

BYRD'S LUCK

1

There were folks, or so some said, who were born lucky. Byrd had heard tell of a man who'd pitched a tent one night only to find, come daylight, gold nuggets lying on the ground around him, and the spot not yet claimed. Standing elbow-to-elbow in a saloon one evening, he'd been told the tale of a brand-new whore whose first customer took such a liking to her that he married her the same day, and he turned out to be a millionaire industrialist, to boot.

Byrd's own luck didn't run that way.

He would not have said that his bad luck began at birth, primarily because he couldn't remember that far back. His suspicion, though, was that it had. His daddy had worked in a bank in Abilene, and his momma had been full-blooded Comanche. Byrd had never known what drew the two together, and since his momma had died during his birth, he never got much chance to ask her.

What his daddy hadn't known was that the men in Momma's family had tended to run large. Since his daddy was on the small side himself, and pale as the winter sun on a cloudy day, Byrd turned out to be a surprise.

By the time Byrd was ten, he was taller than Daddy, outweighed him, and as dark of skin and hair as any Comanche had ever been. That was also the year a mule kicked him in the head, leaving a dent in his skull that remained to his day, although thick, long hair helped hide it.

By the time Byrd was fourteen, he was taller than any man in town, broader through the shoulders, and deeper through the chest.

The year he was fifteen was the last time anyone ever teased him about being a giant. More than once, anyhow. That was also the year his daddy died.

Not quite a man but bigger than most, looking scarier than any Comanche but with no education into the ways of

that kind, forced to prove on too many occasions that he had the backbone to go with his size, Byrd was on his own.

From there, his luck just went downhill.

2

“Bad luck,” Byrd sometimes said, “chases me like a starvin’ coyote after a cottontail.” He had, in fact, said it that morning in Tombstone, in the Arizona territory, after a grocer had explained that he couldn’t give Byrd a job because his looks might scare off the customers. Five years had passed since Byrd’s daddy had passed on, and in that time Byrd figured he’d had about a hundred different jobs, give or take.

“Well,” the grocer replied, “I cain’t afford to buy none o’ your bad luck. Might be you could find work sittin’ outside Doc Carlin’s place, makin’ people sick.”

Byrd grinned. The grocer looked like he might have some kind of seizure at the sight of it, so Byrd closed his mouth and left the store. By the time he was outside, the thought had crossed his mind that the grocer’s suggestion might have some flaws in it. For one thing, although he was big and his head was kind of stove in, he didn’t think he was as ugly as all that. For another, he mostly liked people and didn’t want to scare anyone, much less cause conniptions or worse.

He eased himself to a sitting position at the edge of the boardwalk, his legs outstretched, his boots collecting dust almost a quarter of the way across Allen Street, and enjoyed the October sunshine as he pondered his situation. He was still there—though he had to draw his legs in—when a buckboard came down the street carrying a well-dressed man with gray hair, a Van Dyke beard, and little round spectacles over eyes so hidden by flaps of skin they might not have been there at all.

Byrd studied on the man for a moment. Byrd was new in the area, having been run off his last job, up in Silver City, on account of the outfit he had signed on with didn’t actually have legal rights to the claim they were working, and when the proper owners had showed up they had brought with them lawmen and guns and papers, and Byrd’s employers had last been seen being led down the hill in chains, having refused to

pay any of the hired hands a nickel of their ill-gotten gains. Consequently, he didn't recognize the man, but he could tell that others did; people up and down the street touched their hats or removed them altogether, and a couple of women lifted their skirts and might have curtsied, before turning away giggling and chattering to each other.

The man returned each of these greetings in a crisp, hurried fashion, as if he were much too important to worry about social niceties. He looked to be a little shrunken, as often happened to men of a certain age, though he held himself with the air of a man who had once been an imposing specimen. When he stopped the buckboard outside the store, the grocer himself came out and looped the reins around his hitching post, as solicitous of the man as he had been dismissive of Byrd. The older man climbed down from the wagon with a silver-headed walking stick tucked up under his arm, but despite a slight limp he didn't put it to use.

Byrd was still sitting there—having had to fold his legs up a few more times for passing traffic—and still pondering, when the man came back out after completing his purchases. A couple of the grocer's hired boys carried packages to the buckboard and set them in the bed, and two hired men stumbled out the doors, bowed under the weight of a barrel of something. With a lot of sweating and heaving and *one-two-three-ing*, the men managed to hoist the barrel up and into the wagon.

Where it promptly tipped over and rolled against the side of the bed. Byrd heard wood splinter under its weight. He jumped to his feet and ran around to the street side, past the two men who watched, open-mouthed. By the time the barrel began its inevitable descent toward Allen Street, Byrd had reached it. He thrust his arms into open air and the barrel came down on them.

It was heavy, as evidenced by the destruction of the wagon's side. But Byrd was strong. He caught the thing before it hit the ground, and with a mighty "HMPPP!" he raised it chest high, turned it on end, and set it down gingerly inside the wagon's bed.

When he stepped away, he saw the old man staring at him, eyes wide and mouth gaping. "You might want to fix this side of the wagon," Byrd said. "If'n the road home's bumpy or whatnot."

"You caught that by yourself," the man said. "When those two men together could barely manage it."

"I didn't mean nothin' by it," Byrd said, taking off his hat. "I'm just big is all."

"You Apache?" the man asked.

"Comanche. But only the half of me that came outta my momma."

A smile started to drift across the old man's face. "Wait, that don't sound right," Byrd corrected. "What I meant was my momma gave me Comanche blood, and my daddy was just as scrawny and white as you."

The smile grew. Byrd knew he had still spoken it wrong, but before he could say it a different way, the man was walking toward him, the cane under his arm again, as yet unused that Byrd had seen. He put out a hand and Byrd took it by reflex, gave it a quick squeeze, careful not to break any bones, then released it. "Son," the man said. "Mr. Ziffel inside tells me you're looking for employment. I've got me a little spread down in the valley, nothing much but it does all right. I can always use a hand who's got your qualities. Are you, in fact, available for hire?"

"If you mean to ask do I need a job, then yeah," Byrd said. "I mean, yes sir. Hell, yes."

"Have you any experience with ranch work?"

"Mister, I done just about every job there is, one time or another."

"Very well, then." He started toward the buckboard's seat, then stopped. "One more thing. Do you think that if you rode in the back there, you could keep that barrel from falling out of the wagon? It's about six miles to the ranch."

"I could make a go of it, I reckon," Byrd said.

"Do you have a horse? Any belongings to gather up?"

Byrd did, though Harvey wasn't much of a horse, and his belongings were little better. He owned a saddle; a bedroll;

a couple of plates and a cup; some few clothes in addition to the ones he wore; a small wooden box containing some keepsakes of his momma and daddy, photographs and a brooch and letters and the like; and a decent knife and a five-year-old Winchester Model 1873 rifle with beaded Indian scabbards for each. The latter items he had won in a poker game, making him feel briefly lucky, until he discovered that those items made people believe all the more that he was full-blooded Indian, even though they had come from some faraway tribe, Arapaho, he thought maybe, or Sioux.

