless it's on this lease. I could use another man like Mr. Grant, a man with nerve. Nobody ever accused you of lacking nerve, Turk." She turned to go back to the dugout. "If you want to work here, tell my brother I said to put you on."

After Rhea had gone, Grant and Valois stood for several uncomfortable moments in silence. Then the runner abruptly turned and walked away, and Grant saw him heading toward the bunkhouse where Bud Muller was.

So this, Grant thought, is the way it ends. And there was a heaviness within him as he shrugged and followed Rhea to the dugout. He knocked on the door and waited for a moment, then Rhea opened it,

her eyes widening in faint surprise.

"What is it, Mr. Grant?"

"I don't like the way things are shaping up," Grant said. "I thought you ought to know."

For a moment she did nothing, then she opened the door and motioned for him to come in.

"Because I hired Turk Valois?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "I guess that's it. I like Valois, he's sober and honest, just the kind of man I take to, but within a week I'll be hating his guts if both of us try working here."

"Why do you think I hired Valois?"

"Because he's a fair hand with a gun, because he's got guts, and has no love for Ben Farley."

This seemed to surprise her. "Those are exactly the reasons for my hiring him. Is there anything wrong with them?"

"Just one thing," Grant said tightly, and only now did he realize that an icy anger lay behind every word. "He's in love with you—and you don't care if he lives or dies. He's taking the job because he thinks you want him—and you're hiring him because he might help you out of a tight spot."

That strained expression of almost smiling touched her face again. "And how does this affect you, Mr. Grant?"

"Because I guess I'm fool enough to love you, too." The words came out before he could stop them. And when he realized what he had

said, he felt that he must go on. "If I'd had any sense I never would have come to Kiefer with you. I wouldn't have risked my neck to save your money in Vinita."

Her faint smugness had deserted her now, and her eyes were completely serious. In her woman's mind she realized that her own future was being threatened, and she prepared to fight in her own way. With an impatient gesture she ripped off her bulky windbreaker and threw it into the corner of the room, and she stood before Grant with the knowledge that she was attractive, even beautiful. Not even the man's shirt and corduroy breeches and heavy boots could mask the fact that she was beautiful and desirable, and with these, her own peculiar weapons at hand, she prepared to fight.

"You're behaving like a child," she said. "I need you and I need Turk; I need both of you if I'm to fight Ben Farley." She moved closer, until Grant could almost feel the warmth of her, and she looked at him steadily with that faint half-smile. "What do you want, Joe? Is it money? There'll be plenty for everybody when the well comes in—I'll make you part owner. I'll put it in writing."

But it wasn't money he wanted, and Rhea Muller knew it. "Forget Turk Valois, Joe, he means nothing to me."

"He did once."

Nothing changed in her face. If she experienced any regret, or any emotion at all, she did not let it show. "That was long ago," she said quietly. "Not long in the way years are measured, but long just the same. I was young and wanted something very much, respectability and security. And I wanted all the nice things that women like. I thought for a little while that Turk Valois could give me those things and I would be satisfied, but I soon learned that that was not enough."

"What you mean," Grant said stiffly, "is that you lost interest in Valois as soon as he lost his money."

This time she did smile, but it was a strangely sad expression. "I suppose Turk believes that. He's a proud man."

They stood there for one long moment, and Grant found himself believing that maybe she was telling the truth. She was right about Valois being a proud man—perhaps the fact that Rhea could not love him for himself was more than his pride could accept, so he had convinced himself that she had quit him because of the money.

He would not look directly at Rhea, although she was standing so close to him that he could have touched her by slightly moving his hand. She said, "Don't leave, Joe. I need you."

He hadn't had much experience with women, especially women like Rhea Muller. He hadn't known that the strongest determination could melt and the simplest plan go to pieces by just having a woman look at you in a certain way. He had meant to state his intentions simply, then leave, but it wasn't working out that way at all.

"Don't leave," she said again, and this time he could not avoid looking at her.

"What about Valois?" he managed. "Does he go?"

"I need him. To fight Ben Farley, I need all the strong men I can get. Have you heard that Farley has a gunman on his pay roll?"

If he had meant to quit the lease, he should have left at once. He never should have come to the dugout to explain, for now it was too late. He tried to keep his mind clear, but he kept remembering that first day on the lease when he and Rhea had been standing here just as they were now, and he had held her for a moment in his arms and

nothing else had seemed to matter.

It was a dangerous thing to remember at a time like that. He should have been remembering that bank in Joplin, and Marshal Joe Dagget with the suspicious mind, and the hired killer that Farley had taken on his pay roll, but all he could think of was that one particular moment when he had held Rhea hard against him. He should have remembered Turk Valois' experiences in Bartlesville, and Zack Muller in his lonely grave outside of Tulsa, but it was no use.

Suddenly he reached out with both hands and held her by her shoulders. He felt a small shudder go through her but she did not try to back away. She did not look away nor did she make a sound when he pulled her to him; not even when he put his arms around her, held her roughly, forced her face back, and forced his mouth down on hers did she make any move to escape. She did nothing at all.

Grant felt the anger and brief violence go out of him. Guilt gnawed at him as he let her go, and he mumbled, "I'm sorry. I guess there was no call for that."

"I learned long ago," she said flatly, "that everything must be paid for in one way or another. I need your help—if this is your price, then I'll have to pay it."

"I set no price!" Grant said harshly. "I said I'm sorry."

"We all have a price." And her voice was matter of fact and controlled. "My father is dead—I'll do whatever is necessary to see that Farley pays for that! But I need a man who's not afraid."

"I hold no claim to bravery."

But she seemed not to hear him. "Name your price," she said, almost

roughly. Then coolly, deliberately, she put her arms about his neck and drew him to her.

Abruptly, faintly sickened by his own thoughts, Grant broke her hold about his neck and shoved her roughly against the wall. For one long moment he stood glaring and angry, searching his conscience for some motive to justify his own actions. But there was only one motive, and Rhea knew it. He was in love with her, he wanted her—it was as simple as that. Without putting it into words, he had named his price and she had been ready to meet it.

Not until that moment did he realize what her father's death had meant to her. Shame lay cold in his belly and he shrank a little within himself as he jammed his hat down on his forehead and blundered up the steps of the dugout.

He went to the bunkhouse, glad to find it empty, and he sat for a long time on the edge of his folding cot cursing the day he had decided to try his hand at fanning. If it hadn't been for the farm and the trouble with the bank none of this would have happened; he would still be working on some fenced ranch in the Cherokee Nation, getting drunk every Saturday with nothing to worry about but a hangover the next morning. But there was no solution here to his present trouble and his shame. He *had* tried his hand at farming; he had wanted to amount to something more than a dollar-a-day line rider, and this was where it had got him.

He tried to think about the farm, but he could not dredge up even a vague vision of it in his mind. All he could see was Rhea's face, and he heard Rhea's voice saying, *If this is your price...*

His nerves were raw; he got up suddenly and paced to one of the bunkhouse's narrow windows and stared flatly out at the snow-patched wilderness of derricks and mud. It was a hell of a place for a

woman, and maybe he couldn't blame her too much for wanting to get out of it.

He saw Bud Muller coming toward the bunkhouse from the rig, and Grant turned away from the windows and pretended that he was looking for something in his roll.

"Got a job for you, Grant," Bud said, stamping the mud from his feet on a mat of gunny sacks.

Grant looked up, glad that Bud wasn't one to ask questions. He was also glad that young Muller took it for granted that he was still working on the lease—it was almost as though he had been waiting for someone like Rhea's brother to come in and settle his doubts.

"What kind of job?"

Bud's thin grin was almost a warning. "We need new derrick timbers to repair the damage the fire did last night. There's a shipment waiting for us at Kiefer, but getting it to the lease won't be easy."

Grant sat on the cot, not liking what he saw in Bud's face.

The boy shrugged and spread his hands. "We're broke. We've got just enough on hand to pay the workers; a rig fire wasn't in our plans. We need five hundred dollars that we don't have, but Kurt Battle, the supplier, might give us credit if we can get the timbers out of town without Farley seeing us."

Grant got to his feet again and went to the window, knowing that there was little chance of getting credit from Battle. Still, Turk Valois had been willing to take a chance against Farley at the risk of his own business; maybe Battle would be willing, too. But these were not the kind of odds he liked to play against.

"What happens if Battle doesn't give the credit?"

Bud made no attempt to grin now; he was worried and showed it. "We've got to have the timbers. We can't spud in with a damaged derrick; we can't even raise the crown block."

There was no use to say any more. Farley knew who was holding the high hand and he had the supplier under his thumb. There would be a fight if they tried to take the timbers out of Kiefer, maybe the last fight Farley would have to put up.

Now, his instincts warned him, was the time to cut himself away. But it was little more than a passing thought. If he was going to quit, he would have done it long ago, he never would have taken the train to Kiefer in the first place. He looked at Bud and grinned with faint bitterness. Rhea had known all along that he would see it out with them.

He had his price—and she had known that, too. It was herself.

Grant picked up his hat and started for the door, but Bud stopped him as he reached for the latch. "There's one more thing, Grant: Valois is working for us now."

Grant nodded. "I know."

Rhea's brother was not pleased with what he heard in Grant's voice, and he frowned hard, rubbing his hand over his mouth thoughtfully. But he only said, "Turk is meeting us in Kiefer. Well, if you're ready..."

CHAPTER TEN

AS THEY INTENDED to come back with the derrick timbers, there was no need for taking horses with them. Grant and young Muller hiked across Slush Creek and caught a ride to Kiefer on a returning freighter. The day was bleak and cold but there was no sign of snow, and they rode most of the way in silence, each man busy with his own thoughts.

Once Bud said, "I wasn't sure you'd stay with us after you heard about Valois."

Grant lifted his gaze just enough to indicate that he had heard but he said nothing.

They dropped off the freighter in front of the Wheel House where Valois was waiting. "You got here at a good time," the runner said. "Farley's out on location, and his gun shark's with him." He looked at Bud. "Maybe it would be better if Grant and I stayed behind and let you talk to Battle alone."

"Or maybe," Grant said, "it would be better to let Battle know we mean business."

And Bud Muller nodded. "Grant's right. It would be too easy to put me off if I went there alone; he's not going to be eager to take a cut at Farley the minute he turns his back."

Ducking their heads into the wind, the three of them headed up the shaky plank walk toward the depot where Kurt Battle's warehouse was. Now that they were away from the lease, away from Rhea, Grant discovered that he was not so sorry to have Valois along. If there was to be a fight, it would be a tough one. Even if they got credit from Battle, they would be a long time getting the timbers back to the lease, and Farley had too many men on his pay roll not to hear about it.

Valois grinned faintly when he saw that Grant was studying him from beneath the down-tilted brim of his hat. "It's too bad, isn't it?" he said quietly.

Grant frowned. "What's too bad?"

"I think we could have been friends if we had met at another time and place."

There was no use saying any more; they understood each other perfectly. They were proud men, both of them, and much alike in many ways. But Rhea stood between them and that made them enemies. They must fight their own small war inside a larger one; strange enemies fighting on the same side, without hatred.

Grant darted a quick glance at Bud Muller, but the boy had heard nothing; his mind was full of wells and derrick timbers. He could see what was happening between these men and his sister but he did not have the experience to understand all of it. He did not let it bother him more than was necessary—he had the bitter memory of his father and his anger to warm him.

They reached the end of the plank walk and waded the icy slush toward the boxcar depot. To the west of the depot there was a large flapping tent that might have been a circus or revival tent except for the black painted sign in front: Battle Gtl Field Supply Company.

Bud Muller shot suspicious glances up and down Kiefer's crowded street, and the three men ducked under a canvas flap and stepped inside. The tent was lighted only by the cold yellow light that seeped through the canvas; huge shapes of tarp-covered machinery stood in orderly rows, mountains of pipe rose up against the canvas walls, and there were drill bits of all shapes and sizes. Leather belting and hemp cables and drilling line covered every inch of floor space and

overflowed into a sheet-iron shack behind the tent.

When they reached the rear of the tent they saw more equipment standing in the open: crown block pulleys and bull wheels and big wooden band wheels, and engine boilers that looked like miniature locomotives stripped of wheels and cabs. They passed on through to the sheet-iron shack. This was Kurt Battle's office, and the owner of the Battle Oil Field Supply Company was sitting at his plank desk when they came in.

The supplier did not like what he saw. He glanced sharply at Bud Muller, then at Grant and Valois, and noted the revolver bulges beneath their windbreakers and liked that even less. But he smiled, in a pained sort of way, and stood up quickly to shake Bud's hand.

"I'm sorry," he said with sincerity, the smile vanishing. "Your pa was a good wildcatter, son, they don't make them like him any more."

"My father always spoke well of you," Bud said. And then, after a brief hesitation, "I've come to ask a favor, Mr. Battle."

There was a coal-oil stove in the center of the shack but it was not enough to fight back the chill of those sheet-iron walls. The shack was frigid, and Battle's breathing emitted little puffs of white frost on the air, but at the same time a beading of sweat appeared on his forehead. He was a small man with a smooth-shaven face and the pot belly of an overfed kitten; he did not look like the kind of man to say "no" to Ben Farley.

Battle shifted in his cane-bottomed chair and cleared his throat. "A favor, Bud?"

"We had a fire on the lease last night. The derrick was damaged and we need some new timbers to repair it. We need some credit, Mr.

Battle, about five hundred dollars' worth."

Battle had known from the first what they wanted, but the words seemed to shock him.

"Well, Bud, I sure would like to help, but you know how short supplies are in a boom field..."

"We saw the timbers in your yard. All we need is the credit."

Battle swallowed. He glanced quickly at Grant and Valois, but did not look at Bud. "I'm sorry," he said huskily. "Your pa was my friend and I'd like to help, but I can't. I just can't."

Grant shot a glance at Valois, and the runner shrugged. This was the thing they had expected, and they had no weapon to fight it with. After a moment Grant stepped up to the plank desk directly in front of the supplier. "Getting those timbers is important, Battle. The Muller well can't spud in without them."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry..."

"Is it Farley?" Grant broke in. "Did he warn you not to give the Mullers credit?"

Battle didn't have to answer, the answer was in his face. He blinked quickly, then stood up abruptly and blundered to the one small window in the shack and stood staring out at nothing. "I don't want a ny trouble." He almost whined. "I worked hard to build up my business; I don't want to see it wiped out overnight."

"Did Farley threaten you?"

"He said he'd take away his business. He said he'd stop all his friends from tradin' with me if I gave the Mullers credit."

At that moment the giant shadow of Zack Muller was in the shack and all of them could feel it. Grant hadn't known (he old man long, but he had liked him. Farley had killed him. Farley had burned the derrick. Farley was now cutting off their credit. How much more was Farley going to get away with?

A new kind of anger, a positive anger not complicated by indecision, began to rise up in Grant's throat. And he could see the same kind rising savagely behind Bud Muller's pale eyes, the same danger signal that had been there the day of Zack Muller's funeral.

Grant acted quickly, on instinct. He took one of Battle's arms and spun him roughly away from the window before the maddened boy could get to him. "Listen to me, Battle!" he said harshly. "You know the boy's name is good for the money, you're not afraid of not being paid. Let us take the limbers and you can tell Farley we stole them; tell him anything you like, but we've got to have the material to repair the derrick!"

Battle's eyes were startled; they began to water and he blinked rapidly. "Let me go!" he whimpered. "I've got a right to look after my own business!"

"All right!" Grant spat, and he hardly recognized the icy words as his own. "You can look after your business, Battle, but let me tell you something. Farley's not the only man in Kiefer you've got to be scared of. What about the next oil field you move to? Maybe Farley won't be there. Maybe Zack Midler's friends will start remembering how you took Farley's side against one of their own, and then where will your business be? Who will use your equipment then, Battle?"

Grant tightened his grip on Battle's arm and the supplier's mouth came open in pain. "I tell you I can't help it! I've got to do like Farley

says or I'm ruined!"

"You'll be ruined anyway, Battle, because I'll make it my business to pass the word to every independent driller, every wildcatter in the Territory! It may take me longer than Farley, but I can ruin you just as completely as he can! You'd better think that over before you make your final decision."

The words went home with more effect than Grant had expected. Faint lines of worry appeared on Battle's baby-smooth face, and it was evident that he had been thinking about this same thing for a long time. He was trying to play both ends from the middle, both Farley and the independents, and he was smart enough to know that it was a losing game.

Grant let go of the supplier and spoke again, almost gently. "It's something to think about, isn't it, Battle? Farley won't always be around to look out for you—you need friends among j the wildcatters."

Battle was weakening, but he was still afraid. "It's more than the business," he said thinly. "Farley would kill me if he thought I gave you credit!"

"He doesn't have to know. Get the timbers loaded tonight. Leave the wagon over by the railroad to make it look like a shipment that has just come in, and we'll take care of the rest of it. We'll leave Kiefer in darkness and Farley will never see j us. If he should see us, you can tell him we stole it."

It was not the way Grant wanted it. Farley was sure to catch them on the road, and when that happened, a fight was certain. Then there would be a charge of theft against them, and Jim Dagget wouldn't let a thing like that pass unnoticed. Still, they had to have the timbers

and they were in no position to make their own conditions.

Bud Muller said, "What about it, Battle?"

"I... I don't know. That gun shark on Farley's pay roll..."

"The gun shark's our worry," Grant said. "Do we get the timbers or do I start passing the word around that you're siding with Farley against the Mullers? Sure they're afraid of Farley, but they're pretty worked up about Zack Muller, too, and men can do strange things when they're worked up."

Bud Muller's voice was cold and bitter. "I've heard of business houses burning down, Battle. It wouldn't take much to set off this tent of yours."

