



Small Rocks Rising

A NOVEL

SUSAN LANG

S M A L L R O C K S R I S I N G

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SMALL ROCKS RISING

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In memory of the women of Pipes Canyon

We are but thoughts in the mind of rock

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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I am indebted also to the southwestern desert mountains that inspired this work of fiction, though readers should be aware that many aspects of the actual geography have been reconfigured to meet the dramatic needs of this novel, and that much of the landscape of this work is now fictional, as are the characters who live out their stories within these pages.

S M A L L R O C K S R I S I N G

CHAPTER ONE

When Ruth arrived on the truck loaded with her supplies, she headed straight for the first of four pinyons that enclosed her cabin site. While Matt guided John Olsen's backing of the flatbed, she boosted herself up the trunk of the pine and inched her way out onto a wide lower limb, until she could wrap her hand around a rusted tin can hanging from the branch above. Ruth had been picturing that moment since the day she signed the form and paid the fees for her homestead, March 15, 1929, nearly three weeks before. At that moment, she had made up her mind to erase all sign of the place's history as a stopover for cowboys who couldn't tolerate a few drops of pine pitch on their shirts. Can-Tree Springs, indeed: not a fit name for her land.

Ruth yanked on the can, but it remained stubborn. After twisting the tin several times to loosen the baling wire, she jerked down again. Both wire and can came off in her hand. After she had removed the three other cans, Ruth patted the rough bark beside her. She would free the other trees once the men left. With a finger she caught one of the clear drips of pitch that covered the sides of the can—trying the turpentine taste on her tongue. The rest of the sticky drip she smeared on the back of a hand, its scent merging with her own, then she dropped to the ground to help the men unload her belongings.

Matt and John had already begun piling building materials in front of the furthest pinyon, beside an odd-shaped boulder that reached to just above Ruth's waist.

"Wait," she called out to Matt, who was ready to throw more planks onto the pile. "Not there. Don't put any more there. How about over by that scrub oak?"

"What's the matter with here?" Matt leaned the planks against the boulder and swiped his forehead with the back of a hand. Sunlight turned his hair the color of fresh-churned butter. "Seems here would be handier for you." His pale blue eyes settled on her as John Olsen came up beside him lugging a huge sack of cement.

"I'd just have to move it all again," she said. "That's why." Ruth picked up a fallen twig. "Look. I'll show you," she said, pacing out the area as she drew an approximate rectangle in the dirt. "Here's where my cabin will be, between the pinyons, where the ground's nice and flat. You can see you're putting all that inside my cabin."

"If you draw your rectangle the other way, we won't be," Matt said. "Just turn your house around." With one foot he began to redraw the floor plan.

"No," Ruth said. "I want to walk right out into morning sun. My front door has to face east."

"Ya, Rute," John Olsen said, hunkering beside the stone. He rubbed at the white stubble on his jaw. "But what you do about the boulder?"

Ruth walked over and squatted beside the old Swede, who

smelled of goat and infrequent baths. Baths would not come easy here in this canyon, she realized. She ran a palm across the cold exterior of the rock. It appeared strangely alive. The smooth saddle of its back, the way it rested on a rounded belly made it seem like some kind of mineral beast. "I guess I'll have to move it, then," she said.

Both men laughed. Matt patted her shoulder. "Ruth," he said, "you may be the most capable woman I ever met. Honest. But not even John and I together could move that boulder."

Ruth felt her face flush. For once Matt's big smile didn't turn her to goo. "Just put the building materials over there, Matt Baxter," she said. "I'll move this rock. You wait and see." She marched toward the truck to escape the men's looks of amusement. John Olsen rose and began shifting the pile.

With three of them, it didn't take long to finish the unloading. While Matt and John set up her tent and carried in her cot and chest of drawers, Ruth gathered wood and built a fire in the circle of rocks that cowboys in the past had constructed. Then she picked up a bucket and walked across the wash to the patch of green that surrounded her spring. She knelt among the wiry sprigs of succulent grass, some more than a foot high, and dunked her bucket into the shallow pool of water—careful to avoid skater bugs and the gray beetle floating upside down near the water's edge. Behind the spring, the exposed roots of a cottonwood dropped a tangled skirt down the bank. When her bucket was full, she dipped a cupped hand into the water and brought it to her mouth. No water had ever tasted so sweet. Her very own, fresh from the earth. Her earth.

Later, the three of them sat in canvas camp chairs and christened her new homestead with cups of cowboy coffee. Containing her eagerness for the men to leave, Ruth sat savoring the smell of coffee and campfire smoke. She listened to the drone of passing flies and admired the sunlight puddling on Matt's soft curls. Caught up as she was in details close to her, she almost didn't notice, just over Matt's head, a man descending the bluff across the wash, dropping so smoothly he appeared almost to float down the rocks. She was too surprised to say a word, but

her face spoke for her: John Olsen followed her eyes over to the stony base of Rocky Mountain.

"It just Jim, Rute. Indian Jim," John said, pulling pipe makings from his pocket.

"But I thought you and Kate were my nearest neighbors," Ruth said, "What is he doing . . ."

"Ya, Rute. Jim stay on the mountain sometime. In summer. He set svedges at the mine. Good worker, Jim is. Smart too." Olsen tamped the tobacco in his pipe.

Ruth got up and walked to the campfire, where she wrestled the enamel pot off to the side of the rocks. Using a stick to tip the hot pot handle, Ruth poured coffee into her cup while the man made his way toward the camp. She wondered what she would have done if Matt and John hadn't been there. What could she have done? She decided to take up Matt's offer and borrow his rifle until the one she had ordered came in at Matt's General Store. Not that she'd ever shot a rifle.

The man was dark-skinned, with definitive, rugged features. Abundant black hair hung loose halfway to his waist, except where it was bound by a red bandana around his forehead. Ruth had seen Indians before in El Paso, Mexican Indians who came across the border for supplies or business. She had never spoken to one, but had always been curious because of the rumors about her mother, Cally. No one in the family would speak of it directly—not even her mother—but Ruth had overheard enough hushed snatches of stories those years she lived with her aunt, whispers about the "half-breed bastard" her grandfather had brought home to raise. And once when Ruth was very young, she remembered a time on the streets in El Paso when a well-dressed woman spat at her mother's feet and hissed the word *squaw*.

Matt nodded when John Olsen made the introductions, did not rise or offer his hand. Ruth was surprised to see suspicion and discomfort in his face. She could tell the Indian noticed it too: not that the expression on Jim's face did more than harden around the eyes as he looked at Matt. She made a point of walk-

ing over to offer her hand, though Matt's disapproval lent stiffness to her action.

"There's hot coffee," she said, resuming her seat. "The cups are in the box there. Feel free."

"Thanks," Jim said, his face softening into the suggestion of a smile. "I do." Ruth stifled a laugh of surprise.

"Have they told you," Jim said as he tipped the coffeepot to pour, "about the inscribed rocks up there on the mountain?"

"Inscribed rocks?" Ruth asked, confused as much by the Indian's manner and clear speech as by what he said. He was more than simply smart. "What kind of inscriptions?" A picture formed in her head of cowboys attacking the rocks with pen and ink.

"Figures people long ago made on rocks. Your people call them petroglyphs. I'll show them to you sometime if you want. It means this place was important once. Possibly a major hunting area. My own people had a strange name for it. Something like 'place where rocks reside.' Something like that but not quite. Maybe more like 'small rocks rising.' Some things just don't translate," he said.

From her two years at Sarah Higgins Academy, Ruth recognized the educated nature of his speech—curious in such a man. But underlying that was some kind of Indian inflection that moved his voice smoothly over words, blunting the sharp edges of sound the way flowing water rounds off sharp rocks. She looked at Matt, who was studying the man with a wary interest.

"So before the cowboys came here with their tin cans, there were Indians," Ruth said.

"That's true everywhere, isn't it?" Jim sat on a small flat rock next to the fire. "Good coffee," he said, swirling the liquid in his cup so that light from its surface scattered patterns on the pinon branches overhead.

"You come down to house, Jim? Could use help." Olsen tapped out finished tobacco onto the ground and rubbed it into the dirt with one foot. "Go up for a load in the morning. Stay tree or four day." He returned the pipe to his shirt pocket.

"Thought I might. I'll catch a ride down with you, John. Spotted your truck from near the top."

"Why don't I leave that rifle with you, Ruth?" Matt said, his eyes on the Indian. "Come on. I'll instruct you." He got up and walked to her chair, reached out a hand.

Ruth allowed him her hand and followed him back to the truck. Matt seemed distracted as he gave her a lesson on loading the .22. When he showed her where the safety was located, he seemed unaware of how close his arm came to her breast. "I want to make sure you're safe," he told her, once the rifle was loaded. "I'll be back in a week. No telling who might wander by meanwhile. Here," he said, "I'll show you how to shoot it."

Picking up one of the cans Ruth had discarded from the pine, Matt placed it on top of a rock near the bank of the wash. As she aimed the rifle, he came up behind and reached both arms around her, snuggling the rifle into the crotch of her shoulder. "Now keep the rifle firm here. Line up those two sights on that can," he said, leaning in closer. She could barely breathe with the warm outline of his body fitted tight against her.

Ruth felt him suck in his breath. She closed one eye and lined up the sights so the can sat square in front of the two posts, fighting all the while to concentrate against the pounding in her body. "Now," Matt whispered, "pull the trigger." A great rush of blood swept to Ruth's head as she snapped back the lever.

The shot ricocheted from the cliff across the wash. The can flew off the rock.

"Good shot." The Indian's voice came from behind them. Matt stepped back, and Ruth turned to find Jim and John Olsen heading toward the truck.

"It wasn't hard," Ruth said, keeping all trace of surprise from her voice. She would not be flustered, though she couldn't help but be impressed with herself. So that's all there was to it; it pleased her to have so easily broken through one of the mysteries of the male world. She sashayed back toward her camp, taking the rifle with her.

Setting the rifle and box of shells inside her tent, she went back out to say her good-byes. Matt reached out the truck win-

dow as John started the engine. "See you next week," he said. "I'll bring up those supplies from the store. Maybe your twenty-two will be in by then." He gave her arm a quick squeeze when she came up beside him. "Be sure to keep that rifle handy."

"I'll be all right," Ruth said. She climbed on the running board and poked her head in the window. "Thanks, John. For your help. Your truck too. And tell Kate thanks for the food."

"We neighbor now, Rute. Maybe you crazy, but neighbor." Shaking his head, John put the truck in gear. "Up here . . . all by yourself. Think you can move that boulder?"

"I will move that rock," she assured him, though the truth was she'd forgotten all about her promise until he reminded her.

"Maybe John can loan you some dynamite," Matt said, laughing.

"Ya. We don't use the dynamite. We svedge the onyx." As the truck began to move, Ruth jumped from the running board and stood to one side while they backed onto the rut road. She gave a wave to Jim, who sat on the wooden flatbed, his back leaning against the cab. The Indian nodded, held her eyes as the truck pulled out and bumped on down the rough road.

Ruth watched the truck disappear around the far bend of Rocky Mountain, waited until the drone of motor grew faint. Grateful as she had been for the men's help, she had felt the canyon would not be fully hers until they were gone. When the engine sound faded into rushes of air playing in the pinyons, she lay flat on ground warm with March afternoon sun, nothing but a cotton shirt between her back and the place she had come to claim. Rough pebbles pressed into her skin beneath the cloth. Thin clouds spilled over the tops of the pine tree she had freed, its branches no longer encrusted with rusty tin cans. From somewhere an oriole strung a song through the air. She took in deep breaths of wildflower and pine and let the place seep into her, wanting the canyon to inhabit her as fully as she meant to inhabit it.

When her senses were saturated, she burst to her feet, stretched her arms above her head. "Mine. Oh, it's mine. Really all mine!" she yelled, then listened as her words bounced back

from the bluff across the wash. Of course, the place wasn't quite hers yet. She still had to prove up on her homestead—to construct herself a structure out of the heap of building materials. And to move that damnable rock. She was required to stay three years in this place to make it hers. What sweet torture—living here three whole years! Crazy with joy, Ruth cackled out into the quiet canyon, and the rock cliff across the wash returned the sound of her laughter.

When the echoes died, she walked over to the rock and studied it. As ridiculous as it seemed, there was something willful about that rock. As if it would move—or not move—all of its own accord. She climbed up on the saddleback of the stone, curved her legs around its cool sides. “Giddyup,” she said, almost expecting to ride the boulder like a small pony out of the range of her cabin site. The boulder didn't budge. She knew it didn't want to move anywhere. She knew also that this place could never be hers until she had moved this rock from her chosen spot. She had traveled far to find this place, so many things had come together to bring her here—those months spent in nurse training that enabled her to come west, all the small details dovetailing to bring her to this canyon. She couldn't let one rock stop her now.

Matt said she'd been lucky to get the building materials, thought it miraculous the way they'd come available the day after she filed her claim. The sixty-five dollars needed was exactly what she had left after paying the filing fees. She suspected it was destiny at work—though she hated to think the death of the Henleys' child and their sudden departure had come about in order to present her with the odd assortment of materials she needed.

Can-Tree Springs in Rattlesnake Canyon had been the last of the sites Matt had taken her to see, and even then he seemed reluctant. Not even he had thought a woman would be interested in homesteading such an isolated claim so many miles away from Juniper Valley—or he didn't want her to be. But the place did have water, Matt admitted. Ruth hadn't known herself just what she was looking for, but she knew the minute she found it.

They had followed an old mining road that wound around the base of Rocky Mountain and into the long wash that led up Rattlesnake Canyon, Matt's Model A bucking the rough road all the way up. In the first hour they surprised three deer and stopped to kill a rattler. Hawks and buzzards circled overhead. When they started out, Ruth had a qualm or two about the isolation, but the farther they drove the more at home she felt. The very wildness of the canyon excited her.

Some four miles up, the road cut through a long thicket of willows, and a small stream rose aboveground on one side. A few minutes later they arrived at a stone house tucked back on a flattened knoll. Goats galloped up and down the mountain, poked heads out from behind willows in the wash. "The Swedes' place," Matt said as he stopped in the road and set the hand brake. They would be her closest neighbors if she took the homestead, Matt told her, a mere four miles down canyon from her. The "Swedes" turned out to be John Olsen, his wife, Kate, and several men who slept in tents beside the stone house and hacked out a living mining onyx up the North Fork.

Olsen strode down from the knoll to greet them, large and muscular, wearing a silver badge on each of his suspenders: one badge read "Fire Marshal," the other, "Fish and Game Warden." Then Kate, who must have weighed nearly three hundred pounds, lumbered out the door, her round face beaming as she shouted, "Velcome, Velcome." Ruth didn't know who was the more impressive.

Kate took Ruth out to see her new garden. In the dark rich soil around the willows, Kate said vegetables grew several times normal size, which seemed appropriate for the woman. She insisted they stay for "someting Svedish," which turned out to be a delicious pastry baked on her woodstove and served with what Kate called "cowboy coffee." Ruth felt dubious about the coffee, grounds poured into boiling water, simmered briefly, then pulled off the fire to settle. She forced herself to taste what had come to look like chocolate mud. That one taste had convinced her, and not a day had gone by since that Ruth hadn't brewed some for herself.

Over coffee, John Olsen had given Matt directions. About two miles up, he said, the canyon split at the base of Rocky Mountain. The fork to the right went up past the old Rose Mine and ended at Onyx Peak. The left went to Can-Tree Springs by way of an old cattle trail that had only recently become a rut road. The very names of places seemed to give character to this canyon, and it took considerable effort on Ruth's part not to run for the car as soon as she'd taken the last swallow from her cup. She burned to see what lay ahead.

The Olsens assumed that Matt and Ruth were a couple, having seen Ruth before behind the counter at Matt's store. When Ruth explained that she had only been helping out and nursing Matt's tubercular wife, now recovered, and that she would be homesteading alone—if she decided on the place—the Olsens disapproved. "Ya, not good for woman without man. Too far. Find other place, Rute," John told her. It was the same old story, though Ruth liked the Olsens well enough to forgive them.

Once Ruth saw Can-Tree Springs, nobody else's opinion mattered anyway. She knew at once that it was a match. Standing under the pinyons, she had looked across the wash, where three huge cottonwood trees huddled above the spring, the wind flickering sunlight through their leaves. Already an early showing of purple monkey flower and desert gold carpeted the mountainsides and banks above the wash. The scene reminded her of a poem she'd read at Sarah Higgins, about a poet who once saw a crowd of daffodils and who ever after, back at his dwelling in the city, would close his eyes and remember them. But Ruth knew she would never be content somewhere else remembering this place. She intended to stay right here and live her life with these pinyons and wildflowers. "Glory Springs," she had said in a hushed voice to Matt, not wanting to break the spell. "I'll name it Glory Springs." It deserved better than to be named after tin cans.

And she had done it. Renamed it and claimed it. Now she had work to do. Ruth slid down from the rock and began storing food supplies and large pots under the writing table in the tent. She arranged the cooking utensils in wooden crates stacked as

shelves by the fire ring. Then she climbed the pinyons after the remaining cans, which took up more of the afternoon than she had imagined. The other pines were harder to scale, the cans more difficult to reach. Some she had to bat off with a thick stick, leaving the baling wire dangling. When she dropped down from the last branch, Ruth was as covered with pitch as some of the cans she'd removed. Bark had scraped her arms in several places. She lifted the lid of the water cooler and dipped out a ladle of water, looking back at the stack of lumber and building materials. Someday soon she would have to make sense of them. Meanwhile, she felt more like the yellow butterfly that fluttered up over her two paneless window frames, then dipped down to land on a stalk of apricot globemallow.

Ruth continued on to the high bank of the wash, where bluebells grew knee deep. A cottontail rabbit sat in absolute stillness in a clearing near the spring. Beside her, lupine stalks reached nearly to her shoulder, the blossoms busy with honeybees who seemed to be enjoying the fragrance as much as she was. The lupines reminded Ruth of Texas bluebonnets, except these were lavender and somehow more elegant. And they were hers. How far this place felt from her life in El Paso, from the feud between her mother and aunt that Ruth thought she would never escape. Certainly far from that ridiculous finishing school her late father's family had exiled her to. It was a finishing school, all right—meant to finish off her spirit. But here she was shed of all that.

The sun was about an hour from the horizon. She still had time to get her bedding spread on the cot inside the tent, to revive the campfire and heat the goat stew Kate had sent up for supper. For a moment more Ruth stood basking in her new freedom, then brought her mind back—a person couldn't afford to let it wander for long out in the wild. She picked up the enamel bucket and walked down the path to the spring; she would need more water for the cowboy coffee her taste buds were craving.

Ruth had not counted on the nights being so dark and wild, so full of strange sounds that made the canvas walls around her seem flimsy. For a long while that first night, she tossed on her

cot and listened to crickets and coyotes. She tried not to think of Matt—he was someone else's husband—but when she closed her eyes she would remember the way he had of looking up at her from across the room as they sat reading by lamplight long after May had gone to sleep. Yet she doubted Matt would ever act on what had passed unspoken between them; he seemed far above any other man she had known, so gentle and caring with a wife who was infirm. It might be shameful to think it, but Ruth thought he deserved more from a wife. And Matt was certainly mountains above that fool Karl in El Paso. She had been blinded by curly hair and a motorcycle. If it hadn't been for Cally, Ruth would have been undone that time. Her nurse training hadn't given her any help in that regard, and for once she was grateful for her mother's strange skill with herbs.

Tossing in the wake of memory and the turmoil of strange surroundings, Ruth wondered if she would ever sleep again. After some time, she got back up and lit a candle.

She sat at the tiny wooden table and opened the journal she'd thought herself too tired to write in earlier. Though the white canvas did its best to reflect the glow of the flame, the light was still so dim she couldn't be sure ink actually flowed from the pen, so she wrote on faith. She had felt alone her whole life, she wrote, but always with people around her. This was the first time she had ever been as alone outside as she was inside. It felt right. She dipped her pen and went on to recount the events of her first day, trying to find words for the beauty of the place and her feelings for it.

A scream, eerily high-pitched and not quite human, cut through the quiet tent. Ruth jerked to her feet. The sound was like nothing she had ever heard. Then she remembered what the Olsens told her about the night cries of mountain lions. She considered the rifle leaning next to the table, but put down the pen and picked up two pots from a box. Unlatching the flap of the tent, Ruth stood by the doorway and banged the pots together. When the mountain quieted, she went in and tied up the canvas flap as tightly as she could. She lit a second candle, though she only had four to last the week.

Ruth resumed her pen and journal, but sat without writing a word, watching the wavering shadows cast by candlelight. A tiny insect smaller than a ladybug landed on the blank page and began moving smoothly across the white space. She studied the attractive black-and-white patterns etched on its shell as if they were letters she had yet to learn. When it flew off, she put down the pen and closed her journal.

Unknotting the straps, Ruth stepped outside the tent door. She forced herself to remain in the alien darkness, refusing to entertain the images leaping up from her imagination, the cougars and bears crouched behind black patches of scrub oak and juniper. Instead, she looked up at the ink sky with its stars close enough to touch. She imagined the light dripping down on her like rain, bathing her and washing away her fear until she became part of the mystery she felt around her. How then could she be afraid?

For the next three days Ruth cleared stubborn, thorny shrubs from the ground that was to be her cabin floor. The days were long and hard. She would set to work early, after a breakfast of oatmeal and coffee, not quitting until the long shadows of late afternoon stretched out across the canyon. Sometimes it took hours to remove one bush, especially the cat's-claw, whose barbed branches fought her inch by inch and whose roots went so deep they seemed attached to the center of the earth. Cholla cacti were even more dangerous; the spiny sections reached out to embed themselves in her clothing and boots when she came near, each spine carrying stinging venom in its tip. It was no wonder the plant was referred to as jumping cactus. Ruth was grateful that only two small cholla occupied her ground and that

their roots were shallow compared to those of the cat's-claw. Before long, her sun-darkened arms bore deep scratches as proof of her victories.

She began to notice, as she dug around shrubs to loosen their roots, that what she sometimes assumed were pieces of flat rock were not stone at all, but shards of broken pottery, most of them crude and earthy-red, a bit like the unpainted terra-cotta she'd seen in border shops in El Paso. Many had been blackened by fire. A few, and these intrigued her, had indications of stripes or swirls. She became adept at spotting the unnatural shape of these objects and, whenever she came across one in her digging, would brush off the dirt packed around it and place it in a tin on the flat rock that served as a secondary table by the campfire.

It was midmorning on the fourth day when Ruth felt ready to tackle the boulder. She pulled out a plank from her building supplies to give her leverage, thinking if she could just nudge the rock's rounded bottom and make it roll over by the pinyons where the ground began its downward slope, it would be out of her way. After scraping away enough loose topsoil so she could jam the end of the board under the edge of the rock, Ruth walked around to the other end and lifted the plank. She found she couldn't raise the board above her waist, so she got to her knees and put her back and shoulder underneath, straining upward until she thought her leg bones would crumble. She rested and lifted again. And again. Time after time, Ruth repeated the process. With each lift, either the board or her flesh gave more than the stone. After dozens of tries, her only achievement was to emboss red welts on her shoulders.

Her next idea was to rest the middle of the plank on a smaller rock carried over from the campfire, then to jump up and down on the raised end. About the fourth try, Ruth thought she had it, thought she felt the boulder budge. She jumped once more as high as she could and came down hard. The plank snapped in two. After several jumps so did the second board she used. The next plank she chose carefully for strength and resilience and, indeed, it took her nearly a dozen jumps before it, too, snapped. The stone stood its ground.