It took him less than an hour to gather everything up (the old man paid his hotel bill, which was a blessing because Byrd wouldn't have been able to, and it being broad daylight and him being half-giant, sneaking out would have been a challenge) and ransom Harvey out of the livery stable. With Harvey lashed to the back of the wagon, where he could see Byrd sitting in the bed, Byrd rode the six miles, keeping a hand on the barrel at all times. Liquid sloshed around inside, and on a few occasions it wanted to tip, but he managed to keep it in place.

3

The old man's name was Thaddeus Welch, and his "little spread," the Cross Y Ranch, turned out to be several thousand acres of prime high-desert grasslands, tucked behind the hills outside of Tombstone. His cattle appeared well fed, and as they passed a herd of horses sufficient to outfit a cavalry regiment, Byrd urged Harvey to look away, lest he feel his own bloodlines somehow inadequate.

The ranch house was huge, one of the biggest houses Byrd had ever seen. The other buildings—two bunkhouses, a cookhouse, a tack house and stable, and a barn—were all good-sized, whitewashed, and as clean as any Byrd had encountered. There was a healthy mesquite tree between the ranch house and the nearest of the bunkhouses, but besides that the area had been cleared, and although it might be mud during the summer, in autumn's dryness it was hard-packed earth. The other hands were still out on the range—a few had waved

to the wagon as it traveled down the road from Tombstone—so Byrd took the barrel out of the wagon by himself and set it on the back porch, where Mr. Welch asked him to, then got the other provisions out and carried them to the back door. Mr. Welch had gone inside, he guessed.

“Hello?” he called at the door. “Anybody here?”

After a few seconds, a towheaded boy of seven or eight opened the door. Behind him was a narrow hall. A scrawny yellow dog sat there, tongue hanging out as if to taste the air. The boy looked as if smiling might be too much effort for his face, but the dog seemed happy enough. “You a Indian?”

“Only part.”

“Who are you, then?”

“I’m Byrd.”

“Byrd what?”

“Sorry?”

“Is that your Christian name or your given one? Just Byrd don’t make no sense.”

“Just Byrd will do,” Byrd said. The story of his name was more trouble than he liked to take. He had gone by Byrd, and Byrd alone, for years now. “What’s your dog’s name?”

“He don’t need a name. He’s just a dog.”

“Well, if that’s good enough for him, then one name’s good enough for me.”

“What do you want, just Byrd?”

Byrd shrugged his shoulders, indicating by that and a dip of his chin the stack of wrapped bundles balanced precariously in his hands. “Mr. Welch bought these at the store. I figured he wanted ‘em inside. In the kitchen, likely.”

The boy’s sour expression didn’t change. “Ma!” he screeched suddenly. With no more warning, he turned and stalked out of sight, calling, “Ma, there’s a man!” The dog left with him.

Byrd waited, figuring that if she hadn’t been struck deaf, “Ma” would show up soon.

When she did, she was nothing like he expected.

Truth was, he didn’t much know what to expect. He guessed she was likely to be old, like Mr. Welch. But a woman that old wouldn’t have a son the age of the boy he had seen.

Her children would be grown, with young'uns of their own.

But however he might have pictured her in his head, she wasn't this.

She moved slowly, languorous as a cat waking up from a nap. Her hair was as golden as autumn sunlight, piled mostly on top of her head but with some of it escaping bondage, framing her face and cascading down to a bountiful bosom. She was slender, with a long neck and a slim waist that swelled at the hips before tapering again at what Byrd imagined were exquisite legs. She was barefoot, and her blouse was open several buttons down from the top, and there was a slit up the side of her skirt for several inches. Her face could melt the snow from mountaintops a hundred miles away, and her body could turn the meltwater to steam. Byrd figured if Mr. Welch knew what she made Byrd think of, he'd have his newest hand shot and then hanged and maybe shot again.

"You're the new man?" she said, and listening to her voice was like wading through honey. "Thaddeus told me he had hired you in town."

Byrd shrugged again, showing her the bundles clutched to his chest.

"Oh, pardon me," she said. "You'll want to put those down."

"Yes'm."

"Come on in, then. It's right this way." She didn't budge from her position in the doorway, but when Byrd hesitated, she indicated with a toss of her head that she meant for him to enter. He did. They didn't both fit in the hallway without him rubbing against her, and if Mr. Welch would have objected to what Byrd thought, what Byrd felt when he touched her would have made things a hundred times worse.

"Where's the kitchen?" he asked.

She indicated the first doorway, on the left. "Right through there."

"Are you Mr. Welch's daughter?"

She chuckled, but there was a new huskiness in her voice when she answered. "Why thank you, Mr....Byrd, is it?"

"That's right. Just plain Byrd, though. I don't need no mister put on it."

“Byrd, then. Anyway, no, I’m Mrs. Welch. Greta Welch. Thaddeus’s wife.”

“And the boy is—?”

“Rufus? He’s our son. The one and only. He’s a darling child, isn’t he?”

“Yup,” Byrd said. “That’s the first word I thought of.”

The kitchen was big, and he put the bundles down on a counter. When he turned around again, she was right there, so close he nearly ran into her. “Thank you for bringing those in, Byrd. Will we see you for supper tonight?”

“Well, I don’t know about that.”

“Nonsense. Thaddeus likes to have new hands join us for supper on their first day. Plenty of time to get acquainted with the other men later, isn’t there?”

“If that’s what Mr. Welch wants, why, I reckon—”

“It’s what Thaddeus and I both want,” she said. “Be here at five. With your hands and face washed, or we’ll have to send you back out again. I have the same rule for Rufus.”

“Yes’m, Mizz Welch,” Byrd said. “I’ll be here.”

She gave him a smile that almost burned. “See that you are, Byrd. And welcome to the Cross Y. We’re glad to have you.”

4

Byrd just had time to find an empty bunk and put away his gear when the door hinges squealed like an angry hog and the door banged open. The whole structure shook, as if a good hard wind might turn it to kindling. Byrd had noticed a few gaps between the wall boards, and figured a man would need a good heavy blanket, come winter. A pack of cowboys barged in through the door, covered in dust and grime and blood. The one in front stopped, hat in hand, staring at Byrd. He was a lean young man with blond hair pasted to his scalp, a livid scar across the bridge of his nose and a fair, curly beard barely visible on his cheeks and chin. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“I’m Byrd. New hand. Mr. Welch told me to bunk in here.”

“Indian or half-breed, you look like. How many bunks you take up?” someone behind the first man asked. Byrd

straightened to his full height and saw a dark-haired, heavy-set guy standing there. Like the first, he wore a leather vest and chaps, but his shirt was torn in a couple of places and his hat looked like it had been walked on by half the herd.

"Rough day out there?" Byrd asked, ignoring both the spoken question and the implied one.

"No more'n usual," the blond one said.

A third one pushed to the front, wearing an easy grin. He looked like his clothes had been custom-tailored for him, but Byrd guessed he was just one of those men whose clothing fit right from the get-go. He was a little older than the first two, and his natural swagger told Byrd that he was probably the leader—if not according to Mr. Welch, then in the eyes of the men who worked for him. "I'm Eli Turner," he said. "Pardon these boys. They get their manners kicked out of 'em and forget to pick 'em back up again."

"I'm Byrd."

"That's all? No other name?"

"Byrd is good. With a Y, not like one of them feathered things."