This was taking a turn that Grant didn't like, but it was effective. Battle wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Well..."

And they knew that the wagon would be loaded when darkness came. "Sign here," the supplier said weakly, pushing some papers at Bud.

When Grant, Bud Muller, and Valois came out of the Wheel House and headed toward the depot in the biting wind it was shortly after seven o'clock. The wagon was waiting, fully loaded, the six-horse hitch stamping restlessly on the frozen ground.

Valois grinned. "I've got to hand it to you, Grant. I didn't think Battle would do it."

But Grant was in no mood for congratulations. Fighting weakness with threats was not a pleasant way to do things, but a man could not

always choose his own weapons.

They walked from the main part of Kiefer and moved cautiously toward the boxcar depot. "I wonder where Farley is?" Valois said thoughtfully. And Grant was thinking the same thing. That they should move the wagon all the way to the lease, unmolested, was almost too much to hope for.

There were several horses and hacks tied up at a long rack beside the boxcar, and the three men swung wide around them, keeping in the darker shadows as much as possible. The night was crystal clear, as brittle as ice, and their boots crunched noisily on patches of frozen snow as they made their way toward the freighter.

Bud Muller glanced up at the great spread of sky and the frosted moon that was beginning to rise in the east. "I'd be just as happy," Valois said, "if we had a few clouds. When that moon comes up Farley can spot us halfway to Sabo."

"We'll worry about that," Grant said, "when the time comes."

But the time was sooner than any of them thought. Bud Muller untied the lines, climbed up on the front wheel, and looped the loose ends around the brake lever. Valois climbed up next, taking his place on the driver's seat, and as Grant placed one foot on the wheel spoke, a sense of warning made him let go immediately.

A long shadow fell across the ground and a horseman rode casually from behind the boxcar. From the corner of his eye Grant could see the A & P ticket agent dozing over his telegraph key, but the conscious part of his brain was focused on the rider. Squat and bullish, almost shapeless in the loose folds of a plaid mackinaw, Ben Farley said:

"You aiming to steal those derrick timbers, Muller?"

Three more riders rode immediately behind Farley. One of them Grant recognized as one of the roustabouts that had given him the beating in the Wheel House, another was Kurt Battle, and the third was a lank, scarecrow figure of a man who had about him an aura of danger that was unmistakable, and Grant knew immediately that this was Kirk Lloyd, the gunman.

Farley spoke to Kurt Battle, smiling faintly. "I guess maybe you ought to go after the law, Kurt. We've caught them red-handed trying to steal your wagon and equipment."

Lloyd was gaunt and humorless, forever watchful. Battle seemed to be skating the thin edge of panic; his eyes blinked rapidly, a nervous little twitch tugged spasmodically at the corner of his soft mouth. The roustabout grinned stupidly as though he alone saw some enormous joke in the situation.

Hardly a second had passed, the four horsemen were still riding toward them, but Grant knew instinctively what happened. They had underrated Farley. They had thought that they could get out of town and do their fighting in the open, if fight they must, but the oilman had played it differently. He was playing to bring the law in on his side!

Farley had got hold of Battle and him, and the rest of it had been easy.

For one brief moment Grant stared at the oilman almost in admiration. He was dangerous and deadly and smart, and being smart was the worst of all, because now he would have the law working for him.

At that moment Grant had almost forgotten Valois and young Muller

up on the wagon. He felt sick with defeat, for Jim Dagget would lock them up for theft, and then, sooner or later, he would find the money belt about Grant's waist and remember the bank robbery in Joplin. And that would be the end.

Even as he thought it, he heard Bud Muller snarl like some cornered animal, and the instant of silence was completely shattered by the blast of a revolver.

Now was no time for thinking, or swearing in anger because a hotheaded kid had made a bad situation even worse. Grant leaped to one side, clawing in his windbreaker for his pistol. And he saw Lloyd, Farley's gunman, reacting unhurriedly and coolly, reaching swiftly for his shoulder holster inside his loose-fitting windbreaker.

Farley himself judged the situation instantly and calmly withdrew. Lloyd and the roustabout were paid to do his fighting, and the oilman reined his animal quickly to one side as calmly as if he were getting up to leave a poker game. Battle's face was sheer panic; his startled animal reared suddenly and he fell solidly to the frozen ground and did not get up. The roustabout lost his idiotic grin; he looked bewildered and faintly shocked as he fumbled inexpertly for his revolver.

Only Kirk Lloyd seemed unruffled and cool. He worked smoothly, as only a professional can, and his quick eyes picked out the point of most immediate danger and ignored all the others. The dull steel of a .45 seemed to glow in his right hand, and he fired twice without a change of expression, without a flicker of an eyelash, directly at Bud Muller.

The boy's mouth flew open as if in amazement. He grabbed his side and slipped slowly, gracefully, to the bottom of the driver's seat. Lloyd's horse had shied suddenly at the sound of shooting, and for

an instant the gunman seemed to wonder if his shot had been spoiled and whether he should fire again. But when he saw the boy begin to fall he forgot about Bud Muller and turned his mind to the other points of attack.

The roar of Lloyd's second shot was still ballooning in the air when he turned from Bud Muller. He saw Turk Valois was still struggling to open his windbreaker and forgot the runner as one unworthy of his attention. With a practiced movement that seemed almost lazy because of its perfection, the gunman turned his .45 on Grant.

Here he showed his first flicker of emotion. A faint shadow of surprise crossed his eyes when he saw that Grant's pistol was in his hand. Lloyd was not worried, merely surprised that this man had drawn as fast as he had. Probably it had never occurred to the gunman that, by shooting first at the boy, the odds had grown against him. He was cool and completely confident as he turned to flick his trigger finger at Grant.

Not even when Grant's pistol barked first did any expression come over that lean, stone-hard face. Not even when the bullet tore through him did he show dismay. He was a professional; killing was his business, and he could not imagine that this big wild-eyed man standing before him might beat him at his own business. But the impact of the bullet tore him from his saddle, and he fell to the ground with one foot caught in the stirrup, and the nervous animal whirled in a tight little circle until it had thrown off the dead weight.

Immediately on top of Grant's shot came two more shocking muzzle blasts that jarred the night. And Grant glanced up to see Turk Valois standing crouched on the wagon seat with a revolver in his hand. The roustabout dumped forward from his saddle without ever getting his windbreaker open.

A bare second of silence struck the night as sharply as had the crashing of guns. For one scant instant Kiefer seemed to hold its breath. Then suddenly some distant voice was raised in excitement and the figures of men crowded doorways and spilled into the biting night, and the darkness became cluttered with the sound of running men.

Battle was still lying on the ground, paralyzed with fear, and Farley had vanished somewhere into the darker shadows near the makeshift depot. Drained of all feeling, Grant shoved his pistol back into his waistband and looked up at Valois. "How's the boy?"

"Still breathing. That's about all I can tell."

Grant climbed over the wagon wheel and, with Valois' help, they lifted the boy out of the freighter and put him on the ground. Apparently, one of Lloyd's shots had missed; the other had caught Bud Muller in the right side, about an inch above the thrust of the hipbone. If the boy lived he could thank Lloyd's rearing horse for throwing off the gunman's aim.

In an uneasy gesture the runner wiped his hand across his mouth. "He doesn't look too good to me. Maybe we ought to take him to a doctor."

Grant smiled weakly. "We'll have plenty of help in just a minute."

And they listened to the pounding of heavy boots on the snow-crusted ground. It seemed that every door in Kiefer was standing open; streams of orange lamplight formed bright patterns in the street and on the faces of the running men.

Then one voice sounded out above all the others. "Marshall Over this way!" It was Ben Farley's voice and it was high-pitched, almost

hysterical with rage. Grant and Valois looked at each other, then at the approaching mob with Jim Dagget in the van.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARSHAL JIM DAGGET was an angry man. He glanced at Kirk Lloyd sprawled face down on the ground, and then at the roustabout's motionless form, and finally he knelt beside Bud Muller and felt the boy's throat for a pulse. All the time he kept his own .45 trained on some indefinite point between Valois and Grant, ready to fire instantly at either of them.

"Back up against the wagon," he said, almost snarled, "and unbutton your windbreakers."

In his rage, he would have killed both of them at the slightest wrong move. Grant and the runner, backed against the freighter, gingerly unbuttoned their coats.

"Drop your weapons on the ground."

The two men drew their revolvers carefully and dropped them. Grant said, "The boy's hurt bad. He needs a doctor."

"You should have thought of that before you brought him gunning for Farley!" said the marshal. But he jerked his head at one of the men standing behind him. "See if you can find Doc Lewellen; probably he'll be at the Wheel House bar."

Then there was a stir in the crowd and Ben Farley came shoving his way through to face the marshal. His dark, hard eyes flashed with anger. "This is my fight, Dagget. Me and my boys will take care of it our own way."

The marshal's own anger turned cold. "Stay out of this, Farley!"

"I want justice done!" the oilman roared. "Those two men are murderers! They've got to hang!"

"Maybe, but it'll be on the order of a federal judge if they do, not yours, Farley." He jerked his head at Grant and Valois. "March!" he said coldly.

But Farley stepped in again before they could move. "You can't get away with it, Dagget. There's no jail in Kiefer, and you can't let two murderers run loose."

"There's a jail at Muskogee that'll hold them until they can be brought to trial," the marshal said flatly. Then he turned to the crowd and shouted, "Go back to town, all of you! The excitement's over."

"I don't think so," Farley said. And he glanced around the crowd, his gaze falling briefly on the faces of men he knew, and at last he turned back to the marshal, smiling thinly. "I don't think so, Dagget."

He turned away abruptly, glanced coldly at Kurt Battle who was trying to crawl away in the crowd. He strode stiffly to the still form of Kirk Lloyd and suddenly spat in disgust. "I paid him to protect me!" he said hoarsely. "And he let a stinkin' plowhand outdraw him!"

Then, without a flicker of warning, he kicked the still form savagely with the sharp toe of his boot. Lloyd groaned, and a sharp sound of surprise escaped the crowd. They had thought the gunman was dead.

Lloyd groped blindly, trying to shove himself away from this new source of pain, but Farley, in his rage, stepped in again and slashed at the gunman again with his boot.

"That's enough!" Dagget yelled. And there was a steely warning in the marshal's voice that not even Farley could ignore. Lloyd's eyes were glazed, and he lay in a crooked, distorted position on a dirty patch of snow. Painfully, he turned his head and gazed up at Farley, and a slow, cool savagery formed behind his slitted eyes.

"That was a mistake, Ben." The voice was little more than a whisper, but it carried like the whine of a bullet. "A bad mistake..." And then he closed his eyes and lay still.

An uneasy silence surrounded the bizarre scene for just a moment before Doc Lewellen, reeking with whisky, stumbled through to the marshal's side.

"Looks like you've got your work cut out for you, Doc," Dagget said. "Your sickroom unlocked?"

The frail old man nodded and walked unsteadily to Bud Muller.

"How bad is he?" Grant asked.

The old man shrugged. "He's young and strong; that much is on his side." Then he moved to Kirk Lloyd and made a brief examination. "Bounced a bullet off his rib," he said. "Not much more than knocked the wind out of him. Well, some of you men help me get them to the sickroom."

Grant and Valois watched them pick up the gunman and the boy and carry them back toward town. Battle had escaped in the confusion, but the marshal would find him when he wanted him. Dagget had other things on his mind right now. There was Farley, still furious and lusting for a hanging. And there were Farley's men, more of them than the marshal liked to think about. And it was a long way to Muskogee and the nearest federal jail.

Kiefer, on that winter night of 1906, was a sprawling, howling infant only a few days old. Boom towns such as Sabo and Kiefer got their full growth almost overnight, and died almost as quickly, most of them, when the boom was over. Schools, churches and jails were the last to come, if they came at all. But some of the children got a minimum of teaching at home, church meetings were held irregularly in eating houses or saloons, and jails were where you found them.

Jim Dagget found his near the makeshift depot, in another abandoned boxcar shunted off on a siding. It was not comfortable, but it shut out the wind, and, bolted and locked from the outside, it was stronger than any other building in Kiefer.

Turk Valois' face wore a grin as he climbed into the dark interior smelling strongly of lumber and cattle and a thousand other things. "How long do you aim to keep us here, Marshal?"

"As long as necessary," Dagget said harshly. "I wouldn't stand a chance getting you to Muskogee or Tulsa, the way Farley's riled up."

"What are we supposed to do if Farley decides to burn this boxcar down?"

"Ben's too smart to try that—it would bring the whole federal government on his back, and he knows it." He looked at Grant for one long moment before sliding the heavy door between them. "I told you once, Grant, that I don't like men that get into too much trouble."

"Has it occurred to you, Dagget, that there might be more than one side to this? Those timbers belonged to the Mullers. Battle gave us credit and told us to pick them up."

"I intend to ask Battle about that."

Darkness closed in around them as Dagget slammed the big sliding door, and they could hear him bolting and locking it from the outside. Grant was in no mood for talking. He began thinking of Bud Muller and how lifeless the boy had looked when they had carried him away.

Was he dead? Was he going to die?

There were a thousand questions without answers. He sat with his back against the walls of the boxcar as the slow chill of winter settled in his bones. And he thought again of Rhea and wondered what he was going to say to her if her brother died. First her father, now Bud. There was a limit to the punishment a girl could take—even a girl like Rhea.

It was then that Grant began to learn a strange thing about himself. He didn't want Rhea to change. More than once he had cursed her brazen show of superiority, and her greed, and her consuming ambition—still, it was her storm and fire that had drawn him to her and he didn't want those things changed. He didn't want her spirit broken and gelded—and this was a strange realization and difficult to accept.

He thought about this for a long while, and in the darkness he wondered what Turk Valois was thinking about. The runner had kept his distance as far as Rhea was concerned, that strange combination of love and hate showing only occasionally in his dark eyes. He was a proud man and knew how to keep aloof—and Grant wished sometimes that he had the knack himself.

With another kind of man it would have seemed strange, returning to the source of his hurt, the way Turk had. But with Valois it all seemed

natural enough; perhaps he was trying to prove to the world, or to himself, that he wasn't hurt at all. Maybe he figured that if he could face Rhea Muller every day without flinching, that was all the proof he needed.

At last Grant tried to get comfortable on the hard plank floor of the boxcar, but he knew that there would be little sleep for them that night. The money belt about his waist caused a bulge against his ribs and he sat up again, frowning, the seed of an idea growing slowly in his mind. He had almost forgotten about the money. All of it was still there. Not a penny of it had he spent.

Until this moment the money had been almost an abstraction, symbolic of his independence and manhood. He had taken it because he had believed that it was rightfully his, but now he began to think of it in a more realistic light. Twenty-five hundred dollars in real money! Legal tender for goods in any shop, store, or saloon in any state or territory in the nation.

Strangely, this surprised him. Why, he could have stopped all this trouble at the beginning simply by paying Battle for the timbers!

But after a moment's thought he saw that it was not so simple as that. He was forgetting Dagget again. The suspicious-minded marshal would be very interested to know where an ordinary saddle tramp had laid his hands on five hundred dollars.

Still, if *somebody else* should give the money to Battle...

Working in the darkness, he unbuttoned his windbreaker and shirt and shifted the money belt around, knowing from the feel which pouch to open. He counted out twenty-five twenty-dollar bills, then carefully shifted the money belt back to its original position.

"Turk."

It was the first word either of them had spoken since Dagget had slammed the boxcar door. "I thought you were asleep," the runner said, and Grant was faintly startled to hear the voice so close to him.

"I'm not asleep; I've been thinking."

"So have I, but I can't think of a way to get out of this boxcar."

"That isn't what I've been thinking about. Sooner or later Dagget will take us out of here and to a federal jail, if Farley makes his charges stick. I want you to take this."

They fumbled in the darkness and the runner made a small sound of surprise. "What is it?"

"Five hundred dollars, the amount the Mullers owe on the derrick timbers. I want you to give it to Battle when we get out of here. Or give it to Dagget, and he can pay Battle."

Valois whistled softly. "Five hundred dollars I Where did you get that much money?"

"Never mind. Will you do as I ask?"

"Sure." But his voice said that he was still puzzled. "There's one thing I'd like to know, though. Why are you so anxious to give away five hundred dollars?"

Grant could feel the color rising to his face and was glad that he was hidden in darkness. "I guess you know the answer as well as I do, Valois."

The runner laughed explosively, and the sound was surprisingly loud

in the close confines of the boxcar. "So it's Rhea!" And his tone said that he was no longer laughing.

"It's my own idea," Grant said tightly. "Rhea didn't ask for it."

"She doesn't have to ask. All she has to do is look at a man and he starts shelling out, and he keeps shelling out until he's..."

The suddenness of Grant's anger caught him off guard. "That's enough!" he almost shouted. And for a moment there was only silence and darkness, and when Grant spoke it was almost as though he were talking to himself. "I mean, Farley started this thing and I don't want to see him finish it, that's all."

There was another period of silence, and Grant could almost feel the runner's bleak, humorless smile. "All right," Valois said at last. "I have my own reasons for what I'm doing, and you have yours. We'll let it go at that. But there's one more thing I'm curious about. Why don't you give this money to Dagget yourself?"

Grant had the uncomfortable feeling that Valois was guessing part of the answer. As Dagget would have done, the runner was wondering where the money had come from. "I saved it," he said at last.

And Valois sighed. "Well, I guess it was a foolish question anyway. Do you think we'll get any sleep in this damn thing?"

Dagget rolled back the heavy door as soon as it was light, and said, "All right, you two can come out."