Leaning the shovel against the recalcitrant rock, Ruth eased her rear onto the stone's curved surface, ignoring the muscles that protested each movement. She ran a dry tongue over her cracked lips and thought about walking the few yards to the water bucket but could not bring herself to take even the first step. She pushed back her hair and undid the top button of her blouse, fanning air into the sweat that poured between her breasts. Afternoon sun burnt fiercely through the cotton of her shirt, though it was barely April. Ruth swiped at tears welling against her will. She wasn't going to give in to them. Bodysore, every cell cried out to admit defeat, to give in to the hard cold creature, and turn her house around. But to be humbled by a mere stone was more than her spirit could bear. She'd overcome bigger obstacles just to get out of Texas. Besides, such capitulation was just what Cally and her aunt Myrtle would expect to happen. That Ruth would come crawling back someday was the first thing she could remember the two of them ever agreeing on.

Ruth lurched to her feet and staggered to the tin water cooler beside the pinyon. Dropping the ladle into the cool liquid, she gulped down two full dippers, then dipped again and poured the water over her forehead, letting it drip down inside her shirt. She stood assessing the pile of building materials that had once seemed such a blessing. The mystery of how to turn such things into a place to live overwhelmed her. The sheer labor of it. Ruth shook her head in wonderment. How had she ever expected to construct a house when she couldn't even manage to clear the land to put it on? Yet inexperience had never stopped her in the past—else she would never have come west in the first place, never hitched rides back to El Paso from Sarah Higgins. And what a stir that caused. The thought still amused her.

Ruth dropped the ladle back into the cooler. No use beating herself against that rock anymore today. The sun was already about halfway to the horizon. Tomorrow, once she dug out the rest of the cat's-claw root, she'd find some way to move the boulder. After the way Matt had laughed, she had to. Too tired to walk as far as the tent for a pillow, Ruth sank down into the

shade of the pinyon. She could not remember a bed more welcoming than the simple ground at that moment. She closed her eyes and relished the soft afternoon breeze brushing the hairs on her arms.

The smell of smoke startled her awake. The sun was down and its light nearly faded. Ruth jerked to her elbows at the sight of flames leaping above her campfire. Confusion paralyzed her. Was she dreaming? That fire had been dead out since morning; she was sure of it. Another smell penetrated, coffee and something very like flour baking. Then she saw the figure silhouetted against the tent—where her rifle was stashed, she realized, lunging to her feet.

“Sorry to scare you,” the Indian said. “I thought about waking you, but didn’t have the heart.” He turned and walked toward the campfire. “I knew the smells would wake you sooner or later. Coffee?”

Ruth tried to clear what felt like drips of pine pitch from her head. She hurried to her tent door. The rifle lay in plain sight on her cot. She promised silently that she would never allow herself to be so unprotected again. What if . . . she shuddered to think. He’d had plenty of opportunity. He must not have meant her harm.

Jim held out a steaming cup as she came up to the fire. “You must like to surprise people,” she said. “I keep thinking I’m alone in the canyon. That’s why I chose this place. But what is it I smell?”

Squatting on the other side of the campfire, Jim used a stick in the handle to lift the lid from Ruth’s cast-iron Dutch oven. The glow of coals seeped out from around the edges of the pot. Inside, the bottom was covered with lightly browned biscuits. The smell made her weak in the knees; she’d had nothing since oatmeal at breakfast.

“We finished the swedging early. Kate sent you up some cheese. She likes to feed people. There,” he said, “on the rock beside you. Biscuits go good with it.”

Not knowing what to say or feel—whether to be mad at the intrusion, impressed by the man’s culinary skills, or just plain

grateful for the food—Ruth unwrapped the bundle. The cheese was curdy and white with a pungent aroma. “Goat,” Jim said. “Nothing better.”

She gave him no argument, and indeed Ruth would never forget the taste of those hot biscuits smeared with goat cheese and washed down with fresh cowboy coffee. She didn’t miss in the least the Hereford corned beef and beans she’d planned.

Sitting on the ground in front of the fire, they ate without speaking, while stars seeped out and the cricket chorus deepened. A lemon slice of moon accentuated the night sky. When the biscuits were gone, Ruth got to her feet and moved around the campfire, tipping the pot with the stick to fill her coffee cup. “Thanks,” she said. “Those were great biscuits.”

Jim leaned over to hold his cup under the spout, his dark hair falling across his bare arm like an extension of night. “You looked hungry enough to eat rocks if I’d warmed them up,” he said, looking over past the tent into the dark. “You’ve made progress around here.”

“Some.” Ruth settled the coffeepot back on the rocks and removed the stick from the handle. “What’s this swedging you do?”

“It breaks loose the onyx deposits. I climb cliffs and hammer pegs into the cracks—sometimes I drill a little to get them in. Then soak the wood so it swells up and breaks the rock apart.”

It sounded like a tall tale to Ruth, this breaking of rock with wood and water, hardly possible—yet she felt a surge of something like hope.

As if he read her mind, Jim said, “It wouldn’t work with your hunk of granite, though. Not the same. Too hard. And you need flaw lines.”

“So that’s what that thing out there is, then, granite?” she said, looking into the dark where she could feel it looming, mocking her. Set in its ways.

Jim nodded. Though she could see only his outline against the fire, she sensed a suppressed smile. “That’s what it’s made of anyway,” he said.

Granite rock-flesh, Ruth thought, lying back to look at the

stars, her head pillowed on her hands. The man was educated. She wondered where he'd gone to school to speak so properly, why he'd come back home to hammer pegs into rocks and walk miles up this rugged canyon to bring a strange woman cheese. Someday she might ask him. It seemed a parallel to the one facing her overhead.

Her appetite satisfied, drowsiness came over her, modified somewhat by the effects of the earlier water and the coffee. Her usual practice—until she decided where to dig an outhouse—was to wander out and find a spot a few yards away from her campsite. But she didn't usually have to hide herself from anyone. She became aware, too, of how unwashed she was—only a couple of splash baths in four days. Already, she fit right in with the customs of other canyon inhabitants, could probably give John Olsen competition. She was grateful the campfire smells were so strong around her.

Beside her, Jim stretched his arms upward, then got to his feet. "Miles to go," he said.

"Will you show me sometime how to cook biscuits like that?" Ruth gathered enough energy to force her sore muscles back to a sit.

"Nothing to it. Just coals in a hole beside the fire. Biscuit dough in a greased pot. Coals on top. But keep your nose on it. Smell will tell you when to check." He began walking away from the campfire.

"How can you see where you're going? It's four miles."

Jim stopped and turned back toward her. "I'm an Indian, remember? We can see in the dark."

"What about cougars and bears? They eat Indians, too, I've heard." She wondered whether to offer him a candle to carry.

"I always carry a tiny bow and arrow," he said. "Right here in my knapsack behind this." He pulled out a carbide miner's lamp. Poking a thin twig into the campfire, Jim lit the lamp, pointing it first at her face, then onto the ground in front of him. For a few seconds she could hear his retreating footsteps soft in the wash sand, finally evaporating into cricket song.

"Smart-aleck Indian," Ruth said, rising to pee. Afterward, she

shoveled dirt over what was left of the coals and stumbled into the tent. Tomorrow she would treat herself to a bath, and though it would only be a sit bath in a #8 corrugated tin, she fell asleep imagining herself lying back in a full-sized porcelain tub, submerged to her neck in hot bubbly water.

In the morning, while she prepared oatmeal and coffee, Ruth averted her eyes from the rock, banishing even its image from her mind. She would not allow it to weigh on her. When her dishes had been set to dry in the sun, she went over to appraise the situation, circling the stone in hope of inspiration, of some notion occurring to make its removal possible. Bending to inspect the stone's shape for clues, she ran her palm over a rough ridge that traveled along the sorrel side down to the circular bottom. "You think this is your spot, don't you?" Ruth said to the rock. "But it's mine now." She waited quietly, as if the stone would answer her. "Look," she explained, "I know you've been here a long time. Maybe you like this place. But it's my turn. I live here now." Ruth pushed against the side of the rock. "Move over and make room for me."

Ruth stood, shaking her head. She couldn't help smiling at how silly she must look, talking to a rock. As a matter of fact, she felt pretty silly and was glad Matt wasn't here to witness it. Brother! Would he ever laugh about this one: when she didn't have the strength of a man to move the boulder, she acted like a woman and tried to persuade it to move. "Never mind," she said to him out loud. "So you and John together couldn't move it, huh? Well, just you wait, Matt Baxter."

Despite her resolve, Ruth hadn't come up with a plan to make good her promise. She didn't want to damage any more planks either, so she set to work clearing brush until an idea could come to her. She started on the thick knot of cat's-claw root that persisted above the surface, rising into the area planned for her concrete foundation. Yesterday she'd managed to hack away most of the bush with her shovel, but the blade would not penetrate much beneath the loose layer of topsoil. Now she jammed her boot down on the rim of the shovel blade, cutting an inch at a time into the packed subsoil. Metal sparked in protest against

buried chunks of mineral. Again and again, Ruth forced the blade against the ground, removing a mere tipful at a time. Gradually, she made a shallow recess around the fibrous knot. When the ground became completely impossible, Ruth chopped at the root with the shovel, slightly below the surface of the soil. Just before severing it, she stopped and walked to the water cooler.

Ruth drank, surveying the root stump. She didn't trust it, wasn't at all sure the remnant wouldn't someday raise its snake-like head again and break through the concrete she intended to cover it with. She might just end up with a cat's-claw bush in the middle of her living space. As she drained the last of the water from the ladle, an idea struck her as soundly as her shovel had hit the small stones. Of course.

A bucket of water hauled from the spring filled the recess. Ruth waited while the thirsty ground drank in the liquid. After she had emptied yet another bucket and let it soak in, Ruth picked up the shovel. With a bit of coaxing from her foot, the blade slid nicely into the softened soil. She couldn't help but feel smug as she loosened the earth around the root, then reached in and plucked it out as easily as a carrot from a garden. With only the pinyons audience to her triumph, Ruth flung the rope of root toward the wash, where it looped over a silver sage and hung defeated. Now she was ready for the rock.

Digging through the pile of building materials, Ruth found two coils of rope. One rope felt soft and flexible, the other thick and hard to bend. She chose the flexible rope. As she had hoped, it fit nicely into the grooves of the ridge across the rock. She looped twice for strength, and secured it around her waist. If she could just get the rock tipped on its belly—even a smidgeon—that would be a start. Then she could rock the boulder back and forth, inch by inch, hour by hour over toward the pinyons. She merely needed to move it a few feet. It didn't matter how long it took; she had the time. The trick was to get the momentum started.

Ruth braced herself and walked forward until the rope pulled tight. She took another step and pulled, straining her weight

forward while the rope cut deeply into her waist. She stepped back and started over, tugging as the rope carved into her belly and cut back her breath. Still the stone stayed immobile. She loosened the knot and rolled the rope down over her hips, then forced her body to advance until the rope between herself and the boulder stretched taut as the string on a guitar. She leaned her body into space, only her tie to the rock keeping her from pitching forward. Relaxing the tension on the rope, she tightened it again and began rocking, front and back, back and front, again and again, hoping to entice mobility from the stone.

She might as well have been asking the mountain to move. After numerous pulls that did more to dislocate her hips than to move the boulder, Ruth untied herself and sat cross-legged under the pinyon. She just didn't have the strength to drag the rock forward. If only rocks had roots, like the cat's-claw, she could loosen it with water. But there was no use imagining such things, she chided herself; even her silliness in talking to the rock was more useful than that—for all the good it had done her. Yet the image of the root hung over the sage stayed with her, and when she rose to get a drink of water, the notion came to enlist the help of the pinyon.

Looping the second coil of rope around the tree, Ruth wrapped one end around her waist. It took several tries to knot the thick strands tight enough to hold. Then she retied herself also to the softer rope wound around the rock and walked toward the pine. When the rope between herself and the rock became tense, Ruth picked up the end of the rope she had winched around the tree, winding the strand around her wrist. She began to pull herself—and she hoped the rock—toward the pinyon. Hand over hand, she fought for each frustration of an inch, straining her body closer to the pinyon.

With the pinyon's strength, Ruth was certain the rock would roll and, with ropes pulling her waist in both directions, she did feel something begin to budge ever so slightly. Motivated, she pulled even harder, every muscle straining, winding the rope over her wrist until it twisted her hand halfway back around—painful, almost beyond standing. But this time she was sure

something was beginning to give. Triumph rippled through her, swelled, then surged, as she felt a great release on the rope and pictured the boulder rolling over with her motion.

Ruth found herself propelled toward the tree, her legs moving rapidly to keep her body from smacking the ground. She felt the rope whip from her waist as she ran headlong for the tree. Only the arms she held out in front of her kept her from smashing face first into the rough bark of the trunk.

When she recovered, Ruth looked back at the rock. The rope was no longer attached; its unknotted end lay halfway to the tree. The stone appeared precisely as before. So sure Ruth had been of its movement that she dropped to her knees and inspected the dirt close to the rock's belly for tracks, expecting some kind of indication that it had actually moved as she pulled. She saw none. Still, that didn't stop her from several times repeating the winching process—after she had soaked the rope and tied tight triple knots—before giving up for the day, bruised, but refusing to be daunted.

Exhausted as she was, Ruth forced herself toward the spring with the bucket. Once she'd replenished the water cooler and filled the coffeepot, she took off her blouse and let air pour over her sweaty body. She made four more trips to halfway fill the tin tub, then another bucket to heat on the campfire and warm her bath above the chill temperature of her spring. While the water heated, she sliced up a can of corned beef and opened a can of beans, managing to eat half of each cold from the can. The sun was just sliding behind the far ridge of Rocky Mountain as Ruth stepped into the tepid tub, wincing as water insulted the scratches on her calves, then her thighs when she bent her knees and sat. Despite the stinging when she soaped, the bath revived her. Ruth was surprised at how much of what she'd assumed was dirt did not wash off. Her olive skin had been considerably darkened by sun. She allowed her dry skin to soak up the cooling fluid until she heard the sizzle from her coffeepot that told her the water was readying to boil. When she stood to leave the tub, the water was a murky gray-black.

Ruth climbed onto the rock and dried herself with the towel

she'd set there. She had placed the tub beside the troublesome boulder for the practical purpose of keeping her wet feet and body from the sand. But she couldn't help enjoying the fact that she sat on top of the rock. She felt safe and in charge, using it to her own ends. That fact seemed to shift their relationship. Once her feet were dried, Ruth lifted the tub by its handle and dumped the water onto the ground beside the rock. Naked in the balmy twilight, she walked toward the campfire to prepare the rest of her evening meal.

The next morning, Ruth was dragged out of dreams by the harsh scolds of jays—as if they had peered into her sleeping activities. She shut her eyes and tried to return to the soft lips and insistent arms of the faceless man who had been about to enter her. But he had evaporated and taken everything with him but her longing. Left unrequited with such a burning, Ruth put her hand to herself. She knew she should not, but could not stop, the faces and bodies of men raging through her like a river on rampage: Karl, Matt, Ramon—her first, even the Indian, all swirling into one huge swell that cast her finally onto a shore of shame and release.

Such feelings were not normal for a woman, she knew. At Aunt Myrtle's teas, Ruth had heard whispers about wives "doing their duty," listened to talk of their boredom while the men "went about their business." So what were these feelings in her? It frightened her that in such moments she did not even attach her passion to any particular man. She had been told men felt such things. Was she more like a man in this way? But what man would long after other men? Some things might better remain unexamined.

The mountaintops were barely flushed with dawn when Ruth stepped from her tent. The sight of the pink ridges, the sound of an oriole singing in the morning, weakened her resolve to get an early start on the rock, and when she walked into the wash and found a deer with its fawn drinking at the spring, that resolve evaporated completely, the scene filling her with an unexplained joy. On a whim, she packed a knapsack with a hunk of the canned meat and the last of the half-burned biscuits she had made the night before—next time she would do better—and

spent the first tender hours of the day exploring the lower ridges of Rocky Mountain. As she looked down on the bright green cottonwoods and cluster of pinyons that marked her spot so clearly, she reminded herself that this was the freedom she had come here to find. She resolved that once she managed to get her cabin built, she would spend as much time as she wanted meandering the landscape. Today, she would content herself with merely the early hours, examining the stands of bluebells and splashes of apricot mallow as the sun's low heat wafted a potpourri of fragrances. She hoped to come upon the Indian inscriptions in her wanderings; the nature of such a thing intrigued her. Several times she thought she spotted odd markings on boulders. Each time, closer inspection found the marks to be merely natural marbling of colors. Like most mysteries, the writing was not to be easily discovered.

Though hungry as she descended the narrow draw that led down into the wash, Ruth wanted first to quench her thirst in cool spring water. A startled cottontail perched at the basin took off through the tall grass. She cupped her hands and drank, cupped again and poured cool water over her face and neck. The thick grass invited and she leaned back against the shady bank beside the spring. As she sank into the soft, damp sediment, from somewhere in the loamy dirt behind her back came the muffled but unmistakable sound of a rattler.

In an explosion of motion, Ruth leapt upward, landing several feet from the basin, unsure whether the current that knifed up her spine was from fear or a rattler's strike. Hers was physical terror of the most basic kind, registering in her body before it ever reached her brain. That terrible buzzing continued while she felt beneath the back of her shirt, fingers searching for any trace of wound. And though her knees remained spongy as spring grass and her brain rang with anxiety, she could find no openings or marring of her skin.

Inspecting the noisy bank, Ruth at first saw nothing more than several layers of gray clay formation. Then she discerned a small hollowed opening between the roots; inside, a segmented tail whirled. The reptile hugged into the clay bank appeared

quite small—but she'd heard that even baby rattlers were deadly. Ruth looked around carefully for siblings, her eyes combing the innocent grass for danger.

She retrieved the .22 from her tent and backtracked to the spring. Aiming the rifle carefully, Ruth shot several times into the opening. The rattler quieted, as did her heartbeat. She felt instead a peculiar swelling in her chest, and with it flowed through her a certainty that nothing could stop her. She could take care of herself—even here in this wild place. If anything got in her way, she would remove it—even if she had to kill to do so. With disdain, she remembered the day May had screamed and jumped up on the porch when some harmless bull snake slithered across the desert in front of their house. Matt had come running outside to protect her. Well, Ruth wished he were here now to witness the way she had taken care of a real danger.

Not wanting to touch the snake, but not wishing it to rot above her spring, Ruth used the end of a stick to pry the mangled body from the bank, turning her head when the mutilated cord of body hung on the stick in front of her. Without looking, she flung it toward the wash.

Back at the camp she inspected the rock. Stars of sunlight reflected back from mica embedded in the stone's reddish back. A forest of green lichen covered one side. As alive and willful as the stone seemed, it was not possible to simply kill it and fling it into the wash. Granite, the Indian said, impossibly hard beneath her hand. She hadn't the strength to pull its weight, she admitted, as she squatted and waddled around to the stone's other side. Something about that rounded bottom seemed a clue for its removal. There had to be a way to roll that rock. Ruth picked up her knapsack and sat in the shade of the pinyon, continuing to watch her nemesis as she constructed a makeshift sandwich of her drying corned meat and crusty biscuits. When she finished, she leaned back against the tree and closed her eyes. She pictured the rectangle of her house turned the other way, the front door facing the rocky side of the mountain. A nice enough view, but not the view she wanted. For a moment, she considered building her house around the rock—it could be done. But to have its

presence as a constant reminder of her defeat did not sit well. And behind the image of the boulder in her house, she could hear the sound of Matt's laughter.

She conjured up instead a scene of triumph, Matt walking into her camp to find the boulder over between the pines. She would ignore the look of incredulity on his face as she offered him a cup of campfire coffee, casually, as if nothing at all were remarkable. Then, in the midst of her imagined victory, it occurred to her that this was the sixth day she had been here. Matt would arrive tomorrow. How stupid she had been to spend the morning on the mountain.

All at once, Ruth stood and strode to the stone. She positioned herself flat on her back, perpendicular to the rock, legs bent, feet pressed against the granite. She would roll this rock as surely as she had killed the snake, as surely as she had left El Paso behind her.

Ruth began straightening her legs, straining all their strength against the stone. As her legs straightened, her body slid away. She repositioned herself, and tried again. And again, only her torso moved. After two more attempts, she rose and retrieved the rope, looping it around the pinyon. To keep her body in place, she lay down on the side of the rock opposite the tree and wound the rope ends tight around her wrists.

Keeping the rope stretched between herself and the pinyon, Ruth slowly forced her legs to straighten. As she did, her back arched upward until only her shoulders and head touched the ground, then simply her head. She curled and pushed again, with the same result.

"Damn. Damn. Damn." Ruth lay back and kicked the rock until her soles hurt. Then she sat up, took off her boots, and rubbed her feet, still cursing and holding back all but a few tears, which she quickly wiped away. "You're going to move, damn you," she informed the hunk of granite in front of her. "I don't know just how yet, but you're going to move. Even if I have to take a hammer and remove you from this place chip by chip."

Her early start the next morning did Ruth little good, except for giving her time to concoct stories for Matt about how she

would soon have the rock out of the way, running through imagined scenarios as she worked. She began with the ropes again, but after very few tries went back to using planks for leverage, selecting only the most sturdy boards. She stopped often to listen, thinking she heard the sound of a motor. Each time a plank broke, she dropped it over the edge of the wash, so the evidence of her wasted efforts would be well out of sight when Matt arrived. By late afternoon, she was both relieved and disappointed when he had not showed. Surprised, though. She had counted on his word that he'd be back in a week. Her food was running low. At least she had a day or two of coffee left, maybe more. When she sat down with her next-to-last can of pork and beans for supper, Ruth felt a strange tightness in her throat that made it hard to swallow her food. Matt knew she would need supplies. She had thought he'd be eager to see her.

Gradually, the mixture of coffee and campfire smoke began to lull her. She was making too much of it, she decided. He must be tied up somehow—maybe at his store, maybe May's condition had worsened again. Surely he would be here tomorrow. She should be glad she still had time to find a way to move the rock before he arrived. Getting to her feet, she used most of the lard to put together a fairly decent pan of biscuits, of which she used half to make bean sandwiches and saved the rest. For a long time she sipped coffee and listened to the ringing night while the waxing half-moon rose over the ridge beside her. Coyotes began to yip and howl. They sounded nearby, probably across the wash. For a moment she considered going for the rifle positioned against the stone. Instead, she stood, lifted her chin, and joined in the cacophony.

Ruth started on the rock soon after dawn. It had occurred to her sometime during the night that the broken pieces of plank might make stronger levers than the full-sized boards, since they were shorter and harder to break, so the first thing she did was retrieve the planks least damaged from the wash and even up their ends with a saw. Then, with her shovel, Ruth scraped more dirt from under the edge of the stone so the sheared end of the wood fit snugly under its bottom.

She searched the wash, where flash floods had piled countless rocks of various shapes and sizes, seeking the perfect fulcrum—not wanting a rock so small it wouldn’t give enough movement, but neither a large one that would leave the free end of the board pointing straight for the sky, so she couldn’t get her boot down to apply sufficient weight. This day’s effort, she knew, was her last chance. She had run out of ideas to compensate for her lack of muscular strength. But her resolve was strong.

Balancing both feet on the intact end of the short board, Ruth jumped up and down, bouncing until the moving board flung her off. She climbed back on and resumed the springing motion. Several times she repeated the action, the only result being that the rock gradually smoothed and sanded down the end of the plank placed under it.

The climbing sun beat down through her shirt. After a quick drink to wet her dry mouth, Ruth decided the rock would only roll if more force were applied—and quickly. After fitting another short plank under the boulder, Ruth climbed the saddleback of the rock itself and jumped onto the lever. The first time, she sprang forward from the board and had to run to stay up. Still, the method was promising—and the only idea she had left. She tried again. And again. And again. Each time she became more adept at staying on the plank when she landed. When the board at last began to splinter, she replaced it with the one sturdy piece she had left, then leapt on it from the rock with a vengeance.

Five times more Ruth climbed the boulder and jumped onto the board. Each time, her weight hit the wood without affecting the stone. When she finally squatted to check the end of the plank, she found it too worn to be of any use. The sun now directly overhead, she stared down into the shadow pooled beneath her knees, then at the boulder, which appeared to have no shadow at all but remained solid and immovable in its entirety.