"Well, Byrd with a Y, you look like you'll be a good man to have out there. If you're half as good at punchin' cows as you are at growin'—"

"Done it before."

"Fine, that's fine." Turner pointed out the three men who had come in with him, the young blond, the heavier guy, and a third one, with a mass of curly brown hair on his head and a nose almost as big as Harvey's. "This here is Slim Williams, and that's Gib Calhoun. Feller in back, that there's Stan Douglas."

"Howdy," Byrd said, and they all howdied back at him.

"We're gonna dust ourselves off and get some chuck," Turner said. "You look like you could eat a whole steer. Better let us get in line first."

"Mizz Welch told me I should have dinner in the house tonight. Said it's kind of a rule."

Calhoun and Douglas laughed until Turner shot them a look. "Could be a new one, I reckon," Turner said. "Best you

do it. If she's had a look at you, she'll know how much grub to serve up."

"You enjoy that meal, now," Williams said as the men filed out of the bunkhouse. He wore a strange, kind of sideways smile when he said it. "Cookie dishes out big portions, but they's mostly beans and more beans, along with some bread to soak up the gravy. Might could be a while 'fore you get another meal like they'll give you inside."

"Thanks," Byrd said. When the men were gone again, he felt strange about having said it. There seemed to have been layers to the conversation he hadn't followed. He didn't know Slim Williams or the rest well enough to know if they meant what they said, but they seemed like they were trying to be nice. He figured it was best to treat them like they were being forthright. That was how he tried to be, anyhow, and he appreciated it in others. He had found that some folks just didn't think that way, but until he knew for sure, he wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt.

5

The Welch family's dining room was just about the finest room Byrd had ever ventured into. He felt underdressed in his usual wool shirt and canvas pants. At least he had remembered to take his hat off at the front door, although he had a feeling that when Thaddeus Welch had extended his hand, he should have shaken it and not simply put his hat in it. Mr. Welch had sort of looked twice at the hat, as if it had simply sprung into being there, then chuckled and hung it on a hook near the door. "Come in, Byrd, come in. Welcome to my home."

"Thanky, Mr. Welch," Byrd said.

The front door opened into a foyer. To the left an archway revealed a parlor filled with heavy furniture, some of it draped. The room was illuminated by oil lamps that lent a faintly greasy smell to the air. A glow from beyond the parlor hinted at another, more brightly lit room there. "Come," Welch said. "We should sit a while and get acquainted, but Mrs. Welch suggested that you'd be tired from your long day and would probably want to eat post-haste."

"That anything like potatoes?" Byrd asked. "I like those."

"Ahh, no," Welch said, leading Byrd through the parlor. "Post-haste means 'in a hurry.' Mrs. Welch says I should stop talking like a gentleman from another age. 'Join the nineteenth century before the twentieth comes along,' she tells me. But I am who I am, after all. Can't change a leopard's spots, can you?"

Byrd looked about in case the leopard was ready to attack. He saw a few taxidermy animals—a couple of quail, a pheasant, and a nice buck's head on the wall with a ten-point rack, but no leopard, alive or dead. The leopard probably wasn't real, he decided, just another example of Mr. Welch's funny way of talking. He would have to remember that.

Mrs. Welch met them in the dining room. Byrd wondered how a room could look so nice. A huge wooden table dominated it. China dishes sat in front of each chair, with what looked like real silver utensils ranked around them. The glasses were crystal and the tablecloth and napkins looked like silk. At least, they looked like what Byrd had expected silk to look like; he had never, to his knowledge, found himself close enough to real silk to examine it in any detail.

Gold wallpaper covered the walls, and Byrd would not have been surprised to learn that it was made of real gold, hammered flat.

All of it paled in comparison to Mrs. Welch.

She wore a red dress that fit snugly in certain places and not at all in others, meaning that in those places—places that Byrd believed should be kept covered except possibly in the bedroom of a married couple—it did not exist at all. And in those places where the dress exposed flesh, there was plenty of flesh to expose. Byrd was not entirely without experience in such matters, although all of his encounters involved coins changing hands. But he had his ideas of right and wrong, and somehow Mrs. Welch had taken right and wrong and made them both the same thing.

"Byrd," she said. "It's good to see you again."

"You too, Mizz Welch."

"Greta."

"Mrs. Welch," Mr. Welch corrected.

"Please," Mrs. Welch said. "Have a seat, Byrd. Enjoy our repast."

Byrd wasn't sure what she meant by that, but he had decided to stop asking questions and just take whatever came his way. Anything he couldn't figure out, he could ask Eli Turner about later. He seemed like a smart enough man.

"After you, Mrs. Welch," Mr. Welch said. Byrd understood his meaning, and held off sitting until she had taken her chair. Once Mr. Welch moved toward his, Byrd followed suit. He had just scooted his chair in when Rufus joined them. Moving quickly to stand up again, Byrd tipped his chair over. It crashed against a huge piece of furniture that seemed to have no purpose other than holding several plates, which could more easily have fit into a small crate and shoved almost anywhere.

"I'm sorry," Byrd said, picking his chair up.

"That's quite all right, Byrd," Mr. Welch said. "I must do the very same two or three times a day."

"You never!" Rufus cried.

Mrs. Welch looked like she wanted to say something, but she was laughing so hard her face was turning red. So were the half-globes of her bosoms, where they thrust up out of her dress, undulating with her laughter and gasps for breath.

Once Byrd had his chair squared away, he and Mr. Welch and Rufus all sat. Rufus was directly across from Byrd. "Are you stupid, Mr. Byrd?" Rufus asked.

"Son, that's hardly a question to put to a guest," Mr. Welch said.

"I'm only asking on account of—"

"Rufus," Mrs. Welch managed. She got control of her laughter, though her blush took longer to fade.

"Are children ascaired of you?" Rufus asked. "I about wanted to bust out cryin', first time I seen you. But I'm too brave."

"Rufus!" Mrs. Welch said. "Mind your Ps and Qs!"

"I'm only asking questions! You said a person don't learn without he asks questions."

"Polite questions, please. Mr Byrd is our guest."

"Sorry, Mr. Byrd," Rufus said.

"Aw, I don't mind," Byrd said.

"Have you ever killed a man?"

"Rufus!" This time it was Mr. Welch, and his tone was sharper than his wife's.

"I am a touch curious on that point myself," Mrs. Welch said. "It's such a dangerous world outside these walls, isn't it? One longs to know that a man can do what's necessary."

Mr. Welch shook his head. A touch of the blush from Mrs. Welch's breasts seemed to have landed on his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mr. Byrd," he said. "Ladies have their own minds today, it seems. And so do children."

"It don't bother me," Byrd said again. "I have killed me a couple of fellers, sure enough, but only them as needed it."

"The lowest of scoundrels, I have no doubt," Mr. Welch said.

"Did they bleed a lot?" Rufus asked.

"That's enough, Rufus," Mrs. Welch said. She fanned her face with her hand. "I don't know where our dinner is. My apologies, Mr. Byrd. It should be on the table by now. Iselda?" She turned toward a door that Byrd assumed led to the kitchen, or maybe outside. "Iselda, where are you? We're about starved to death, here!"