It was blustery and cold outside and the pewter-colored sky lay heavy and sullen over the colorless hills of the Creek Nation. Grant got stiffly to his feet, chilled to the bone, his in-sides soured with

sleeplessness. Before moving into the light he pulled his hat down hard on his head, always acutely conscious of his hair when. Dagget turned those calculating eyes in his direction.

"Have you heard anything about the boy?" Grant asked.

"Young Muller? He'll have a sore side for a spell, but he'll be all right. His sister is with him now, in Doc Lewellen's sickroom."

Turk Valois swore hoarsely and coughed as he climbed painfully to his feet. "Goddamnit, Dagget, you've got to get a better jail or I'm going to take off somewhere else."

The marshal was amused. He stood to one side, his eyes slanted and watchful as the two prisoners eased themselves through the doorway and down to the graveled track bed.

Grant said, "Did you get the truth out of Battle? Did you get our side of the story?"

"I didn't have to," Dagget said flatly. "Battle had it down in writing."

Grant and Valois glanced at each other, frowning. But all Dagget said was, "March. We're going over to Battle's supply shack."

"You going to take us down to Muskogee?" Valois wanted to know.

"I guess," Dagget said with a savage grin, "that decision will be up to Farley. Now march!"

They marched—rather they stumbled on stiff legs and numb feet with the marshal right behind herding them like reluctant cattle. What had Dagget meant when he had said the decision was up to Farley? The oilman might run Kiefer and Sabo, but the marshal was a man who ran his business in his own way.

The marshal kept them marching, prodding them from behind with the muzzle of his .45. They stumbled into Kiefer's main street and made their way clumsily across the iron-hard ruts toward Battle's supply tent. Dagget grunted for them to go around the tent, and they swung wide and came up at the supplier's shack of an office.

"Inside," the marshal said, almost snarling. He knocked the latch open and shoved the two through the doorway.

Ben Farley, looking pleased when he saw Dagget and the prisoners, sat at Battle's plank desk. The supplier stood uneasily to one side, hugging close to the coal-oil stove.

"I'm glad to see you're both here," Dagget said blandly, looking at Farley. "We can get this thing settled without a lot of fuss."

The oilman tilted his chair back and smiled. "What's there to settle, Marshal? These two killers murdered one of my men and shot another. They're murderers, and I mean to see them hanged."

Dagget took a frayed cigar from his shirt pocket and inspected it carefully. He licked it expertly and began searching absently for a match. "I take it then that you aim to bring charges against these two with the U. S. marshal's office."

"Of course. It's my duty as a decent, law-abiding citizen." But Farley was wondering what Dagget was getting at, and his eyes narrowed and his smile was not so wide.

Dagget lighted his cigar, glancing carelessly at Battle. But when he spoke, it was to Farley. "Just what kind of charge do you aim to bring?"

"I told you. Murder. Unprovoked attack and murder; I've got Battle

here as a witness."

The marshal nodded. "All right, but you'll have to go down to Muskogee and swear out a complaint."

That was the way it was in the Nations, the only dependable source of law enforcement was the government marshals, and their ranks were thin and the system was all but hopelessly snarled in inevitable mountains of red tape. Once, not so long ago, the nearest marshal's office was located at Fort Smith, in Arkansas, but now there was an office in each of the Nations and a man didn't have to ride a hundred miles or more to swear out a complaint. Things were not so bad as they once had been, but they were not good. Local government in towns like Kiefer was practically nonexistent, and the load of law enforcement rested heavily on the thick shoulders of a few men such as Jim Dagget.

Jails here were few, the courts were overworked, for thieves and killers habitually sought sanctuary in the Nations. Another time, under other conditions, Dagget would not have handled this situation as he did now—but here it was part of his job to see that the overworked courts did not collapse under a mountain of borderline cases, and if he sometimes set himself up as judge and jury, that also was part of the system.

Perhaps "the system" was in Jim Dagget's mind now as he fixed his stern gaze briefly on Grant. He did not look as though he enjoyed the job as it had to be done, but he was a lawman and had learned to make the best of what he had.

Ben Farley, from behind Battle's desk, was nodding. "I'll be glad to swear out the complaint, Marshal."

"Good," Dagget said stiffly. "But there's something that maybe you

ought to know before taking the oath on an unprovoked attack." He drew a folded slip of yellow paper from his vest pocket and laid it gently on the plank desk.

Farley frowned and darted a quick glance at Battle. "What is it?"

"A sales slip, Farley." And he smiled with that peculiar savagery that seemed always to lie so close to the surface. "It's made out by Battle and signed by young Muller, a record of a business transaction made by them yesterday. Would you like to read it, Farley?"

A sheet of cold, still fury slipped down behind the oilman's eyes, but he made no move toward the paper.

"It says here," Dagget went on, "that Battle sold the Muller lease five hundred dollars' worth of derrick timbers, on credit. So it would appear that the boy acted in good faith when he went to pick up the merchandise last night. You claimed they were stealing the shipment and you and your boys pitched in to give Battle a hand, but the ticket says different."

Kurt Battle made a small, explosive sound and wheeled on the marshal. "Where did you get that?"

Dagget's grin was a hairline slash across his face. "You ought to be more careful about locking your safe." Then, to Farley, "Do you still want to swear out that complaint of unprovoked attack?"

Because Battle had insisted on a legal right to five hundred dollars, Farley's plan had boomeranged. With the ticket in Dagget's hands, the last thing Farley wanted was to face the questions of a federal court.

"A man on your pay roll was killed," Dagget pushed him. "You've got the right to go to court about it."

Farley shot Battle a glance of blinding anger. He stood stiffly, jamming his hat down on his forehead. "I withdraw my complaint," he said. "I was misled by what Battle told me. You can't prove that I wasn't."

"No," the marshal said, "I guess I can't."

Farley fixed his gaze on the sales ticket, and suddenly he grabbed it up and waved it in Dagget's face, then turned his rage on Grant and Turk Valois. "Battle can still withdraw his credit! He doesn't have to give credit to anybody he thinks is a bad risk, even if the material was ordered on consignment!"

A nervous, bitter humor tugged at the corners of Turk Valois' mouth, and he stepped forward to the marshal's side, drawing the packet of crisp bills from his windbreaker. "We've decided we don't need the credit," he said, grinning at the oilman. He threw the money on the desk. "Mark the bill paid, Battle. The timbers belong to us legal, and we've got a deputy marshal as witness."

Not until they were outside and well away from Battle's supply tent did the marshal speak. "Listen to me!" he said, taking the runner's arm in a steel-trap grip. "I don't want you thinking I did you any favors. Both of you ought to be in jail, along with Farley and Battle, and the wild-eyed Muller kid and the hired gunman." Suddenly he seemed tired; his eyes were faded with fatigue. "But in the eyes of a court both sides had a good case and probably all of you would have gone free anyway."

For just a moment he regained his old savagery. "I'm not a court. But if I have to be, I'm the judge, jury, and executioner... and don't you forget it!"

Doc Lewellen's office and sickroom was over a feed store a few doors up from the Wheel House. Except for four cots, the interior was as barren as a garret, with only a single oil-drum stove in the middle of the floor to fight back the winter chill.

Rhea Muller did not look up when Grant and Valois came into the room. She sat ramrod straight on a cane-bottomed chair beside her brother's cot, her pale face set like concrete, and Grant's memory went quickly back to the day of Zack Muller's funeral, for she had looked the same way then. Bud Muller lay motionless beneath a mound of cast-off army blankets, his eyes closed, his face colored with fever in a way that made him look even younger than he was.

Doc Lewellen glanced at them from the corner of the room where he was scrubbing his hands at a makeshift washstand. "Jim Dagget must be goin' soft," he said dryly. "I didn't expect to see you two so soon."

"How's the boy?" Grant asked.

The doctor wiped his hands on a flour-sack towel and began fastening his soiled cuffs. "He's full of opium now. Likely he'll be sicker from that than from the gunshot wound." He got into his coat, buttoning it all the way to his scrawny throat. "How come the marshal let you go?"

Grant ignored the question and walked quietly to the boy's cot, but Rhea still did not look up. "You look like you could use some sleep," he said.

At last she raised her head and fixed her cool gaze on Grant's face. "There'll be time for sleep... later. What happened to the timbers?"

At a time like this, with her brother full of opium and in the hands of a whisky-soaked quack, her principal concern was still with the well. Grant smiled stiffly. "The timbers are bought and paid for; they belong to us."

Surprise jarred her out of her frozen calm for a moment. Grant's smile felt like a crack across the face of an earthen jug, but he held it and inclined his head toward the runner. "Valois paid for it."

She glanced quickly at the runner, her eyes narrowed and suspicious. Valois caught and held her gaze for just a moment, but both their faces were blank, and Grant could not guess what they were thinking. "Thanks," Rhea said briefly. "You'll get your money back when we're spudded in."

"I'd like to have that in writing," Valois said, and high color appeared suddenly in Rhea's face.

"You'll have it in writing," she said stiffly, and looked away, but the dollar-sized circles of crimson still burned in her cheeks.

On the other side of the sickroom there was another occupied cot, and Grant became aware of Kirk Lloyd's gaunt face and the pale, humorless eyes watching them. "So you're awake, are you?" Doc Lewellen said, but made no move toward the cot.

"And still alive, no thanks to your filthy bandages," the gunman said bleakly, but his steady gaze was on Rhea. He shifted himself on the sagging cot and studied her with brazen admiration. "You're lucky that crazy brother of yours is still alive," he said at last. "I don't usually miss." Then, in the same voice, "Am I under arrest?"

No one made a sound. Somehow, it didn't seem decent to speak to this man who had tried to gun them down a few hours before. Lloyd

laughed abruptly, but the sound quickly degenerated into a spasmodic fit of coughing.

Still he had his bleak gaze fixed on Rhea Muller's face, and he lay for a moment quietly admiring what he saw there. "I don't know how you swung it," he said finally, "but Farley won't take kindly at bein' made to look a fool. You've got your job cut out for you, lady, if you mean to go on fightin' him."

For the first time Rhea turned and looked at this man who had tried to kill her brother. Nothing changed in the smooth, stonelike contours of her face, no hate flamed up in her eyes. She studied the man coldly, thoughtfully, and at last she said, "You hired your gun to Farley, but you sound as though you hate him."

The man's eyes narrowed, and Grant could see that Lloyd would not soon forget those kicks that Farley had delivered while the gunman had been helpless. He eased himself down on the cot and gazed flatly at the naked ceiling. "That's puttin' it mildly," he said at last quietly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A COLD, SLASHING wind swept through the Glenn Basin that day. There had been no snow for three days—since the night they had brought Bud Muller home from Doc Lewellen's sickroom—and the ground was frozen and wind-dried to the hardness of iron ingots. Tall, dead weeds in the draws rattled like bones, and the mangy patches of buffalo grass that carpeted the land were powder dry, brittle, incendiary, and dangerous.

Most of the rigs in the basin had fire watches out that day, but the

Muller lease was more watchful and tense than the others. Since sunup Grant and Turk Valois had been riding the boundaries, watching sharply for the faintest whisper of smoke to the north. This kind of weather was made for men like Ben Farley. A spark could set off the entire lease, burn it out, delay construction beyond all hope of meeting the deadline.

For once Grant was glad that Valois had hired on, for two sets of eyes were not too many to cover that wide expanse of grass. And all of them knew that it was time—past time, maybe—for Farley to make his next move.

From behind a stand of naked blackjack Grant swept the northern boundary with a searching gaze, from Slush Creek to the derrick, to the dugout, to the bunkhouse, and for a moment he watched the derrick builders climb like monkeys in that flimsy lacework of wood, fifty feet above the frozen ground.

The derrick itself was almost finished; Rhea's dream was nearing reality. Zack Muller was dead. Bud Muller limped about the bunkhouse with a bullet hole in his side, but every minute brought Rhea's dream closer to being true, and that, Grant thought grimly, was the thing that mattered. And yet he found his gaze returning to the dugout door again and again, searching for a glimpse of her.

Even now, as he sat the shaggy claybank stallion on that gusty hilltop, Grant could not be sure why he stayed here risking his neck by the hour for a woman who wouldn't even look at him unless she wanted something. If this was love, he'd rather have nothing more to do with it. He had been happier on the Missouri farm, womanless, or on the trail in the company of cowhands like himself.

It was a strange thing, this feeling that a man could have for a woman, and perhaps there was no logical explanation.

He hunched a bit deeper into his windbreaker. Then, as he started to rein the claybank around, he saw a rider approaching from the direction of Sabo. Grant frowned and forgot everything else for the moment. Even from that distance, as the horseman rode through the scrawny line of gaunt cotton-woods, Grant sensed that danger was approaching.

Instinctively, he reached into his windbreaker for the comforting feel of his revolver, then he hauled the claybank around and quartered across that stretch of barren land to cut the stranger off between the creek and the dugout. Away to the south, near the far corner of the lease, he saw Turk Valois standing in his stirrups, one hand shading his eyes. Grant started to pump his arm, a signal that would have brought the runner up from the south, then he realized that this might be a trick that would leave half the lease unguarded, and he motioned for the runner to stay where he was.

Now, as the strange horseman rode out of the frozen draw, Grant could see the hunched, gangly figure leaning heavily on the saddle horn. He made a small sound of surprise and nudged the claybank to a faster gait. The rider was Kirk Lloyd, Ben Farley's imported gunman.

The gunman's face was even more gaunt and drawn than Grant remembered it, the skin stretching like yellowed rawhide drying over a hickory frame, the mouth a thin line, the eyes hollow and feverish. How he had escaped the sickroom Grant didn't know, and at the moment he didn't care. He grabbed the .45 from his waistband and approached Lloyd with the revolver in his hand.

"That's far enough!" he called as soon as he was within shouting distance.

The gunman gave a bare suggestion of a shrug, dropped the reins,

and let his animal stand. "One day," he said bleakly, "you're goin' to grab your gun and I'll be ready."

"I can wait," Grant said steadily. "Now haul your animal around and head back across the creek."

But Lloyd shook his head and almost grinned. "I'm a special visitor. I got an invitation from the Muller girl."

Grant came a little straighter in his saddle. It must be true, for not even Lloyd would have tried so brazen a lie. But Grant found it hard to believe.

"Rhea couldn't have talked to you. She hasn't been off the lease for three days."

Lloyd lifted his head as though it were an effort. "I didn't say she had. Turk Valois came to see me yesterday at Doc Lewellen's place. He said the Muller girl sent him."

Grant hesitated, remembering that Valois had gone to Kiefer the day before to buy groceries. Beyond that, he did not want to think. "All right," he said, motioning shortly for Lloyd to lift his hands. Quickly he reached inside the gunman's coat and drew out an oak-handled .45. "We can see soon enough if you're lying."

They dismounted in front of the dugout, Lloyd climbing slowly, painfully out of the saddle, holding his left elbow hard against his side. The door to the dugout opened and both men stood for a moment, staring.

Rhea, wearing the white dress that Grant had seen once before, stood in the doorway, straight as a lance, cool and beautiful, with the gusty wind whipping the tiered organdy about her ankles. And at that

moment Grant knew that Lloyd had told the truth. She had sent for him. She had expected him and had worn that new white dress especially for his coming.

Whether the sudden glimpse of beauty—in this land where women were rare and beautiful women almost nonexistent—had its calculated effect on Lloyd, Grant could not tell. He merely stared for a moment in a kind of blank surprise.

“Your man, Valois, said you wanted to see me,” he said at last.

She almost blinded him with a smile, but Grant noticed that the slaty flatness of her eyes did not change, and Lloyd noticed it, too, for he bowed stiffly, the corners of his mouth twitching, and limped down the sod steps ahead of Grant.

And now Grant knew what was coming next and waited for Rhea to work her magic. He felt wooden and awkward and was angered when she glanced at him, quickly, as if in some manner to say this was their secret, between just the two of them. And then he heard her saying, “How much did Valois tell you, Mr. Lloyd?” And made it sound as though she were asking important company if they would have another cup of tea.

The gunman sank slowly to the edge of a cane-bottomed chair and sat erect, his elbow against his side. And for one long moment he studied Rhea Muller’s face, and then, with supreme arrogance, he let his gaze move up and down the length of her slender figure until slow, hot color began to show above the high neck of her organdy dress.

“Valois said you had a job for me,” he said, but did not change his expression of blunt appraisal.

If it had not been so deadly serious it might have been amusing to see a girl like Rhea choking on her pride. Lloyd voiced no off-color word or suggestion; only his eyes spoke his thoughts. And Rhea, her body growing more rigid, the color of anger climbing steadily in her face, fought to control her instincts.

In the end, of course, she succeeded. Grant, watching silently from the far side of the room, held the brief hope that she would break and react like a real woman. But she held her ground, bit back her anger—and perhaps she even convinced herself that she had misread the things she saw in Kirk Lloyd's eyes—and when she spoke her voice was steady.

"Yes," she said, "I have a job for you. My brother is... indisposed," and Lloyd made no sign that he knew what she was talking about. "We must have a man to take my brother's place, to help protect the lease against Farley's attacks."

"I see," he said. But the tone of his voice said that his mind was on other things. "My services come high."

"We're willing to pay anything within reason," Rhea said quickly, emphasizing the word *reason*.

The gunman never took his eyes away from her face. "I usually get paid in advance."

"As soon as we're spudded in we'll pay you."

"That's a gamble," Lloyd said flatly, "and men in my position can't afford to gamble."

Rhea went on as though she hadn't heard him. "You have reason to hate Ben Farley, don't you, Mr. Lloyd?"

Something happened behind the gunman's eyes, and it was not pleasant to watch. "Enough to kill him," he said quietly.

Rhea glanced quickly at Grant and almost smiled. "That's up to you," she said to Lloyd. "But murder is no small thing, even here in the Nations. There's a deputy marshal in Kiefer, and he'll see you hang if you go gunning for Farley."