“Damn you goddamned piece of granite,” Ruth shouted, pushing at the rock. She stood and kicked at it with the sole of her boot, first one foot, then the other. “You goddamned thing, you.” She wouldn’t give in to the burning behind her eyes, she just wouldn’t.

Ruth stomped to the tin water cooler and gulped down two full dippers of water. Lifting a third to her lips, she found her throat so constricted she couldn't swallow. All she wanted to do was smash the rock to smithereens. In a fit of rage she flung the dipper at the boulder, the ladle clanging against the surface, to spill her drink onto the dry ground.

For a moment Ruth stood impotent. What a useless act—the waste of precious water she had to haul from clear across the wash. She stared at the small splotch of dark on the dirt, feeling tears again about to overpower her. She imagined her tears pouring out over the ground like the water from her tub, flowing in a river toward the rock, carrying the massive mineral away. The thought of soft wet earth left behind the tear river made her smile. It would be earth easily dug.

Ruth began hauling water buckets from the spring, dumping them onto the ground beside the boulder. She chose the spot where she had emptied her tub days before, hoping some of that dampness had been retained beneath the harsh soil. After the first few trips across the wash, Ruth removed her shirt and worked bare-chested as she had seen men do down on the desert. After all, it seemed certain by now that Matt wasn't coming—not that she cared much anymore. Bucket after bucket she poured onto packed earth that drank it in as quickly as she could drain her container, wetting, then digging into layer after layer of softened soil. When her back and breasts began to burn, she wet her shirt and kept it on during the long hours it took to loosen, then dig down into what had been hard ground. Her digging also turned up a number of the odd pottery shards. Intent as she was on her project, Ruth did her best to toss as many of these as she could toward the rock by the campfire. About the time the hole beside the boulder was waist high, her shovel brought up an odd, triangular-shaped object. Not a shard, but also not natural. She spat on it, swiped it across her pantleg, and examined it. A small thrill ran through her. An arrowhead. She stuck it in her pants pocket and persevered in her shoveling, dousing and digging, until the hole grew a few inches deeper. The sun had dropped behind the mountain and spread a thick

twilight across the canyon when she climbed out of the pit she had created.

Standing with her legs apart at the edge of the hole, Ruth reached in with her shovel and chipped at the ledge of dirt that kept the boulder from rolling into the depression. She moved to the other side and repeated the action until the rock hung over the edge of the hole more than a foot. Ruth counted on the same weight that had made the boulder immovable to work in her favor now. Once she had placed another long plank from her pile under the far side of the stone, she again pried the rock toward the opening, lifting the end on her back. This time she felt definite movement. But not enough to push it in.

Straining to see in the dim light, Ruth stretched as far as she could without tumbling into the cavity and hacked away a few inches more of the dirt with her shovel, then walked back around. To maximize leverage, she shoved a rock under the middle of the plank as fulcrum again and went to the raised end. She closed her eyes, pictured the stone in the grave she had dug for it, then jumped as hard as she could onto the end. The plank snapped, flinging her onto the ground just as the boulder rolled over the edge and thudded into its final resting place.

For the briefest of moments, Ruth felt a twinge of sympathy for the rock she had unseated. Then she struggled to her feet, shouting in triumph. She peered down at the fallen boulder. Strange as it seemed, she could still imagine it escaping from her trap. Exhausted or not, she wasn't taking any chances. Piling wood high on her campfire, she struck a match to it, then by firelight, threw shovelful of dirt into the space around and over the boulder. Afterward, she spread the extra dirt around her site. Finally, it was done; she had won. The boulder was out of her way, buried forever under what would be the foundation of her cabin.

With due ceremony, Ruth set the unusable pieces of plank on the campfire, along with a couple of pine logs. She peeled off her sweaty pants and shirt and, wearing nothing but boots, danced in her victory, cackling and hooting in the flickering red firelight as she stamped down the dirt to pack it. This was her night to

send wild screams echoing off the mountainsides. She almost expected to hear creatures out in the dark bang pans to shut her up.

But no one was around to shut her up. She could dance and shout naked around her fire if she felt like it. And she felt like it. This was the freedom she had dreamed of. No one came to constrain her. Not her aunt with admonitions of impropriety, not her mother with dark and bitter eyes. No one at all. Ruth had conquered the boulder. Whatever else life chose to hand her, she was ready.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning Ruth woke before the sun was up, her belly rumbling. She had finished off half of the last can of beans after she buried the stone and had just enough coffee for one more pot. She'd saved a biscuit, too, though it seemed near hard enough to break teeth on.

It was now her tenth day. Or was it the ninth day; she was no longer sure. All she knew was Matt had promised he'd be back with supplies for her in a week, and it had been longer than that. Her check would have arrived at his store days ago. She was tired of finding excuses for him—didn't care if May had had a relapse. Ruth was sick of always being on alert, several times a day mistaking wind in the pines for Matt's Model A. He hadn't even arrived to witness her triumph over the rock. She was sick

of beans, too; hungry as she was, she couldn't bring herself to eat them. One thing was sure—she wasn't going to wait around for him until she starved to death. It was time to do something on her own. Get herself something to eat and walk down to the Swedes'. Ruth picked up the rifle—she could thank Matt for that at least—and headed up the wash past the spring.

She hadn't gone far before she spotted the cottontail, pink ears pointed skyward, as it basked in new sun beside a clump of sage. Ruth took aim with the rifle, bringing the sights together in front of the rabbit's head; she gripped the trigger with her index finger. The rabbit hopped a few inches closer to the bush, then stopped, hunched back its ears. Ruth resighted. The cottontail appeared sweet and innocent, not at all menacing like the rattler she had shot. Certainly a far cry from the spit-roasted rabbit she had been served at the Paxtons' cookout. She was almost ready to drop the barrel and walk back to camp when her stomach groaned again. She thought about the half can of beans drying in the cooler, a thick skin forming around the edges. Damn you, Matt, she thought, and pulled back the trigger.

The rabbit flopped onto one side, kicking its hind legs wildly in the air as Ruth ran toward it, blood splattering onto the sand as the creature propelled itself across the clearing, emitting a fine high-pitched squeal. She pushed the rifle barrel against the rabbit's head to still it and pulled the trigger once more. The cottontail's body jerked once, then went limp.

For a moment when Ruth first took hold of the soft, warm carcass, its fur sticky with oozing blood, she was willing to resign herself to a life of pork and beans. But the deed was done. It would be wrong to waste this rabbit's death and leave it to rot in the sun as she had the snake, whose odor now hung heavy in the warming air. The problem was how to turn the creature into a meal she could actually eat—she'd not so much as plucked a chicken before, though she'd seen it done often enough. And fur, like feathers, had to come off.

At camp, with the end of the soft rope, Ruth tied the rabbit's hind feet, then looped the rope over a pine branch. Using her butcher knife, she cut the fur from around the bound feet, and

pulled, peeling off the skin like pajamas from a small child, exposing the shape of naked muscle. An ugly purple wound gaped in the right shoulder. By this time Ruth's stomach was more queasy than hungry. She had lost all desire to eat the raw and bloody meat hung in front of her by furry feet. But she couldn't just quit, though she wanted to more than ever. Taking up the knife again, Ruth slit open the balloon of belly. The sweet smell of intestines made her own stomach churn. Swallowing back her nausea, she reached in quickly and yanked out the colored coils of intestine, dropping them onto the ground, reached in again to pluck the heart and pink sponge of lungs from the chest cavity. The last thing she removed was a line of little round pellets, wrapped in a membrane tube like a row of chocolate balls.

The knife would not slice through the delicate ankle bones. She grabbed hold and snapped them, then cut through the muscle and ligaments to free the dressed carcass. Carrying the feet and guts down to the wash, Ruth buried them in a shallow grave of sand. That done, she poured water from her bucket over the rabbit and wrapped it in a wetted burlap bag. The rest of the water she used to rinse the blood splotches from her own hands and arms, thinking of the trip she would soon make to the Swedes'. Perhaps she would take them the rabbit.

Her body filthier than a few splashes of water could take care of, Ruth began hauling buckets from the spring to fill her tub, which she placed next to the spot where she had buried the rock. When her coffeepot was on the fire, Ruth stepped into the unwarmed tub, goose bumps popping out over her skin as she willed herself down into the chill water. She got on her knees and ducked her hair into the water, lathered and rinsed it before attacking the rest of her body with the fat bar of Ladies Joy, finally using a pine needle to clean the dirt from under nails so ragged they had caught on her hair as she washed it.

Yet all the while Ruth had a nagging feeling that something was amiss. Her eyes scanned the bluffs on the other side of the wash and the brush around her camp. No graceful Indian man was gliding down the cliffs or appearing out of nowhere. The .22 was near enough, propped against the tent. There had been no

boulder to lean it on—as there would be none to climb on to dry without plastering her feet with sand. Then she realized it was the rock that she missed. Somehow its absence loomed as large as its presence once had. She was just marveling over that absurdity when she heard the first hint of an engine in the distance.

Ruth sat in the gray-black water, listening for a moment before dismissing the sound as another false hope. She poured cold water over her hair from the smaller bucket she had placed beside the tub, then stood to clean-rinse the rest of her body. Still the sound persisted. She was rinsing the last of the soap from her arms when Matt's Model A appeared down by the bend. He gave three hoarse blasts of horn.

Ruth bounded from the tub to the tent, grabbing up her towel as she went. More horn blaring disrupted the canyon. She ran back out to dump the tub. By the time Matt pulled into her camp, she had a clean blouse and slacks over her undried body and stepped out of the tent to greet him, her hair still wet and anarchic, though she managed to finger-comb and fluff it as she walked.

Matt's lanky form unfolded from the car. He smiled and shook his head when she stopped in front of him. For a moment she thought he might hug her. "Ruth," he said, pulling at one earlobe as he did when he was trying to find words, "you look beautiful, like . . . well, like some kind of wild woman. So . . . untamed. I'd guess your skin is near dark as that Indian's. Honest."

Ruth reached up to straighten the collar of her blouse. "I was getting ready to walk down to the Swedes," she said, "if you hadn't come." The sound of her voice speaking in normal words and sentences after all these days surprised her, seemed to settle her back into a civility she had almost forgotten. "I'm out of food—nearly coffee too."

"Not anymore, you're not." Matt reached into the rear of the Model A. Three big boxes of groceries were jammed into the space behind the seat. He extracted a five-pound can of coffee and held it out. Ruth hugged the can to her while he picked up one of the boxes. "I got a good deal on the gun, too. You'll see,"

he said as they walked toward the campfire, where the water in the pot was splashing and hissing onto the flames. Ruth poured in the last of her coffee and pulled the pot to the edge.

Matt placed the box on the flat rock near the fire ring and looked around at the ground she had cleared. "Well, I'll be," he said. "How did you ever . . ." He walked out to the middle of the clearing. "But what did you do with it?" He stood surveying the campsite, then looked back at her. "Boulders don't just disappear," he said.

He stopped, broke into a sudden smile. "I know what happened. John must have brought his men up here to help," he said, laughing. How yellow and pointy his teeth were, sort of ratlike, she thought, so out of place in an otherwise handsome face. Funny she'd never noticed it before.

"I said I'd move that rock by myself, Matt Baxter. And that's what I did," Ruth said, facing him. "Nobody helped me."

"But it's not even here. Someone had to haul it off."

"It's buried. I buried it. Directly under where you stand."

He cocked his head to one side. "Buried it?"

"It was simple. I dug a big hole and pushed it in. Getting rid of that rock was sure easier than digging out all those cholla and cat's-claw bushes," she lied. "It didn't take strength but brains—a mule has brute strength. Seems to me any fool would have thought of it."

The half-smile seemed frozen on Matt's face. He looked quite dumbfounded. Ruth gave a quick toss of her damp hair, acutely aware of the sun on her skin, the smells of pine and lupine, of her heart pumping blood through her toughened body. It was if some power radiated up from the ground into her bare feet, bringing with it a desire to howl out loud. The invincibility that had visited her the night before roared back in full force. She threw back her head and laughed.

"My hat's off to you, Ruth," Matt finally said. "I never dreamed you would actually do it." He looked down at the loosened earth. "I still find it hard to believe." Ruth was certain he would stop to ask John Olsen on the way down, just to make sure.

She turned toward the campfire. "I'm having coffee," she said. "Want some?" Not waiting for an answer, she poured hot frothy liquid into two tin cups. Her noisy stomach reminded her she had forgotten its earlier request. "I could use some food too."

"You have plenty to choose from now. Two more boxes in the car." Matt walked over to pick up his cup from the rock. "And I brought that jug of . . . well, you know, what you said you wanted for cooking. It's good, too—from my brother's vineyard."

"Thanks," Ruth said, taking the jug from the box and pulling the cork. She brought the crock up under her nose. "It sure smells good." Matt had no trouble supplying folks with whatever they wanted, she had learned working at his store. What law there was out here looked the other way.

She threw kindling and two logs onto the coals. Cup in hand, she dropped into the camp chair beside Matt. "I thought I might fry up the rabbit I've got in the cooler first," she said casually, all her squeamishness set aside by the opportunity to further impress Matt with her homesteading skills. "Shot and skinned it just this morning." Yet when she looked over to find him regarding her intently, the expression on his face was not one of admiration, but discomfort, with a hint of caution. What kind of a woman are you, anyway, he seemed to be wondering. She supposed he would be more comfortable if she brought out her knitting, like his wife might do—except that Ruth had never owned a knitting needle, wouldn't know what to do with one. Didn't care to know.

"How's May?" she asked then; she had almost forgotten Matt had a wife.

"Holding her own," Matt said, his eyes turning back to the area Ruth had cleared, "thanks to all the care you gave her. She does get tired out easily, though. I've had to take over most of the cooking again." He looked back at Ruth. "That kind of thing," he said, nodding toward Ruth's future foundation, "would likely kill her. Didn't seem to do you any harm, though."

"It wasn't easy," Ruth said, "but not so hard either."

They sat facing each other in the shade of the pinyons. For a

few minutes Matt caught her up on happenings in Juniper Valley. After talk fell off, Matt raised his cup. "A toast. Here's to you, Ruth," he said. "The wild woman of Rattlesnake Canyon. You'd be a challenge for any man."

"I'm not sure I want to drink to that." Ruth pulled back the cup she had raised. "At least not to being a challenge. Who wants to be that?" She tried to smooth down the hair that had dried so impossibly disheveled. "There are better things for a woman to be for a man."

Matt looked at her and swallowed, yet didn't pull his eyes from hers. His face reddened slightly. "Well, then," he said, "let's drink to the wild woman."

They clanked tin cups. When they finished their coffees, Matt rose and carried over the rest of the groceries. Ruth put the rabbit to fry on the campfire. She stacked the supplies while Matt wrapped new burlap around the wire mesh of the cooler. It warmed her to glance over and see the sun in his hair, to have him fixing for her the way he always did for May, to have his eyes keep coming back to her. She wondered what it would be like if he were hers, her man and not May's. Not a husband, really—she couldn't picture herself as a wife, back under someone's control—but her man. She was ready for the arms and lips—and the rest of it. Desire for the faceless man of her dream flooded her body.

It wasn't that she'd been with many men. There had been only one before Karl—Ramon, the son of one of Aunt Myrtle's kitchen workers. It happened shortly before she had been sent to Sarah Higgins. All summer, Ruth had found herself setting her reading aside to stand at the window and watch how the muscles of the young man's back gleamed as he raked leaves from the huge lawn or pulled weeds from the flower beds. She wasn't sure he was aware of her until that day he came to the door to ask for water. His look asked for much more. Ever since she could remember, she had known the word for what was going on all around her. Those early years with Cally had been informative. Now was her chance to experience it for herself. And she wasn't disappointed. Afterward she understood that she wasn't cut out

to be like other women—in it for the man's sake, married, or being paid to supply him, then blamed for doing it, like the prostitutes that Aunt Myrtle's women's group wanted to eradicate. Ruth had as much right to that pleasure for herself as any man; Cally had taught her that much. A few weeks later, when they sent Ruth to Sarah Higgins, she wondered if they hadn't found out somehow. Why else would her late father's family suddenly offer to pay her way to an Eastern boarding school? Clearly they were all trying to save her from becoming her mother's daughter. Well, they needn't have worried; Ruth wasn't about to take that route either.

The rabbit turned out to be tasty but tough and hard to chew. Ruth was hungry enough by this time to tear the meat from the bones with her teeth, but forced herself to use a fork and knife, for Matt's sake. She gave each of them a meaty hind leg. Hers was gone in short order, before Matt's was half finished. She looked up, after being intent on extracting every last piece of flesh from the bone, to see Matt regarding her with a bemused glance.

"Don't know that I've ever had wild rabbit before," he said. "Interesting taste." He straightened up from the plate in his lap and put his silverware on top of his food.

"You don't like it?"

"Of course I do, honest, but it does take some getting used to. Same with venison. Excellent once you acquire the taste." He stood, set his tin plate on the rock beside her and began walking toward the Model A. "You haven't seen your new twenty-two yet," he said. "I'll go get it." When his back was turned, Ruth reached for the rabbit leg he had barely touched. She bit off a mouthful, then put the rest down quickly.

When Matt returned, he carried a shinier version of the rifle he had loaned her. "It looks a lot like yours," she said.

"A newer model." He sat beside her, leaned the .22 against her chair. "This and the groceries took up most of your check. Here's what's left." He held out a few dollar bills.

Ruth slipped them into her slacks pocket. "It was good of you to bring supplies, this rifle, all the way up here. You must have closed up the store to do it?"

"Today's Sunday," he said, shaking his head. He looked at her intently. "I would have closed it if I had to, though. I've missed you, Ruth. I was glad to have a reason to come see you."

"I'd been wondering if you'd changed your mind."

"I couldn't get away any sooner. Had to make a trip into San Bernardino for May's medicine and supplies for the store—I picked up the gun while I was there. Then May was feeling poorly again. I couldn't leave her alone."

"I suppose not. I was about to walk down to the Swedes' and hitch a ride to town to get what I needed."

"Don't ever think I'll let you down, Ruth. I don't want you to think that. Promise me." He reached over and took her hand.

Ruth looked away, struggled to speak through wings fluttering inside her. "Who am I to count on you?" she said. "Why should you do for me? You have a wife to look after."

"Thanks to you she's still alive. But that's not . . . You know why, Ruth." He let go of her hand and waited until she looked up at him. "You must know how I feel about you." He glanced down, then back up to catch her eyes directly. "Some things are best left unsaid . . . as long as it's understood."

"What if understanding isn't enough? What if more is required?"

"What would that be, Ruth? What would you require?"

"I don't know," she said, getting up. "But what use to talk about it?" She took hold of the rifle. "Did you bring more bullets?"

Matt rose and stood beside her, laid a hand on her shoulder. "What would you require, Ruth?"

She felt the pressure of his fingers through the cloth of her shirt, heard his breath coming deep and irregular. "Sometimes in the dead of night, while May's asleep beside me . . . I know it's wrong to tell you this. But . . ." His hand closed around her shoulder, his voice becoming a hoarse whisper. "I remember the way you look at me . . . the way you walk across the room . . . it's been so long since . . ."

The very smell of the man's sweat drew her toward him. Ruth felt herself propelled toward those pale desert-sky eyes. Only the

ground under her feet held her back. That and the sound of footsteps crunching up the sandy wash behind them.

Even before Ruth turned, she knew, so the sound of the Indian's voice did not surprise her, nor did the look of displeasure that swept over Matt's face. What did surprise her was the lift she felt at Jim's appearance, despite considerable irritation at the interruption.

"Can't see how you missed me waving you down as you drove by. I was right out there by the garden," he said to Matt. "Kate wanted to send Ruth these early squash and tomatoes. Some goat jerky too. We expected you to stop. It's customary. Check in next time you come up." Jim held a lumpy flour sack out toward Ruth. "I went ahead and brought them up myself. That way I can still catch a ride back down when you go." He turned to inspect the spot where the boulder once sat. "You must have been persuasive," he said, glancing back at Ruth.

"You might say that. There's some rabbit left in the pan, Jim," Ruth told him. "Coffee over there too. Help yourself. Can't offer you any biscuits, though. I'd already used up all the flour . . . that is, until Matt brought me a whole new supply." She looked up at Matt, whose eyes were fixed on the Indian.

"You tried your hand at it, then?" Jim said as he walked to the campfire. "Must have had enough for two or three batches when I left."

"So you have had company," Matt said quietly to her, still staring at Jim with what could only be termed hatred. "And the rock . . ."

"I told you. I moved it myself," Ruth whispered, taken aback by the intensity of Matt's response. "Kate sent Jim up with fresh goat cheese nearly a week ago." Ruth touched his arm lightly. "How about more coffee?"

Matt looked back at her, his eyes still iced with anger, as if trying to decide whether to believe her. Then he took in a breath and nodded. "I think it's best I head back now," he said, starting toward the cooler. "I'll get my tools together." Ruth watched his retreating back. She swallowed her disappointment. It wasn't only what had been lost at the interruption, all that had not hap-

pened, but what was yet to be lost. She wasn't ready for either of them to leave—the first company she'd seen in days—and could have spent a good deal of time drinking coffee and talking around the campfire. But the company didn't mix, and while she could have enjoyed either of them alone, it would never work with the two of them.

"Shot this yourself?" Jim called from the campfire. He picked up a foreleg and took a bite. "Not bad," he said. Ruth carried the vegetable sack to the rock table and began removing squash and tomatoes, placing them in her favorite ceramic bowl, yellow with tiny blue flowers. Except for the potatoes Matt had just brought, these were the first fresh vegetables she'd seen in a long while.

"You might simmer these last two pieces in a bit of the wine you have in that jug there and see what happens," Jim said, as he cleaned the last of the meat from the leg bone with his teeth.

"Now that's something to look forward to," she said, imagining the two dry hunks of rabbit transformed into succulent morsels. She could even picture squash and potatoes in the sauce beside them. "You always have such good ideas for food."

"You probably would have thought of that one yourself," he said, his eyes crinkling slightly at the corners. Ruth wanted to show him the pot shards in the tin but noticed that Matt kept glancing over as he stashed tools behind the front seat of the car. She placed the bowl of vegetables in the burlap cooler, then went to the tent to retrieve Matt's rifle. When she returned he was standing near the tent flap.

"I'm ready," he said to the Indian.

"Thanks again for loaning me your twenty-two," Ruth said. She stepped out to hand Matt his gun.

"Don't mention it. It's best to be safe. Now you have one of your own. You never know just who's going to show up—even out here. Could be someone who means you harm," Matt said as the three of them walked toward his Model A.

"There's a dance at the Olsens' next Saturday, Ruth," Jim said. "They said to tell you. Just about everyone from Juniper Valley will come for Kate's pastries alone—the Hudsons, Talmadges.

Shorty with his fiddle. John said he'd bring the truck up to get you." Jim opened the passenger door. "You come too, Matt. Bring your wife," he said.

Matt remained looking at her. He appeared to be over his anger. "Looks like I'll be back next week, then," he said, giving her hand a quick squeeze in full view of Jim. He climbed behind the wheel. "No need for John to get you, with guests coming and all. I'll be up for you myself."

Ruth waved as they drove off, staring after them as if that might bring the men back. She sighed as the Model A grew smaller, finally disappearing around the far bend, and the solitude of the canyon wrapped quiet arms around her. The thought of the coming dance comforted her, the food, music, conversation. How she loved to dance. She had danced a lot those months after she left the finishing school, when she'd cut her hair and considered herself a flapper. She pictured herself dancing, whirling around with a variety of faceless men. The idea of dancing close up with Matt made her skin tingle. And she wondered what it would be like to put her arms around Indian Jim, to feel the hard muscle of his shoulder beneath her fingers, the strands of his long hair brushing the skin on the back of her hand. Her breath caught at the prospect.