6

The rest of the dinner went much the same way, but the food was good and there was plenty of it. By the time Byrd made it back to his bunk, the other cowboys were asleep, Slim and Calhoun snoring up a storm. Byrd rolled into his bunk and was asleep in no time.

It felt like he had barely closed his eyes when Eli woke him by kicking the leg of his bunk and clapping his hands. "Byrd!" he called. "Get up! Time's wastin'!"

Byrd opened his eyes. A lamp burned in the bunkhouse, but it was still dark outside. Byrd hadn't cowboied in some months, and although he knew early mornings were part of the job, he hadn't been thinking about that the night before,

enjoying the fine meal with the Welches instead of turning in when he should have.

"All right," he said. "I'm awake."

"There's coffee and hard tack waitin' for you," Eli said. "But it ain't waitin' forever, so you best get your feet on the ground."

Byrd pulled on some clothes and dragged himself outside. The morning air was cold, scented with smoke from the cook-fire and from the house. The chill woke him up, and before long he had saddled Harvey and rode out to spend a day on a distant range, checking fences and rescuing calves caught in mesquite thickets (scared calves, he remembered too late, sprayed green panic diarrhea everywhere; he had to clean his boots and chaps that night when he got back to the bunkhouse), and otherwise doing the things that a cowboy did.

The days went along in much the same fashion, one after the other. For a cowboy, every day brought something different, but the days ran together because the overall routine was always the same. Byrd got to know his bunkmates and the other cowboys of the Cross Y, and in his usual fashion, got on well with them all. He looked up to Eli Turner, as the others in his bunkhouse did, and Turner took his side when Slim Williams made jokes at Byrd's expense, which happened often. Within the first two weeks he had been cut six times, by barbed wire and by a knife and by a cow's hoof and by a jagged edge on a fence board, but that was just typical of Byrd's luck and nothing to get riled up over.

On the second day of his third week, Mr. Welch told Byrd he was going into Tombstone again, and wanted Byrd to go along. This time, Byrd could ride up on the buckboard's seat, and wouldn't have to sit in back unless Mr. Welch bought something else that might try to fall out of the bed.

On the ride in, Byrd tried to find a way to talk to Mr. Welch about a conversation he'd had with Rufus the day before. Despite his initial misgivings, the boy seemed to have become fond of Byrd, frequently pestering him with questions about his size, his life, and his personal habits.

Byrd had been working near the house, digging a pit on Mr. Welch's instructions. Around midday, Rufus had approached

him, barraging him with questions in his usual manner. This time, though, they seemed to narrow in on when and why Byrd had struck out on his own. Byrd had tried to impress upon him that it hadn't been his choice, that with his folks both dead he'd had to do it.

"I wouldn't wanna wait for that," Rufus said. "I'm itchin' to see some new horizons."

"If'n you want, next time I got a day off we can ask your daddy if you'n me can ride over to Bisbee. Or take a couple days and go down to Sonora, in Old Mexico."

"I *seen* those places!" Rufus complained. "I want to see new things. The ocean. Paris. Maybe Araby. Like that."

Byrd wasn't entirely sure all those places existed, but he didn't want to sound unlettered. "Well, that's different."

"Pa don't understand. He says he's seen the world, and they ain't nothing better than what we got here. I don't want *better*, though, I just want *different*."

"What about your ma?"

"She don't want to buck Pa, and she don't want me to go anywhere. She still thinks I'm a baby."

"You are still a young'un," Byrd observed.

"I'm almost ten!"

"You're almost nine."

"Close enough! I want to get in a gunfight and kiss a girl. I want to wear a silk hat and meet a president and battle pirates. I want to do *everything*! Everything there is to do."

"You just need to wait a few more years, Rufus," Byrd advised. "Then you can light a shuck out of here when you want to."

"I don't know as I *can* wait," Rufus said.

"A body can do anything, he puts his mind to it," Byrd said. "Leastways that's what my daddy always told me."

"And look where you are now. You didn't have no better idea for yourself than being a ranch hand? Digging a pit on account of somebody else told you to?"

"It ain't so bad, Rufus. Your pa treats me good."

"Maybe," Rufus said. "But he treats the dog good, too. And the dog gets steak scraps from the table."

Byrd wanted to warn Mr. Welch about his son's longing to wander, to see the world. But he couldn't find a good way to bring it up, and in the end he didn't say anything. Mr. Welch probably already knew how Rufus felt, and if he didn't, it wasn't Byrd's place to enlighten him. Byrd held his tongue all the way into Tombstone.

The town seemed unbearably crowded after two weeks on the Cross Y, with just a handful of people on the huge spread. While Mr. Welch did his shopping, Byrd walked up and down the boardwalk, sniffing the air outside saloons, trying to stay out of the way of people bustling about on more urgent missions than his.

He was leaning against a pillar when a runty little man came along with a hammer and a stack of papers and nails in his mouth. "Mmmff," the man said.

"I in your way?" Byrd asked.

"Mmffffmmb."

Byrd stepped aside. The man took one of his sheets of paper and a couple of nails and pounded them into the pillar. The paper's corners flapped in the day's gentle breeze, but Byrd could see that it was a wanted poster. His daddy had taught him how to read and made him go to school, so he looked at the picture and then read the words and then looked at the picture again.

It was a bad picture, a drawing short on detail, blurred and smudged in places. And it showed a man with long hair and a thick beard. But in the places where it was clear and distinct, in the eyes and the nose and the set of the mouth, the man depicted looked familiar.

It looked like Eli Turner.

According to the poster, he was wanted in New Mexico Territory and Texas for murder, bank robbery, train robbery, and sundry other crimes. It said his name was Jed Callaway, and gave several aliases, none of which were Eli Turner. There was a thousand-dollar reward offered for his capture or his corpse. Byrd chased down the little man. "I got a question," he said.

"Mmmffm?"

"Take them nails outta your craw," Byrd said. Remembering what Mrs. Welch so often told Rufus, he added, "Mind your Ps and Qs!"

The man spat his nails into his hand. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"I ain't sure," Byrd admitted. "Somethin' to do with manners, I expect."

"Well, what the hell's your question, then?"

"Are these your posters?"

"What do I look like, some kinda lawman? This feller outside the Oriental said he'd gimme two bits, I put 'em all up for 'im. So I'm puttin' 'em up. With two bits I can get good and drunk!"

"Can I have one?"

The man looked at Byrd like he was crazy, then relented and handed over one of the broadsides. "Rip it a little top and bottom, so it'll look like I nailed it up first."

Byrd took the sheet and tore it, as requested. He glanced over toward the buckboard, saw that Mr. Welch had not yet returned to it, and carried the broadside to the sheriff's office. He went in and found Sheriff Winkler sitting with his boots up on his desk. The room smelled like chewing tobacco and sweat. Behind the sheriff were three cages, all empty. The sheriff raised one bushy white eyebrow at Byrd's entrance, but otherwise didn't budge.

"I got a question," Byrd said.

"Usually got a few myself."

Byrd put the wanted broadside on Winkler's desk, beside the lawman's boots. "What do I do if I seen this feller?"

Winkler took his feet off the desk and sat upright, studying the poster for a moment. "Was me, I'd run the other way. Sounds like a dangerous sumbitch."