Even a man like Lloyd respected Jim Dagget's ability as a lawman, and it was clear that Rhea's thought was not new to him. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

And now Rhea would not look at Grant. She did not like the way Lloyd looked at her, and she did not like putting her thoughts into words. But the gunman would not accept implication; he would meet her only on his own level of cold violence. To accomplish this, all he had to do was remain silent.

The color mounted to Rhea's face, and it was not so much from anger now, but shame. In a desperate attempt to skirt her own conscience, she said, "Don't you see! If you worked for us, the Muller lease would protect you against Dagget!"

He understood perfectly well, and said, "Tell me how you could protect me against Dagget?"

And Rhea knew that he would have it no other way. He was determined to make her say it, thereby declaring him her moral equal.

There was nothing Grant could do to help her. This was her decision and she would have to make it her own way and for her own reasons. And he could see her pride deserting her, and her haughtiness, but not her determination. She wheeled suddenly, the full white dress

swirling like foam around her ankles, and she paced nervously to the dugout's single small window and stood for one long moment staring out at the blustery sky.

"All right," she said at last. "Farley killed my father, he's responsible for my brother being wounded. But he's still alive and free, and the marshal does nothing about it!" For the first time she was exposing all her hate in these few words. "I want Farley killed, do you understand! I want to see him dead, the way I saw my father, and I don't care how it happens!"

Now she wheeled away from the window and her face was a fine, delicate mask of hate. "You'll have your chance to kill Farley, if you work for us. Sooner or later he'll make his play to wipe us out. Then, if you kill him, there's nothing Dagget can do about it, because you'll be on our pay roll, protecting our property. They don't call it murder, Mr. Lloyd, when a person fights back to protect his property."

A kind of grim admiration showed in Lloyd's eyes; it was not every day that a gunman found a woman like Rhea Muller to meet him on his own level, talk to him in his own language. He got to his feet, his gaze fixed hungrily on Rhea's face. "Tell your man to hand back my pistol. I think we can do business together, Miss Muller."

And by "business" he didn't mean murder alone, but Rhea chose not to understand the full meaning. She nodded to Grant, without actually looking at him.

Bleakly Grant handed over the revolver. He wanted to be angry, but strangely he found that he had lost most of his capacity for anger. From start to finish it had been a mistake, and he tried to tell himself that he was lucky to have it ended. But he didn't feel lucky now.

The gunman said, his voice full of meaning, "I'll be seeing you, Miss

Muller," and started toward the door.

Grant turned toward the dugout steps when Rhea said, "Joe, I want to talk to you."

So it's *Joe* again, he thought, with a kind of grim humor, but he paused for a moment in the doorway, looking back at her, and finally, when Lloyd had reached the top of the outside steps, he closed the door again.

"Joe, we needed him! You understand, don't you?"

"Sure," he said wearily.

She came toward him, pausing directly in front of him, but her eyes never quite met his. "Joe, I'm fighting for my life! For everything I ever wanted! And I'm not going to let Farley take it away from me!"

"I gathered that much. Well, maybe you're right. Maybe Farley deserves to be gunned down by a man like Lloyd, but I'm through with it, Rhea."

Her eyes widened as they flitted about his face. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not working for you any more. I quit the minute you hired a killer on your crew. I don't know, maybe I'd do the same thing in your place, if it had been my father who was killed. I guess I can't be sure just what I would do if things were turned around. But they're not turned around, so I'm quitting."

Her lips came together tightly, and her eyes narrowed, as though she were trying to see inside his brain. "Joe, you can't mean it. You can't run out on us when we need you!"

Grant shook his head. "You don't need me, Rhea. Once I felt sorry for you, one lone girl going up against a man like Farley. I guess I should have felt sorry for Farley." He pulled his hat down on his forehead. "You'll find another man to take my place, another Joe Grant, or Turk Valois. One man more or less needn't bother you, Rhea."

Abruptly, she laughed. The sound was edged with a wild-ness that chilled him. "You wouldn't dare walk out on me! I know all about you—that bank robbery in Joplin—I'll call Jim Dagget the minute I see you getting your roll together!"

Grant stood motionless, looking at her. Here was a Rhea that he had never seen before; here was feminine uncertainty and fear skirting the thin edge of hysteria. "Nobody's ever been able to stop you from doing as you please," he said stiffly. "I guess there's no use of my trying it now."

He put one hand on the door latch and suddenly she was on him, her arms about his neck. "Joe, I didn't mean that! I wouldn't call Dagget!"

He had almost forgotten what it was like having a woman, like Rhea, in his arms again, having a woman clinging to him, depending on him. "Joe, you've got to listen to me! I'm afraid of Lloyd—the way he looks at me! You can't leave me here alone with him!"

"You'll have Turk Valois to look after you."

"Valois!" She spat the word. "He thought he could buy me! I loved him once—or thought I did—but he thought he owned me with his money! And when he had no money..."

"You quit him," Grant finished.

"No!" she almost shouted the word. "He *let* me quit him. There's a

difference.”

“I guess I don't see it.”

She made a small sound of helplessness and pressed her face against Grant's chest. “I don't want to talk about Turk Valois. He's dead. His manhood went out of him when he lost his money in Bartlesville. Joe, I want you to stay, not because of Lloyd, but because I love you!”

It was the word itself, the shock of hearing it spoken, that chilled his anger, numbed the truths that he should have known instinctively. Clinging to him, her arms tightening around his neck, she said it again. And for a moment he could think of nothing else. Her mouth was fire against his, her body warm, her hair and clothing smelling cleanly of lavender. And he knew that he would never forget her; time would never erase this particular moment, and he would always see her in his mind just the way he was seeing her now.

He could easily forget that she had worn her best dress especially for Kirk Lloyd, but he could not forget how she looked in it as she pressed herself against him and said not once, but twice, “Joe, I love you.” It was what he had wanted to hear, he guessed, more than anything else, and he could not believe that she had ever said it before to anyone else. He could even forget that she had once loved Turk Valois, and that she had permitted Lloyd to look at her the way he had and think what thoughts he pleased—all that vanished in the past.

For a moment, at least. And he held her hard in the rough circle of his arms and her mouth was willing. A thing like this, he told himself, could not be faked or repeated. It was a thing that happened once, only once, in a lifetime, if a man was lucky, and he would not let the past rear up and spoil it now.

For a long time neither of them spoke, and it was very quiet there in the gray gloom of the dugout. Grant was vaguely aware of the clean smell of the earth, and the sharpness of hardwood ashes and lime on the whitewashed walls, but the thing he would remember longest was the fragrance of Rhea's hair, the ghost of lavender.

Only after several minutes had passed did reality slip back into the room. And she asked quietly, her cheek pressed against his chest:

"Joe, will you stay?"

"Yes. If Lloyd goes."

He felt her body go rigid against him. Suddenly, her eyes flashing, she shoved herself away, and when she spoke her voice hissed like water on a hot stove lid. "Get out! Get away from me!"

Her teeth bared almost wolfishly, and the flush of shame was in her face. "Get out!" she hissed again.

He drew himself up as tall as possible, unaware that this gesture toward self-righteousness might be a bit ridiculous. "All right, Rhea, I'll get out." But then, as he reached again for the door latch, a strange thing happened. She made no sound but something discomfoting happened to her face; a flatness appeared in her eyes, the snarl left her lips, and slowly her expression of rage began to break up and lose its definition. Suddenly she turned her back to him but made no sound. Only after several seconds had passed did he realize that she was crying.

This was the one thing that he had not been prepared for. At her father's funeral she had not cried, nor had she shed a single tear for Bud when the boy lay wounded in Doc Lewellen's sickroom, but now she sobbed, silently, her face turned toward the far wall of the dugout.

Instinctively, Grant started to move toward her, but the impulse was short-lived. He reminded himself bitterly that he had played the fool twice, falling for her tricks like a backwoods dolt, believing her lies. He did not intend to be tricked again. He lifted the latch.

“Good-by, Rhea.” He left the dugout quietly, as one would leave a sickroom.

I'm well, he told himself sternly, standing for a moment on the top step of the dugout. It's like I've been sick of some strange disease, and now I'm well. It's over.

But he did not feel well. He was not even sure that he was glad that it was over, but there was a limit to how much punishment a man's pride could take. Numbly, he buttoned the collar of his windbreaker. The wind slashed over the prairie basin like the backlash of a saber. The sky was a bitter gray, as hard as gun steel; here was a dry, treacherous cold that could freeze a man into immobility without his knowing it. A line day for the end of the world, he thought grimly.

But it was not a new experience. Once before, when he had quit the trail, one of his worlds had ended. And again when he had quit the farm and made himself an outlaw. But somehow this was different from the others; he was not leaving a way of life this time, but a dream, all wrapped up in Rhea Muller. He had known from the first that it was hopeless, but a thing like that doesn't stop a man from dreaming.

He grinned with bitter humor. Joe Grant, a man born less than a month ago on a Missouri creek bank, was no better off than the hard-scrabble farmer who had robbed Ortway in Joplin.

For a moment he let his gaze rest on the near-finished derrick and the reluctant builders working in the bitter cold. Well, with a killer on

the pay roll, and with Valois' help, maybe Rhea would get what she wanted, if she knew what that was. And he tried to put her out of his mind as he tramped up the clay slope toward the bunkhouse. But it was not quite so simple as that. Even through his anger he could still see her standing there in the dugout, looking beautiful, yet ridiculous, in that new white organdy dress. A cold, beautiful, ambitious, scheming woman, crying silently, for what reason he could not, or dared not, guess.

As he stepped into the dry, acid heat of the bunkhouse, Kirk Lloyd said, "I was waitin' for you, Grant."

Grant stopped short, faintly surprised to see that the gunman had made himself so completely at home on the Muller lease. Lloyd had stowed his scant gear neatly beneath his folding cot and was now sitting slouched near one of the oil-drum stoves. In his hand he held his .45, the muzzle pointed carelessly at Grant's chest.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"COME IN, MR. GRANT," the gunman said dryly, motioning casually with the revolver.

Carefully, Grant closed the bunkhouse door and latched it. He glanced quickly at Bud Muller who had a cot next to the far stove, and the boy said, "What's the meaning of this, Grant? What's this gun shark doing on the Muller lease?"

"Your sister just put him on the pay roll," Grant said, never taking his eyes from the gaunt, half-grinning Lloyd.

Bud made a short, explosive sound of anger, which was quickly cut

off by an exclamation of pain as he lurched up on his cot. "I don't believe it! Rhea wouldn't hire him; why, just three days ago he tried to kill me!"

"She hired him just the same," Grant said, and as he moved across the floor toward his cot, Lloyd's revolver followed him, staying fixed on some invisible point near the center of his chest.

"But I tell you Rhea wouldn't..." The boy started again, and this time the gunman showed his first sign of irritation.

"Shut up, kid, before I finish the job I started the other night! Grant's right: I'm workin for your sister."

"It's my lease as much as Rhea's! I say you're not!"

Lloyd chose not to hear him, chose not to see anyone in the bunkhouse but Grant. At first he looked puzzled when Grant went straight to his own cot and began dragging out his gear —his saddle, a small blanket roll. Then the gunman gave a snort of surprise when he saw Grant remake the roll, lashing it doubled in a horseshoe for traveling.

"I guess you've got more sense than I'd figured on," Lloyd said, and it was Grant's turn to pause and look surprised.

Grant frowned. "I guess I don't know what you mean by that."

"Sure you do. I've just been hired to ramrod this operation. The first thing I aimed to do was run you out of the Territory, but it looks like I can save my breath." He leaned back on the cot, gingerly favoring his left side, but the muzzle of his revolver held steady. "All right," he said flatly, "get packed up and clear out. You're lucky I didn't decide to kill you."

Grant tried to overlook the gunman's implication. "I'm clearing out, but not because you told me to, Lloyd!"

The gunman laughed; it was a curious sound, completely without humor. "You can believe that if you want to, but not me." And his voice was suddenly harsh. "Now get your plunder together and don't let me see you again on this lease!"

Grant could see the bitter humor in the situation but that did not make it easier to swallow. He could not explain what had happened in the dugout after Lloyd had left—it would only make him look more ridiculous than he already did.

But it was not pleasant looking into Bud Muller's wide, bewildered eyes as he said, "Good-by, Bud." The boy turned his face away in anger, and the gunman laughed.

Grant felt the anger piling up inside him and knew that he had to get out fast if he was to go out at all. He shouldered the saddle, took up his roll, and tried to make the door before Lloyd could say anything else.

"Just a minute." The gunman stood up beside the stove. "This is almost too easy. I kind of had the feeling there was something between you and the kid's sister, but I guess I was mistaken. She's the kind of girl a man fights for, if he has to."

Grant shoved through the door and stood for one long moment against the bunkhouse, turning his face to the cutting wind, hoping that it would cool the anger inside him.

A part of his mind told him that he was smart, and he congratulated himself for that. What chance did he have against Lloyd with a drawn pistol? The gunman had been waiting for an excuse to kill him.

Besides, what difference did it make if Lloyd thought he had been buffaloed?

And if Rhea got herself into trouble—well, she had asked for it when she put a killer on her pay roll.

Walking away was not easy, but walk he did. Past the shuttered, mud-daubed dugout, past the derrick. Two thousand dollars in his belt and he didn't even have a horse to ride. He paused briefly to shift his saddle to the other shoulder, then headed doggedly toward Sabo.

Sabo now was something of a city in its own right and had ceased to be a mere stopover between the discovery well and Kiefer. Less than a month ago there had been nothing here but a single frame building known as the Sabo Mercantile Company, a lonesome place in a lonely land, catering to the Indians and a few scattered ranchers; now there were close to a thousand tents, shanties, and buildings overlooking this strange new forest of man-made derricks sprawling out along the rim of the Glenn Basin.

It was shortly after noon when Joe Grant tramped cold and stiff into that maze of noise and confusion. He had no plan except to get away from the Nation, away from the Territory as fast as possible.

Unlike Kiefer, with its mile-long main street of shanties, Sabo lay sprawling and shapeless, milling with freighters and hacks and saddle horses. Here in canvas and sheet-iron flophouses the roustabouts gathered, the smell of Bartlesville and Bowling Green still in their grimy corduroys. And in the more pretentious clapboard "hotels" tool-dressers and drillers mingled with land speculators, gamblers, businessmen, and a few of the more adventurous eastern

dandies, all acutely aware of the acrid smell of illusive wealth that swirled like some exciting fog over the basin. Here sharp eyed land men dealt for quarter sections near the discovery well which they would cut, with the precision of a skilled surgeon, Into a thousand small and worthless pieces and peddle them as vain able properties to gullible investors in Massachusetts or New York.

Here was a boom town, loud and crude as any trail town, unpredictable and dangerous as a tiger. Grant shifted his saddle and waited while a giant freighter with a twelve-mule hitch rattled past over the frozen ground. He felt the excitement here, and the greed, and the lust for sudden wealth was etched in every face and stared out from every eye. Even the cowhands from the Cherokee country and the old Outlet had been drawn away from routine herding jobs to sniff this new smell of oil and taste the excitement. And many of them had not returned.

Grant smiled thinly, continuing his plodding march toward a livery barn, dodging tents and shanties, wagons and impatient teams as he went. He told himself that he was glad to be leaving. Violence and greed were the urge of youth... and he was no longer very young. Maybe, after it was all over, he would look back on this day and consider it the luckiest day of his life—the day he had pulled away from Rhea Muller.

But he didn't feel lucky now, and he didn't dare look back. He kept his steps and thoughts going straight ahead.

Now, he had to stop again beside the flapping canvas of a tent restaurant while another freighter rattled past. And a voice behind him said:

“You aiming to leave our fair city, Grant?”

He wheeled as though a gun had been shoved in his back. Jim Dagget, 'dry, humorless, perpetually angry, gazed flatly at him from under his wide-brimmed hat. Slowly Grant lowered his saddle and rested it on his hip. "Is there a law against leaving Sabo?"

"Maybe there ought to be," the marshal said tonelessly, his pale eyes digging at Grant's face. "Why're you leaving?" Grant shrugged and unconsciously tugged his hat down on his forehead. "I'm not working on the Muller lease any more."

"Why?"

The way he said it shot a chill of warning up Grant's back. "Would that be any of your business, Marshal? Officially?"

Surprisingly, Dagget shrugged and let the subject drop. "Maybe not. It's kind of a coincidence, though, running into you like this today. I was just on my way to the lease to pick up Turk Valois."

The warning went up Grant's back again, colder this time than before.

Dagget smiled faintly and it seemed that his grim face would crack with the effort. "Surprises you, doesn't it? Well, it surprised me, too. You'd think Valois would be too smart to try passing stolen money this soon after a robbery."

Those pale eyes kept darting at Grant's face and he couldn't meet them. Although the wind was bitter cold, his palms and forehead felt sweaty. "What," he asked, "is that supposed to mean?"

"The money Valois gave Battle in payment for the Muller derrick timbers, remember? It made me curious. So I checked with a bank up in Joplin—one that was robbed not long ago—to see if they had the serial numbers of the stolen money."

There was a numbing ache in Grant's chest and he realized that he had been holding his breath.

"What did the bank have to say?"

"They had the numbers, all right, and they matched the bills that Turk gave to Battle. Well..." And he stood there for a moment, unsmiling, his face showing nothing. "I guess that's all there is to it. Sooner or later we catch them, Grant. All of them."

Grant stood frozen, and all he could think to say was: "I haven't seen you catch the man that killed Zack Muller."