Shaking off her fantasies Ruth revived the small fire and set about making a sauce of wine and water, stirring to dissolve the crust at the bottom of the frying pan and adding the last of the rabbit with squash and potatoes, and a tomato for good measure. While it simmered, she prepared the best biscuits she had yet made. At dusk, she savored the pungent stew, washing it down with a cup of wine. The flavors helped to quiet, though not quite satisfy, her hunger.

The next stage of house building gave Ruth a clearer idea of the realities she faced. While clearing her land, she had merely been readying to build. Now that she was starting on the actual structure, she became more aware of how much she did not know about constructing a house—which was nearly everything. Whatever had made her so sure she could undertake this project, she wondered again as she inspected the dirt surface for her foundation. She had been instructed to make the ground as level as possible beneath the concrete and to outline the rectangle of its shape with long strips of wood that would serve as a form for her cement. John Olsen's warning that a proper foundation was of crucial importance served to emphasize her ignorance and to underscore the importance of somehow overcom-

ing that ignorance. This was not to be an undertaking she could brazen her way through, as she had most other endeavors. Unsure of herself, she worked with great care.

Ruth continued to uncover pottery shards as she shoveled and raked to level the soil. She found a few more the day she dug a hole for her outhouse behind a scrub oak. Though she saw no more arrowheads, she did unearth a large shard that was particularly attractive, one side lightened with a kind of glaze, its surface depicting a fragment of intricate design. She ran a finger over the dark swirling lines as she carried the piece over to put with the others, conscious that someone long ago had taken care to make it lovely in much the same way that someone more recently had covered her yellow ceramic bowl with small blue flowers. Finding the arrowhead had confirmed Ruth's notion that the pottery belonged to the Indians that Jim said once occupied her land. Now, as she spread the shards out on the rock to inspect them, she wished she knew more about the people who made and used them here. Another fragment appeared blackened by fire. A hole fashioned through its lip caused her to wonder if it hadn't once hung at the same fire she used for her own cooking: the fire ring she assumed had been constructed by cowboys might be of even earlier date. She sat on the rock and tried to imagine these people who had dropped arrowheads and broken vessels here, what they must have been like. The best she could do was to people her spot with versions of Jim.

About midweek the temperature cooled slightly, and a few puffy clouds came to drift aimlessly overhead. Ruth felt herself slip into their languorous mood. She had, after all, already dug the hole for her privy and completed the wooden outline for the foundation. She had even experimented with test batches of cement, which convinced her she must speak again with John Olsen before she attempted to prepare and pour the concrete. She would talk to him at the dance, an event that itself occupied a great deal of her attention as she worked dreamily at sawing and hammering the last of the usable broken planks into a seating arrangement over her outhouse hole, her mind filled with

visions of herself in men's arms, with snippets of fantasized conversation. Even a few nicks with the saw and a fairly bruised index finger resulting from her divided attention were not enough to bring her back. When Ruth was not imagining herself at the Olsens' party or picturing a female Jim squatting beside a cooking pot, her eyes searched the lower parts of Rocky Mountain while she pondered the whereabouts of the hidden inscriptions.

The day before the dance, she hung her party dress to straighten on the rope strung for skinning the rabbit, which had now become her clothesline. The dress was the same one she had worn in the fall to the dance at the Hudsons', but that did not much concern her. She had purchased it when she stopped in Los Angeles before she came to the desert, and it looked good enough on her to do for many dances. Besides, she had no choice, since she did not sew. Scarlet was the best color for her, too, set off her skin and hair, and she liked the way the bodice lowered at the neck to show just enough bosom to be interesting. And she had enough bosom to be interesting, she thought smugly as she stood before the small mirror in her tent the afternoon of the dance, turning sideways to admire herself in profile.

Matt's response confirmed her view, and, though she still felt some distance when he arrived to fetch her, it was clear he couldn't keep his eyes off her. Ruth knew from the mirror that her excitement had given a flush to her cheeks, overruling even her tanned skin, and she couldn't help but be aware of how she must appear in his eyes as they drove down canyon toward the Swedes', making small talk and speculating about the evening's highlights.

Goats ran crisscross between the line of parked cars as Matt pulled up in front of the Olsens'. In the wash beside the car, several horses stood grazing, hobbled or drop-reined. A brown billy leapt onto the front fender as Matt pulled on the brake. He squeezed the horn twice and the goat slid to the ground. "We better join the crowd. May's been waiting to see you." Matt placed a hand over hers. "You'll save a dance for me, won't you, Ruth?"

“More than one, if you like,” Ruth said, taking hold of the door handle with her free hand. They looked at each other and smiled long enough for her body to remember what had happened between them last weekend. Then she pulled the lever and pushed the door open.

She knew it would be some time before the dancing started. First would come food and conversation. Then a few folks would pack up and leave, but most—whole families—would stay to bed down late after the music stopped. At least that was the way it had been at the two dances Ruth had gone to in Juniper Valley. People lived spread out, traveled a long way to each dance; some, like the cowboys, came on horseback.

May waved and several other women seated next to the stone house turned to nod as Ruth approached. Otherwise she would have been tempted to join the men who stood around talking and laughing, especially the cowboys from the Heart Bar. And she did want to have a close look at the concrete slab out where the dancing would take place.

May put aside her knitting and held out her hand. “It’s so good to see you again, Ruth. I’ve missed your company,” she said as Ruth came near. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come all the way to get you.” May managed a weak smile. “But I’m afraid just riding this far has tired me greatly.” Though the woman’s face was sallow and drawn and her brown hair lacked luster, the tubercular flush of her cheeks presented a false appearance of health.

“Just look at you,” May said. “You look like you’ve been living in the wilderness for years, like you were born here. How dark you’ve become.” Ruth followed May’s eyes down to where their hands joined, one creamy white, the other bronze in contrast.

“How are you feeling?” Ruth asked. “Matt tells me you’re doing well. Are you still taking walks?”

“Some days. I feel stronger again now that I have dear little Lily to come in and help me. She’s been assisting Matt in the store too. You remember Lily Rose, don’t you, Ruth?” May turned to place her hand on the young woman beside her.

Ruth nodded, wondering why Matt hadn’t mentioned it. “Hello, Lily. Hello, Mrs. Rose,” she said to the girl and the mother

who appeared to be a faded version of the younger beauty. How could anyone not remember Lily Rose? The Angel of the Valley, they called her. And no wonder, Ruth thought, as Lily smiled sweetly up at her, giving her head a little toss that shook the golden ringlets framing her face. With her light blue eyes, she could be a sister to Matt, except for those full, white teeth. Ruth knew Lily was close to her own age, maybe nineteen to Ruth's new twenty-one, but her innocence made her seem younger than Ruth had ever been. The only thing Ruth had in common with her was the name, Ruth's middle name being Lilith, another form of Lily.

"Rute. Rute." Ruth turned in time to be clasped in Kate's bone-crushing hug. She thrust Ruth out at arm's length and held her there. "You werk too hard. I told Jim. Need the strudel to fatten you up." She let go of Ruth long enough to squeeze her upper arm. "Need meat on your bone," she said, pulling Ruth into another hug. "It good to see you."

Ruth couldn't help but smile. Kate's affection was so genuine and direct. "I'm glad to see you too, Kate. Thanks for all the cheese and vegetables you sent me. The jerky, too. Those seeds I planted haven't begun to sprout, and I've already tired of canned meat and beans. Luckily, Jim showed me how to make biscuits. Someday maybe I'll make them as good as he does."

"Ya," Kate said. "I have tomato for you take home. Now you sit. John and Jim bring over the goat pretty soon." Over behind the tents Ruth could see the two men shoveling out coals from a large pit. Jim worked without a shirt, the last of the afternoon sun sliding over his muscles as he moved. He made work appear so graceful. She wondered what she must have looked like clearing her land, had anyone seen her—awkward and inexperienced as she shoveled and pulled brush.

After forcing herself briefly to make small talk with Martha Hudson and Charlotte Paxton, whom she barely knew, Ruth disobeyed Kate's orders by following her into the stone house to see what was to be done. She could bear no more of the conversations around her about sewing and other domestic affairs. Even the talk of recipes—what good were they to her own camp-

fire cooking? She would rather corner some of the cowboys gathered in a tight knot within the main collection of men. Besides finding the talk more interesting, she might even pick up some campfire cooking ideas she could use. Ruth wound her way through a group of boys tossing a wooden ball—all but one of the girls had remained sitting prettily beside their mothers—and walked through the open door of the house.

Kate allowed Ruth to carry out two of the many dishes kept warming on the huge woodstove for the “smorgasbord,” as Kate called the potluck. When the women saw Ruth bringing out casseroles to set among the cold salads and fruit on the long table, others headed in to get their own concoctions. By the time everything had been put out alongside the pit-roasted goat, Ruth was witness to the most impressive spread she had ever laid eyes on. The goat, Kate’s pastries, and fresh vegetables moved the repast far beyond anything she’d seen at other dance gatherings in the valley.

A few of the men, Matt among them, pulled up chairs and ate with the women, though many—all of the miners—stood holding their plates and talking as they ate. The cowboys squatted in a circle, as if they were hunkered around a campfire. Ruth kept her eye out for Jim, wanting to brag to him about her latest batch of biscuits and the rabbit-wine stew, but he had managed to slip away with a plateful of food and sat on a rock out of range of the gathering.

She settled into the chair Matt had pulled up for her in the small circle that consisted of himself and May and the two Rose women. Ravenous, Ruth had heaped her plate high at the table, the plate’s circumference seeming inadequate for her appetite and the many dishes before her. Remembering Kate’s admonition, Ruth had added two pastries on top of the rest. After trying to move aside her dessert to eat the main dishes, Ruth had finally decided to eat the strudels first and get them out of her way. About midway through her first, she looked up to see Matt staring down at the mountain of food in front of her. As was Mrs. Rose.

Ruth paused, teeth sunk into the delicious pastry, and glanced

at the other plates in the group. The women had more space on their plates, it seemed, than food. For a moment, Ruth felt heat creep up the back of her neck, but she shook it off and bit down further, refusing to drop her eyes from Matt's. She chewed, instead, with relish, though the strudel's flavor had gone dry in her mouth. She bit down again and took an even larger mouthful, flicking her tongue out to get every last speck of filling that clung to her lips.

"Aren't Kate's strudels wonderful?" she said.

"I wouldn't know," Mrs. Rose said. "I haven't had time to complete the rest of my meal. But the casseroles are certainly delicious. I don't care much for the goat meat, though."

"Where are you going to put all that food, Ruth? That's a man-sized plateful," May said. "I couldn't eat all that in a month of Sundays."

"Mother's casserole is the best, don't you think?" Lily Rose said in a honeyed voice. "She makes the best cream sauce in Juniper Valley." Her blue eyes looked up for approval. Ruth noticed how dark and full her lashes were. Was there no flaw in this woman—besides a syrupy manner that Ruth could not abide? Everyone else, including Matt, seemed to adore her.

"Which dish is yours, Mrs. Rose?" Ruth asked, but before she got an answer a commotion started among the cowboys. Ruth looked over to see two of the men—she couldn't tell who—wrestling and punching as they rolled in the dirt by the tents. Other cowboys cheered the two on as John Olsen marched toward them.

"It's probably that Johnny Lee again, from Mound Springs," Lily Rose said to her mother, while Matt hurried toward the crowd of gathering men. "He's always stirring up trouble." And sure enough, when John reached in and extracted one of the cowboys, it was Johnny Lee. John shoved him away, landing the slender cowboy on his rear. The other, someone with orange hair whom Ruth didn't recognize, was struggling to sit up, his face smeared with blood.

"Whiskey," Mrs. Rose said. "That's what started it. Tippling. Always starts trouble."

"It's not simply the drink," May said. "Matt drinks whiskey, or did when it was legal; it never made him fight."

Mrs. Rose shot May a look that Ruth would have flinched at. "I've had whiskey before," Ruth said, in May's defense. "It never made me want to fight either."

Now the three women looked at her. All but May dropped their eyes. "I tried it once," May said, "but it tasted like turpentine. Only a man could drink it."

Ruth clamped her lips shut. As a matter of fact she was quite fond of whiskey. It was often available at her mother's. She hadn't indulged for some time until the last dance, when she granted Johnny Lee's request that she join him in "a little snort." Now she sat quietly while she finished her food. The women's small talk only served to make her feel more removed. Maybe later she would have a chance to greet Jim, though he was no longer anywhere in sight.

When her plate was empty, Ruth carried her own and May's into the house. Several women were already helping Kate with the cleanup, so Ruth walked back out to inspect the cement slab, where chairs had been set along the outside edges. When she squatted to judge the texture of the concrete, she spotted the Indian on a branch in the cottonwood overhanging the tents. Seeing her look up, he jumped down and came over to squat beside her.

"Poured your slab yet?" he asked.

Ruth shook her head, ran a hand over the level surface of concrete. "First I want to be sure I know what I'm doing. John said a foundation's important to get right. I mixed up a few test batches of cement with sand and water in a coffee can. It was fun to smooth it over a section of rock—sort of like frosting a cake," she said, ducking her head away from a kid that trotted up from behind and began nibbling at her hair. "Only I couldn't get it right. Once it slopped over the edge like thick soup and ran down the sides. Another time it piled up like whipped cream. None of it turned out anything like this, so nice and clean on top."

"Takes practice, like anything else, to get right," Jim said. "There's a lot to learn about such things."

"I suppose. It's true enough with biscuits, anyway. My first couple batches were pretty black. But I wish you could have seen the last batch. I might even give you competition someday." Ruth straightened and pushed the goat away. She looked down at the slab. "The problem with the cement is I only get one chance before it hardens into something I have to live with under my feet forever."

Jim nodded. "I've never seen you in a dress," he said, rising to stand beside her.

"It's the only one I have," she said. "My dancing dress. See?" She gave a little whirl to show how the skirt twirled out, then stopped, feeling silly before him.

Jim smiled. "Well," he said looking away, "the dancing should start soon."

"Shall I save a dance for you?"

His smile was dark. "Someday I'll dance with you," he said. "Not here." Jim said no more as the two of them watched John Olsen striding toward them.

"You want goat, Rute?" Olsen asked. "Take nanny home for milk?"

"What would I do with a goat, John? I've never milked one." Ruth said.

"Ya, we teach you. I bring one up."

"What I do want is to know more about making concrete for my slab," she said, describing her experiments and the questions they raised about the rest of the process. "I'm not even sure just where I can mix it," she ended by saying, "except maybe in my bathtub."

"Too big job for you," Olsen said, shaking his head. "I come up with Jim, maybe bring Ingmar and Olaf. We get done in a day."

"A woman can make concrete too, John—this one can, anyway. I simply want you to instruct me on a few things—the amounts to mix, how much sand and water, how thick it . . ."

"John doesn't mean the job's too big for a woman," Jim said. "It's a big job for any one person—with numerous and simultaneous steps."

“Well, tell me about the mixture anyway, so I can start fixing it in my mind,” Ruth said, unconvinced. “And what things need doing all at once? Can’t they happen one step at a time?”

“You a strange woman. Stubborn,” John Olsen said, but he explained the process anyway, helping her to see how the type of sand she chose to mix with the cement, as well as the amount, had made such a difference in her experiments. The coarser wash sand was the kind she should use, he said, the small pebbles being what gave the concrete its strength. The more of them the better. As he went on to describe the way to mix and how to trowel and tamp, she began to understand how it might be difficult for one person to do, especially one who had never even seen it done before. She listened carefully and tried to memorize the details, but decided that if John were to offer his services again, she would certainly accept—though she would insist on being part of the crew. But she was not about to ask him.

By the time John and Jim began throwing wood on the roasting pit for the bonfire, several other men had straggled over to join the discussion: Matt first, then a few men from the valley and some of the cowboys, who each tugged down the front of his hat at her. When Larry Hudson began telling Matt what he needed ordered at the store, the orange-haired cowboy who had fought with Johnny Lee turned to her. “I hear tell you’re camped out at Can-Tree, ma’am,” he said. The cowboy’s ears stood out under his hat brim, like opened car doors. His rancid breath nearly made her turn her face away. Something in his voice made her fidget. She had to force herself to stay and be civil when her body wanted to flee. He was not like Johnny Lee and the others with their easy friendliness.

“You hear wrong,” Ruth said. “I’m not camped. And the place used to be Can-Tree Springs. It’s now Glory Springs, my homestead.”

“A watering hole’s no place to homestead, ma’am. The cattle have rightful claim. Maybe you haven’t heard of the law of the West. This here’s open range.” He pulled down his hat brim so it hid his eyes and slouched off toward the horses, two other cow-

boys close behind. She thought she heard him mumble something about a cattle drive.

Ruth turned back to Matt, a jumble of worries tumbling through her. "Is it true," she asked, "what he said?"

"What who said?" Matt asked, pulling away from his conversation.

"That cowboy over there. He said my water belongs to the cattle. That it's open range. Called it the law of the West."

"Beats me," Matt said. "You have papers on the land. Seems to me the law's on your side."

"Having the law on your side doesn't mean much when a herd of cattle want to get to your water hole," said Larry Hudson. "You got a fence? That might help."

Ruth shook her head. "I don't want a fence. I don't like fences."

"Don't worry, Ruth," Matt said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "That cowboy was just trying to start trouble. Don't let him ruin your evening."

Ruth nodded. Matt was right. Shorty and Zeke were already warming up fiddles at the head of the slab. The sun had dropped behind the mountain and a huge orange moon was rising on the other side of the sky. Ruth put the worry from her mind and let her spirits lift with the moon. She had come here for dance and fun. The round moon's promise made her feel heady, as if she'd had a shot of whiskey. She became strangely elated, as if before her were endless possibilities, an entire smorgasbord of men, and she wanted nothing more than to heap her plate high with tastes, selecting from whom among them she would take a large helping, from whom take the merest nibble: the dance to come, a sampling platter.

She sat out not one dance the entire evening. The music so excited her blood that, had she not been asked, she would have gladly danced without a partner. But there was no chance of that. For every tune she had three or four offers. Only Lily Rose was as popular, and Lily chose to sit out the faster melodies, the ones that Ruth loved best. Ruth preferred Johnny Lee for those,

since he was the most skillful at swinging and twirling her around. She danced several slow tunes with Matt, though she noticed he danced with Lily a great deal, too, when he wasn't sitting at May's side or conversing with other men.

Toward the end of the evening, Ruth looked over to see Lily and her mother leading May toward the tent provided for women's cots. She finished the polka with Corky Warren, another one of the Mound Spring cowboys, and was immediately caught up by Johnny Lee again, who whirled her till she was so dizzy she could hardly stand. As they came to a laughing, staggering halt, Matt tapped Johnny's shoulder. "This one's mine," he said, sliding an arm around Ruth's waist. The sweet aroma of fresh whiskey wafted over her when he spoke. He pulled her close, and they began moving to the music. Neither spoke as she felt that familiar heat grow between them, drawing her body tight to his. She felt exposed by the bright moon overhead and the bonfire's light, so she closed her eyes to shut out anyone staring at them.

"Has May retired for the evening?" Ruth asked when the song finished and the musicians stopped for a drink.

"I'm afraid she was exhausted. Lily took her to the women's tent," Matt said as they walked to the circle of empty chairs. "She said to tell you she was saving you the cot next to her."

"Not for Lily?"

"Lily's on her other side. The Rose girl's been such a comfort to her."

"A help to you, too, May tells me," Ruth said, studying Matt's expression.

"She learns fast. Knows the inventory and prices almost as well as I do already." He looked over toward the tents. "The two of them get on well."

"May looks . . . well, a bit weaker than when I left."

"She's tired from the trip. I didn't think she'd be coming along with me." He looked back at Ruth. "You seem to be having yourself a good time tonight. You've certainly had enough partners."

"I am," she said as John Olsen came up in front of them. The fiddles were starting up again.

“How ’bout dance with old man, Rute?” Olsen asked.

Ruth got to her feet and took his arm. “What old man, John?”

The two dances following her dance with John were fast, and Ruth let herself be carried off by Johnny Lee. She was aware of Matt watching her, and he came to her side when the music slowed for the last dance of the night. His arm circled and brought her so close against him she could feel a hard knot against her skirt. She swallowed and met his eyes. For a few more beats they pretended to dance, then stopped. Everywhere around them was in motion.

“I’ll walk you to the women’s tent,” he said.

They continued past the chairs, reaching the darkness between the tents just as the music ended. The moment they were out of sight, he pulled her to him and kissed her so hard she felt her lip split against his teeth. Then his tongue burst into her mouth and his pelvis probed hers, his hands gripping her buttocks. “Ruth,” he rasped. “Ruth.”

At the sound of approaching footsteps, he wrenched himself away. Ruth took a step backward to steady herself, watching him disappear around the far corner of the tent just as Martha Hudson’s full form came into view on the other side. Ruth smoothed her skirt and moved aside to let the woman go into the tent ahead of her.

Overhead, cottonwood leaves rustled, though Ruth could feel no breeze. She looked up to see no one, but remembered the Indian perched there earlier. The thought sobered her. But why should it bother her, why should she care? What should bother her, she realized, was where she was headed with Matt. The fact that there was only one place she wanted it to head was not a good sign. She should feel guilty going in to sleep beside the man’s wife, she told herself as she followed Mrs. Hudson down the middle aisle and sat on the empty cot. But her body was too full of longing to have room for guilt or worry. She slid beneath the blanket and tried to keep from tossing. Surrounded by the women’s soft purring and May’s quick, shallow breaths, Ruth remembered the hands of the woman’s husband kneading her

buttocks, felt again the hardness he pushed against her. Quietly, she put her hand to herself, imagining the rest. Even in this simulated scene, she could feel the Indian's eyes looking down on her from the cottonwood. She would not raise her own to meet them.

Shortly before dawn, a cough hacked its way into Ruth's dream, appearing as voices of little green jays fussing in her pinyons. When the noise became more insistent, she awoke. Once her eyes became used to the near dark, she could make out a figure sitting up in the cot next to her. "Are you ill again, May?" Ruth asked, raising to her elbow.

"I'll be fine. The cough always comes this time of the morning," May whispered.

"Since when?"

"Always."

"Not when I left."

"Yes, even then, though not so much."

"You never said. Matt never told me." Ruth reached over to feel

the woman's forehead. "You're feverish." She couldn't remember May feeling quite this hot, even at the beginning of her care.

"I'll be all right as soon as the sun comes up, really." She coughed quietly into her handkerchief. "Go back to sleep."

Ruth lay back down and closed her eyes, but it was impossible to sleep. Each hack hammered another nail into her guilt.

When the tent began to lighten, Ruth left to fetch May some water. A rooster crowed as she walked to the well. By the time she lowered the bucket, brought it up, and found a cup, the nannies were demanding to be milked. Morning in the Swedes' yard—the men sleeping in the open on bedrolls, the emptied chairs, and scattered belongings—retained none of the magic of the night before. Ruth had the feeling she'd awoken from a long dream, or from a drunk—perhaps an intoxication with moon. Last night she'd been in Matt's arms; now she was back to nursing his wife. Ruth sighed and entered the tent.

Grateful, May drained the cup at once. "You must keep your liquids up," Ruth reminded her, operating from the textbook ingrained in her during the months of training. How quickly she'd fallen back into her role as nurse. But why should she? She was no longer under hire. She'd be better off if . . . Ruth pushed the hateful thought from her mind. "I'll see if Kate can't fix you some broth, too," she said. Stepping out of the tent in time to see the sun slide over the top of the mountain, Ruth stopped for a moment to watch it lift up from the ridge.

The risen sun did not stop May's cough, nor did the water, nor the chicken broth Kate made, and it was still early when Matt packed up to take her home, along with the Rose women who'd ridden up with them. In the atmosphere of concern surrounding May, Matt had not once met Ruth's eyes. He was now the concerned husband, failing even to acknowledge the care Ruth had given his wife before the others were up. Even the precious Lily Rose had slept on until her mother shook her. Matt's response left a bad taste in Ruth's mouth, transforming her guilt to resentment, mitigated only slightly by the anguished look Matt finally gave her as the departing group situated themselves in his Model A.