"No, but—I mean, what should I do? Should I come and fetch you?"

Winkler eyed him from under those impressive brows. He was a tall, slender man with an enormous beak that seemed to provide nurturing shade to a thick brush of a mustache. His hair was pure white and curled around his ears. "What for?"

“To arrest him, I reckon.”

“Son,” Winkler said. “He ain’t broke no laws in Arizona Territory. This here reward is offered by the Pinkertons. They’s most probably working for a railroad or bank, or some consortium of those. You see that owlhoot, I were you I’d go the other way, like I said. But you want to take some kind of action, be a hero, you’ll have to go to the Pinks, not to me. I got no reason to put the man in irons.”

“How do I find the Pinks?”

Winkler shrugged. “Was me, I’d look for anyplace where somebody else is buying the whiskey.”

7

The next night after dinner, Byrd went for a walk at the edge of the pasture behind the house. He loved the high desert this time of the day, with the sun gone from the sky, leaving behind only some gold and dark blue highlights in the west. To the east, stars were starting to blink into existence. The breeze was usually still then. Yucca stalks stood tall over the grasslands like silent shepherds, but the things that poked and tore, mesquite and prickly pear and cholla, were mostly hidden in the gloom. A last bird or two flitted across the acreage, but most day creatures were tucked in and the night creatures not yet out. The desert always smelled fresh and new at twilight.

He was heading back to the bunkhouse when he saw Mrs. Welch heading his way. “Evenin’, Mizz Welch,” he said. A moment later he remembered his Ps and Qs and whipped off his hat.

“I wish you’d call me Greta, Byrd.”

“Mr. Welch don’t seem to cotton to that notion.”

“When he’s not around, then. It’s my name. I hardly ever hear it.”

“He’s my boss.”

“I know that, Byrd. Just once in a while, though? For me?”

“Reckon I can try. Once in a while.”

“I’d like that.”

“There anything else, Mizz Welch? Or . . . Greta. I should

be gettin' to the bunkhouse."

She took a couple of steps forward, until she was right in front of him, almost touching. Her proximity made Byrd anxious, as if she were made of flame or thorns. "You like me, don't you, Byrd?"

"I like you fine. I like Mr. Welch. And Rufus. And the dog."

"I'm not talking about that," she said. "I mean, as a woman."

"You look to be a fine woman from here. I don't know any more'n that."

"But you'd like to find out?"

"I don't expect I should say any more on the subject, ma'am. Like to have said too much already."

She smiled, and it was as if the sun had decided to come back out, but only in a limited way, shining its rays directly at her face and bathing it in gold. "I'm not asking you to make love to me, Byrd," she said. "Not even hinting at it. A woman has needs, and Mr. Welch, well, he doesn't seem interested in that sort of thing anymore. He's not as old as he looks, and I'm older than I look, so that's not the problem, though I know a person might think so. I don't know what it is, but it hurts sometimes. I know you're an honorable man, Byrd, and you work for him, and I'm a married woman. So I wouldn't. But sometimes . . . sometimes just knowing one is still admired is better than nothing. That's all I'm asking for, Byrd. To be admired once in a while. And to hear my name spoken. That's not so much, is it?"

"I don't guess it is."

"Just between you and me, Byrd. No betraying anyone's trust. No touching, or anything like that. But if you could say my name now and again, and look at me the way you seem to want to, why, that would be enough for me."

"All right, Mizz Welch. I mean, Greta. I really got to hit the hay, though. These early mornings, you know."

"Very well. Goodnight, Byrd. And thank you."

"Goodnight, Greta."

He left her there, at the pasture's edge. Walking back toward the bunkhouse, he saw the silhouette of Mr. Welch standing behind the ranch house. He couldn't tell which

direction Mr. Welch was looking, but his face burned with shame. He hadn't done anything untoward with Mrs. Welch, but if Mr. Welch had seen them together he wouldn't know that. Byrd considered going to him and trying to set things straight. That seemed like it would only complicate things more, though, so he kept on going, walking faster until he was safely inside the bunkhouse.

When Byrd was seated on his bunk, pulling off his boots, Eli Turner went over to the door and scraped a chair in front of it. He propped it so its back was wedged under the handle. "Reckon we got to have a talk, Byrd."

His voice was serious, even menacing. Byrd swallowed back his alarm. "About what?"

"You been starin' at me ever since you come back from Tombstone."

"No I ain't," Byrd protested. "Hardly even seen you today."

"When you seen me, you been starin'."

"I don't mean to."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not. Can't say as it matters much whether you mean to. Point is, you been. I think I know why."

"Could be you remind me of somebody."

The other boys laughed at that one. Turner crossed the room until he stood close to Byrd. "Could be you figgered out who I am. Hear tell my picture's all over Tombstone."

"I don't think that's it," Byrd protested. "I was so sleepy, when we got to Tombstone 'bout all I did was sleep in the buckboard. He finished shopping, Mr. Welch had to pretty near smack me in the face to rouse me."

Turner sat on the bunk opposite Byrd's, the one usually occupied by Calhoun. "I think you figgered out that my name ain't really Elias Turner, didn't you? You know it's really Jed Callaway, and you know what I done. Might be you don't know the boys here is really Matt Healey, Harry Begich, and Joe Broun, and might be them names don't mean a thing to you. But that ain't a chance we can take."

"Honest, Eli, I never heard them names before. I don't know who you are nor care. Far as I'm concerned you're good old Eli Turner, my friend."

"That's right nice of you, Byrd. Only you see, we got us a problem here. Might even say a dilemma. Only way out of it is for you to tell us, right now, no questions, are you with us or a'gin us?"

Byrd wished he had more information. His brain hadn't even settled from his unexpected talk with Mrs. Welch, and now here it was getting all combobulated again. But Eli—or Jed, whoever he was—had said "no questions." "I'm with you, Eli. Jed. I always been with you, ever since I got here."

"That's what I figured," Turner said. Callaway, not Turner. Callaway. He kicked Slim Williams's bunk. Only Slim wasn't Slim, he was somebody else. Byrd didn't even know what name went with who. "Harry here didn't think so. He figgered you for yellow. I told him, old Byrd, he's a good old boy. He'll go along."

"Of course I will," Byrd said. He didn't know what he was going along with, but going along sounded like the wisest course of action.

"I don't trust him," Williams said. Or Begich. Byrd was so confused. "I don't think he's got it in him."

"You're a big feller," Callaway said. "You been in some fights, right? Raised a ruckus now and again. Shot someone, mebbe?"

"Course," Byrd said, trying to grin like he meant it. "Shoot, who ain't done those things?"

Callaway leaned into the space between the bunks. "Here's the lowdown," he said. "Me and the boys, we like it here on the ranch, since things was gettin' a mite heated where we was. But there's another reason we're here, and that's why it's important we know where you stand. See, the road past the ranch is also the road the payroll for some of the mines is carried over. The Can't Quit Mine and the Bear Ridge mine, mainly, plus some smaller ones. Now, I got to give Joe credit for this idea, and it's a good one. The last two times the wagon's come through with the payroll on it, some masked men has stopped it in a canyon up toward Tombstone. The guards has traded lead with those masked men, but they've always been able to turn around and ride back the way they come.

Only thing is, the payroll hasn't got through."