Dagget's face cracked again with that tortured smile. "I will. You can bet your life on it!" And he wheeled suddenly, a squat bulldog of a man hunched into his shapeless, fur-lined windbreaker. Then, almost as an afterthought, he turned again and said, "I hear Kirk Lloyd went to hire on with the Mullers. I hope Rhea had the good sense to turn him down; Kirk's got a reputation with women. And it's not a good one!"

Grant stood motionless for one long moment, watching Dagget's broad back bob and weave among the wagons and teams and finally disappear in the confusion of clapboard and canvas. Urgency was on the wind, an impulse to run grew up inside him, but he stood there motionless, trying to make sense out of what Dagget had said.

For the moment, he told himself, he was safe. But Dagget would not be fooled long. Ortway, the banker, would not identify Valois as the robber—and anyway, the runner would yell his innocence at the top of his lungs and then the whole story would come out.

Quickly Grant shouldered his saddle again and headed once more

toward the livery barn. No, Dagget would not be fooled for long, but with a little luck it would be long enough for him to buy a strong saddle animal and get a good start out of the Territory.

The public corral had been built near the edge of town when Sabo was only a few days old, but the mushrooming boom town had since grown up around it. That steaming manure piled tent restaurants and flophouses passed unnoticed in this place where filth was taken for granted and griminess as a sign of wealth.

Grant slung his saddle to the ground beside a row of rental buggies and buckboards and quickly scanned the saddle animals inside the pole corral. The liveryman, a small man heavily weighted in a buffalo coat, came out of the barn and raked Grant with a pair of calculating eyes.

“Buy or rent?”

“Buy.” Grant indicated a tall gelding against the far fence. “How much for the black?”

The liveryman spat and brushed tobacco juice from the front of his coat. “Two hundred.” And when he saw the man hesitate he turned to re-enter the barn. At another place the animal would have brought seventy-five dollars, or maybe a hundred. But this was a boom town where double price was considered cheap.

Grant sighed and felt the money belt about his waist. He called to the liveryman and the deal was made.

Grant kept telling himself that he was lucky, but a vague uneasiness, almost a fear, grew up inside him as he cinched his rig on the

gelding's back. *Kirk's got a reputation with women*, Dagget had said, and those words kept coming back as Grant lashed his blanket roll behind the saddle.

It didn't do much good to tell himself that Rhea Muller was none of his concern—that she had deliberately asked for the trouble that went with hiring a gunman. Turk Valois was a queer one, but he had his pride and a kind of honor that Grant could understand. With that kind of man you could hate his guts and still not be afraid to leave him to look after your wife... or the woman you loved.

And Grant knew now that he had been counting on Valois to keep the gunman in line. Not that the runner could stand up to Lloyd with a gun, but there was something tough and ungiving about the man that made you know that he was strong in many ways where strength was needed.

It was strange, thinking of Valois this way. Grant hesitated before climbing to the saddle, wondering what Rhea would do if Dagget took the runner away.

And Dagget would take him away. Valois would yell, but that wouldn't stop the marshal from holding him until he could prove his innocence.

Goddamnit! Grant thought with sudden, unexpected savagery. What do I care whether or not he holds Valois? What do I care what happens to *her*?

But when he climbed atop the gelding he found that anger was not enough. It should have been an easy thing simply to bring the animal about and ride away from Sabo, but he did not find it so easy when he tried. Instead, he found himself wondering if there might be some way that he could clear Valois without putting his own neck in Dagget's noose.

Maybe it could be done. Suddenly he wheeled the big gelding away from the corral and rode obliquely through the clutter of Sabo, heading grimly back toward Slush Creek and the Muller lease.

He tried to tell himself that he was doing it on Valois' account, because he wasn't the kind to let an innocent man pay for something he'd done himself. But he knew well enough that Valois had little to do with it. No matter what kind of fool Rhea was, she didn't deserve to be left on the lease alone with a man like Lloyd.

A man had his pride, and a kind of honor that he had to preserve if he meant to go on living with himself. As he rode hunched low in the saddle, his head ducked against the cutting wind, he almost convinced himself that he was doing no more than any other man would do under the same conditions.

The black skidded down the bank of the creek and the sheet of ice cracked like a pane of glass. In midstream the gelding shied, and Grant swore harshly as his hat fell into the muddy ice water beneath the horse's belly. He swung low and swooped up the dripping hat, and the icy band around his ears did not improve his temper as he jammed the battered Stetson back on his head.

Now from the other side of the creek he could see the marshal's horse tied up on the protected side of the dugout, and he forgot the discomfort of a soaked hat. He took one deep breath and felt a nervous ripple flutter across his shoulders. This had to be brought off fast and exactly right, or it wouldn't be brought off at all.

He kicked the gelding roughly, almost as though he were afraid of changing his mind, and rode directly to the dugout. He scanned the high ground for riders but saw no one.

He left the black tied to a scrub-oak thicket behind the shack,

drawing his revolver as he approached the dugout steps. He could hear voices, but the sound was warped and distorted by the wind. Quietly, now, he made his way down to the bottom step and, without warning, kicked open the dugout door.

Rhea whirled and made a strange, small sound when she saw Grant standing in the doorway. Kirk Lloyd, lounging against the far wall, showed no surprise at all. Turk Valois, standing rigidly near the stove, made no sound, but his eyes were narrowed and bright with warning.

Whether the warning was intended, Grant didn't know, but he took advantage of it quickly. He kicked the door hard and swung his revolver on Dagget who was standing by himself against the near wall.

"Drop your gun, Marshall!"

Dagget's face was a grim, pleased mask showing no surprise. In his hands was a snub-barreled carbine pointed casually in the general direction of Valois, but Dagget didn't appear to have much interest in the runner now. "I can't see that this is your play, Grant," he said calmly, almost gently.

"This .45 makes it my play, and I can trigger it a lot faster than you can swing your carbine. So drop it."

The marshal looked thoughtful but undisturbed. Valois looked as though he were trying to speak but the words had stuck in his throat; Kirk Lloyd had not changed his lounging position or blank expression, except when he looked at Rhea. For an instant there was complete, roaring silence in the small room, and then Rhea hissed:

Joe, you fool! You fool! Can't you see it's a trap!"

A chill colder than the ice of Slush Creek settled in, Grant's middle. He did not glance around, did not take his eyes from Dagget's satisfied face. The marshal's shoulders moved slightly in an almost invisible shrug, and he leaned the carbine against the whitewashed wall. "Why did you come back, Grant?" he asked with that savage smile.

Grant's eyes darted about the room, then came to rest on Dagget. "Don't you know?"

"I want you to tell me."

Rhea took one quick step forward but Dagget nailed her to the spot with one savage glance. "Joe, don't tell him anything!"

Now Grant felt the water from his wet hat dripping down his neck, running slowly over his face. With his free hand he reached up to wipe the water away. And then he noticed the dark brown stain on his hand, the color of the dye that he had used on his hair. Dagget watched thoughtfully and said again:

"Why did you come back?"

And now, at last, the picture began to form in Grant's mind. Dagget had guessed all along that he would return because of Rhea. And even as he thought it, the marshal glanced bleakly at Lloyd, then at Rhea. And he studied Valois carefully, measuring him against the gunman.

Grant took a deep breath, knowing that it was a trap. But he also knew that it wouldn't have changed anything, even if he had known at the beginning. Strangely, he found this thought bitterly amusing. Dagget didn't know how deep his trap had actually been—how

inescapable.

"All right," Grant heard himself saying. "Valois is innocent. I gave him that money to pay off Battle."

"And where did the money come from?" the marshal pushed quietly.

There was not much sense in lying now, for he would have to fight his way out of this anyway. "Joplin," he said. "I took it off a banker named Ortway." He saw Kirk Lloyd's mouth curl in faint amusement, and he saw the gunman's hungry gaze measuring Rhea. Grant looked at the marshal. "Does Valois go clear? Is he free to go on working here for the Mullers?"

"Sure. If you can prove you're the bandit."

"I just told you! You've got a confession, with witnesses. What more do you want?"

"The money," Dagget said dryly. "Show me where you hid it and maybe I'll believe you."

The money. All it had brought him was trouble, and at the moment he was glad enough to get rid of it. "Then Valois will be clear?"

"You've got my word on it." Then the marshal's eyes widened, glittered with outrage when he saw Grant open his windbreaker with his free hand and draw out the money belt.

"You've had the money on you all the time?"

"Where else would I have it?"

Abruptly, Dagget laughed, and the sound was harsh and unpleasant. "I had you pegged for a fool, but not that much of a fool!" He shook

his head angrily as he grabbed the money belt and began breaking the pockets open. "To think of all the trouble I went to trying to find out where you had the money hid! Lying about the serial numbers. Lying about Valois. And all the time you had the money strapped around your gut!" There was amazement in his eyes along with the anger. And he laughed again when he saw surprise in Grant's face.

"Don't think Territory law is less effective than any other kind. That hair, it's getting lighter by the minute, Grant, the color is dripping down your face! But I needed more than that; Ortway's yelling for his money. And all the time you had it in a money belt!"

Grant's back stiffened. "You didn't get the serial numbers from Joplin? You lied about that?"

"What bank clerk bothers to take serial numbers?" the marshal asked dryly. "But I knew you'd believe it. I knew you'd come running back when I told you that Lloyd and your girl friend..."

Without a word Grant shifted his gun to his left hand, stepped in quickly, and struck Dagget in the face.

Dagget, startled, went reeling back against the wall. Gently, he touched the corner of his bloodied mouth, his eyes blazing. "You don't like to think about that, do you? Lloyd's a hard case, takes what he wants. You don't like to think of him being alone with Miss Muller, do you?"

"Shut up!"

But the marshal shook his head and grinned. "Every man has his weakness; yours is a girl. I knew it the first time I saw the two of you together. Well, you never should have robbed that bank, Grant, because you are going to pay for it a long time."

"Don't bet on it," Grant snarled. He glanced quickly at Rhea and said, "Get me some rope, plenty of it."

"It won't help you," Dagget said, his anger cooling. "It'll only go harder when I catch you. And I *will* catch you!"

"We'll see about that." He took a roll of rough hemp binding twine from Rhea, then motioned for the marshal to turn around. "Cross your hands behind your back."

The marshal hesitated, then turned slowly, his face, to the wall. Grant lashed his hands together then, and whipped his feet together with another length of twine. As he finished with the job, he turned to see Rhea standing beside him.

"Joe, why did you do it?"

"Why," he asked stiffly, "does a man do anything?" Then he turned to Lloyd. "As long as you're on the Muller pay roll, you might as well earn your wage. Nobody's watching the fire line, is there?"

Surprisingly, the gunman showed no anger. He shoved himself lazily away from the wall, still favoring his left side. "Dagget's goin' to be mighty put out about this," and his thin mouth stretched in a humorless grin. "But it's your show, I guess." He glanced blandly at Valois, then turned his gaze on Rhea and held it until she colored and turned away. "I'll be seein' you, Miss Muller," he said dryly. "Later."

Turk Valois stiffened with anger of his own as the gunman left them in the dugout. He turned abruptly toward the door, motioning for Grant to follow.

"I had you pegged right the first time I saw you," the runner said flatly

when they were outside. "You didn't come back here to clear an innocent man. You came because of Rhea."

"Do you aim to keep working for the Mullers?"

"That's the reason you came back, isn't it, to make sure I stayed to keep an eye on Lloyd?"

Grant nodded, knowing that this was no time for subtleties. "Yes, I guess that's the way it is. He's dangerous."

A quiet change appeared in Valois' expression, the old toughness that had not been apparent in the dugout was now set in the lines of his face. "I'm not afraid of Kirk Lloyd, but can you give me a good reason why I should risk getting shot over a girl like Rhea?"

Grant took a deep breath, risking everything on the turn of the first card. "I can't give you any reason at all. I guess maybe you've got reason to hate Rhea, but she's still a woman. I was hoping you'd do it because it was the decent thing."

"If she's afraid of Lloyd, she can always fire him."

But both men knew better than that. "You don't fire a man like Lloyd. He stays as long as he likes, and then he quits."

A long moment of silence stretched out between them. At last the runner shook his head. "You've got it bad, but I like your guts. Not many men would stand up to Dagget and Lloyd together."

"So you'll stay?"

"Until the well's spudded in. Rhea won't need any protection after that; she'll be able to buy anything she wants."

Not until that moment did they become aware of Rhea standing on the top step of the dugout, her eyes wide, listening.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT SEEMED A long time that she stood there, the wind whipping her long dress against her slender body. She did not look so driven now with ambition and greed; she was alone and afraid. Suddenly she uttered a small sound and came flying across the weed-grown lot. At that moment she was more beautiful than Grant had ever seen her, but a core of hard-ness grew inside him, and he stood wooden and unmoving. "Joe, why did you do it!"

And Turk Valois said, with a kind of amused bitterness, "Because he loves you, Rhea. A man does some crazy things when he's in love—I ought to know!"

Grant turned sharply to look at the runner's face, but Valois had already wheeled and was walking stiffly toward the dugout. As if from a great distance he heard Rhea's voice, the words strangely stiff and awkward. "Joe, it's true, isn't it?"

"Who knows why a man does such things?" And with cold deliberateness he said, "Good-by, Rhea."

"Joe, listen to me! You can't run from Dagget; he'll catch you, no matter where you go. Give yourself up. When the well comes in we'll have the money to hire the best lawyers in the Territory."

He looked at her as though he had never seen her before. "No, thanks, Rhea. I'd rather look after myself."

"It's Lloyd, isn't it? That's why you're angry. I'll fire him, I'll put him off the lease!"

Even in his woodenness he was puzzled. Why was she so concerned? He was through; just one short jump ahead of the law and prison. He couldn't possibly be of any use to her now.

He could only wonder what kind of trick it was this time, what more did she want of him? He became aware of the cold, and the slashing wind that whipped through the grasses of the draws and the naked thickets of blackjack, and he pulled himself deeper into his windbreaker and fastened the collar with thick fingers. He said again, "Good-by, Rhea," and turned to go.

But she grabbed his sleeve. "What do I have to say to make you understand?"

"Nothing, Rhea. You'll get what you want, with a little luck; all the money you'll ever want. Your gun shark will protect you from Farley, and Valois will protect you from the gun shark. It's a nice arrangement, isn't it?"

"Valois!" she hissed. "I don't want his protection!" "Then fire him. But you'll find that Lloyd won't be so easy to deal with."

Suddenly the fight seemed to go out of her. "What can I say? Once I thought I wanted money more than anything in the world; money and revenge. I wanted security, a place to live that didn't reek of oil; I was tired to death of living in the ground like a wolf, and I wanted to live like a woman. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Grant said nothing.

"I love you, Joe."

He could not believe her.

"From the very first I think I loved you, but I wouldn't admit it, even to myself."

He looked past her, to where Valois was waiting against the side of the dugout. Then he turned and walked away. And when he turned to look back, she was no longer there.

So this, he thought, is the way it ends. Filled with doubt and roaring emptiness, he tramped down to the thicket where the gelding was tied. Valois came toward him, calling out as Grant was about to step into the stirrup.

"Where do you aim to go from here?"

Grant shrugged. For the moment he didn't care what trail he took or where it led him.

"Dagget's going to be fit to kill when we turn him loose," the runner said. "We won't be able to hold him long. We can lie to him, tell him that you kept us at gun point so we couldn't untie him. Even so, we've got to let him go pretty soon."

Grant climbed heavily to the saddle. "Give me a few minutes, and then..." He shrugged, and hauled the gelding around to the north.

"Just a minute," Valois called. "Dagget's going to be a wild man when he starts after you this time. He'll burn up the telegraph wires—within a few hours the borders will be watched so a coyote couldn't slip through."

"That's a chance I'll have to take."

"But I thought of something. A few months ago I stumbled onto an old

dugout about five miles up Slush Creek. It's dug into the creek bank and grown over with weeds, built years ago by one of Payne's boomers, I guess. Far as I know I'm the only one that knows about it. It might do as a hideout. It would beat trying to cross a border crawling with U. S. marshals!"

Grant scowled. "Maybe. But I couldn't keep my horse, and I'd need supplies."

"Let the horse go; more than likely he'll come back to Sabo, which won't tell Dagget a thing. I can bring you supplies and another horse later."

"I'm not asking you to get mixed up in this any more than you already are."

Valois grinned. "I'm already in it as far as I can get."

Grant hesitated only a moment. "I guess I didn't expect this much help. A fool doesn't deserve it, but..." He lifted a hand in a solemn gesture of friendship. "Thanks. I'll be looking for the squatter's place as I head north."

He put iron to the big gelding, and the black wheeled and settled to an easy lope to the north. When they reached the gentle incline that sloped gently up to the rim of the basin, he turned briefly in the saddle and saw Valois still standing there, and he saw Rhea standing straight as an arrow beside the bunkhouse, but he was a long way off by then and couldn't see what her face was like. And he wanted to lift a hand to her, to indicate with some small gesture that he had not asked it to end this way, but his male pride lay hard and cold inside him, and he turned bleakly and raked the gelding with blunted spurs.

Time sped now; he had never known it to pass so quickly. He ticked off the seconds and minutes in his mind and forced himself to hold the big black to an easy lope. Minutes counted now; time was the lone sheer thread that held him to freedom, and it was running out at an appalling rate. Five minutes he had—possibly ten—and then Rhea and Valois would be forced to let Dagget go. Even so, they would have trouble enough explaining the delay to the marshal.