Ruth wondered, as the Model A pulled away, why May's relapse should cause Matt to disregard her so completely. That disregard seemed more wrong than had their furtive coming together by the tent, though she was certain others wouldn't see it that way. But how wrong could it be for Matt to want someone who could give him what his wife had no inclination for? And was it wrong of Ruth to take from him what May no longer had any desire for? Here Ruth knew her thinking was too much like her mother's, though Cally would have more plans for Matt than simply bedding him.

Where she had gone wrong, Ruth realized, was in counting on Matt. This was where her thinking differed from her mother's. Cally, in Ruth's opinion, depended on her lovers for far too many things. Early on, Ruth had learned to count only on herself. Cally had left Ruth to her own devices, and that was fine with Ruth. She had come to prefer it—which was why life became so difficult after she was made to stay with her aunt Myrtle, a woman who ruled her own home with an iron will. Not that Cally hadn't tried to control Ruth in subtle ways, too, hadn't wanted to limit Ruth's horizons to the world Cally made for herself after Thomas left. It was a world Ruth found disturbingly flimsy, that dependence on the goodwill of men, on the herbal sorcery that Cally used for healing practices, the midwifery, and on whatever was going on at the so-called rest home she managed. None of these things had much substance, as far as Ruth was concerned, and were not enough to base a life upon.

Ruth walked down the path through the willows toward the garden, where Kate had gone to gather vegetables. John had agreed to drive Ruth home when he finished helping the Hudsons start their Model T, since Jim had already left for the mountaintop. So far no progress had been made with the broken crank. Mrs. Hudson sat fanning herself in the passenger's seat, while her two children chased goats up and down the wash. Everyone else had driven off.

Kate had a bowl already filled with radishes by the time Ruth opened the garden gate, and was bent down searching under the large zucchini leaves for fruit. "Squash too small," she said, bring-

ing out two zucchini somewhat bigger than cigars, "Like sausage. Few days be bigger."

"I'm happy with these, Kate. It will be midsummer before any of mine are ready." She helped Kate to her feet, then the two of them walked back to the house to see if John was ready to take her home.

It turned out the Hudsons' car had to be towed down to the valley. Rather than wait for John to drive her home when he returned, Ruth elected to risk her one pair of dress shoes and walk. Everything at the Swedes' served to remind her of the disturbing incident with Matt. She had been away from her place too long.

As she had anticipated, the further she walked up the rut road home, the less concern she felt about what had happened. The event at the Swedes', even the dance itself, became less real than the canyon around her: its dusty smells, the jays' sharp squawks in the pinyons, the shapes of ridges in front of her lightened each step. She could not let herself be deterred from what was important by her feelings for a man. And Ruth wasn't sure just what Matt did mean to her, other than being an attractive man she wanted, a man married to someone else.

She thought about the rough way he had grabbed at her, like an animal pouncing. At the time, she had been caught up in the excitement of surprise. But the way it had happened bothered her now. It held no tenderness. With Karl, there had been tenderness. Even her encounter with Ramon, whom she did not know at all, was sweeter, she thought, remembering the way he had touched her face, her body. The differences in men puzzled her.

Ruth had only a dim memory of her father—not surprising, since Thomas had left before she was three. She'd reconstructed her image of him from photos she found in Aunt Myrtle's attic. In one of the photos, her father stands close beside Myrtle. Behind them is a trellis with white tea roses, and Thomas's hair appears almost as light as the flowers. The photo must have been taken while he was still engaged to her aunt, before eloping with Cally, who was only sixteen at the time. What sweet revenge that must have been for the outcast half sister that Ruth's grandfather brought home to raise.

The marriage, of course, was doomed. At least Myrtle had that satisfaction. She loved telling Ruth how horrified Thomas's family was when they met the strange girl, how they did everything in their power to end the union. The Eastern family had barely approved of his engagement to Myrtle in the first place—considering Thomas's fascination with the Wild West a whim he would soon tire of. In the end, it was Cally who tired of him. At least that was her story. That he ended up dead three years later in New England, Cally cited as evidence of her continued power over him. To do the right thing, the family granted a small allowance for the child of the union, which Cally said was meant to keep herself and it out of their sight. Now that Ruth had emancipated herself from both Cally and Myrtle, with a career in nursing, the family sent the money directly to her, care of the Baxters, who they thought still employed her.

Ruth didn't know how long she could count on this guilt money—but she hoped the honorable intent of his family would last long enough to support her until she proved up her homestead; it would be nicer yet if in the future she came into a small inheritance as a severance settlement. Otherwise she'd be forced to find employment somewhere, and the nearest hospital was seventy-five miles away, in San Bernardino. Of course, tubercular patients other than May had come to recover in Juniper Valley. But caring for others was not the life Ruth wished to live—doing someone's bidding for her pay; even worse, it would keep her from her canyon. No, she would find a way to remain in her canyon—and without help from the likes of Matt.

Lost in these reflections, Ruth rounded the far bend at Glory Springs and walked up the wash to her campsite. It wasn't until she climbed the high bank of the wash and entered her camp that she saw the shaggy black rear protruding from her tent, cans and scraps of sacks strewn behind it. Her supplies! And her rifle under her mattress in the tent.

Without thinking, Ruth ran toward the tent, shouting to get the bear out of her groceries. When the animal began to move, Ruth changed course and ran to the shelves next to the fire ring. Her hand was on the cast-iron pot by the time the animal backed

out of the tent and turned its head to look at her, white powder caked around its mouth and dusted over its face. The bear rose up on hind legs, front paws kneading the air, while a light wind riffled the glossy fur of its belly. Ruth let go of the pot, straightened, bared her teeth, and growled as loud as she could, her fingers shaped into claws raised above her head to shake at the bear.

For a long moment, both creatures stirred air with their forepaws. Ruth became aware of her pounding heart and of the size of the animal towering more than a foot above her. The .22 in the tent would not do much good even if it were accessible. The bear's power and beauty, its magnificent presence, and its absolute belonging to the wild awed Ruth almost to inaction, tempted her to give up trying to claim this canyon and just give it back to the bear. Then her senses took hold and she grabbed up the pot and flung it at the bear.

The creature was on all fours, turning to run when the heavy pot glanced off its shoulder. Ruth kept growling and shouting as she bolted into the tent for the rifle, and though the animal was no longer in sight when she came out, she aimed the .22 toward the bluff, where she knew the sound would echo, and fired off several rounds.

She had only glanced at the mess inside her tent when she went in for the gun, but once she was sure the bear was gone for good, she took a deep breath and stepped inside to face the damage to her supplies. The top strap that latched the tent had been torn off, though the bottom strap had simply come untied when the animal forced the flap back. The sight inside made her heartsick. Canned goods were scattered everywhere, on the chest of drawers, on and under her cot, as if the bear had tossed them in all directions. On inspection, she found that, other than a few dents, the cans were intact. Her dry goods were a different story. A light film of flour coated everything, and she imagined the bear had shaken the sack in its teeth. One five-pound sack was completely gone, even the cloth chewed to a pasty rag. The other sack had teeth and claw holes, as if the bear had just started on it, but most of the flour remained. The sugar had been ripped open, the paper sack licked clean, and the box that held her groceries shredded.

No use getting teary over it. She would have to cut back on her biscuits for the next month, that's all—and she didn't really use much sugar anyway, Ruth told herself as she did her best to sweep and wipe up the chaos created by the animal. She reminded herself that she was lucky not to have lost all of her flour, and that the bear hadn't touched the cooler. Yet the destruction deepened the despondency she'd experienced at the Swedes' and underscored the extent of her isolation. That evening she had no appetite for food. To chase off the blue devils, Ruth filled her cup twice with wine as she sat by the crackling campfire, determined not to brood. Afterward, in her journal, she did not whine but pressed her resolutions hard into the paper. She would build this house and make her life here. She would not be deterred. She would not seek the presence of Matt or any other man in her life. How frivolous she had been at the dance; she had forgotten herself. It reminded her of how silly she had once been about Karl back in El Paso, infatuated with his German accent and foreign ways, not once thinking ahead about what might happen to her. Even Cally had never warned her of the consequences until it was too late—then had told her of the use of vinegar and herb. But such things were behind her now.

What to do about these longings that sometimes drove her without her knowing, Ruth did not know. What she did do seemed only to increase her desire and was a poor substitute for connection with another's flesh. Yet she didn't want the dangers that came with such connections. The new prevention devices she'd heard about were too difficult to get, so she was left with only Cally's herbal remedy. The emotional attachment troubled her even more. The safest answer she could find was not to become attached, the way men sometimes did. But that was hard to do. She had to fight aspects of her nature that worked against it, she wrote, pressing down so hard the pen etched into the paper. She would not let even her own nature deter her. The silly girl who whirled at the dance would be banished from her.

Ruth blinked her eyes dry and put the cork in the inkwell. She must sleep, for she had work to do at dawn. In all the confusion of the morning after the dance, no further mention had been made

of concrete for the slab, so she would complete the project by herself—no matter what the men had told her. Besides, other than begging for help, what choice had she? She now relished the idea of such a large project; the hard work and preoccupation would be good for her. She understood that choosing another woman's husband to help stave off attachment had not been a good idea, and lay back on her cot going through the steps John Olsen had outlined, forcing her mind away from other images—Matt's rough embrace, Indian Jim in the cottonwood. She wondered, though, why Jim had left so soon, allowing herself the thought since he was a friend and not in the same category as other men.

The next morning, Ruth woke to find her curse had come upon her, that aptly named scourge that was the burden of a woman's body to endure. She had been outraged to learn about this injustice—the inescapable condition of her fate; it was explained to her one day after she had buried all her bloodied undergarments in Aunt Myrtle's backyard and been caught filching more out of her cousin's drawer. She had thought herself the victim of some shameful and deadly disease and, even when her aunt had told her differently, could not bring herself to believe it for some time. Then, when she did believe, she could not accept the idea that such an awful event would continue to plague her through all the years of her life. Even now, residue from that early fury revisited her as she fastened the belt and pad that would be her imprisonment for the next three or four days and rinsed the blood from her sheet in the short stream trickling from her spring to vanish into the wash sand.

Once she had dispensed with this inconvenient delay, Ruth set about constructing the large board for mixing that John Olsen had said she would need. It turned out to look something like a huge breadboard, which she made from plywood rimmed with strips of thin wood and placed near her foundation to be. Rather than constructing a bottomless box for measuring sand, as Olsen had suggested, Ruth decided to use her bucket and count the number of trips she made. The whole project began to seem more and more like cooking up a recipe, and while some cooks measured carefully and used the perfect utensils, others

managed to throw ingredients together with common sense and have better results for it. The latter method suited Ruth best.

For the next two days, she worked to create a layer of sand about three inches high, as John had prescribed, selecting for the most part sand with large pebbles, carefully cleaning out debris as she spread it out on the mixing board. The buckets of sand were considerably heavier to move than buckets of water, but the wheelbarrow simply buried its wheels deep in the sand of the wash, so she continued hauling the sand in buckets. She was most grateful on the second day, when puffy white clouds parked flat bottoms overhead, blocking the sun's heat while she worked. When she sat in the tub at the end of the day, the air carried a most delicious smell of rain somewhere in the distance.

The following day, Ruth used most of one sack of cement to cover the sand, distributing it as evenly as she could manage with her shovel and rake. But when the breeze came up just after lunch, cement went everywhere, in her hair, on the ground around the board, in the air. It took hours for her to turn the powder over into the sand, and she was again glad for the clouds that gathered overhead. John had said to blend the cement in evenly with the sand and pebbles so no pockets or streaks of sand or cement or pebbles remained, much the same way flour and baking powder and salt and lard mixed in a batch of biscuit dough. And what a giant batch she was fixing to bake for her cabin floor, she thought, as she turned the mixture over and dragged it back again and again, moving from side to side of the mixing board. The more she worked, the more confident she became of her success. She thought about how surprised the men would be with her accomplishment. By the end of the day she had the mixture ready for water.

Ruth sat by her campfire with coffee and canned stew as darkness deepened, planning out the timing and tools she would need the next day, while sheet lightning from a storm far off on the desert continually lit the ridges down canyon, lulling her to near sleep. She fell onto her cot tired as she had ever been, but with a strong sense of satisfaction. Tomorrow she would complete the foundation for her cabin.

After coffee and oatmeal the next morning, Ruth moved her #8 tub beside the mixing board and began hauling water to fill it, appreciating the lighter weight of the water buckets. She was grateful for the cloud puffs forming overhead, piling into a mountainous vapor above Rocky Mountain. A husky breeze cooled her further. With the tub filled to the brim, nine buckets' worth—she'd gotten into the habit with the sand of counting each bucket—she was just deciding where to begin pouring liquid onto the mixture when she heard the first sound of cattle.

At first she didn't believe her ears. The bawling came from somewhere near the bend, so she walked to the bank of the wash to look. There were definitely cattle in her wash, only a few, but more coming along behind. And the whole of them headed directly for her spring.

Ruth used a broom to shoo the first few, but not before their big hooves trampled the small plot where her seeds were about to sprout. The chicken wire over the plot meant nothing to the cattle, who simply walked right over it, dragging the wire askew with their hooves. And the cattle she had chased away didn't go more than a few yards, then remained to watch her as they pulled off huge mouthfuls of her bushes and grass and dropped large, stinky plops around her spring. Branded on the animal closest to her she could make out a heart with a line through the middle. More cattle bawls and mewling sounded from near the bend.

Ruth marched back across the wash to her tent to retrieve her rifle, knowing the nasty animals would be at her water before she could get back. Well, it might just be the last drink the stupid bovines ever had, she thought, snatching up both boxes of shells from her table. She strode back toward the spring, where one cow—steer, bull, how could she know—was about to drink. Ruth shouted and ran at the animal, who moved back a few feet and continued to chew as it viewed her.

She put the rifle to her shoulder and took aim. The beast was a large target at such close range, giving concrete meaning to the term *bull's eye*. And she figured a bullet between its eyes would indeed be a good start. But when she pulled the trigger, nothing

happened. She remembered the safety, released it, and took aim again.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you, ma'am. You might spook 'em," a familiar voice to her right said. Ruth looked over to see the cowboy who had fought with Johnny Lee, the one who had been so rude to her. His hat was hanging behind him, and she got a good look at his stringy orange hair. It reminded her of the strands of orange fungus that wrapped themselves around rabbitbrush to strangle its life.

"And why not? These cattle are on my property. They're ruining my spring and garden." She kept the rifle to her shoulder, aimed at the cow, as she watched the man.

"The cattle always stop here to water. I told you that before." The cowboy set his hat on his head and pulled it down in front. He turned his face so she couldn't see his eyes.

"Are these your cattle, then? If they are, you better get them off my land before I shoot every last one of them." Just the sound of his ugly voice had filled Ruth with a bloody rage.

"With a twenty-two, ma'am? You'd only wound them. I couldn't let you do that. People like you don't belong in this place." He dusted his chaps and spat a stream of tobacco halfway to her feet, while his big buckskin stamped its hooves and raised its black tail to loose a stream of nuggets.

As Ruth turned to face him, she caught sight of the rifle strapped to his saddle; his hand lay ready to undo the knot. The idea of it pushed her over the edge, and words exploded from her. "Maybe I should just shoot you instead, then," she said. "Since you have no respect for me or my property." She kept the .22 to her shoulder, though she did not aim it at him.

The man looked at her now, his eyes as dead cold with hatred as her own must have been hot with anger. Neither moved nor spoke. Ruth knew her action had not been entirely sensible, and she waited to see what he would do next. But she stood her ground, holding fast to her rage for strength. Now was not the time to think straight.

It was the cowboy who finally pulled his eyes away, looking back over his shoulder at an approaching rider. In the gusty wind

now whipping around them, Ruth hadn't distinguished the horse sounds from the trampling of the cattle. The second cowboy rode up beside the first and tipped his hat in greeting. "Name's Bobby Key, ma'am. I see you've already met Charlie Stine here."

"I can't say he introduced himself. I'm Ruth Farley and your cattle are trampling my homestead." Altogether there now totaled about twenty head.

"Not much of a homestead, from what I can see. Ain't no place to put one, neither," Stine said, glancing over at Ruth's tent on the knoll as he unscrewed the top of a whiskey flask.

"Aw, the cattle don't hurt nothin'," Bobby Key said. "They only want a drink a water, then they'll move on. They's just a few strays we're running back up the *cienaga seca* to the Heart Bar. Took the others up the North Fork."

"That spring is the water I drink from, mister." Ruth picked up a rock and tossed it at the cow that was munching its way through the grass to the pool. "The cattle don't need to drink here. You must have just come past the Swedes', where there's a stream a mile long."

"We've stopped at Can Tree long as I been herding cattle. Your tent there's in our camp," Charlie Stine said. "You haven't the right to stop us."

"I've filed papers on this land. Glory Springs is mine. That gives me the right." She hefted the rifle back against her shoulder.

"Not on a water hole it don't," said Stine.

"Don't be that way, ma'am. It'll just start trouble," Bobby Key said, watching her hand on the .22.

"It's you that's starting trouble. And I'll not run from it." Though she was outnumbered, outgunned, and certainly out-experienced, Ruth knew if she gave so much as an inch, she would lose everything she had worked for.

The cowboys looked at each other and Ruth could see some sort of unspoken conversation going on between them, one she couldn't read. "Anyway, John Olsen will settle this when he gets here. He and his men should be showing up anytime now," she said, surprised at the lie so readily springing to her lips like a gift

from some great god of words, “to help me prepare concrete and lay the foundation. I’ve got the sand and cement all mixed on the knoll there, waiting for them. You’re both welcome to stay and help—though I’ll still not let your cattle into my spring.” Ruth set the butt of her rifle on the ground, holding on to the barrel. She managed a smile. Much of the tension in her had dissolved, as though her saying the words, or the cowboys’ belief in them, had made them real. After all, they could have been real, she thought, fully embracing the miracle wrought by language. “Is that a motor in the distance I hear?” she asked, turning to walk up the wash toward her knoll, not looking back. She imagined the cowboys’ resigned glances at one another. By the time she set her rifle in the tent and walked back to the wash bank, the men were gathering the cattle to herd on. Before he spurred his horse, Charlie Stine gave a long last look over his shoulder to let her know she hadn’t seen the last of him.

Ruth stood watching until the men and their cattle were out of sight up the ravine that led to the *cienaga seca*. Then she picked up a shovel and went down into the wash to tend to the cow and horse plops, flinging them as far from her spring as she could. Flies scattered in protest. Ruth smoothed out the huge tracks in the soil that held her seeds, squinting to keep sand from blowing into her eyes, and resecured the chicken wire to keep out rabbits. She didn’t like the look of the sky overhead. The protective white puffs had turned dark and unfriendly during her encounter with the cattlemen and gobbled up the last of afternoon sun.

As she climbed the wash bank next to her camp, a gust of sandy wind peppered her face. Ruth squinted toward her mixing board and found she had another problem. Already the mixture had been altered, as wind lifted the cement from the sand and pebbles, powdering the ground around the board. Now that the gusts were fiercer, the sand was being whipped up too.

Ruth pulled out tarps from the building supplies to cover the mixing board, using a line of pot-size stones to hold down the edges and corners. It took her several attempts to secure the sides, with the wind ripping the canvas from her hands. A few drops of rain splashed her face as she dragged the unused bags of

cement to the tent. Thunder followed a spear of lightning across the canyon, rumbled off the rocks on the bluff. More drops fell, the biggest she'd ever seen, like whole teacups of water dumped on her head. She dashed to her rock table, scooping up the oatmeal sack and coffee, and ducked into the tent. A towel drying on a bush went sailing off as she latched the bottom strap on her tent flap. Then the sky burst open, and Ruth thought the whole world would wash away.

Rain lapped inside the flap, which untied and danced wildly in the wind. Streams of water poured down from around the center pole as Ruth vainly tried to catch and tie the door strap, which kept escaping from her grasp. When wind began swaying and shaking the tent, she let go the flap and ran to the tent pole, holding it tight while rain coursed down her arms. Thunderclaps crashed on top of each other, magnified by the rocky bluffs across the wash. Wind tossed her, too, from side to side, so she dropped to her knees and held fast the loosening pole with all the weight of her body. She might have succeeded in keeping the tent upright if the canvas had not torn loose on one side from the baling wire that fastened its bottom to the ground. Then the pole gave way, the bottom half snapping up to whack Ruth on the side of the head.

In the dizzy jumble that followed, furniture toppled and rolled, her cot, bureau, table, and she with them, barely registering a slam in the face with canvas, the earlier blow to her head having knocked the sharp edge off of consciousness. She wriggled into a space between the tipped bed and table, where there were blankets and water wasn't pouring over her. She had no idea where the door might be and no desire to go out into the tempest if she had known. She struggled the free edge of a blanket around her shoulders and snuggled into that small pocket of warmth in the shambles made of her home. Lightning illuminated the darkened canvas cocoon, and thunder cracked close around her. Already she could hear water flooding in the wash. At least she'd managed to save the mix for her concrete, or most of it, she thought, as she sank down and let the turbulent darkness take her.

The next thing that penetrated her consciousness was light and bird chirps. Ruth opened her eyes to find the canvas strip beneath the tipped table lit with filtered sunlight. Her head was clear, though it throbbed on one side. She smiled, appreciating the birds' celebration of sun.

She sat up between the askew pieces of furniture. The interior was totally chaotic. She felt her clothing, which was only slightly damp, then the side of her head, with its sore and swollen knot. Gingerly, she half rose and, keeping her body bent, made her way around spilled cans, past the tent pole, to the chest of drawers. She pushed the bureau off its front side to reveal the tent door faced to the ground. It took her several minutes to push the furniture back to what had been the floor of the tent so she could free the front and sidewall to extract herself.

Ruth stood upright in the bright sun. Not a cloud in the sky. Beneath her feet, in the soaked ground and tracks of rivulets, lay what was left of yesterday's sky. Then she turned to look at the sight she had been avoiding. It was much worse than she had imagined.

One tarp was nowhere around. Later she would find it down the wash, caught on a cat's-claw. The other lay beyond the campfire. Her concrete mixture had been ruined; most of it had washed onto the ground and flooded with water before cutting a narrow pathway under the wooden strip around her foundation, etching straight across her would-be floor and out under the strip on other side, continuing on over the bank of the wash—except where it had pooled over the area above the buried rock, sinking in the dirt around it. The entire surface she had smoothed to pour the cement onto was webbed with rivulets that had washed away most of the looser soil. But the sight she most dreaded had also appeared. In the middle of the gray sink around the rock, she could see a clear patch of what could only be the rounded top of the boulder. Though the rock had not risen from its grave as she had feared, it had surfaced by lowering the earth that had embedded it.

Initially, Ruth's amazement at the spectacle of power she had witnessed was as strong as her dismay at the damage to her

work. She couldn't help but be awed by forces she had no control over, that sometimes seemed to be working directly against her. An odd idea crossed her mind: that she would not be able to make her place here unless these potent forces let her do so. She did not, like the bear, belong unconditionally to the wild. How, she wondered, did that mesh with the sense of destiny she felt in finding the place? It seemed to her more and more that this place had a spirit and will of its own, one stronger than that of a person or animal, and that the spirit was somehow bound up with the boulder she had buried.

Ruth shook off these strange thoughts; they would not help her build her cabin, were not a sensible way to look at things, no more helpful than the tears she fought back at the thought of the work needed to make repair. She wondered, thinking of those poems gushing with daffodils and the beauty of nature, if that poet had ever spent any real time living in the nature he gushed about. If he had, she decided, he would have written differently of it. If he had come to know the other side of the pretty flowers, as she had, he would have shown at least as much respect as he had admiration.