"And you're the masked men?" Byrd asked.

"That's right. So tomorrow, accordin' to our man at the mine, they're comin' through with the payroll one more time. Only now they got three weeks of payroll instead of just one or two. They'll have plenty of guns along—but they won't be lookin' for ambush until they get near that canyon.

"This time, we mean to hit 'em an hour or so before they reach it. They'll be relaxed. And they'll be thinkin' that when they do get to the canyon, even if the masked men are there, it won't be so bad because they got lots of hands and because those masked men are some pretty bad shots. But this time, we won't be shootin' to miss like we done before. We'll kill us as many as needs be, and we'll take three weeks of payrolls for two big mines and a few small ones, and we'll be out of the territory before noon. What do you think?"

Byrd swallowed again. "Sounds like a right smart plan."

"It's brilliant!" Callaway said. "There's just no way it can fail."

"But seein' as it's so good," Byrd said, "You don't need me for—"

"There's gonna be a lot of guns, like I said. Can't hurt to have us one more on our side. Plus, anybody sees you, they'll be scared. Plus too, anybody sees you so big and all, they'll be even less likely to remember any details about the rest of us. Havin' you along, Byrd, is what takes it from brilliant all the way to genius."

"Well . . ." Byrd said, uncertain of how to proceed.

"Of course," Callaway added, "You don't got to put in with us."

"I don't?"

"Naw," Callaway said. "If you don't want to, there's no problem. We'll just have to kill you, that's all."

8

Byrd didn't sleep.

The plan was to rise early and be at the ambush point by the time the sun rose. But Byrd didn't mean to be anywhere

near the Cross Y when Callaway and the others awoke. He would be shut of the hold-up plan, shut of his discomfort over Mr. Welch and his lovely wife, shut even of having to listen to Rufus's complaining.

When he was positive, by the now familiar, individual tones and pitches of their snoring, that all his bunkmates were sleeping, he rolled quietly from his bed. He gathered up one set of clothes, his rifle and his knife, his boots and his hat and his daddy's little box. The rest he could come back for, or leave behind, either way. The floorboards squeaked, but he knew which ones to avoid. Healey turned over and moaned once as Byrd passed, and he froze in place, the burden of carrying so much in his hands already numbing his fingers. Healey's breathing slipped back into its usual buzzsaw mode and Byrd continued.

The chair was still propped against the door. With his hands full, Byrd wouldn't be able to get a steady enough grip on it to ease it aside. He raised his boots to his mouth and gripped them with his teeth, and that helped a little. When he neared the door, though, by the dim moonlight leaking through the one curtained window he saw that Broun was asleep in the tipped-back chair.

That complicated things considerably.

Byrd hesitated for a moment. Waking Broun would mean a fight. He thought he could take all four men individually, and maybe all at once. But somebody would draw a gun and in these close quarters, somebody would get hurt or worse. Given Byrd's luck, that somebody was likely to be him. The whole point of sneaking out—well, most of the point, anyhow—was to not get killed.

Which left him with a choice. Go back to bed, ride out with the men in the morning, and take part in a murderous holdup? Or risk a brawl and maybe a gunshot right now?

Making his decision, Byrd laid down his rifle and his knife and his clothing and his box, took his boots from his teeth and set those down, and put the hat on his head. Barefoot, moving slowly to avoid the bad floorboards, he approached the door. He could have used a little more light, but the moon was new

and already low in the western sky. He eyed Broun and the chair, wishing it had been Begich, who looked much more like someone named Slim Williams than someone named Harry Begich, which sounded like something you'd see a doctor about. Broun was at least fifty pounds heavier than young Begich.

Resisting the urge to rub his hands together, lest the rasp wake somebody up, Byrd bent over in front of the chair. He reached past Broun's hips and got a grip on the seat, a little more than midway back. The angle was difficult, but he straightened and lifted the chair from the floor, holding it in the same position. It tapped against the door once and Broun gave a muffled groan, but his eyes didn't open. Byrd took two sideways paces, doing his best to keep the chair still. Fire raged through his shoulders and arms; he wouldn't be able to keep the chair airborne much longer, not without bringing his back into play, and that would likely jostle the sleeper too much.

When he was clear of the door, he lowered the chair again, setting it down as gently as he could manage. It slipped from his grasp and fell the last eighth-inch or so, landing with a thump that Byrd was convinced could have been heard in the ranch house. At least by the dog.

Begich snorted and shifted and almost fell out of the chair. Byrd left his hands where they were, and his arms held Begich in place. Within moments, he was again snoring peacefully.

Byrd let out a breath and returned for his things. Scooping them up, he moved as quickly as he dared to the door. It opened about halfway before the hinges squealed, so Byrd halted it before that and managed to squeeze through with all his belongings. Outside, he held his breath again and pulled the door to with the softest of clicks.

Shivering in the frail moonlight, he dressed and shoved his feet into his boots. He went to the tack room and found his saddle and bridle, and carried those to the corral where the ranch's horses slept, most standing, a few curled on the bare earth. Byrd tossed the saddle over the fence and then climbed over himself. A couple of horses, alerted by the thump of the

saddle, whinnied in alarm, before recognizing the big man and going quiet.

Harvey stood by himself, like a kid in school who had failed to make friends. Byrd went to him, stroked his muzzle, ruffled his mane. The horse nuzzled him back. Byrd bridled and blanketed and saddled and cinched him. Other horses were awake and interested now, walking over, neighing their concerns. Byrd had always thought horses were smarter than most people gave them credit for; they had a language all their own, and he could only hope to understand the slightest fraction of it. "Guess you got some friends here after all," he said quietly.

He led Harvey to the gate and opened it, letting Harvey out while blocking the others with his body. He closed the gate and looped the rope around the gatepost to hold it that way. Then he climbed into the saddle, took a last look around the Cross Y—a place he had been hoping to stay for a goodly while, had his luck run the other way—and rode off into the darkness.

9

Byrd had been riding for most of an hour, trying to enjoy the peace of the nighttime desert, when he became aware that he was not alone.

He halted Harvey and listened.

Sure enough, he heard the sound of another horse's hooves clomping on hardened earth, and the creak of saddle leather. It was coming down a gentle slope, and he calculated that the rider would have met the trail Byrd followed at about the same time as Byrd, had he not stopped.

Was it one of Callaway's men? Somebody else from the ranch? Or unrelated to the Cross Y at all? He was well off Mr. Welch's holdings by now. But there were few reasons anyone would be riding around in the middle of the night, and even fewer good ones. He leaned right and twitched the reins. Harvey sidestepped until he was just off the trail. The moon was balanced on the far horizon, casting very little light and putting Byrd's shadow behind him. He slid his rifle from the

beaded scabbard, just in case, and waited.

Soon enough, the horse came into view as the path it followed merged with the wider trail Byrd had been using. The appaloosa looked familiar, but not as much so as the rider. "Rufus!" Byrd called.

The boy spun around so fast he nearly fell from his saddle. He caught himself and hung on, and when he looked at Byrd again he was trying to rearrange his face from rank embarrassment to a sort of privileged outrage. "If Pa sent you after me, he's got no right. I got to find my own fortune in the world."

"Your pa don't know I'm here neither," Byrd said. "Reckon we's both runaways."