To avoid attention and suspicion, he kept to the well-traveled freight trail as long as he dared... but the minutes were flying by. At last he hauled the gelding around and peered down once again on that lacy wilderness of derricks where an endless, twisted chain of wagons crawled like black ants over the frozen prairie. And he could see the slanted roofs and flapping canvas of Sabo, and far to the west the endless chain of wagons disappeared on the horizon where Kiefer lay. But the thing that he was looking for was somewhere else, on the other side of Slush Creek. And he came suddenly erect in his saddle and a faint, fleeting grin split his face as he saw the tiny figure of Turk Valois flogging the marshal's horse. His taut nerves relaxed and he sat easy in the saddle, watching the animal bolt for the lower reaches of the frozen stream.

Valois thought of everything! And he had guts, risking Dagget's wrath to buy more time for the escape. Grant shook his head in vague bewilderment and wondered how Rhea could doubt a man like that.

The pale winter sun was falling behind the rolling brown hills to the west when Grant came upon the ancient dugout that Valois had mentioned. He would not have seen it if the runner hadn't pinpointed the place for him, for it was dug into the side of the claybank and years of slow erosion had brought the earth down on top of it, making it shapeless and inconspicuous. And the covering of earth had grown

up with grass and tall weeds, and not even the sagging stockade door was visible to a casual searching, hidden as it was behind a spearlike thicket of mullein.

Grant hesitated for one long moment on the opposite bank. Somewhere behind him Dagget was raging. Already the telegraph would be sending out its staccato warning and U. S. marshals and state law officers would be gathering on the borders to head him off.

To run or hide—the decision had to be made quickly. If he stayed here he would have to let the gelding go, for the animal would be a dead giveaway when Dagget's men came through this way. And they would come through soon enough.

He didn't like the idea of being afoot in the middle of the Creek Nation, without provisions, literally trusting his life to a man who owed him nothing. Yet, the dugout, if not warm, would at least keep him from freezing. And it was unlikely that Dagget would expect to find him in a place like this.

He beat his arms together, hunching into the bitter wind that swept down through the canyon of naked cottonwoods, realizing that he had to trust Valois. He could not fight Dagget's wrath alone.

With cool deliberateness, he rode the gelding on past the dugout and dismounted a hundred yards upstream. Here the ground was frozen hard as flint, carpeted with brown, brittle bunch grass, making a trail almost impossible to follow. With numb fingers he unbitted and threw loose the cinch, stripping his meager gear from the gelding's back. Without a moment's hesitation he cracked the black across the rump and stood for a moment watching the startled animal bolt upstream for perhaps fifty yards then turn slowly and start walking back toward Sabo.

The decision was made, and there was no backing out. The rest was up to Turk Valois.

Bleakly, he took up his saddle and roll and made his way back downstream to a log crossing. Carefully parting the curtain of weeds, he paused in front of the stockade door sagging obliquely on one leather hinge, and a kind of bitter humor welled up inside him as he thought of his hard-scrabble farm in Missouri. So much had happened that he hadn't had time to think back or feel regret. But he had plenty of time now, he thought wryly—it was all he did have.

He shoved the door inward and it ripped from its rotten hinge and went crashing to the ground. Gently he eased his rig to the ground and stepped into the cavelike darkness of the dugout. Once this place had meant hope to someone, maybe to some awkward cowhand like himself who had held visions of owning his own land, being his own boss, in some vague way hoping to make something of himself.

But from the looks of things, the man who built this dugout had come on bad luck, too. Likely the cavalry had routed him out of here, as they had so many of Captain David L. Payne's misguided Boomers.

Grant searched his windbreaker for a match and held the flaming sulphur above his head as he surveyed the place. A lot of work had gone into the building, a lot of useless work. First the clay creek bank had been dug out, and then Cottonwood logs had been cut and split to side the dirt walls of the cabin. A crude sod fireplace stood against one wall, and a chimney fashioned of sticks and mud had once reached up through the top of the dugout. And perhaps there had been furniture here once, homemade or hauled in by wagon, but the floor was bare now. Only the fireplace remained; the mud chimney had long since crumbled and disappeared. And dirt sifted down like sporadic rain between the huge log beams of the ceiling,

and before long it would fall in completely and fill up with more dirt and no one would ever guess that a man—a family perhaps—had lived here once.

Grant dropped the match and let the flame go out. There was too much here that reminded him of himself and he didn't want to see any more of it.

In the failing fight from the outside he opened his roll and spread his blanket in the corner of the room; then he propped the door in place, blocking out the cutting wind, and a sheet of blackness came down on the only available light.

I'll wait, he thought. That's all I have to do. Valois helped me once—twice—and he'll do it again.

And he felt his way to the corner and sat on the thin blanket, cursing himself for not thinking to bring provisions. But there hadn't been time to think of provisions. There had been time to run and that was all.

He didn't want to think, but there was little else to do in the tomblike darkness of the dugout. He drew his revolver from his waistband and busied himself with cleaning it, but that wasn't enough to stop the aimless procession of thoughts that passed through his mind.

It was too late for regrets. He should have thought of that before robbing the bank in Joplin. Too late for anything now except to wait, and run when he got the chance. And he smiled grimly, rubbing hard along the barrel of his .45. Who would have thought that it would have ended like this?

It was early morning when he awoke with the steel-hard light of winter slanting through the cracks of the propped-up door. There was a new

smell to the air, a sharpness that had not been there the night before. He threw off the thin blanket and got to his feet numbly, knowing what he would see even before he pulled the door inward.

A long shelf of slaty, stonelike clouds had slipped in from the north during the night, and a gun-steel case was on the sky. The wind had settled and an uneasy hush lay over the prairie, and a prickle of warning started at Grant's neck and worked its way up to his scalp. There was snow and sleet in those clouds, and the kind of wind that only the plains country knew. He stepped outside into the funeral-like silence, a silence so heavy that the nervous stirring of prairie chickens startled him.

Then, from a distance, he heard the sound of hoofs, and his heart pounded a little faster in the hope that it might be Valois. But when he climbed the creek bank and lay belly down in the tall weeds, he saw two Creeks driving a small bunch of cattle to the south, ahead of the storm. When they over on his back and studied the sky thoughtfully. Already, in the east, the slablike clouds were shredded with sleet and snow, and the horizon shimmered behind a gauzy curtain of ice.

In a way the snow was good—it would cover any tracks that he might have left. At the same time it might hold up Valois. And—despite his resolutions—he found himself thinking of Rhea again. There was no telling how long a norther would last—it might hold up construction of the well for days. And there, he thought grimly, would go Rhea's dream, wiped out in a storm of snow and ice, and Ben Farley would have his way, after all.

He lay there for a long time, feeling strangely empty. And the loneliness at that moment was heavier than anything he had ever known before.

Almost too late did he hear the approach of more horses-several of them this time, coming from the north. Grant lay motionless in the rattling stand of mullein as the six horsemen broke out of a thicket at the far end of the creek and rode a plodding crow line cross-country toward Sabo. Grant heard his compressed breath whistle between his teeth when he recognized the lead rider as Jim Dagget.

Evidently the marshal hadn't wasted time trying to trail Grant from the lease but had picked up a posse and headed for the border to cut him off. Evidence of failure was etched like saber cuts at the corners of Dagget's hard mouth. The other riders glanced warily over their shoulders at the gathering storm, or slumped heavily in their saddles, sodden with fatigue and cold. Only the marshal rode stiffly erect, his restless, flashing eyes gouging at every bush and thicket.

Instinctively Grant pressed harder to the frozen ground as the marshal reined up a scant hundred yards away, and one of the riders said, "You see somethin', Marshal?"

"No. But it would be better if we spread out on either side of the creek and follow the stream back to Sabo."

The rider grunted uneasily. "That norther's goin' to hit any minute now. Don't you think we'd better stick together?"

"Any fool can find his way home by following the creek, even in a snowstorm," Dagget said. He tossed his head like an angry mountain lion and sniffed the air. "Grant's out there somewhere, probably between here and Sabo."

"If he is, the storm will get him."

"I don't want the storm to get him!" Dagget turned in the saddle and raked the riders with his anger. "That's a job I set for myself!"

The horses tramped nervously, betraying the emotions of their riders. "Well," one of the horsemen said at last, not returning the marshal's gaze, "I guess we can spread out until the storm hits."

The voices carried like bullets on the still air, and Grant could see the puffs of frost as the men talked; he could almost smell the warm animal odor of the steaming horses. As the riders quartered toward the creek, below the dugout, Grant let out the breath that he had been holding. This was too close for comfort. The sooner he got out of the Territory the better he would like it, storm or no storm. For he had glimpsed the marshal's rage, he had felt Dagget's iron-hard determination on the morning air. Dagget was a bulldog. He would never turn loose.

In spite of the cold, Grant felt his palms clammy with perspiration as he eased himself back down the creek bank. Then another thought occurred to him. What if Valois had started out with the provisions? What if the runner ran into Dagget as the posse followed the creek back to Sabo?

Then, suddenly, the air was no longer still. He could hear the storm coming like the subdued purr of a powerful locomotive from a great distance. The tall buffalo grass bent before the first gust, the weeds rattled, and the naked cotton-woods clacked their arms. A scattered volley of sleet slashed like buckshot against the creek bank.

Quickly Grant skidded down the creek bank, grabbed up an armful of driftwood, and made it back to the dugout before the storm struck full force. He propped the stockade door against the wind and packed loose dirt against the bottom. And now the snow came, and the slashing sleet; a dazzling white sheet seemed to have dropped in front of the dugout door so that Grant could not even see the other side of the creek. In this kind of weather cattle lost their way and died going around in circles, men froze to death on horseback, even the

coyote and lobo wolf became confused and sometimes died.

But Grant's instinct warned him that Dagget would not become confused and would not die. Somehow the marshal would last out the storm. And then he would come again, searching.

So the storm had postponed the end but had not changed it. Grant stood for a moment at the door, watching the sleet and snow clog and fill the cracks, banking up against the stockade slab until the dugout was practically airtight, sealed against the storm.

Grant broke up a small mound of driftwood in the sod fireplace, shredded some dry bark, and got it going with a sulphur match. He smiled grimly as the thin ribbon of smoke climbed up to the porous ceiling, toward the half-filled opening that once had been the chimney. No use now worrying about smoke attracting attention from the outside!

Then, almost before the thought was completed, he heard the small, insignificant puff of sound, all but lost in the lashing of the wind. Grant came rigid, listening until his ears rang, waiting tensely for two more pistol shots—the universal call for help. Then, quietly, almost matter-of-factly, another small blunt note punctured the raging wind. Then, after a brief pause, another. And Grant crouched before the small fire, listening hard, but the only sound was that of the storm roaring through the draw of Slush Creek.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AFTER A FEW minutes of listening to the storm it was easy to imagine that he had never heard the shots at all. It could easily have been something else, he told himself—dry branches cracking in the wind—a lot of things might sound like pistol shots in such a howling

confusion of noises.

And anyway, it was none of his business. If one of the posse members had got into trouble, there were five other members to give a hand. And if it was one of the Indians-well, the Creeks knew more about this country than the white man.

But it was not so easy to let the thought drop there. The longer he waited, the harder he listened for other sounds that might be mistaken for pistol shots. There were none. He had not been mistaken; it had not been the sound of cracking branches. And as he crouched there, his hands held out to the bright warmth of the fire, he fought a quiet but bitter war within his conscience.

Suddenly he came to his feet, swearing hoarsely. Buttoning his windbreaker tight at the collar, he kicked the dirt away from the stockade door and shoved it back against the powdery drift. I've acted the fool so long, he thought savagely, maybe it's got to be my nature!

Outside the dugout the cold was breathtaking, the sleet slashed and cut like knives. He leaned heavily against the door and shoved it back into place. He paused a few paces in front of the dugout, already confused in the swirling white sea of snow. The icy weeds stood like tall, white bones, cracking like icicles as he pushed through to the creek. Here he dragged a cottonwood log up on the bank, then laid a long stick of driftwood across it to mark the point of the dugout. Breathing hard, he drew out his revolver and fired a single shot toward the swirling sky.

A long minute passed. He beat his hands together and tramped a small, impatient circle, waiting. At last the answer came, a tiny mushroom of sound muffled under the blanket of snow. It came from downstream, but there was no way of telling how far; distances and

directions could not be trusted.

His back to the wind, Grant clawed his way along the creek bank, slipping, stumbling, but always inching his way forward, with the creek itself as his only guide. He fired another round and again he got an answer, this time closer and slightly to the right.

He began climbing the bank, grabbing at roots and brittle weeds, his eyes slitted, almost closed, as he peered into that blanket of snow. Another shot led him away from the creek, away from his only touch with reality and direction. But now he heard a voice calling weakly, "Over here! Over here!"

If his face had not been frozen, leatherlike and stiff, perhaps he would have smiled with grim humor. The irony here was almost too much to believe, and yet he was not surprised. It was almost as though he had expected Dagget to be here, almost as though he had known all along and was helpless to ignore the warning.

"Sam, is that you?" Dagget called hoarsely. "My horse fell on my leg. I can't move."

It was then that Grant saw the shapeless form lying in the brush, plastered on the windward side with a crust of ice and snow. "It's not Sam," he said, kneeling down beside the marshal.

Dagget turned his head and stared. His blue face expressionless, his eyelashes tipped with ice, his hair powdered with snow and sleet, he looked the picture of a winter storm.

"How bad are you hurt?" Grant said.

"My leg's broke, I think," Dagget said matter-of-factly, gazing steadily at Grant's face.

"What happened to the others? I saw five men with you not long ago."

The marshal snorted with profound disgust, but that was his only comment.

Grant moved his numb fingers up Dagget's right leg, feeling the hump of the break a few inches below the knee. Then for a few brief seconds he held Dagget's bleak gaze, doing nothing, saying nothing. It would be so easy to go on doing nothing. The posse members had deserted or were lost in the storm. It would be a simple thing to return to the dugout and stay there till the storm was over, then make a run for it while the Territory dug itself out.

Dagget would die in a matter of minutes—but this was a game of life and death, with no consolation for the loser. Dagget knew that the day he first pinned on a federal star—he must have known that sooner or later this would come.

But this line—the logical line—of thought offered little comfort to Grant. Whatever he was, he was no murderer. He shoved himself to his feet and thrashed blindly through the brush. He ran straight on into a slender cottonwood sapling, and he grasped it in both hands and broke it across his knee.

The marshal looked up in surprise as Grant came blundering back through the storm. "I thought you were gone."

"You do too much thinking, Dagget. Maybe that's your trouble."

The marshal threw back his head and his mouth flew open as Grant grasped his broken leg and pulled it straight, but no sound of pain escaped him. He watched bleakly as Grant broke the brittle young sapling again and made two splints to fit on either side of the break.

"What are you doing?" Dagget said, the words coming through

clinchd teeth.

"The leg has to be splinted or the broken bone will come through the skin. We've got a good piece to go, and it's apt to be a long while before you see a doctor."

Dagget's mouth twisted into what might have passed as a grim smile. "You're wastin' your time. You wouldn't stand a chance of getting back to Sabo."

"I'm holed up in an old Boomer dugout upstream. It's not exactly fancy but it's tight; we won't freeze."

The marshal gritted his teeth and said nothing as Grant pulled his belt tight around the splinted leg, then he lay still for a moment, breathing hard. "You're aiming to take me back to your dugout," he said flatly. "Is that it?"

"Unless you'd rather stay here."

"Before you go too far, we'd better get something straight. I'll not be bought, not even with my own life. As long as I'm alive I'll be after you for robbing that Joplin bank."

"I figured you would be," Grant said harshly.

Numb and near blinded, their clothing crackling with ice, Grant dragged the marshal the length of Slush Creek until they stumbled over the cottonwood log crossed with brush. Both men paused, breathing hard, the marshal holding fast to Grant's left arm.

"We'll have to climb the bank here," Grant said, almost yelling.

Dagget nodded, but at the first step his icy face went gray and Grant had to catch him in his arms. He stood for a moment, his mind as

numb as his body. He surveyed the sheer creek bank as a mountaineer might gaze hopelessly up at Everest's highest peak. In Grant's mind Dagget had ceased to be a marshal, or even another man. It was almost as if this dead, bulky weight was part of himself, a useless appendage that must be dragged along wherever he went. Slowly he tuned his ears to the wind and to the noise of driving sleet as it ripped the bark from cottonwood and scrub oak. He saw himself, no longer standing, but sitting leisurely in the snow, waiting for the insidious cold to work its painless magic.

At last a slow, insignificant fear began to stir inside him, and he thought, "I'm freezing. This is the way it is when the temperature drops thirty degrees in as many minutes."

Abruptly, in a kind of bleak panic, he shoved himself to his feet and attacked the icy creek bank, still dragging Dagget's bulky weight with one hand. He crashed through the tall weeds standing like giant upside-down icicles in front of the dugout, and shoved open the stockade door.

Only after several minutes of rubbing his hands before the fire did he realize that he had left Dagget in the open doorway. He pulled the marshal inside and blocked the opening again.

"Dagget!"

Water from the thawing snow rolled down the marshal's face like giant tears. At last Dagget opened his eyes and glanced coldly at Grant. "This is quite a place you've got here."

"It'll have to do." Quickly he examined the marshal's leg and saw that the splints had held. "I'll pull you over to the fire; it won't be long before you're thawed out."

Dagget sighed, a strange, hard cast on his blunt features. "Just a minute; there's something I have to do first." Propping himself up on one elbow, he reached into his wind-breaker and drew his revolver. "You're under arrest, Grant. Let me have your gun."

Grant felt himself go rigid. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

Dagget's voice was bleak, without tone or timbre. "I warned you how it was going to be. I didn't ask you to save my life."

Grant's voice was almost a snarl. "I should have left you out there to freeze!"

"Maybe... but you didn't. I'm still alive and I'm still a deputy U. S. marshal." He motioned with the muzzle of his revolver. "You're under arrest and I want your gun."