By midmorning, when Indian Jim came off the mountain and walked into her camp, Ruth's newfound appreciation of nature's power had diminished considerably, being overruled by her consternation over the damage to her camp and project. Once she had stabilized her center tent pole and set the rest of her furniture upright, she hung bedding in the sun and lay her damp journal and books to dry on the rock table. It was the first time she had unsealed the boxes of books that Cally had sent a week before Ruth came to the canyon. They had belonged to Ruth's father; Cally said he'd left them when he went back East and she was tired of keeping them around all these years.

Ruth kept a suspicious eye on the cloudless blue sky. She set

up the shelves by the fire ring that had blown over and cleaned her pans and utensils of sand. The burlap cooler had fallen beneath the pine, where she left it for the time being. She wanted coffee in the worst way with her makeshift breakfast of sardines, but there was no wood yet dry enough to burn, so she gathered up twigs from a dead bush and placed them in the sun. As she restored her camp, she considered where to begin on repairing the concrete project, an intimidating prospect. Most of the sand mixture had been washed off the board, leaving hardening chunks and lumps stuck to the bottom. The network of rivulets covering the ground of her foundation could be filled in and raked over—perhaps raised, since so much dirt had washed away, but the larger channel would be difficult to erase, since the cement it carried had caked the earth tight. And the sink around the boulder was already hardening in place. Turning from her frustration with all the work it would take merely to get back to where she'd started, Ruth picked up the water bucket and headed to the spring. She would find a way to start a fire for coffee even if she had to burn blank pages of her journal.

Another shock came at the wash bank when she nearly put her foot down into empty air. The path leading down the bank into the wash had been completely erased, along with a good portion of the bank itself, which had been sliced off by the flood. But the sight of the spring gave her even more pause. She remembered hearing water running in the wash before she fell asleep; now she found it had risen high enough to cover over the spring's grass and small pool with sand and debris. And nothing of her chicken wire garden remained, not even the small rising where she had planted seeds. All was gone, carried away by the flash flood, which had deposited a pile of rounded rocks in its place. Such indifference to her survival seemed a betrayal. "Goddamn it, I'll not leave this place. You'll not make me. Do you hear?" Ruth shouted toward the bluff, which bounced the words right back at her.

She retrieved the shovel from camp and began digging away the sand. It was a few minutes later that she looked up to see Jim descending the bluff, a bedroll strapped to his knapsack. Her

gladness was tempered slightly by embarrassment that he might have heard her yelling earlier. She was glad to see anyone right now, she told herself, though she knew she was especially glad it was Jim walking toward her, sunlight adding silver streaks to his dark hair. She jammed the shovel upright in the sand and stood watching the way he moved lightly over the landscape.

"I'm surprised your tent withstood the storm," he said, nodding toward the knoll. His lips held the hint of a smile.

"It didn't," she told him, "but it kept me dry, or mostly so. One side ripped loose from the baling wire and everything tumbled," she added. "I'd offer you coffee, but my spring seems to have disappeared. I've a whole tubful of water in camp. I guess I could clean out the pinecones and twigs and whatever else the wind blew into it."

"Looks like you lost some of the wash bank."

"And my garden. But that wasn't the worst of it," she said, and told him about the damage to her concrete mix and foundation.

"John planned on bringing up the crew once we got out the next load of onyx. Still will, but in a day or two; they were repairing the road to get the load out when I left the mine. I came over the mountain to see what happened on your side. They'll have to do some fixing on the stretch of road up to your place to get the truck here, too. I could see from the mountain where the flood took out whole sections." Jim looked up at the clear sky. "We watched it building for a couple days, but weren't sure what was coming. Early in the year for that kind of storm."

"I thought they were just heat clouds," Ruth said.

"Not when they get those flat black bottoms. Then it's time to look out."

"I covered the mix just before the rain came, but the tarp didn't hold," she said.

Jim nodded. "Why don't you clean that water for coffee? I could use some. Meanwhile, I'll get rid of some sand here. You'll have your spring back in an hour or so." He took hold of the shovel Ruth had left standing. "Water's already trying to fight its way through." He pointed to a spot about two feet from where she had started to dig, where the sand was so saturated it was

beginning to flow outward. Ruth wondered how she could have missed the spot.

She was still struggling to light a fire when Jim climbed the bank of the wash and went over to examine the ruined foundation. Finally, with a few strips of cardboard left from her shredded food boxes and the twigs she had dried earlier, she managed to get a small flame going. She built up the fire before setting the coffeepot on and went over to join him. One glimpse of the depression surrounding the now visible ridge of the boulder and Ruth's spirits sank like the earth packed around the rock.

"The rain cemented it in place," Jim told her. "That's a good thing. You wouldn't want the loose dirt dropping down like that once you had the cement over it. It would weaken the foundation."

"I stomped the dirt down. It felt solid to me," she said.

"The rain showed you different. Helped pack it down."

"Could be," Ruth said, trying on the point of view that the rain had actually been a help. Then she thought about all the work wasted making the sand mixture. "Took care of a lot else, too."

Jim used the shovel to chip away at the drying clumps on the board. "You made some strong cement here," he said with a subtle grin. Ruth picked up a rake and worked with him, filling in the eroded fissures. When he used the shovel to loosen the dirt in the main escape channel, she did not object, but imitated his actions, pounding up and down along the gully, softening the soil the way a cook would tenderize meat with a cleaver.

Later, over coffee, she told him about the conflict with the cowboys and the encounter with the bear a few days before. She liked the careful way he listened to her, as if he were taking in her words the way sand takes in water.

"You can take care of yourself," he said when she finished. "But there's a lot of work to be done here. You should let us help you. It's a neighborly thing people do for each other out here. The cowboys shouldn't give you as much trouble once you're built. You might borrow one of John's shotguns and keep it on hand, though, just in case."

"I like to do for myself," Ruth said, nodding, "but I see now the foundation's a big job alone—like John said. Even without a thunderstorm. So I've no objection to accepting help—just so I'm a part of the crew."

"There'll be plenty for everyone to do, including you." His smile held an understanding of her that went deeper than Ruth liked. She said nothing, but rose to pour another cup of coffee.

"Would you like to see those inscriptions while we wait for John?" Jim asked when she sat back down. "I could take you there in the morning."

Ruth's flash of excitement faded as she looked over at her ruined work.

"We've done all we can do for now, and it'll be another day before they get here," he continued. "There's only one more thing for us to do tonight. Make some biscuits. Didn't you want to show me how good you can make them?"

Ruth smiled at the prospect, feeling her spirits lighten. Surely she could spare the flour for that. "I'd be delighted," she said. "Do you think you can find enough dry wood to make coals?"

The biscuits turned out to be Ruth's best yet, and she was most pleased with herself as the two of them sat at the campfire later, darkness softening around them. "What made you come here?" Jim asked, sometime after the second cup of after-supper coffee. "Such a long way from where young women usually go."

"My life, I think," she said, realizing she didn't know exactly. "Sometimes I get the feeling I was meant to be here. But that's silly, I guess. Yet I seemed to recognize this place the moment I saw it, as if I had been looking for it a long time without knowing." In the protective darkness, Ruth found herself telling Jim of her background in El Paso, of the feud between her aunt and mother, and of Cally's hushed past. She continued, describing the finishing school and her escape, hitching back to El Paso to become a flapper, her training as a nurse, and the move to the West. She told him not only the facts of the events, but also her struggles and confusions along the way. When she had spilled herself out, she stopped, feeling like someone who had taken off clothes for the first time ever and wasn't sure what to make of the

warm air on her body, without shame but with an uncertainty that felt tangible in the night.

Neither spoke for some time. Finally she said, "And you? Where did you grow up? You've been somewhere besides the other side of that mountain."

"I was born there," he said, "on the Black Canyon Reservation. When I was eleven some people—Mormons—came and took me away to raise. It was right after my grandmother died. They gave my parents money, shoes for my brother and sister. We were very poor; my folks did what they had to.

"They were good people, the Mormons, meant well. They wanted the best for me, just as my parents did. Sent me to good schools. Tried to teach me their values. I kept my mouth shut and did what they said, as my parents had told me to do. I learned to talk and act like a Mormon, but I was never one of them. I sure didn't look like them. And after all that education what was I to do? Even with a college degree I was still an Indian."

Jim stopped talking, and they sat with the sound of crickets. An occasional shooting star. Somewhere down canyon, coyotes began to howl. Ruth remembered the woman who had hissed *squaw* at Cally, the undisguised disdain and hatred in the woman's voice. She thought about the secrecy and shame associated with her mother's background.

"So I came back home. You could say I escaped, too," he said, after a while. "My father was dead by then—of cancer or alcohol, I'm not sure—and my mother had severe diabetes. My brother had been killed; my sister had married a white and left the reservation. But still it was home. It was where I wanted to be. And my mother needed me. After she died, I had a bout with alcohol for a while, but it didn't help for long. Then one day I found work with John here on this side of the mountain. That was three years ago."

They sat for a while longer, watching the campfire flame change to liquid embers, comfortable in the warm evening. Jim was easy to be with, Ruth thought, though she missed the excitement she felt with Matt. . . . She stopped herself. She would

not dwell on such things. Then Jim rose and stretched. "I'll camp up there on the mountain, just above the spring," he said, "if that's all right with you. We can get an early start that way."

He was in her camp as the sun came up. After coffee, they packed some jerky and the biscuits left from the night before, filled canteens in the spring, which had now recovered, and started climbing a long ridge that led up the side of Rocky Mountain. The ridge was fairly rocky and steep, the surface hard-packed, except near the sides, where draws led off and the mountain sagged into soft rivers of sand, as if it were dissolving as they walked. Her boots sank in, at times, and the loose, pebbly sand closed over them, pulling her a few inches back down the mountain with each step. After crossing one such draw, Jim stopped in the shade of a pinyon ahead of her and motioned for her to rest.

"The granite's wearing away there," he said. "Decomposing fast." Ruth let her feet slide out from under her and dropped down beside him. The granite wasn't the only thing decomposing, she thought. A sharp jab in one buttock caused her to lean to one side; she reached down and extracted a pine needle from her pants. She wriggled in her blouse to ease the tickle of sweat trickling down between her breasts, and waited while her breath began to come easier and her pounding heart slowed.

The green spot that was Glory Springs appeared minuscule far down in the canyon below. She was surprised how high they had come so fast, already deserting the pinyon for taller pines. When she climbed alone, Ruth set her own pace, as she did now everywhere in her new life. She uncorked her canteen and took a long, deep drink, restraining herself from allowing water to pour down her neck and into her shirt. Instead, she rationed out a mere handful to pat over her hot face.

"The rest of the way's not so steep," Jim said, regarding her. "And there'll be water near the top."

The climb did become less steep afterward, but more rocky and less direct, forcing them to skirt huge tangles of manzanita and thick clumps of scrub oak. At one point Jim held up a hand, and they stopped so he could listen, though Ruth heard nothing

other than the drum in her chest. "I think we surprised a doe," he said. When they rounded the next knoll, Jim showed her the animal's track.

"But how do you know it was a doe and not a buck?" Ruth asked, unconvinced, looking at the set of V's at her feet. The size of the print and the noise told him, he said, and bucks usually make more crashing as they go. They bent to examine the track, and Jim showed her how the ridges were still sharp and the ground underneath still tight from impact, explaining that the way the tracks came down side by side again and again showed how the deer was bounding up the mountain.

They climbed for about an hour more, until Jim led her into a passageway concealed between mammoth boulders, where weather had sculpted a near tunnel. They stepped out the other side into a small valley. Ruth blinked, for a moment not believing her eyes; how could a place so strangely beautiful be hidden high on the mountain?

A few feet from her, a small stream flowed down over smoothed pink-marbled rocks to form a small lake. Beside the stream rose a wall of the same colorful rock, embedded with large chunks of shiny flakes that mirrored the sunlight. Willows and tall grasses grew along the far rim of the pond. Ferns grew thick beneath tall pines and huge oaks that overhung the rocky outcrop. Hugging the rocks was a rounded lean-to, made of pole-like branches and covered with skins, and boughs and mud. A hawk floated out from the mountaintop and sounded a shrill cry.

"No wonder you stay up here." Ruth walked farther out toward the pond and looked around. That he trusted her enough to show her his camp touched her. "It's a world unto itself," she said, at once realizing that a similar attribute drew her to her own place, though his was far less accessible. She squatted and put a finger in the water, found it cold but not frigid. "But the inscriptions," she said, turning back toward him, "are they nearby?" Jim said nothing, but looked toward the rose-colored rocks.

She followed the trail of his eyes. It took a few seconds for her

to realize that some of the marbling she was seeing was geometrical, that mixed in among the natural rivers and swirls of color were hundreds of shapes etched purposefully into the stone.

Walking closer to the rock, she could make out some of the shapes. Many appeared to be animals: coyote or wolf, some definitely deer with antlers, some of those hugely pregnant. Still other figures looked to be large lizards. She also found human shapes, and swirls, intricate mazes, and sun circles with outward rays. There was a figure with what seemed to be a huge penis, beneath him another figure with large breasts, from whom a smaller figure was emerging. For a long time Ruth walked under the rock face, running her hand over the hard surface, trailing her fingers along the grooved lines of the forms, worn smooth by time, as if the feel of them would bring her closer to deciphering them. Instead, it deepened their mystery, and she found herself no closer to answers that would interpret the past than before. The lives of the early people here stayed as closed to her as the mystery of her mother's past, impenetrable as the etched stone. She was left with only the future to make sense of.

The next day when John Olsen and his miners arrived at Glory Springs, they made short work of Ruth's foundation. The six men accomplished with ease in a day what would have taken her four to complete. And probably with better results, she admitted. She helped them, worked hard too, making a total of seven on the project—which was one reason it was superior to her own efforts, she reminded herself. Glad as she was to have it finished, she was left with a sticky beholden feeling, although she knew there were no better people to be beholden to.

They all assured her it was common neighborly practice, as Jim had said, part of a tradition of house raising. She knew that was true, yet she suspected that the practice might also give them neighborly say-so in other areas of her life, some stake in her life that she didn't want anyone to have. It was that feeling of obligation that kept her from refusing when they insisted she accompany them back to the Olsens' for supper at dusk. Ruth knew she should have been more grateful for their thoughtful-

ness—and for the hearty food Kate prepared, which she did enjoy immensely.

After supper John drove her home, armed with a few supplies Kate sent to replace what the bear had eaten—Ruth couldn't even tell her story without Kate rushing in to help. But there she was, being ungrateful again, instead of being glad she could now have sugar with her oatmeal. It would be more than two weeks before her next allowance check arrived at Matt's store, which served as the post office for the community as well. She was grateful also to know that the Olsens would be taking her into town for supplies, and so she needn't rely on Matt Baxter. His affections turned out to be thin indeed. But that was a matter she was no longer concerned with.

On the way back to Glory Springs, John suggested that, because of all the lumber she had ruined on the rock, she build the bottom half of her cabin with stones from the wash—which were certainly in plentiful supply.

The next morning as she stood in front of the freshly poured slab, the sunlight of a new day filtering through the pinyons, Ruth felt the canyon take hold of her. Her uneasy feelings dropped away as she remembered how ruined she had felt after the storm. Now the damage had been repaired; what did it matter how? She squatted and touched a finger to the drying cement. Yesterday on a whim, when they finished the slab, she had removed a boot and pressed her bare footprint into the concrete of the cabin doorway. The surprise and chagrin of the miners, who had only just smoothed the surface, had embarrassed and almost stopped her. This morning she was glad she had not stopped. She admired her footprint, the round scoops of toes and heel seemed as much her mark on the land as the barred-heart brand was for the cattle ranch and cowboy she had come to hate. Her soleprint and the slab beneath it sealed a contract between herself and the place she had chosen.

Over the next few days, Ruth settled nicely into the routine of summer days, mixing small batches of concrete each morning and adding layers of stone wall for her cabin. Once she had collected rock and sand and piled it near her foundation, her work

did not take up all of the day, but left her time during the afternoon to read or to explore the mountains around the canyon. She especially enjoyed the days Jim would appear, usually early enough to help her add a few stones. Then the two of them would set out together, the Indian taking time to point out as they went various kinds and features of animal tracks that were new to her. Soon she was able to distinguish bobcat from coyote and to know whether the tracks were old or new, walking or running, though she was far from the understanding Jim had. Yet she was fascinated by what she learned and intrigued by this man who was as fluent in the language of the land as he was in words. Jim knew vegetation, too, and showed her plants that she found quite tasty mixed in with other dishes; she became particularly fond of the tender, arrowhead-shaped leaves of lamb's-quarters. The watercress near the willows was a favorite, too. While the plants fulfilled some of her need for greens, Ruth shot rabbits regularly to supplement her meat, and she had three cans of Hereford corned beef and two of stew left the afternoon before the Olsens were due to fetch her in for supplies.

She decided to bathe and set out clothing that afternoon, since her neighbors were due to arrive early the next morning. As she hauled buckets to fill her tub, Ruth found herself imagining her encounter with Matt at his store the next day. "Good day," she would say politely to him. "Could I have my mail, please?"—all traces of familiarity absent from her voice. Then, "Thank you, Mr. Baxter." When her fantasy progressed to include his response, Ruth would catch herself and erase the scene from her mind.

As she soaked in the tub, memories gathered over her with the soap on her skin, and when she closed her eyes to pour rinse water over her lathered hair, she found Matt's face in the darkness behind her eyelids. She turned in early, then tossed until she thought her cot might tip over. She got back up to resolve in her journal that she would quit this silliness, for "the man was not that likable" to her. Why should she be stuck on the way his eyes examined her, the promise of sun on his light hair? If they had bedded just once, she wrote, perhaps she would be able to forget

that one quick moment when he pressed his body against hers.

The sight of Matt Baxter's Model A down by the bend the next morning rocked Ruth back on her heels. Impatient with the lateness of the Olsens' arrival, she had looked up at the sound of the motor, expecting to see the flatbed. Instead, the modern tan shape swept away her guard. She almost took off running toward Rocky Mountain. Then she dropped down into the camp chair, rose quickly again, ducked, and dashed into the tent, where she paced, picked up the piece of mirror, glanced, paced again. When the car pulled in front of her camp, Ruth was still unsure what to do.

"I'll be right there, John," Ruth called, when the motor quit in front of her camp. She took a deep breath, grabbed her sweater, and stepped out of the tent, letting her face settle into an expression of surprise as she looked over at Matt's car. She stopped and stood without speaking as he climbed out of the Model A.

"Hello, Ruth," he said, walking around the slab toward her.

She waited quietly until he came near. "I should have known that wasn't the sound of John's motor. He's coming, you know, to take me to town."

Matt shook his head. "I stopped on the way up and told him I had your supplies with me. They sent up a few vegetables again. When I left them, they were on their way down to Juniper Valley. That Indian went with them."

"Jim," Ruth said. "His name is Jim."

"Okay, Jim, then." Matt looked over at the slab and the layers of rock around it. "So you're making your house of stone now?"

"I'm not sure why you're here," Ruth said. "I wasn't expecting to see you anymore. I can make my own arrangements."

"I told you I wouldn't let you down, Ruth," he said, looking back at her.

"That's already happened."

Matt gazed down at the ground. He began rubbing a pine ant into the sand with one foot.

"And May?" Ruth asked. "I trust she's getting stronger again, with Lily's help."

"No." Matt looked up again as he spoke. "That hasn't hap-

pened. She's worse than before . . . before you came. If it weren't for . . ." He closed his eyes and looked away.

"You shouldn't have left her, then, to come here today."

Matt pulled at a strand of hair above his ear. "Lily Rose is with her. Ruth . . ." He reached down and took her hand. "I had to see you again. I know it's wrong, Ruth . . . if only we hadn't . . ."

Ruth let him keep her hand. The cold sweat on his palm strengthened her. "It might be wrong—or it might not," she said, "but it has nothing to do with May's getting ill. Have you taken her to a doctor?"

He let her hand fall and reached back up to pull at his hair. "Dr. Bendall thinks she might have to go back to the sanatorium if she doesn't improve. I don't know what I'd do without Lily's help. She's a fine girl, Ruth, honest. She practically ordered me to make this trip, knowing how much it's been on my mind."

"How sweet of her," Ruth said, heat rising to her cheeks. "So I have her to thank for these groceries. We'd better unload them, then, so you can be off." She began walking toward the car.

"Ruth . . .," Matt said, starting after her. "That's not what I meant." He came up beside her as she took hold of the door handle and covered her hand with his. Pulling her fingers away from the lever, he turned her to face him. Suddenly his arm whipped around her waist to jam her body up against his. "It's wrong, we both know that. But I can't stop thinking about it, Ruth," he whispered into her hair and neck. "The way it felt to press up against you that night. I can't forget . . . I have to have you for my own."

Her breath caught as he crushed her into the side of the car, bending her back against the fender. Ruth thrust him away from her, escaping from the heat of his embrace and from the tingling chills she felt as his lips moved against her neck. "Stop now, for godsakes, since you think it's so wrong." She straightened the front of her blouse. "I don't want you blaming me for it."

He grabbed hold of her arms, but she put her hands up to his shoulders and held him away from her. "Wrong is wrong, Ruth," he said, hoarsely, his chest heaving. "I didn't make the rules."

"Rules? How can you talk about rules? What have they got to

do with the way we feel . . . what harm would we do?" She dropped her hands from his shoulders. "I don't care about rules. If I minded rules I'd still be . . ."

"Don't talk like that. You don't sound like . . . like any woman I ever heard talk." He gathered her to him. "But the devil knows I want you . . . oh, how I want you. Whatever you are."

When she turned her face away, his teeth bit gently into her neck. Ruth felt herself dissolving. "If you don't think it's wrong, why are you fighting it now?" he whispered, snaking a hand under her skirt. He pressed himself against her leg, and she felt him fumble at his pants. Before she could push him off, his fingers reached down and slipped under the rim of her underpants. Her resolve was rent with the edge of cloth that first gave, then came apart. Before she wrapped her legs behind him and pulled him into her, Ruth glanced quickly into the branches of the pinyon above her and over at the bluff across the wash. Then with her backside against the cold tin fender of the Model A, she rode the man hard toward that place where all men merged with the rest.

Ruth's experience in El Paso had taught her the cost of freedom from her monthly nuisance, and she had not failed to rinse herself with vinegar and herbs each time Matt left. Yet her relief was great the day her curse returned. The fact that she had only two of the new Kotex pads left and would soon have to resort to rags as she had used in her early years did not dampen her gladness, nor did the inconvenience that Matt was due up again tomorrow. Pads would not be included with her supplies, either, for she could not bring herself to list them.

After breakfast, Ruth mixed her daily batch of concrete and sculpted a layer over a small space of wall, jiggling each rock to fix it in the mudlike texture. The cabin walls had now reached

waist high, and it gave her much satisfaction to go through a doorway to reach the interior. The strenuous work helped to stem the cravings in her, for at the slightest provocation her body would remember its wild pleasures, her lust opening up to a vast array of possible partners. Sometimes she found herself imagining how it would be with Johnny Lee or some of the others, the sounds and smells of the men, the size and shape of them—already she had experienced substantial differences. Her intense urges both pleased and frightened her.

By the time the sun bore down overhead, Ruth had set the last of her day's stones in place. She stepped back to survey her work, then moved next to the fresh section of wall to measure its height against her body. Today's new layer, about four feet long, had raised that section as high as the cage of her ribs. Pleased with her progress, she sat under the pinyon and drank from the cooler. When she saw Jim's figure descending a ridge on the mountain, she felt as if she'd been waiting for him. Ruth had missed the Indian, for he had come only once since Matt began making his visits, and they had spent the day following the cattle trail up the *ciénaga seca*. She had been preoccupied the whole while, her body overruling her head at every chance, not only with bawdy memories, but also with revived appetite at the sight of the muscles of Jim's back and the movement of his buttocks beneath his cotton trousers. More than once she had to avert her eyes to keep her thoughts clear. Sometimes she had not.