"Well, don't think you can change my mind, Byrd. It's fixed."

Byrd rode up closer to the boy so he could speak in normal tones. Disturbing the quiet of such a fine night seemed like a violation of some kind. "Rufus, you're just a boy. What are you gonna do for money? How you gonna find a place to live, or a job?"

Rufus shook a pouch he wore on a strap across his chest. Byrd heard the jingle of coins. "I got money," Rufus said. He reached into a saddlebag and drew out a revolver. "And I got this from Pa's gun case. Got bullets, too, and plenty of 'em. What else you think I'd need?"

"A lick of sense, for starters," Byrd said. "An eight-year-old boy can't just up and turn hisself into a man. You know your folks'll be worried sick, right? Instead of runnin' the ranch they'll be ridin' the countryside looking for you. Spending all their money offerin' rewards, hirin' Pinkertons and the like. You could be the ruination of the whole outfit, pullin' something like this. That what you want, to see your daddy in the poorhouse? Your ma worryin' herself to death?"

"Of course not!" Rufus barked. "That ain't the point."

"It'll be the outcome, though, sure as I'm sittin' here. Look, Rufus, my momma died when I was born, so I never knew her. I knew my daddy, though. He weren't much of a man, mebbe, but I sure missed him somethin' fierce when he was gone. I expect you'll feel the same way soon. Could be by sunup, even,

or by the next sundown for sure. Soon.”

“You think so?”

“And what about that dog? He’ll wake up in the mornin’, not know where you are, and probably won’t eat another bite till he wastes away to nothin’. A dog without his boy is a sad, sad thing.”

Rufus waved a dismissive hand. “Aw, he’s just a old dog!”

“Don’t matter,” Byrd argued. “A dog’s got feelings, same as a horse or anythin’ else. Not like a momma’s or a daddy’s, but powerful just the same.”

“You think so?”

“I know it, boy. I don’t know a lot in this world, I’ll grant you. But I know that.”

Rufus took in an exasperated breath. Byrd knew how he felt. But he also had an idea how the boy would feel by lunch-time, if he didn’t turn back now. He held his gaze steady, and in a minute Rufus’s shoulders wilted. “Ah, hell!” he said.

“Mind your Ps and Qs!” Byrd reminded him.

“I guess you’re right. I’ll go on back home. At least for another few months. When I’m nine, though, I’m lighting out, for certain.”

“You might want to wait another couple years past that,” Byrd said. “But yeah. At least till you’re nine.”

Grudgingly, the boy turned his horse around and started toward the path he’d taken before. “This way’s quicker,” Byrd said. “Looks longer but there’s not so many up and downs.”

“All right,” Rufus said, glumly resigned. He rode past Byrd. “I’m sorry you’re runnin’ off, Byrd. Won’t be the same there without your big ugly head around the place.”

“Reckon I’ll miss you too, Rufus,” Byrd told the boy’s departing form.

By the time Rufus reached the first bend, Byrd had second thoughts. What if he didn’t make it back in the dark? He hadn’t come by that route and might miss the trail. Or what if an early morning rattler spooked his horse and threw him? What if he was attacked by Apaches or thieves or a mountain lion?

No, there was nothing else for it. Byrd had to ride along, to

make sure Rufus reached the Cross Y in one piece.

"Ah, hell," he said, and he turned his horse around and chased after the boy.

10

When they reached the ranch house, the sun had not yet so much as faded the eastern darkness, and the moon was long gone. The ranch would have been as black as Byrd had ever seen it, but for a lamp burning inside the house. Someone inside must have been sitting up and listening, because Byrd and Rufus had been riding quietly, not talking, but as they approached, the front door of the house burst open.

Mr. Welch came outside with a rifle in his hands. He stood on the porch and raised the rifle to his shoulder, pointing it toward Byrd.

"No, Pa!" Rufus shouted. "Byrd made me come back! I left all on my own!"

"I'm glad he did that, son," Welch said. "But that ain't why I've a mind to shoot him."

"What, then?"

Before the man could answer, Mrs. Welch came onto the porch, wearing a nightgown that caused Byrd to wonder how the man could have lost interest in her. She grabbed Welch's shoulders. "Thaddeus," she pleaded. "I've told you, nothing happened between us. Ask him, he'll tell you the same!"

"Sure he will, now he's heard you say it," Welch countered, shrugging her hands off him.

Byrd stopped Harvey and raised his hands. "I know you got no cause to believe me, Mr. Welch," he said. "But you ought to believe your wife. She's a good woman and wouldn't tell you no lies."

"You both have your stories straight, don't you? To think I brought you here my own self, Mr. Byrd. Only to have you betray me."

Greta Welch caught his arm and shook it violently. "He didn't do a thing, Thad!" Tears brimmed at her eyes and started to spill. "He was a perfect gentleman. I might have had some ideas along those lines, but he wouldn't have it!"

"That ain't true!" Byrd cried. "Don't listen to her!"

"I'm done listening to the both of you," Welch said. He yanked his arm free of his wife's grip and aimed the rifle again. "You first, Byrd, then her."

Byrd froze. He could go for his rifle, but the man could take three shots before it cleared the scabbard. Or Welch could use one on Byrd, then turn his gun on Greta. Better Byrd sit there and let the man shoot him. Maybe Welch's conscience would perk up before he shot his own wife, right in front of their son. Maybe killing one would be enough for him. And the way Byrd's luck ran, he had to be the one to die.

But the door to the bunkhouse banged open and Jed Callaway stepped out, followed by his men. They all carried pistols or long guns, and they pointed them at Byrd. "Whatever he's told you, Mr. Welch, it's a damn lie," Callaway said. "He told us last night that he was gonna make up some fool story about us bein' outlaws, in order to get you all unsettled while he ran off with Mizz Welch."

"He's told me nothing of the kind," Welch said. "But what are you doing out so early, Eli? It's hours yet till daybreak."

"Why, I heard Byrd's voice, and figgered he was spreadin' those lies he talked about. Me and the boys wanted to make sure he didn't, is all."

"Well, he hasn't. At least, he hasn't lied about that."

Callaway raised his pistol and took aim at Byrd's head. "Could be I should make sure he don't get the chance, then."

Byrd knew he should have jumped off the horse the moment Welch came outside with the gun. Now he was trapped. If he moved one way Welch would fire, and if he moved the other, Callaway and his gang would. They might all shoot at once. Either way it went, his run of bad luck had finally played out.

He heard the first gunshot, loud in the quiet morning air, and the muzzle flash seemed bright in the corner of his eye. But he didn't feel the hot pulse of pain he expected. Instead, Callaway gave a choking cry and dropped to the dirt, his gun falling from his hand.

Past him, Byrd saw Rufus standing by the corral, clutching his pa's pistol in two fists, swinging it around toward

Begich and Broun. Greta saw her son at the same time, and screamed his name.

Byrd leapt from the saddle, snaking his rifle from its scabbard as he did. When his boots hit the ground he was already turning and ducking. A shot flew past him and into the wall of the ranch house. Firing from the waist, Byrd shot Healey, dropping him where he stood. Begich squeezed off two shots from a pistol and darted around the bunkhouse. Broun fired a wild shot that missed Byrd but hit Mr. Welch, who staggered back against the doorjamb. Byrd tried to shoot back as Broun retreated into the bunkhouse, but Greta was dashing across the open space toward Rufus, and Byrd raised his Winchester's barrel just in time to not plug her. His slug sailed off into the sky someplace, and he hoped it didn't hit anything living on the way back down.