"And if I don't give it to you?"

"You will, because you know I mean business."

The day was an endless, howling eternity. Grant kept just enough wood in the fireplace to drive back the icy chill and warned himself to stay awake and alert. Sooner or later Dagget would have to sleep; eventually he would have to give in to exhaustion and pain.

But the marshal showed no signs of giving in. Against the far wall in the dark shadows, his face expressionless, the color of yellow clay, he sat hour after hour, the revolver handy at his side. As the day dragged on, Grant became acutely aware of his own hunger, the growling and sour nervousness of his stomach.

"I brought no provisions here," he said at last, watching Dagget's

face. "We've got nothing to eat."

The marshal shrugged faintly. "The storm won't last more than a day or so. Then somebody from Sabo or Kiefer will come looking for me."

"We're snowed in. How are they going to find us?"

Dagget shook his head as if to say he'd worry about that when the time came.

Once more the dugout became heavy with silence. Snow from the outside had clogged the chimney opening and the heavy, pulpwood smoke forced Grant to cut the fire down to a small finger of flame. Dagget didn't seem to mind the cold. Nothing seemed to disturb him; discomfort, or pain, or hunger. Hour after hour his eyes stared flatly at Grant, his face cast in a yellowish mold of clay.

Those eyes and the monotony of the silence began to work on Grant's nerves. At last he walked to the door, punched a bit of snow and ice from a crack, and peered outside.

"The storm seems to be slacking off," he said to himself.

Dagget grunted. "Northers like this don't last long."

Grant remained at the door for a long time studying the blue-white landscape through the crack. The sun had set hours ago, but it was almost as light as day outside. The savagery of the wind was now tamed, and the swirling snow fell softly. By morning the storm would be completely over. The Creek Nation would begin digging itself out, and search parties would be formed in Sabo and Kiefer to look for Dagget.

I'm lost, Grant thought to himself. Everything is lost. From the minute I

walked into that Joplin bank and threw down on Ortway, the world started coming apart at the seams.

Strangely he did not feel angry. Perhaps there had been too much anger all at once and it had blown itself out, like the storm. Then, from the far side of the dugout, Dagget asked, "Why?"

Frowning, faintly surprised, Grant turned away from the door.

"It's my professional curiosity," the marshal said dryly. "I'd like to know why you robbed that banker. Why you took exactly twenty-five hundred dollars, not a penny more or less. Why you didn't spend the money after you got it, except to buy a horse and make the payment to Battle."

Grant returned slowly to his place beside the fire. "What difference does it make?"

"None, more than likely. As I said, it's my professional curiosity."

And Grant thought back to that day in Joplin which now seemed so long ago, and he tried to recall the anger that he had felt for Ortway at the time. But that anger, too, was strangely missing, and Ortway was a shadowy figure in the past. He said thoughtfully, almost to himself:

"It's a funny thing. It seemed so important then, but now I can hardly remember anything about it."

The marshal shifted his position with great care. "You were a farmer, weren't you?"

"I had a farm. There's a difference. Most of my life was spent tramping from one place to the other; I was fifteen when I rode drag on my first cattle drive." At that moment, glad that the silence had been broken, he could almost forget that Dagget was his enemy. "It's

a funny thing," he said again. "All those years I spent on the trail I thought of just one thing. Owning my own land and being my own boss. And I thought I never wanted to see another beef steer again, so I saved my trail money to buy a farm."

He shook his head. "But I was no farmer. I guess I would have lost the place anyway, even if Ortway hadn't tricked me out of it, but I didn't think of that in Joplin that day. All I could think about was getting my money back—the twenty-five hundred dollars that Ortway had tricked me out of...."

Dagget sat stolidly, like some squat stone idol, but his eyes were slitted, thoughtful. "There's one more thing I'd like to know. Why did you drag me out of the storm?"

"I wish I knew!"

Dagget surprised him by grinning—that same savage expression, completely devoid of humor, that Grant had come to know so well. "I'll tell you why you did it! You figured you could make a deal, didn't you? You knew your string had run out, and getting me in your debt was the only chance you had!"

To Grant's own surprise he failed to respond to the marshal's prodding. "You always see the bad side of a man, don't you?"

"It's the business I'm in."

"And in your business a man never saves a life without selfish reason?"

"That's about it." Dagget still held his grin, but only with his mouth. His eyes were slitted and cautious, and he shifted again, grimacing. He rested against the wall, sweat beading his forehead, but he never took his eyes from Grant's face.

“Tell me about Rhea Muller,” he said at last.

Grant looked at him flatly, not with anger but with quiet hatred, then turned back to the door.

Dagget could not let him alone. In the back of his searching mind all was not exactly as it should have been, the pattern did not fit the material. The marshal was a blunt, calculating man and did not like subtleties. And there were shadings and overtones to this man who called himself Joe Grant that he could not fully understand, and this angered him.

“I guess,” he said harshly, “you must be pretty stuck on the Muller girl. Well, you’re not the first one. Turk Valois had himself a bad case up in Bartlesville, but she threw him over, they say, when Turk lost his money.”

He fixed his eyes on Grant’s back and saw it go rigid. Dagget grinned again and went on with his probing. “Rhea’s got kind of a reputation with the wildcatters; she’s got a good head and plenty of gumption. Why did she hire a hard case like you, Grant?”

“She hired Kirk Lloyd, didn’t she?”

“That’s different. Kirk’s a gun shark, but he’s not wanted by the law. Not in this country, anyway.” He shook his head. “But why would she hire a wanted man—it was a fool move; and Rhea Muller’s no fool.”

Abruptly Grant wheeled away from the door. “What are you trying to say?”

“I was just thinking maybe you’ve got the girl figured wrong. Maybe she really liked you from the first; maybe she still does. It’s funny, isn’t it, you not trusting her, and her with too much pride to do anything

about it?"

Dagget's eyes almost flamed with intensity, then suddenly he sank back against the wall, breathing heavily. "That was hitting below the belt, wasn't it? Well, I fight that way when I have to."

Grant's anger returned, a cold, compressed thing, and his words were as brittle as the ice that crackled in the trees outside the dugout. "You must enjoy your work, Marshal! Catching a man isn't enough for you, is it? You've got to build him up in his mind, show him a picture of everything he's ever wanted, and then grab it away!"

Exhaustion and pain were beginning to show on the marshal's face; the mask of clay was beginning to melt and sag at the corners of his hard mouth. "You won't believe it—but I don't hate you, Grant. But I had to see your face naked, unmasked. I had to see what you looked like after having the ground cut out from under you." He sighed, and years of fatigue were behind the gesture. "I had to be sure in my own mind that you didn't kill Zack Muller."

Words would not form in Grant's mouth; he could only stare.

Dagget seemed vaguely amused. "Did you think I'd forgotten how the girl's father was killed?"

"You thought I did it?"

"Had it done, maybe. A hard case arriving from nowhere, going to work for the Mullers, getting mixed up with the old man's daughter. Rhea was the old man's legal heir; she'll get all the money if the well comes in. Your money, if you'd married her."

"You're crazy!" Grant hissed. "Rhea wouldn't marry me if I was the last man in the Territory!" Dagget shrugged. "Did you ask her?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GRANT LAY RIGIDLY on his thin blanket before the fireplace. Outside, a shifting wind slithered over the dugout roof and trees clashed their icy branches. A coyote ventured forth into the night and barked forlornly. But inside the dugout the silence was almost a tangible thing, with only the crackling of a small bark fire to break it.

Dagget, wrapped in his dark shadows against the wall, had not moved for a long time, and Grant listened intently to the marshal's measured breathing. He could not see whether Dagget was asleep; he could only guess at that. And hope.

Grant lifted himself quietly to his elbow, then to his knees, peering steadily into the darkness. Without a horse there was no hope of escape, but there might be a chance of bargaining with the search party when it came—providing he could get the revolvers away from the marshal now.

An inch at a time, hardly breathing, he made his way across the dirt floor until at last he could see Dagget's shapeless hulk slouched forward at the corner, the broken leg stretching straight out. Now he paused, taking one last deep breath before reaching across the marshal's body to where the pistols lay. Then, as he started the movement...

"That's far enough, Grant!"

Out of the darkness the muzzle of a .45 loomed in Grant's face so close that he could smell the oil on the blued steel. "That's far enough!" Dagget said again, harshly. And Grant's hope melted like wax—the last hope he had.

"It's just as well," Dagget said, faintly amused. "An escape now would

only get you killed.”

Grant had no words in him. He rested for a moment on his hands and knees, crouching, but he had no thought of springing into the muzzle of Dagget's revolver. It had been a faint hope at best.

He got to his feet slowly and paced the dugout floor, and the only sound that came from Dagget was the steady, measured breathing of one who is neither fully asleep nor awake.

Grant told himself with some bitterness that he might as well face it. Like a bulldog, Dagget had his teeth in his throat and would hold on to the death.

At last Grant went to the door and peered once more through the crack and saw that daylight was not far off. His stomach was empty and sour, his nerves lay on the top of his skin. Pretty soon the searching party would come, he thought, and Dagget's job would be over.

He held that thought in his mind, concentrating on the trial, the conviction, the prison. He was afraid to let his mind go free, for he knew that it would return to Rhea.

But he could not keep from remembering what Dagget had implied in his own brutal way.

Did you ask her?

And he realized now that he had not asked her anything. He had been ready to believe anything Turk Valois and others had said against her, but he had not bothered to ask what she thought about it herself.

Then Dagget, as though he had been reading his thoughts, said

dryly, "Maybe she'll wait for you." His voice had a knowing quality to it. "They've been known to wait—for the right man."

But at the moment Grant was more interested in the marshal than in what he was saying. Dagget was a strange one—cold as winter, humorless, tough as whang leather. It was faintly shocking to see behind that exterior some semblance of human emotion, no matter how slight. And Grant knew, in some uncertain way, that Dagget was merely doing his job and did not hate him. But he was wrong about Rhea. Rhea waited for nothing or no one. She had set her ambitions long ago and her course was as inevitable as a bullet's flight.

Then, as they studied each other silently across the gloom of the dugout, they heard a sound that did not blend with the passing storm. Dagget grunted with pleased surprise, his ears turned sharply to the crunch of hoofs on the crusted snow.

The marshal was thinking of a search party from Sabo, but Grant had the sudden final hope that the rider might be Turk Valois.

"Open the door," Dagget said quietly, "but go no farther."

Grant peered quickly through the crack but could not see the horseman. Then he began kicking away the packed earth at the bottom of the door, and a deluge of powdery snow spilled into the dugout as he pulled the door away from the facing.

"I wouldn't like to kill you," Dagget said in his measured voice, "but I will if you don't do exactly as I say. Call out; let them know where we are."

Grant swung half around and saw the marshal's revolver aimed directly at his back, and he knew that Dagget would be as good as his word. Then he called out, his voice strangely muffled on that

blanket of snow, like shouting into a feather pillow.

There was no answer, but he still heard the sound of hoofs as a horse stamped nervously on the other side of the creek. "Call out again," Dagget said, and Grant took a careful step forward, framing himself in the doorway. He cupped his hands around his mouth, but before a sound could escape his throat he sensed, rather than heard, the scream of the bullet. And then, almost instantly, he heard the sodden, matter-of-fact report of the rifle as the slug caught him under his left arm, spinning him around like some giant hand and slamming him to the dirt floor.

There was no pain at first, only shock, and as he lay on the floor he turned numbly to look at the marshal's amazed face. All color drained from Dagget's face as he shoved himself away from the wall and began crawling to Grant's side. Swearing savagely, he pulled Grant over on his back, ripped open the windbreaker, and probed for the wound with his blunt fingers.

"Who was it?" he demanded angrily, as though Grant had got himself shot on purpose in order to make his job more difficult.

"I don't know. I couldn't see."

Now the pain was beginning to come, a bright flame that started under his left shoulder, reaching up to the base of his skull. The marshal probed harder, keeping his eyes on the dugout's open doorway.

"Who'd want to kill you?"

"I don't know. Farley, maybe."

Dagget swore again and tried to straighten his own injured leg. "That bushwhacker knew just where you were. He was waiting across the

creek for you to show yourself in the doorway. Farley couldn't have known about this dugout, could he?"

The first flare of pain had lessened now as a great ache spread out over the left side of his torso. "Farley couldn't have known. Turk Valois told me about the place just before I got away from the lease."

Dagget's eyes slitted and his anger became something much more subtle and thoughtful. But he only said, "The bullet went right through the soft part of your shoulder; no bones broken that I can find."

Now they heard the horse again, heading downstream on the other side of the creek, and Dagget began stripping the windbreaker and shirt away from Grant's shoulder. "Whoever it is, likely he'll head for the downstream crossing and come back to see what kind of job he did."

With quiet expertness the marshal ripped off the shirt sleeve and bound it about the wound to stop the bleeding. "Do I get your word that you won't try to run if I give you your gun?"

Grant grinned thinly. "You get it... for whatever it's worth."

Dagget didn't like it, but there was little he could do about it now. One wounded man stood little chance against a killer who'd stoop to bushwhacking.

Now, with a revolver in Grant's right hand, his left side didn't seem to hurt so much. His pain became bewilderment, and the bewilderment anger, as he dragged himself shakily to his feet. He helped Dagget hack to his place in the shadows, listening to the sound of hoofs returning on the dugout side of the creek. Now he heard the screech of cold leather as the rider dismounted, and the slow, careful steps as he approached the front of the dugout. "Grant!"

The voice was flat and toneless, and Grant groped in his memory for the face that went with that voice. He glanced at Dagget, and the marshal was grinning with even more savagery than usual.

"Lloyd," he said quietly. "Kirk Lloyd."

A prickle of warning went up Grant's back. He had faced this killer once and survived, but he felt that his luck had run out. You don't give a man like Lloyd a second chance and live to tell about it. Any man who will shoot from ambush is deadly—but Lloyd...

The steps were closer now. With his back against the far wall, Grant could hear the gunman's heavy breathing as he stood at the dugout's entrance. Only one lone thought circled like a soaring hawk in Grant's mind—why did Lloyd want to kill him? A gunman killed for money, not for the mere pleasure of it. Why had the killer gone to all this trouble, stalking him through the storm, to shoot him down from ambush?

Suddenly the dugout itself was a storm of violence as Lloyd fired two fast rounds blindly through the doorway, then stalked into the room. Grant glimpsed Dagget's grimace of pain as he tried to shift to a firing position.

Lloyd saw it, too, and in the same split second wheeled to fire at Dagget when a single explosion of Grant's .45 drove the gunman against the wall. The killer's face was a twisted picture of amazement as he dropped his own revolver and clawed at his chest.

Lloyd was dead before he fell to the dirt floor, before the sound of Grant's shot had ceased to reverberate around the walls of the dugout. And in the sudden silence that followed, Grant stood heavily with the smoking pistol held lax in his hand.

"Why?" he asked, his voice strange and leaden in his own ears.

And Dagget, who had met death face to face only a few seconds before, wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his wind-breaker. "Did Lloyd know about this hideout of yours?" he said at last.

Grant shook his head. "Not unless Valois told him." Then he turned, his gaze clashing with Dagget's, and suddenly they were thinking the same thing. "Valois..."

The marshal sighed. "It looks like it." Suddenly he laughed, but the sound was harsh. "You never know what goes on inside a man's head; experience is a poor teacher in that respect. There it was against my nose all the time, and I couldn't see it. I couldn't get my mind off Farley, I guess. He had a top lease on that land; he was the logical one to start trouble. And not only Farley. You were in the picture, too, standing to get rich by getting rid of the old man and marrying his daughter. Or you could have been tied up with Farley some way." He shrugged. "But I never paid enough attention to Turk Valois."

Grant stared at the marshal as though he had never seen the man before. Gone now was Dagget's savagery, and in its place was cold, machinelike calculation, as efficient and unfeeling as a Chinese abacus.

"I was looking for a man greedy for money," the marshal went on quietly, ticking his thoughts off to himself. "I was thinking all along of that lease of Zack Muller's and how much money a good well would bring." He squinted up at Grant. "I rode into Kiefer that day looking for a bank robber and ran into a murder. Bank robbers—usually they're greedy for money, but there was something I overlooked."

He motioned with his revolver. "Close the door. We'll have to go on waiting here until the search party finds us."

But Grant didn't move. "What was it that you overlooked?"

"They say hate and love are cut from the same cloth, they're that close to being the same thing. I figured it was a simple thing when Turk hired on for the Mullers, helped them out with workers, deliberately putting himself on Farley's black list. I figured he was still stuck on Rhea."

"He is," Grant said steadily. "I've seen the way he looks at her."

But the marshal shook his head. "You're forgetting what I said about the two being cut from the same cloth—love and hate. Maybe he didn't know which it was. But it's my guess that Valois killed Zack Muller. It's my guess, too, that Kirk Lloyd was working for Turk."

Grant's frown deepened. "It ~~was~~ Turk who went to Kiefer and got Lloyd to take the job."

"And it was Turk, probably, who sent Lloyd gunning for you this morning," Dagget said wearily. "Now shut the door before we both freeze."

But that single, circling question was still in Grant's mind and he could not rid himself of it, could not rest because of it. "But why? Valois and I got along all right. Why would he want to kill me?"

"I intend to ask Valois about that," Dagget said, shrugging. And he started to motion again toward the door when Grant raised his revolver with studied deliberateness.

"I'll have to go back on my word, Marshal."

Dagget blinked, then retired once more behind his mask of anger. "Walk through that doorway and I'll shoot you, Grant."

"That's a chance I'll have to take."

"Don't make yourself a worse fool than you already are!" the marshal snarled. "Even if you did escape this dugout, I'd catch you. Sooner or later I'd catch you, if it's the last thing I ever did!"