Her shirt tied up under her breasts to let the currents cool her, Ruth drank from the dipper while he approached. Even in the shade of the pinyon the still air gave little relief, the heat bound up with the ringing din of locusts in the cottonwoods across the wash. Ruth remembered the cool pond behind Jim's place and wondered why he had left it to come to her oven of a camp—at least it had become one the last few days, until she sometimes felt like one of the biscuits she baked. She did not untie her blouse as he came near, his own shirt hanging down around his waist, hair knotted behind his head and held tight against it with a bandana. Her hair had grown too long for this heat; if she had

better scissors, she would reinstate her flapper cut for the summer and get it off her neck.

Ruth held out the dipper as Jim walked up and set his rifle against the pine. He nodded, then drank, watching her as she settled onto a small rock beside the tree. "Thanks," he said, hanging the ladle on the side of the tin container. He slid the knapsack from his shoulders and sat on the ground beside her, leaning his back against the trunk of the pine, and closed his eyes. Neither of them spoke. A deerfly droned by. Ruth quit wondering why he had come. It didn't matter. Whatever the reason, it felt good to have him there, and she had the odd sensation that they'd been sitting beneath the pinyon for a long time.

"Kate said to tell you to come down and help yourself to whatever is in her garden," Jim said, when some time had passed. "That was a few days ago, before we went up for a load of onyx. Maybe, when it's cooler, you'll want to walk down with me to get the vegetables. John or I will drive you home." He opened his eyes and smiled. "It's cooler there in the willows by the Olsens', you know. We could even stop and find a place in the stream to soak."

Ruth considered the wavering mosquito larvae she'd seen stuck to rocks where the stream calmed, the forests of fuzzy mosses that now inhabited the bottom of each small pond. Sweat trickled down her neck, finding its way under her collar and into the waiting pools beneath her breasts. "Why not go now, then," she said, "while it's still hot?"

Time flowed by unhurriedly, barely moving in the heat. "Okay," Jim said, finally. "That's a good idea." Ruth nodded, but didn't move from the spot. She had remembered during the interval that she was cursed. Should she defy the medical books? The notion that her condition should keep her from cooling her heated body angered her—as did the potential of bloody water spreading out around her and dribbling down between her legs to stain her pants as she rose from the water while Jim looked on. But she could not tell him this.

Jim pulled his knapsack onto his lap. "My magic bag," he said. Reaching inside, he extracted a cloth and unwrapped it. "Lunch," he said, holding some out to her.

The jerked meat was dry and tough, with a gamy taste, and a bit salty. Each bite required a great deal of chewing before she could swallow it down with hot water from Jim's canteen, the two of them being too lethargic to make the journey to the cooler for lukewarm liquid. But the food filled and promptly strengthened her.

Before leaving, each filled a canteen and wet a shirt in the scanty runoff from her spring, Jim first, who then turned his back and walked toward her camp, while Ruth soaked hers in the coldest water dripping from the bank, then slipped her arms back in the sleeves and covered her bare breasts with the chilled cloth. Her nipples flared up under the sudden cold, and with them her awareness of being half exposed and alone with this man, though he had never shown any sign of regarding her as anything other than a friend.

Their clothing had dried by the time they were halfway to the willows, so when they finally reached the beginning of the stream a ways up canyon from the Swedes' they sank down on the shady bank, parched, welcoming even the moist smell of decay beneath the willow trees. The steady stream had exposed layers of debris from other epochs, the preclay revealing slices of pebbly pink sands left by floods, along with darker tiers containing the packed roots that had gathered in quieter eras. Ruth sat on a rock and splashed her arms and face, took off her boots to soak her feet where the stream slowed and eddied into a small pool rimmed with watercress.

"You can bathe here," Jim said, getting to his feet. "I'll be just on the other side of those willows downstream."

Ruth waited for the lap and splash that told her Jim had entered the water, before she undressed, rolling her pad and underwear up with her pants. She waded out past the rocks into the waist-high water. The bottom of the pool was sandy under the soft moss that her footsteps loosened to float up and murk the clear fluid. When the shock of the cold on her hot body eased, she squatted, letting water flow over her shoulders. Bits of blood floated up to mix with the debris, dissolving and washing away in the stream's flow. Ruth kept still until the water cleared. She

closed her eyes and for a long while savored the cooling liquid that pronounced every pore on her skin.

She had heard no sound of Jim and looked about should he be hiding somewhere to watch her. And if he were, she wondered, remembering the sight of his bare shoulders, how bad would that be? She stood upright, then, aware of the thrust of her breasts, her nipples lifted to let the sun reheat them, the wet ends of her hair dribbling cold water down her back. She reached down and broke off a sprig of watercress, began nibbling at its tangy leaves.

The cowboys' horses neighed before they appeared, in time for Ruth to squat back down and hide from the riders who came into sight on the road a few yards away. The watercress and brush between the pond and the road nearly concealed her. Then one of the cowboys looked over. He pulled his buckskin to a halt. The other continued on. "Well, looky what we got here," Ruth heard the first say. The other cowboy turned his horse and rode back.

"What kind of a fish do you suppose that is, Charlie?" the returned rider asked.

"Don't know for sure. But I think it's some kind of cattle-hating fish. What do you say we get closer and find out?" Charlie Stine swung one leg over the saddle and dropped down, hanging his hat on the saddle horn to expose a tangle of orangy strands to the sun. Bobby Key remained fidgeting on his horse.

Ruth fumbled in the sand near the edge until her hands closed around a slick rock. "Don't come any closer," she said. She felt absurd giving orders from her lowered posture and was afraid the tone of her voice announced that fact.

"Hey, Bobby, it's a talking cattle-hating fish," Charlie said, walking toward her. "I'm gonna see if I can catch it and have it for dinner."

"Stop right where you are." Jim stepped out from the willow. "What do you think you're doing?" He kept his rifle lowered, though Ruth could see his finger on the trigger. Stine saw it too.

"Looks like it's an Indian-loving cattle-hating talking fish," Stine said. "I mighta known."

“I think you better just get back on your horse and leave right now.”

Stine snorted. Jim cocked the hammer and raised the rifle. For a moment Stine stood glaring, then turned and sauntered to his horse. Jim followed behind him, waiting while the cowboy replaced his hat, mounted, and the two rode off. While Jim climbed the knoll to make sure they left, Ruth rose and stumbled out of the water, her teeth chattering and her hands gone blue. She dressed behind the willow, remaining chattery, the warm air and sun failing to revive her.

“I’m sorry, Ruth,” Jim said, when he came down from the knoll. “I was half submerged and didn’t hear them until you did. And I didn’t think I’d have much effect walking out without pants or the rifle.”

“They were the same two who drove up the cattle, the ones I told you about,” Ruth said, her teeth banging against each other to cut hunks from her words.

Jim nodded. “The Texans. They’re new around here, only the last year or so.” He walked over and set down the rifle, took hold of her hands and rubbed them. “Here,” he said. “You need sand.” Ruth glanced down at the .22 and back at the road. “They won’t be back,” Jim told her, “at least not today.”

Jim lay Ruth facedown on the sun-soaked sand and covered her hands and arms with its warm blanket. He sat beside her and kept watch while, pressed against the heated ground, cell by cell, Ruth’s body began to calm. When she could breathe easy again, they walked on to the Swedes’.

Both Olsens overpowered Ruth with huge hugs as she and Jim came into the yard. Kate at once invited her for supper. John’s face clouded and his jaw clenched when they told him about the behavior of the cowboys. “Those two a bad lot, ya,” he said later, over a meal of cornbread and sweet goat chili. “I warn them good next time they come by here.” Ruth sat with the Olsens at the long table with Jim and four other miners, who spoke among themselves in Swedish and sometimes to Ruth in English with thick accents. Only Ingmar, a large man about thirty, spoke English as well as Kate and John.

"Some of the women said Johnny Lee was trouble, too," Ruth said, remembering Lily's words. "But he seemed a different sort to me."

John nodded. "That boy he okay, John Lee. Too much fun in him sometime. Too much liquor, too," he said laughing. "Shoot mouth off sometime. Don't mean harm. But the two today different story."

"Ruth could use one of your shotguns, maybe the twelve-gauge," Jim said. "She needs more than a twenty-two around with them coming through." He picked a moth out of his chili, flicked it toward the open door, and swiped the bottom of his bowl with cornbread. The moth flew back to join others banging into the lanterns at the ends of the table.

"I told you, Rute, this canyon no place for woman alone." John rose from the table and pulled a shotgun from its rack above a cabinet. "But you here now. Shotgun, it good idea." He held the gun out to her.

Ruth pushed back her bowl and took hold of the big shotgun, having no doubt that she might need it. "It's good for shooting quail, too," Jim said. "If you want to add them to your menu."

"I'll pay you," she said, despite Olsen's shaking his head and holding up a hand at her words. "When I get my check tomorrow. Matt will bring it with the supplies." She turned to Jim. "But I don't think I could kill those cute quail with their little topnots, Jim. A whole crowd of them come every morning to drink at the spring."

John and Kate exchanged glances. John Olsen shook his head again. "I take you to town," he said. "Baxter, he take the wife to San Bernardino."

"To the sanatorium? Did she have a turn?" Ruth asked, careful to keep her voice even, her face controlled, aware that the couple knew every trip Matt had made up past their house in the last two months. Each time he had stopped to offer them some different excuse, he told Ruth, some item he had forgotten to bring the time before, but she knew they must have questioned the frequency of his visits. "He told me she was improving." She felt Jim's eyes on her. In truth, she was not surprised at May's

decline; though Matt had claimed May was again gaining strength, Ruth had suspected all along he was fooling himself.

Kate got up to fetch the enamel coffeepot from the woodstove. "Ya, Baxter send word up with Ingmar and Olaf two days ago," she said, setting the pot on the wooden table, "when they were in town. Said to tell you." She turned back to the stove and unlatched the oven door.

"Aye, Baxter say wife took ill," Ingmar said.

"I go into valley with you in three day," Olsen said, pouring hot coffee into his mug and passing the pot down the line.

"You need more food now, Rute?" Kate asked, carrying over a steamy strudel from the oven. "I got everyting you want."

"You sure do," Ruth said. She breathed in the aroma of the pastry. "I have plenty until then, Kate, especially with all the vegetables you keep giving me." She took the pot that came her way and filled her cup to the brim. Kate's pastry was indeed a consolation, but it could not override the sick feeling Ruth got at the mention of May's condition.

"Maybe she's just gone in to be evaluated," Ruth said.

After the dishes were done, Jim drove Ruth up canyon to her camp. When the flatbed's headlamps fell on the tent as they pulled up, she noted that the flap had gapped open. Inside, she struck a match to the new kerosene lamp Matt had delivered. Everything was as she had left it, or at least it appeared so at first. Then Jim noticed a small lump moving under the blanket on the cot. He motioned for Ruth to stay put and threw off the cover.

The two of them jumped back as the snake shot out toward them, dived off the bed, and wriggled under the chest of drawers. Ruth reached under her mattress for the .22. "It's just a racer, Ruth," Jim laughed. "But they do move fast enough to make your heart stop."

"But that reddish color—I thought it was a rattler," Ruth sank down on the mattress. "I wonder how it got in here."

"I wonder too," Jim said. "Let's look." He picked up the lamp and went through the flap. "That's what I thought," he said as Ruth followed him out. Even in the weak light cast by the small

lamp, Ruth could see the ground was pocked with hoofprints. "They were here all right."

Checking further, they discovered that Ruth's water containers had been emptied, dumped over the stone walls into the interior of her cabin-to-be, and the rope that hung her burlap cooler had been frayed by knife so that it would fall at the slightest addition of weight or movement. By the time they got to her spring to find the chicken wire torn away and the new zucchini and tomato plants she had transplanted from Kate's garden trampled, Ruth was choked with fury. "How could they? How dare they?" she spat. "If they come back, I'll shoot them on sight." She swallowed hard. "Bastards!"

"They're bastards, all right," Jim said. "Dangerous ones. At least Stine is. I'm not so sure about the other—but he goes along." He set the lantern down and knelt beside Ruth, who had begun to pull off fragments of leaves and broken stems and prop up the rest with twigs, and helped her repair the little they could; then they replaced the chicken wire to protect what was left.

Before leaving, Jim showed Ruth how to crack open the shotgun and put in the shells, reminding her that the kick would be much stronger than the .22. When he was gone, she sat at her writing table and filled several pages of her journal with angry words, then more pages to explain to herself why she needn't feel guilty over May's deteriorating condition. When she finally blew out the lamp and lay back in the dark, sleep was slow to come. The day's events had doused the flames of sensuality that had raged for the last two months. Now each sound that disturbed the quiet night reminded her of the cowboys' threats. They had violated her home; what else might they do? That fear chilled her more than had the images of cougars and bears materializing from dark outlines those first nights in the wild. This was not a peril to be explained away as an imagined danger.

The morning before the Hudsons' party, Ruth set each stone in place with a jaunty little half-dance. The day had taken forever to arrive. After she finished the last section of stone, which raised the entire layer to just above her breasts, she began hauling water for her bath. Ruth had first heard about the event when the Swedes took her to town. It was just as well that Matt had not been at the store that day when they picked up groceries. He had gone to visit May in San Bernardino, leaving Lily Rose in charge of the store, and the girl did not indicate that he had left a note for Ruth. Every day, she had half expected to see his Model A appear around the bend, until John Olsen had told her Matt was gone. Between bouts of guilt and lust she found herself wondering what he would do when May returned from the sanatorium,

since it would no longer be appropriate for Ruth to nurse her. She would ask him at the Hudsons' dance tonight—assuming he would be there. Local gatherings were such occasions that folks had been known to leave deathbeds to attend.

Ruth had received letters from Cally and Myrtle when she was in town. There had been some scandal involving Cally and the mayor, her aunt wrote, without going into details on the trouble, and for that Ruth was grateful. Myrtle warned her not to believe the “shameless hussy,” who had once again brought such disgrace to the family name. As for Cally's letter, it was intended to remind Ruth that El Paso was where she belonged and that she should return immediately. No doubt Ruth's allowance check was dearly missed. Only at the very end of the letter did Cally make oblique reference to the scandal, cautioning Ruth to beware of rumormongers and small-minded people. Once she read the letters, Ruth used them to start her evening campfire.

The Olsens arrived midafternoon to fetch her. With the summer heat upon them, the event wouldn't start until just before dark. Like most families in Juniper Valley, the Hudsons had electricity—which made possible outdoor lights and a late start of the potluck. The Hudsons' house was roomier than John and Kate's and more equipped for social gatherings. Tables with benches were set end to end behind the kitchen so that all could be seated around what appeared to be one long picnic table, with dishes of food down the middle. Ruth had brought her own contribution this time, a pot of rabbit stew. The dancing would take place after dark, inside on wooden floors where the light was good.

Because the Hudsons' place sat back against several piles of boulders, with many hidden spaces for parking, it took some minutes before Ruth could determine that Matt had not arrived. Then she joined the women on the porch and watched each approaching trail of dust on the dirt road, while children played kick-the-can in front of them. The sun lay low on the horizon when the familiar shape of the Model A finally came into view. She remained seated beside Kate as Matt pulled up, observing as he walked around the car to open the passenger door. First Lily Rose, then her mother exited the automobile.

Ruth noted a tightness in Matt's jaw as he greeted her that was not present when he spoke to others gathered on the porch. He avoided her eyes. He and the two women he brought were only staying for the potluck, he told Martha Hudson as they came up the steps. "We'll leave before the dance. I'm making another trip in to San Bernardino early in the morning, and Lily Rose has to mind the store." Ruth listened closely as he answered Mrs. Hudson's questions about his wife's stay at the sanatorium, his voice brittle beneath the words.

"This must have been a shock. You thought she was getting better," Ruth offered. He looked at her, then, and nodded slowly, his pupils shrinking to tiny dots in the pale blue of his eyes. He looked away.

"Even her doctor had said she was improving," Lily Rose added. "You mustn't blame yourself, Matt. You did everything you could."

"Did I?" Matt said with some bitterness.

Ruth knew it was not himself he was blaming. "What made the doctor believe her improved?" Ruth asked, thinking of her own intuition in the matter.

"Ya, doctor not always know," Kate said, her usually robust face pale. "She die at twenty, my Sarah. I told them, but they not listen."

"May hid the worst from us," Lily said. "She didn't want anyone to know. She made sure even Matt didn't know."

"And if my Lily Rose hadn't come across those bags of soiled tissues, no one would have known until she was dead of it." Mrs. Rose reached over to pat her daughter's arm. "Thank God you cared enough to investigate."

"Mother!" Lily said. "You shouldn't . . ."

"All that blood," Matt said. He bent his head and covered his eyes with one hand. "I never knew."

"I'm so sorry, Matt," Martha Hudson said, her leathery face gone soft with pity. "How long had that been going on?"

"We don't know, Mrs. Hudson," Lily said. "It could have been for some time."

"She wasn't coughing up blood when I left," Ruth remarked.

"I would have known. Even the fevers had left her. She was much stronger." She noticed Matt was staring at her, his face empty of expression.

"Are you sure, Ruth?" Lily asked, a bit of mettle showing beneath her sweetness. "She was very good at hiding things."

"I would have known," Ruth repeated. "I'm sure"—though she couldn't help remembering May's words that morning in the tent.

"Rute is nurse. She know if someting wrong," Kate told Lily. "That morning after the dance, Rute worry about her." Kate looked over at Matt. "Rute knew what to do."

"Maybe she shouldn't have left May for that godforsaken wilderness," Mrs. Rose said. "Then the poor woman might never have worsened."

"I told you she was improved when I left." Ruth got to her feet. "May no longer had need for a nurse. That's why I left," Ruth said, though she knew there was more to the truth, not just the flirtation between her and Matt but the fact that she'd only taken the job to come west and could hardly wait to leave and begin her own life. "I'm going out to see John," Ruth told Kate. She could not bring herself to say "excuse me" to the rest, as she knew was expected. Except for Kate, Ruth didn't care whether they excused her or not.

She walked around the house and out past the crowd of men near the tables, toward an opening in the cluster of boulders, and slipped out of sight behind them. Two ravens rattled their throats and barked at her from the top of the rocks, then flew off. She flattened her back and shoulders against the stone, reaching behind with shaking hands to grip the rough granite. The rock's surface felt solid beneath her fingers. If only she could absorb its stillness to quiet her heart. She took deep breaths, swallowing hard to quell the welling rage and shame. Who were they to pass judgment on her? She should just give them something to pass judgment on, march right back to the porch and slap Matt's sheepish face, grab Lily by the throat and shove her face-first into one of her mother's creamy casseroles.

So now they all accused her—all but Kate. It stood to reason

that Matt found it convenient to blame her for his failure to his wife. Well, maybe she had asked for that. It was unfair, but it was the way men usually operated. She'd seen it enough times over those years with Cally. But, God, she hated to compare herself with her mother. She wasn't about to follow that twisty path.

Then why was she fooling around with a married man, she asked herself? Ruth couldn't say that she loved him—she had never loved any of them. But that didn't keep it from hurting when he disregarded her. She was unable to find an answer beyond the fact that he was there, and he attracted her. Maybe that was all there was to it. But, be that as it may, she reminded herself, their couplings had nothing to do with May's worsening. May had never known what went on between them. Ruth was sure that Matt hadn't told her. She wondered for a moment if Lily Rose suspected, might have hinted at it to May, then dismissed the idea; someone as naive as Lily, who knew nothing beyond the inside of a living room, would never entertain such a thought.

Ruth had no desire to go back and face the politeness inside—a civility that was as cool to her as it was warm to Lily. But what was she to do, hide out in the rocks until Matt left? Surely Kate would miss her eventually and come out to find her. Ruth walked on, skirting the backside of the boulder and heading down a path that led toward the interior of the cluster. She had gone only a few yards in when she nearly tripped over a leg that suddenly shot out from a cove in the rocks. She peeked around the corner to see Johnny Lee tipping back a flask, so engrossed that he noticed her only when she spoke.

“What are you doing out here, Johnny? I hope you don't intend to keep all that moonshine to yourself,” Ruth said. Maybe there was a way out of her dilemma.

Johnny looked up at her and grinned, pulled on the handlebars of his moustache. “Why, just having myself a little drink or two before dinner. Helps the food go down.” He took another swig and held out the flask. “Well, come sit yourself beside me, you sweet thing.” He patted the ground next to him with his other hand. “There's nobody I'd rather share with than you, Ruthy.”

Ruth settled against the rock next to him. It felt good to find someone glad to see her. She tipped the flask up and took a healthy belt, relishing the sharp burn as the liquor made its way toward her stomach. She took another and passed back the flask. "I forgot how good you do that for a woman," he said. "Haven't seen you drink since . . . well, I guess it was the last dance here at the Hudsons?"

"That was the last whiskey I had," she said. "But I feel in the mood tonight."

"I hear tell you had a run-in with a couple Heart Bar boys," Johnny said. He made a depression in the sand with the flask and left the liquor between them.

"More than one run-in." Ruth felt heat rise to her cheeks. "Then they went through my camp while I was gone and wreaked havoc, deliberately ruined my new garden—the one I had to replant after their cattle stomped out my first one. I was counting on those vegetables. I'll give those cowboys a piece of my mind when I see them." She raised the flask to her lips again.

"That might well be tonight," Johnny Lee said. "They're big trouble, all right, those two. We wouldn't hire 'em over at Mound Springs when they showed up in the area about a year or so ago. Don't need that kind of headache."

"That why you and Stine were fighting at the Swedes?"

"Nope. There doesn't have to be a why with Stine. I just have to pound that devil every chance he gives me." Lee swigged more whiskey. "How do you think the food's comin' along?"

"Who cares?" Ruth took back the flask from him. She was feeling stronger already.

"Well, I do, kinda. Us cowboys need to eat something besides beans, you know. And they got everthing a man could eat just waiting over there on that table." He waited for her to drink, then took the flask and screwed on the cap. A cactus wren sang out just as the sun vanished behind a red glow above the mountain horizon. "But know what I like best about eatin'? That way you can drink even more before you fall down," he said with a wide grin. "And we got some dancin' to do, darlin'." He got to his feet and reached out a hand to her.

Ruth laughed despite herself. She allowed him to pull her up, stood for a moment until her dizziness passed. "Just one more," she said, "before we go."

He looked reluctant but handed back the flask. "Easy, girl," he said. "Don't worry. There's plenty more in my saddlebag."

Ignoring him, she took a long drink before returning the whiskey. She heard Kate calling her name. "That means it's time to eat, I bet," she said, slipping her arm through the crook of Johnny's held out for her as they walked back toward the crowd.

Ruth sat next to Johnny on the bench, across from Kate and John. She had noticed Matt seated by Lily and her mother down at the far end of the table and made a point of not glancing his way, though it wasn't long before even those next to her became blurred with dim light and whiskey, as did conversation and the differing tastes of the foods on her plate. Sometime during dinner Kate said she was feeling poorly and that she and John would have to leave early. The two of them tried to talk Ruth into going with them instead of staying the night at the Hudsons'. But Ruth was feeling exceptionally fine by this time and was not about to miss the dancing. The evening was just beginning to get exciting. After Johnny Lee walked over to tell John Olsen that he'd "ride lil' Ruthy home if'n she wants to go," the couple gave up and headed out.

Ruth didn't see the Heart Bar crowd ride in when she and Johnny Lee walked back behind the boulder for an after-dinner shot or two, didn't notice them alone at the table when she and Johnny returned and headed into the house to dance. She did notice Lily Rose and her mother waiting in the car while Matt conversed with some men on the porch. Ruth went inside and vowed to think no more of him, but he came up beside her when Johnny went to get her a glass of water.