Mrs. Welch scooped her boy into her arms. She was weeping buckets, and the boy had started to cry as well. Mr. Welch slid slowly down until he was seated on the porch, leaving a slick of blood on the jamb. Shouts came from the other bunkhouse, but Byrd was afraid when those cowboys reached the yard more innocent blood would be shed, since they wouldn't know who was shooting at whom, or why.

Begich was somewhere on the far side of the bunkhouse, and Broun inside. The one window faced this direction, and there were gaps in the walls big enough for a gun barrel. Byrd knew that poking his face into the bunkhouse door was sure suicide. But so was staying here, and the Welches were all in danger, too, with no cover but that one mesquite tree.

Well, he thought, that bunkhouse could use replacing anyhow.

He lowered his head and charged it.

From inside he heard a frightened cry, and a couple of panicked shots buzzed past him. He didn't slow. At the last second, he tucked his head and threw his right shoulder forward, and it hit the wall first. Splinters flew and shards of wood stabbed him in a dozen places, but Byrd kept going, off-balance now, tumbling forward and taking the wall out with him. He managed a few more steps before he lost his footing

altogether, tangled up in what must have been his own bunk and pieces of the wall and the beams that held it up, but he kept turning, so when he hit the floor he was already rolling, and he came up on the other side of the roll with his rifle in his hands.

The bunkhouse was done—the far wall swayed a couple of times, this way and that, and then collapsed outward. The wall Byrd had gone through was already disintegrating, and the back wall gave up when the first one did. Within instants, the only wall remaining was the one with the door in it, and that was skewed at an angle. The next person who breathed in its direction would likely topple it.

Begich—Slim Williams—rose out of the wreckage with his Colt in his hand and swiveled toward the Welches. Byrd levered the Winchester and got off two shots. The first hit Begich in the upper thigh; as he started to fall, the second entered his jaw and went out the top of his skull.

That left one. Byrd looked around for Broun, then realized his knee was on the man's throat. Broun's face was about the color of an eggplant, and getting darker every second. Byrd took his time about getting up, and when he did he jerked away Broun's weapon and hauled him, choking and wheezing, to his feet.

The other bunkhouse's cowboys had arrived. Byrd handed Broun off to one, saying, "Hold this feller for the sheriff." The cowboy tried to ask him something, but Byrd was already stalking toward the ranch house. Greta was up on the porch, holding Rufus against her bosom and squatting beside her husband. Tears glistened on her cheeks.

"How is he?" Byrd asked.

"Thaddeus? He's—"

"I'm fine!" Welch growled. "Shot through the shoulder is all. Hurts like the dickens but it won't kill me."

"That's good," Byrd said. It seemed there should have been more to say, but he couldn't think of what.

"Byrd," Welch said. His voice sounded weak, but that was no surprise. He was losing blood fast. Byrd tugged some shards of wood from his own arm and shoulder, then knelt

beside Welch and put his hands on either side of the wound, pressing to staunch the flow. Welch winced but didn't object. "Byrd, I reckon I owe you an apology."

"Don't worry about that," Byrd said. "I wrecked your bunkhouse."

"I mean about Greta."

"She's a fine lady," Byrd said. She was right beside him, her eyes luminous, her face as lovely as any Byrd had ever seen.

"I know that. And I should trust her. I just . . . hell, I don't know."

"Don't try to talk," Byrd said. "There's nothin' to sort out, but we can sort it later just the same."

Byrd felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned quickly, afraid it was one of Callaway's guys, but it was just Greta. She had changed position, let go of the boy finally. Her hands were covered in her husband's blood, but so were Byrd's so that was nothing. "Thad," she said. "I love you and only you. And Byrd? You're beautiful." She leaned close and kissed Byrd's cheek. "A big, beautiful man." She turned back to Welch. "See? I can like me a man without loving him, Thad."

"Hell, I know it," Thad said. His eyelids fluttered. "Now be quiet a minute, would you? There's enough damn noise around here to wake the dead."

11

Byrd stayed for three more weeks. Mr. Welch couldn't get out of bed much the first few days, and he was short four hands, so Byrd did what he could to make up the difference. Mrs. Welch posted some notices in Tombstone, and as new hires arrived, Byrd showed them the ropes. But everyone knew he wasn't staying long; he had made that clear enough the first day. During those three weeks, he smiled at Mrs. Welch, and once or twice he called her Greta. But he spent more of his few moments of free time with the boy and the dog, and occasionally he stopped in to talk to Mr. Welch about how the ranch was doing and about getting it ready for the coming winter. Seeing as Rufus had been the one who shot Callaway, he got

the reward, which Mr. Welch said would be kept in the bank, as the boy's grubstake for whenever he eventually did strike out to see the world for himself.

On Byrd's last day he stood in the yard near where he had scraped the earth clean of the bunkhouse he had knocked down, and looked at the ranch house. The bullet holes had been plugged and paint dabbed over them. The place hardly looked like the scene of a massacre anymore. Greta came out on the porch and looked across at him; with her up two steps, their eyes were almost level. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"I do, though. Reckon I've brought enough of my bad luck to you folks."

"Your luck isn't as bad as you think it is, Byrd."

He liked the way she smiled when she spoke the words, but he wasn't sure he could put much faith in them. His arrival at the ranch had precipitated strife between the Welches, Rufus's running away, a bloody gunfight, and a destroyed bunkhouse. It had put people he cared about in danger and caused new friendships to end in bloodshed.

"Just the same," he said finally. "It's time I was back on the trail."

Thaddeus Welch came out then. He had got most of his color back and could raise his arm almost shoulder-high. Rufus and the dog joined them on the porch.

"You have my thanks for all you've done," Welch said. "And you'll always have a seat at our table, any time you want it."

"I appreciate that, sir," Byrd replied. "Might just take you up on it, one of these times."

He had already loaded up Harvey with everything he owned. The reins were looped once around a hitching rail by the house. Byrd freed them, put a foot in the stirrup, and hoisted himself into the saddle. The animal shook his head, nickered softly, and stamped his hoof once in the dirt. "Guess he's ready, too," Byrd said.

"Looks like it," Greta Welch agreed.

Byrd looked at the family on the porch one more time. Thaddeus Welch had his arm around his wife's waist, and her hip was cocked against him. Byrd thought Mr. Welch was one

of the luckiest sons of guns he had ever met. He had a place to call his own, some land and livestock to keep his family fed, the love of a good woman, even a healthy boy and a loyal dog.

Byrd's luck didn't run that way.

But maybe there was something in what Greta had said. Maybe it had changed, or would one day.

He rode out of the yard and into the morning sun, and as he did he thought about what a fine day it was, not too hot and not too cold, and the trail before him was long, leading into mountains and deserts beyond those and who could say what else. One trail led to another and still more, and where there were enough trails there was hope, there was a chance, and any chance was better than none at all.

Anyway, it was what he had, and he'd take it.