They studied each other like two wolves, and at last Grant said, "Yes, I know. But I'm going anyway. If Valois would try to have me killed, there's no telling what else he's got in mind. If he's that full of hate, the least he'll do is try to ruin the Muller well. When Kirk Lloyd doesn't come back, Valois is going to know that something went wrong..."

He paused for a moment, then turned toward the door. "I'm going to stop him before he carries out the rest of his plan, Dagget—if you don't shoot me in the back as I walk out of here."

He walked out of the dugout, purling the stockade door into place from the outside. Dagget did not shoot.

About fifty yards below the dugout Grant found Lloyd's horse tied up in a stand of scrub oak. As he climbed painfully up to the saddle a dazzling sun began to appear over the edge of the rolling, snow-softened prairie. A new day was beginning. Grant pulled his hat down on his forehead and turned the horse toward Sabo—he hoped this day would turn out better than the last one.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TOPPING THE RIM of Glenn Basin the new oil field looked clean and sterile beneath its cover of glistening snow. The endless chain of freighters had commenced again like some bright, moving ribbon thrown down among the derricks. And from that great distance the

derricks themselves looked like a toy forest of Christmas trees, standing straight and serene, their hard angles softened and rounded now with a frosting of glittering ice.

Everything about the scene seemed quiet and peaceful—even Sabo looked clean and white under the snow—and for a moment Grant almost forgot how much greed and violence lay before him in that derrick-studded saucer.

He rode obliquely down from the rim, his head pulled deep into the collar of his windbreaker. The pain in his shoulder was like a small fire blown to white heat, but Dagget's bandage had stopped the bleeding, and stiffness had not yet had time to set in. Anyway, the pain was a secondary thing now, crowded to the back of his consciousness by more pressing thoughts.

He rode on, circling Sabo, keeping to the ridges and high ground as much as possible, watching for the search party that would soon be starting out to look for Dagget.

Now he could see the tall white cottonwoods that marked Slush Creek's course across the basin, and soon he could make out the Muller derrick on the other side standing tall and proud, the construction of the crown block just begun.

He approached the lease from downstream at a shallow crossing, and the ice cracked like rifle shots as he urged the reluctant animal into the freezing water. From the other side he could see the dark smoke streaming up from the dugout's chimney and from the two stovepipes of the bunkhouse, but the lease itself seemed deserted.

Slowly, like a tired old man, he climbed down from the saddle and tied Lloyd's horse in some brush behind the shack. Beyond this point he had no plan. His only aim had been to return to the lease, and now

that he was here he was not sure what to do next.

Then, between the naked girts and sway braces of the derrick he saw a man come out of the belt house and swing under the derrick floor to the cellar. The working crew—the rig builders and roustabouts—were still in the bunkhouse waiting out the tail end of the storm.

All but one man, who worked alone under the floor of the icy derrick. A big man wearing a loud mackinaw and a flap-eared cap, a man who moved with the litheness of a mountain cat, a man who nursed a consuming anger....

Grant felt the hand of caution touch him as he swung wide behind the dugout and headed toward the derrick on the windward side of the belt house. He could not silence his approach on that crackling crust of snow and there was no use trying. He had his revolver in his hand as he stepped into the sheet-iron belt house which housed the huge band wheel, and he could almost feel the rigidity of the sudden silence from beneath the derrick floor.

"Is that you, Lloyd?"

Grant moved as quietly as possible past the band wheel and newly installed sand reel.

"Kirk?" Valois called again, sharply.

Now Grant moved from the floor of the belt house to the derrick. He knelt, grasped the edge of the flooring timbers, and swung down to the rig's cellar. He felt his wound tear open under Dagget's bandage, and the brief knifelike pain that drove through his left side was breathtaking. But he landed on his feet in the gloom of the cellar, revolver ready and cocked, and Turk Valois wheeled sharply, a small

bundle of dynamite sticks in one hand.

And Grant said quietly, "Put it down, Valois. Lloyd won't be coming back."

Surprisingly, Turk Valois smiled, but the expression was as cold as the winter morning. "So Kirk failed again," he said mildly. "I should have done the job myself."

"Put it down," Grant said again, indicating the dynamite.

But the runner held his cold smile and shook his head. "When I put it down, you'll never know it, Grant. Have you ever seen what a handful of this stuff can do at close quarters?"

Now, his eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom, Grant saw three more dynamite bundles, like the one Valois held, lashed to three of the derrick's huge wooden legs. He tried to keep his voice calm and his eyes away from the compact packet of violent death. "So you were going to blow up the derrick," he said.

"You're wrong. I *am* going to blow up the derrick!"

Grant thought that he was beginning to understand, and now his voice was edged with bitterness. "So you were working for Farley all along! Even when you brought us the workers. When you hired on yourself. You were doing it for Farley, seeing to it that the Mullers lost their lease."

The runner's mouth twisted with sudden hatred. "I wouldn't spit on Farley! What I do, I do for myself." Then he smiled again, as suddenly and coldly as before. "You don't understand that, do you, Grant? A saddle bum like you, a hard-scrabble farmer—you wouldn't know about pride, would you? Pride is the most important thing in the

world to some men.”

Like Dagget, Grant found it hard to believe that a man could do what Valois had done for any reason other than greed. But the truth was in Valois' eyes. If he had never told the truth before, he was telling it now.

“I see,” Grant said heavily. “But is pride worth dying for?”

“Yes.”

He didn't know exactly why, but he did know, instinctively, that now was the time to bring Valois to a test. And he said tensely, “All right, drop the dynamite, Valois. Throw it at me—now—before I take it away from you.”

The runner's eyes widened as Grant took one step forward. Then another. He drew his arm back and shouted, “I'll do it!” His forehead glistened with the effort, but something inside him would not let him loosen his deathlike grip on the dynamite. He whirled away and grabbed frantically for his revolver.

Grant shouted hoarsely, but he was already too late, for there was a kind of insane rage in the runner's eyes, and as the muzzle cleared his waistband, Grant set himself grimly and fired.

The tremendous impact of the bullet slammed Valois against the clay wall of the cellar, grasping death in both hands. He stared blankly, letting the .45 slip slowly from his fingers and fall to the ground. Grant stood frozen, knowing that he could do nothing, watching with a kind of terrible fascination as the runner's fingers began to loosen on the explosive.

Slowly, almost gracefully, Valois began to fall, his glazed eyes fixed on the dynamite, and in some fragmentary way he seemed to sense

and fear the packet's violent potential. And even as he fell to the ground himself, he hugged the small bundle close to his body, taking the shock of the fall on his shoulder.

Grant felt that all the strength had been sapped from him; he was an old man, his knees weak. He took one deep breath and thought bleakly of what Dagget had said about love and hate, but he guessed that he would never understand completely.

He grasped the edge of the derrick floor and with the last of his strength climbed out of the cellar. As if from a great distance he could hear the crunch of several boots on the packed snow, and the sound of excited voices, mellow and bell-like in the dazzling winter morning.

At last he became aware of the warm flow along his side and the numbness of his shoulder, and wondered vacantly why there was no pain. He knew in an abstract way that his wound had opened under Dagget's bandage and that blood and life were running out of him, but now even that seemed very unimportant.

He took one reckless step from the derrick floor and sprawled face down in the soft snow—and that was the last he remembered for a long time.

Shortly after noon that day four men brought Jim Dagget into Doc Lewellen's sickroom on a stretcher made of saddle blankets and trimmed saplings. As always, the marshal seethed in his perpetual anger, roundly cursing the stretcher bearers for their clumsiness and old Lewellen for reeking sourly of rotgut whisky. But when the doc ripped the trouser leg up past the knee and began probing the humped discolored flesh around the broken bone, Dagget fell

abruptly into perverse silence. He did not make a sound as Lewellen gleefully sawed off his boot with a bloodstained scalpel, but when the old man grasped the leg with both hands and rasped together the ragged ends of bone, great beads of sweat rolled down the marshal's rock-hard face.

A few feet away Grant watched the operation from one of Lewellen's sagging army cots. After Lewellen had set and bound the leg in packing-crate splints, Dagget said hoarsely, "Go find Ben Farley. Tell him I want to see him. Now."

The old doctor scowled, but he didn't have the spirit to fight the fire in Dagget's eyes. At last he nodded, pulled on his soiled swallowtail coat, and went out. Only after Lewellen was out of the room did the marshal permit himself to look at Grant on the nearby cot.

"So you had to come back!" he said, almost snarling.

Grant smiled. "Yes, I came back."

Dagget pulled himself up on one elbow, breathing hard with the effort. Angry words were on the tip of his tongue, but in a strange, weary gesture he choked them down again and lay back on the cot, his eyes closed. "They say you told them where to find me."

Grant nodded but said nothing.

"And they say you killed Turk Valois."

"Not until he started his draw. He was setting dynamite to the legs of the derrick—he was going to blow it up."

The marshal breathed heavily but said nothing more for a long time. At last old Lewellen returned, tramping into the sickroom with the blunt, scowling figure of Ben Farley in his wake. Slowly, Dagget

opened his eyes and gazed flatly at the oilman's face.

"Look here," Ben started harshly, "I don't know what you've got in mind, Dagget, but you can't tie me to any of this trouble!"

"Not even the shooting at the railroad station?" the marshal asked, almost gently. But he went on before Farley could reply. "I didn't call you here to tie you with any of the past trouble; it's the future I'm thinking about now. How much time have the Mullers got before your top lease goes into effect?"

The oilman's frown deepened. "Four days. What're you getting at, Dagget?"

But the marshal turned to Grant this time. "What kind of shape is the rig in?"

"It's ready to spud in," Grant said carefully, "except to raising the crown pulley."

The marshal nodded and spoke quietly, almost to himself. "That's no more than a day's job, so the Mullers should get spudded in in plenty of time to hold their lease, unless"—and he looked directly at Farley—"unless something happens."

Farley's eyes narrowed. "A lot of things can happen on an oil rig—sometimes at the last minute."

Dagget's mouth curved slightly, but the expression was diluted with fatigue, the smile betraying only a small part of its old savagery. "Nothing else is going to happen at the Muller rig," he said flatly. "Turk Valois is dead. Kirk Lloyd's dead. Grant's under arrest. So that leaves only you, Farley, if anything happens..."

The oilman's face burned a deep red. "Don't threaten me, Dagget!"

"I'm not threatening," the marshal put in quietly. "If anything else happens on that lease I'll see you in prison, even if I have to be under oath in federal court to do it." He gazed expressionlessly at Farley, then closed his eyes, sighing. "That's all I've got to say. Now get out."

After Farley had gone, after the storm clouds began to recede with the sound of the oilman's angry tramping on the sickroom stairs, Dagget opened his bloodshot eyes again and gazed at Grant. "One day soon," he said vacantly, "maybe before we get out of this sickroom, the president will take up his pen and sign the paper that will make Oklahoma a state. Then every town and county will have its own elected law; the responsibility will be on their shoulders then—and I can't say I'm sorry."

He grinned faintly at the puzzled expression in Grant's face. "I'm just a man, after all. Does that surprise you?"

But Grant's mind had drifted on past the marshal to other things, and a core of hardness grew inside him as he said, "I guess nothing will ever surprise me again."

"Valois?" Dagget said quietly. "A lawman is supposed to get used to such things, but he never does. I guess Turk was crazy about the Muller girl, after all." And he blinked, thinking back on what he had said. "Yes, that's the word for it. Crazy. He was a proud man and couldn't stand failure. He couldn't stand the idea that people were laughing at him because a girl had thrown him over. So he had to hit back. Somehow, he had to bring Rhea down to his own level—he had to ruin her, the way she had ruined him—I can imagine just how Turk must have had it figured."

"I can't," Grant said. "I can't see why he killed Zack Muller. If he's the one that did kill him."

"Oh, Turk killed the old man, all right," Dagget said dryly. "Probably he hadn't planned it that way, probably the killing was an accident, but it worked in with Turk's plans just the same. What he wanted was to be needed by Rhea, to have her depend on him. Only in that way would he be in a position to destroy the things she wanted—just the way she had done to him."

Scowling, Grant said, "How do you know so well what went on in Turk's mind?"

And Dagget grinned with some of his old fierceness. "Because your shot went wide and Valois didn't die right away. But he knew he didn't have long, so he cleared you, and even Farley." Now the heaviness was back in his voice. "It's a funny thing. Turk was a good man. A sober, hard worker who never had much luck at anything, neither with money nor women."

A good man. The thought might have been amusing if it had not been so grim, for sometime in the future Dagget might look back and say to himself, "Joe Grant was a good man." But that wouldn't stop him from doing his job. Prison was now a hard reality that Grant knew he must accept.

Dagget had fallen into a deep, exhausted sleep, and Grant lay on the cold canvas cot and tried to think of Rhea. Things as they might have been were now more impossible than ever. Rhea's dream of wealth was about to come true. She had no more need of him now....

Slowly, like a stifling cloud, sleep wrapped itself around him, for a little time blotting out his bleakness.

He dreamed that cold spears of afternoon light were coming from the single west window of the sickroom and that the rest of the place lay in a slaty gloom. And the marshal, sodden with fatigue, lay like some

shapeless figure of mud on the neighboring cot, and the only sound in the sickroom was that of Dagget's heavy breathing. And in the dream there suddenly appeared another face, Rhea's face, pale and thoughtful and soberly purposeful, and as he stared up in vague surprise at the face, her lips curved faintly in the smallest smile that he had ever seen, and she said:

"You've been asleep for a long while."

That was when he knew it was no dream.

His brain felt sluggish and unresponsive, and his left side was a thin blade of pain that reached from hip to shoulder. For some perverse reason, as he stared at her, all he could think of was the well. She had come from the lease to Doc Lewellen's sickroom in Kiefer, and Rhea never did anything without a reason. And he asked dryly:

"Is there anything wrong with the well?"

Her gaze was steady, and there was a kind of formal stateliness in her posture. "No, the rig is fine. The crown block will be raised today; spudding operations will begin tomorrow morning."

"Then," Grant said, measuring his words, "may I ask why you came here?"

The implication that she had come for selfish reasons was clear, but she made no show of understanding. Instead, she opened her black cloth purse and drew out a folded legal-size document, then stood up in a kind of dowagerlike dignity and placed the paper on the cot.

"I came to deliver this," she said gravely, then suddenly she turned away and, without another word, walked quickly from the room.

The room seemed amazingly empty after she had left it, and the

emptiness magnified itself with every receding click of her spool heels on the sickroom stairs. Several minutes must have passed before he at last remembered the paper. He picked it up with his good hand, shook it out, and held it to the fading light to read. And as he read, a subtle insanity seemed to seize him and the impulse to laugh aloud, bitterly, was almost uncontrollable.

In sudden anger he balled the document in one hard fist and hurled it to the floor between the two cots. On the other cot Dagget stirred restlessly, as if disturbed by some unseen, intangible violence in the room. He fixed his slitted, suspicious eyes on Grant's face, and then some instinct carried the gaze to the balled paper, and he swooped it up in one hand and spread it to the light.

"This seems to be your lucky day, after all," he said dryly. "It's not every day a man gets half the mineral rights from a lease like the Mullers'." His eyes narrowed down still further, and his frown deepened. "Did Rhea do this?"

Grant nodded numbly.

"You'll be a rich man when that well comes in," the marshal said thoughtfully. "That won't keep you out of prison, but it can get you a good lawyer. That, together with saving the life of a deputy U. S. marshal, might get you a light sentence."

"I don't want the money," Grant said coldly. "I'm not taking it."

To his surprise, Dagget's face grew hard, his voice snarling. "You fool, Rhea Muller's not offering you money, she's offering you a partnership! Maybe she did use you at first, but you can't blame her too much for that. She's a girl in a man's world, and her looks and brains are all she's got to fight with. But you think about this, Grant—think about Turk Valois and what happened to him when he let his

pride get the upper hand. You'd better think about that for a long time before you start doubting and distrusting and hating, until it becomes a disease like it did with Turk!"

Dagget raised himself up on one elbow, breathing hard. "You've got a proper right to half of that lease—without you, Valois would have exploded the rig all over the Creek Nation—but she didn't have to give it to you. She didn't have to give you a damn thing that she didn't want to."

Suddenly his face went lax and the anger seemed to leak out of him like blood through an open wound. "Well," he said wearily, "what are you going to do?"

There was nothing he could do. Rhea was gone.

The gloom of winter twilight was beginning to come down on Kiefer and the silence in the sickroom was a cold and brittle thing. Perhaps an hour elapsed with not a word passing between the two men, and finally old Doc Lewellen came back to light the coal-oil lamps and stoke up the fire in the oil-drum stoves.

Grant's mind went back over too many wasted years, and he had never known such emptiness as existed in the sickroom at that moment. It seemed that all his life he had been searching for something that he really wanted—not a farm, not money—but a sense of permanency. And security—not the kind that Ortway's bank notes could buy, but something he had worked for and earned. And a family, maybe. But it was like wishing for the moon, now that Rhea was gone, for everything had been focused on her.

Then out of the outside darkness he heard a sound that made him catch his breath—the hurried, almost dancing click of spool heels on the sickroom stairs. Dagget had heard it, too, and was listening

intently. Even Doc Lewellen heard it and turned toward the door with a kind of suspicious scowl. And then the door opened and Rhea was standing there.

"I just wanted to tell you," she said, looking directly at Grant, "that I've waited a long time to get what I wanted. I can wait a few years more."

Dagget grinned with some of his old familiar savageness. Old Lewellen stared, then turned awkwardly and began fumbling loudly at one of the oil-drum stoves. But the thing that Grant noticed most was that the feeling of emptiness was no longer in the room.