When Matt whispered her name, she turned to look at him. "Just look at you," he hissed. "You look like a drunken slut." The mixture of hatred, lust, and jealousy on his face seemed to knock her back against the wall she'd been leaning on. Then he turned away and was gone, and Johnny was there with a glass of water. Then they were dancing to the fiddles, and she was having trouble

keeping on her feet during the peppy steps of fast tunes, Johnny Lee steadyng her so she did not fall. It was her disequilibrium that knocked her against Charlie Stine as Johnny spun her around.

"Watch where you're going, squaw woman," he said. Ruth heard him clearly, but before she could respond, Johnny had pulled her away into the whirl of dancers again. For the rest of that tune, she kept hearing Stine's voice repeating those words in her head, a dark stillness in the blurred world of motion around her. When the song ended, Ruth broke away from Johnny and ran toward the door, where she'd seen Stine last, searching all the bleary faces for his as she went. She would kill that man. Another dance began and Johnny followed, catching hold of her and trying to pull her back onto the dance floor. She wrenched herself from his grasp and marched toward the door, Stine's voice and Matt's expression fused into a hot poker to goad her.

Ruth found Stine on the porch with the rest of the Heart Bar cowboys. She didn't hesitate, but cut through the small crowd, pushing the men between them aside until she stood staring straight up into his face. "What did you say to me in there?" she demanded.

"You heard me," he said, pulling his hat brim down.

"Say it again, then. I dare you." Ruth stepped a few inches closer to him. The men around them shuffled and guffawed.

"I don't like to repeat myself," Stine said.

Ruth pushed at his chest. "Say it," she yelled. "Say it, you son of a bitch. I double dare you." Behind her she heard Johnny calling.

"All right, then, squaw woman. I said to watch where you're going," he said calmly, steadyng himself. "And careful where you put your hands." Stine leaned over and stuck his face next to hers. "Squaw woman," he jeered.

Ruth struck him with all the force she could pack into her fist. It was enough, along with the surprise of it, to knock the man against the porch rail. His hat flew off into the dirt. Before he could recover and turn on her, she felt herself being pulled back

and swung to the side, and would have fallen had she not crashed into the wall beside the doorjamb. Johnny had removed her and jumped in, in her place. Furious at being rescued, she strode back toward the men, grabbed hold of Johnny's arm, which was now pounding Stine's face, and tried to pull him away. "He's mine," she yelled. "Get away."

Maybe it was because the cowboys who pulled her off were laughing at her that she began trying to punch them instead. Then the porch was crowded with men, and everyone was shouting and arguing. Martha Hudson was peeking out from the doorway, along with the other women behind her. Larry Hudson was trying to hold Ruth still and quiet her. "What did the man do, dear?" Hudson kept saying, and "Why don't you go inside now?" Someone had pulled Johnny Lee off of Stine, who lay on the porch groaning. Johnny brushed off his chaps and walked over to her.

"Come on, Ruthy, I'll take you home," he said. "He won't bother you for a while."

"What did the man do, Johnny?" Hudson called as they walked away. "Don't you think you should just take the poor woman inside?" He stepped off the porch after them into the moonlight as Johnny pulled Ruth up behind him on his horse. He wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Now hold on tight, darlin'," he said, and kicked the horse.

Ruth clung to the wiry body in front of her, while wind whipped back her hair. Each gallop of the horse threatened to toss her body out into the night. The events behind her became hazy and dissociated, swept away by the huge animal power that thrust her body up again and again. Sweat trickled between her legs where they rubbed the beast's back.

After that, the night grew holes, blank except for a flash or two that came back when she half woke the next morning, her eyes sealed against the light: she and Johnny on sand somewhere while the horse drank; the two of them bending to drink water like horses; more whiskey; Johnny pulling at her clothes; her pushing him away; back on the horse again, then down; her throwing up; Johnny leading her somewhere to lie down. She

fought against the consciousness restoring these memories, but the early sun was drilling heat into her face; she turned over, but it drilled harder into her back. The boulder she'd buried seemed to have risen and attached itself to her shoulders; it was all Ruth could do to crawl into the shade behind a juniper and fall back asleep. When she woke again, her mouth dry as sand, her head felt a bit less dense; she looked around—first to find the water she craved, then to question her surroundings and the fact that she had been left sleeping on the bare ground. Neither Johnny Lee nor his sorrel was anywhere around. Attempting to piece together what had happened from the few flashes left made her brain hurt more, and her heart and dignity as well, so she quit trying and concentrated on finding water.

She managed to sit up, her head growing more massive as she rose and throbbing violently. But she began to recognize the landscape; though she had never seen it from quite this angle, her outhouse was not ten feet away. When she reached the privy, Ruth realized her underwear was missing and the top of her dress had come unbuttoned.

The distance to the water cooler seemed insurmountable, but her need was great. By the time Ruth reached it, her head was screaming, and she could hardly drink. Her stomach kept wanting to hurl up what the rest of her body demanded. From the tent, already swollen with the sun's excess heat, Ruth retrieved a pillow for her sore head so she could lie in the shade of the pinyon, and fell into another strange semi-sleep for several hours. By late afternoon her body had begun to revive, and with its revival came a further deepening of memory. She lay under the tree, her mind clearing while her eyes followed the motion of the pine branches in afternoon breeze. Odd fragments of recollection came to her. She remembered coming to, finding Johnny's hands on her breasts. He was slamming himself between her legs, where she had been open and enjoying him in her stupor. She had bent her legs and shoved him off.

She recalled him crawling back for her, apologetic, mumbling her name, his face drunken and desperate in its desire. In the half moonlight she saw the flash of belt buckle around his knees. The

shine of skin on his thighs. She had met him halfway, pushing him over sideways and backward. Then she rode him, plunging, the way she had ridden the horse, galloping his body into the night. Anger had put a sharp edge to her lust, bursts of pleasure exploded inside her. She had never felt more powerful and had meant to ride the man into the ground. Like a lion, she would devour all of them, every last one. Again and again the man pushed himself up into her and she rode him down. Someone was laughing, shouting out, "Ride 'em, cowboy!" There was a point where Johnny had cried out, but she had kept pounding on. A voice was laughing and sobbing at the same time. She felt him struggling under her as he yelled for her to stop, calling her names when she pressed on. But she did not stop—not until he lifted and pushed her upward and she was catapulted into the night.

Well, Ruth thought, I guess I got carried away. A dark laugh bubbled up as a hiccup, and a vise gripped the sides of her head. She closed her eyes. Not that she thought any of it funny. But it was better than worrying about the stories that mouthy cowboy would tell about her. Getting to her knees, Ruth put a hand on the trunk of the pinyon and pulled herself to her feet. She finished unbuttoning her dress, let it fall to her feet, and stepped out of it. She needed to bathe herself, but hauling water was out of the question. At least she still had time to use the vinegar and herbs.

Ruth ate a few beans cold from the can and drank water till her stomach sloshed. She didn't allow her mind to dwell on anything beyond her own thirst and hunger, the calls of quail watering at her spring, crickets warming up in the bushes at sunset, a coyote beginning to yip in the distance. Gradually, the canyon reassured her.

Gathering her .22 and the shotgun from under the back edge of her outhouse, where since Stine's last visit she had taken to hiding them when she left her camp unattended, she set both beside her cot—as if she might use them to chase away any other memories that crept up on her. But when she blew out the lamp and lay alone in the tent, moon illuminating the white canvas,

she was visited by the question she had avoided earlier: Just who was this woman she was becoming, this woman so out of control? What would become of her? Ruth had been thrilled to leave behind the constraints that had been placed on her in El Paso. But what was to replace them? She had spent her whole life fighting others' attempts to control her. Now that no one else was around to control her, Ruth wasn't really sure she knew how—or why, or when—she should control herself. And the more she broke the rules, it appeared, the more rules she was willing to break. That could be as bad in its own way as ending up being someone like Mrs. Hudson or, worse yet, Mrs. Rose. It was the old choice between Cally or Aunt Myrtle all over again. Ruth was neither, would be neither. But what then, how was she to know how to be, even here in this place where she could be free? Or was she truly free? she wondered. Were there things that this place itself required of her?

Ruth woke the next morning filled with worry over Kate. In a dream she couldn't remember the details of, she had seen Kate's face pale, all jolliness gone from her eyes. As Ruth built a fire for coffee, she made up her mind to walk down after breakfast to see if Kate had recovered from her ailment. Ruth felt much recovered herself, her mind clear and fresh again, her body filled with energy. And she was ravenous. Her thoughts from the night before now seemed unreal. What was done could not be undone—and why should she place restraints upon her inclinations? Wasn't that exactly what made women the submissive creatures she despised?

While she waited for water to boil, Ruth inspected the rock walls of her cabin. It seemed strange not to start her day by mixing concrete, but when John Olsen had come up to get her for the dance, he told her not to add another layer. "Is good, Rute," he had said, walking around the rectangle, bending now and again to eye the evenness of the structure. "Fine level." He nodded in approval. "Build rest with wood now. I come and get you started." The two of them had surveyed what remained of her building supplies, which was everything but the cement and the planks she had used on the boulder.

She would need to learn new skills to finish her cabin. Laying the rocks had been backbreaking work, but simple. Constructing walls and a roof with wood would be more complicated than nesting stones in cement. This time, Ruth decided as she started down the road toward the Swedes', if John suggested the help of his men, she would accept at once. He had at least offered to get her started.

Ruth arrived at the Olsens' to find Kate's face still as wan as the night of the dance, though the woman claimed that she felt her old self. "It was someting I eat," Kate said. "Too much. Ya, I try everything." Her good humor had certainly returned. John Olsen, along with Jim and the miners, had taken a load of onyx down to the valley to sell. She had hoped to ask John when he might be up to help her with the construction, but Kate assured her that John had said he would come up to help soon. "Now, come," Kate ordered her. "Time for the coffee."

Afterward, the two of them walked to the garden, where she helped Kate with the weeding. The uninvited thrived also in the dark, rich soil. Kate raised the small dam to let stream water run into the rows as they worked. In Ruth's small patch at Glory Springs, the spring runoff rose on its own and flowed from the little pool to saturate her garden soil sometime during each night, and then the soil became dry again during the heat of the summer day. When they had weeded and watered and picked the ripened vegetables, the women returned to the house. Kate heated up a stew with goat meatballs and vegetables and made biscuits for lunch on the outdoor stove beneath the cottonwoods that she used during the day to keep the house cool.

Ruth had been waiting to ask Kate about the Sarah she had spoken of that night at the Hudsons', wondering if that memory had been the cause of her feeling poorly, but she struggled with just how to ask. Finally, as they sat at the window watching a nanny trying to fend off twin kids from her teats, Ruth blurted out, "Tell me about Sarah, Kate. Who was she?"

"It was long time ago. Twenty year. Before we came to this canyon." Kate said after a short silence, her face and body drooping as she continued. "She was our only child, Sarah. When she

gone, we came here.” She pushed up from the table and shuffled toward the pantry, which tunneled from the kitchen into the hill behind the house. Ruth waited until Kate returned with a tin box. Setting it carefully on the table, Kate unlatched the lid and opened the box.

The girl in the photos she spread on the table was as blond as Ruth was dark. Not a frilly blond, like Lily Rose, but sturdy and as capable as Kate. Ruth put her hand on Kate’s arm. “She was beautiful,” Ruth said. “And strong. I’m so sorry, Kate. It must have been . . . been so hard.”

Kate’s face looked tired as she gathered up the pictures and locked them back in the box. Her face had aged ten years since Ruth asked her question, and she was sorry she’d stirred things up.

“It was the cancer,” Kate said, placing a hand on her breast. “My mother and sister too. I told them. But Sarah . . . she was the hardest.” Kate took the box back to the pantry.

Though Ruth had intended to leave after lunch, now she could not, and she and Kate spent the rest of the afternoon outside in the shade of the cottonwood, Kate telling stories about her life in the old country as they prepared a huge chicken stew for John and the miners to eat when they returned. Chopping vegetables as she listened, Ruth admired the way Kate had been able to retain such a generous and caring nature despite a life that would have warped a lesser person out of shape, the way it had Cally, giving her a mean and selfish edge that Ruth had been the recipient of time and again. Kate’s spirit was as abundant as her body.

As for Ruth’s stories, it took persistent probing on Kate’s part to get her to begin telling stories of her own growing up. Once started, she could not stop, and the two women were still deep in conversation when the flatbed drove into sight, and neither of them had heard its approach.

Ruth ended up staying for the stew she had helped to prepare. The miners, even John, brought back with them the odor of whiskey on their breath—just the smell was almost more than Ruth could stomach after her own adventure. It was during

their stop at the Red Dog Café, a thinly disguised speakeasy like the Lone Star, that they'd run into Matt Baxter, who told them that May had weakened even more. Her condition was so serious that Matt was returning to San Bernardino to spend some days near her. Ruth felt a rush of sympathy for the woman. It was a revelation to find that her thoughts were for May and not at all for the husband she had coveted and now disliked intensely. Ruth pictured herself begging the dying woman to forgive her—and no doubt May would. Ruth would not confess, of course, since she still hoped May knew nothing.

Jim had arrived with the miners, but disappeared soon after they unloaded. Ruth was pleased to see him return shortly after they sat for supper. He nodded and sat at the table across from her. Ruth smiled, then turned her attention back to John, who was talking about their work in the low desert mines during winter. She'd felt her cheeks flush at Jim's glance and could not look back again. His eyes had shaken loose the memory of her night with Johnny Lee, only now she was sure Jim had observed it all. But that was impossible, she knew—simply a product of her imagination and the guilt she tried to disown. But what was it about this man that tortured her conscience and left her with a shame she could not escape?

The moment he spoke, asking how her damaged garden had survived the cowboys' trampling, all tightness left her. "Between the two of us, I think we saved about half of it," she said. "Lost most of the squash. All but two plants." She took a breath and met his look full on. It contained no disapproval.

"The story's around town that you showed those cowboys a thing or two that night at the Hudsons," Jim said, smiling. The miners around him were smiling at her too.

Ingmar patted Ruth on the back. "Ya, hear you was tiger after him."

"A lion, actually," Ruth said. The miners laughed out loud. Only John looked at her with concern.

"You keep shotgun handy, Rute?" he asked.

"By my bed."

Jim glanced over by the door. "Then I hope you brought it

with you today,” he said. “You might run into those two on the road again sometime.”

Ruth shook her head. “You’re right, though.” She must get into the habit of bringing the gun with her, though she hated the idea that their threat should place such a limitation on her freedom—that even in her own canyon she could not travel safely. And that damn gun was heavy to carry.

Before Jim drove Ruth home, John Olsen assured her that he would be up in a few days to get her started on the rest of her cabin, and even though she sensed some mystery in John’s demeanor, she trusted him and left feeling lighter inside than she had felt in some time. She looked forward to being home and to having soon a real house of her own. Small and primitive as it would be, Ruth knew the stone structure would stand strong for a long time. To have neighbors like Jim and the Olsens was fortunate. She realized, as the truck bumped its way up the rut road, that she had no desire to see Matt Baxter again. And who knew what else lay ahead for her; she could see no more of the future, she thought, than she could see ahead of her on the dim path illuminated by the truck’s headlamps, the vague shapes of shrubbery looming for an instant, then folding into the darkness the way events melt back into the times surrounding them.

Ruth took the east ridge up the mountain so she would have an unobstructed view of the road between her place and the Swedes'. But when she reached the high ridge, she saw no sign of a flatbed inching its way up canyon. Blood pulsing against her temples from exertion in afternoon heat, she flung herself down under a pinyon. A week had passed without her seeing a sign of John Olsen, and her patience had worn as thin as a page in her journal. Jim had walked up three days ago to take an inventory of her construction materials, so she was sure Olsen did plan to help her. But she wanted to get on with it. For the first few days she'd counted herself lucky to have time to climb around and explore, to hunt fresh meat for her table each night. But she tired

quickly of the novelty, finding it impossible to concentrate on exploration when her overriding concern was for completing her cabin. She found nothing more aggravating than waiting, and it was only her determination to have a cabin that would last that kept her from attempting to finish the place herself.

Ruth poured a dab of canteen water in her palm to wet her face, then peeled off her blouse so the light wind could reach the sweat on her torso. She was about to remove her boots and lie back beneath the pine when she noticed a rider in the canyon below, just the other side of the bend down from her camp. Reaching for her .22, she placed it across her lap and tried to make out more details.

Before the figure disappeared behind the ridge, she determined that he wasn't riding Stine's big buckskin, but a small sorrel—like Johnny Lee's. The man didn't seem large enough to be Stine, either; his frame appeared wiry—also like Lee. But why would Lee be returning after what had happened? Ruth slipped on her blouse as she rose, gathered up the rifle and canteen, and started down the mountain, buttoning her blouse with her free hand.

It was some time before she got another clear sighting of the man. By then he was already parked in a chair at her camp, tipping back a flask while his horse grazed near the spring. The closer view confirmed that he was indeed Johnny Lee. Better Johnny than Charlie Stine, Ruth told herself as she stopped on the way down for the shotgun she had concealed underneath a scrub oak. But she didn't want to see either of them, not anyone but Jim and John Olsen—and the crew of miners she hoped John would bring.

Lee rose when Ruth walked into camp, smiling hugely beneath his moustache. An empty whiskey bottle sat propped against the saddle on the ground beside him. He paid no attention to the two guns she was carrying. "Why, there you are, little darlin'. I wondered where you'd got yourself to," he said, snaking an arm around her as she walked. Each word he spoke floated toward her in a cloud of whiskey breath.

Ruth shrugged him off and claimed the chair he had vacated, sitting with the guns erect between her legs. "Don't be like that, sweetheart," Johnny said, squatting in front of her. He took her hand. "I'm sorry I ran off like that, Ruthy. But you like to of scared the bejesus out of me. Never before have I seen a gal like you." He pulled her hand toward his puckered lips.

Ruth shoved his hand away. With her foot, she pushed him over on his backside, his hat bouncing between them. The man cried out, then got to his knees and reached around to his back pocket for a small glass flask. "Almost broke it," he said. Unscrewing the cap, he brought the container to his lips, but stopped without taking a drink. He held the flask out to Ruth instead.

Ruth shook her head. "C'mon, Ruthy, I know you like this stuff. I 'member the things you like," he said with a sloppy smile.

"Why did you come back here, Johnny?" Ruth got to her feet. "What do you want with me?" She stepped around the man and his hat and walked to her tent with the firearms.

"You know what I want with you, Ruthy. You know why I came back," he called after her. Laying the .22 on her bed, she cracked the shotgun. The shells were intact. She slammed it shut and flicked off the safety. Lee was standing, hat held in front just below his waist, when Ruth charged out of the tent with the shotgun.

"You can get right back on your horse and leave," she told him.

"Now, darlin', you don't have to be like that." Lee put on his hat. "Shucks, I don't want nothin' more than to do the right thing by you. I want to marry you, gal." He stood before her, grinning wider than ever.

"What are you talking about? I'm not marrying you, Johnny Lee."

"Sure you are, Ruthy. Wouldn't be right not to, after what happened between us." He tipped back his hat with the back of a hand. "'Course, it all scared me at first. Didn't know what to do with all that—comin' from a little thing like you. But I'm ready for you now."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Now, go on and get out of here."

"I'm not going nowhere without you, darlin'. I'll ride you down to the preacher right now, or we can wait for mornin'."

Ruth brought the shotgun up to her shoulder. "You're riding off, all right, but not with me."

Johnny pulled the flask from his hip pocket and unscrewed the top. "Go ahead," he said, "shoot me if you want. My life's in your hands, Ruthy." He raised the flask and took several swallows.

Ruth took aim. Johnny blotted his moustache with the back of a hand and looked at her. "Sure you don't want some?" He held the flask out to her, then took another swallow himself. Ruth lowered the gun.

"I knowed you wouldn't shoot a man who loved you," Johnny said, stepping toward her. Ruth moved back fast.

"Don't press your luck," she said. "I want you to leave, Johnny."

"Say you'll marry me first."

"I won't marry you. I told you that."

"But you have to, sugar darlin'."

"No, I don't. I won't. Now get out of here."

"Nope," Johnny said, straightening his hat brim. "You'll have to shoot this cowpoke first, drag my carcass off."

"That can be arranged," Ruth said, raising the shotgun. Johnny grinned, crossed his arms, and looked at her, teetering on legs spread wide apart.

"Oh, for godsake," Ruth said, walking past him toward the campfire. "Stand there like an idiot, then. I'm going to fix myself coffee and something to eat."

Ruth set the shotgun beside her and piled the kindling into the fire ring. Johnny Lee stumbled after her, bending occasionally to put in a stray stick, all the while keeping up a barrage of slurred nonsense meant to persuade her. She lit the fire and filled the coffeepot from her water bucket, then pulled the rabbit she'd shot that morning from her cooler and began to braise it, stymied as to how to rid herself of this drunken cowboy who only stopped talking long enough to slug down more whiskey. His behavior might well have been funny, if it weren't so annoying.

Likable as he could be, Ruth had no desire for a repeat of the other night—how desperate and drunk she must have been—let alone a lifetime with him. Look at the complications that just one encounter had wrought.

Johnny Lee collapsed into the camp chair as Ruth worked. Gradually, he began to wind down and soon quit talking completely. Between belts he sat staring off at the mountain with glazed eyes. When Ruth served up two plates of food—thinking to sober him out of his delusions—and pulled up the other camp chair for herself, he didn't respond. His plate of rabbit and beans stayed untouched on the top of Ruth's flat rock table.

Ruth was half finished with her plate when Johnny Lee rose from the chair and staggered over to the rock table. "Iff'n you don't say you'll marry me, I'll cut this here finger off," he blurted out suddenly. He had her carving knife in one hand.

"Don't be crazy," Ruth told him. She turned her head and continued to chew the mouthful of food she had taken.

"Marry me then?"

"Put down the knife, Johnny."

"Not'll you say yes." He pressed the knife against his left index finger.

"I'll not." She kept her head turned away as long as she could stand it. When she looked back, she found him sawing small cuts into his flesh, his face screwed up with pain, squinting as if to see through the dimming dusk or an alcohol fog. "Goddamn it, Johnny, stop that stupidity!"

He kept cutting.

Ruth rose abruptly from her chair and lunged for the knife. Drunk as he was, the cowboy sidestepped her movement and lifted the knife out of her reach, leaving the hand with the wounded finger on the rock to support him. "Say it," he said.

Ruth looked down at the bloodied finger, sliced open just above the knuckle. "You're a fool, Johnny Lee. A drunken fool," she said, wincing and turning away as he brought the knife back down to make several snapping chops at his target. Ruth swung back around and ran straight for him, knocking him over sideways.

“Now whadcha do that for?” he mumbled, fumbling to his knees, then collapsed back onto the dirt. He crawled forward toward the fallen knife, fell again, took in a breath, then lay still. “Ruffy,” he slurred. “My lil’ Ruffy.” When Ruth walked around to pick up the knife, his eyes were closed. Soon he began to snore.

His lil’ Ruthy, indeed. The arrogance of that assumption was as crass as Matt’s blaming her for May’s worsening. Staring down at his injured finger, Ruth was seized with pity and anger—and intense relief. Still, Johnny had a good heart. And the man could dance, she’d give him that. At any rate, the finger appeared not to be bleeding much, from what she could see of it in the fading twilight. She had no desire to tend it at the moment; nursing had never come naturally to her.

Ruth threw a couple of chunks of pine on the fire and poured herself a cup of hot coffee. She settled into the camp chair, then had another thought. She removed Lee’s flask from his back pocket and dumped the remaining shot of whiskey into her cup. The smell of it no longer repulsed her. After she drained her cup, Ruth lit the kerosene lamp and examined Johnny’s finger. It pained her to see how his last hacking had further mutilated the flesh around the original cut.

Lee’s saddlebags held another, bigger bottle of whiskey. She poured some over the cut, then soaked the finger in water. When the crusted blood softened, she used a damp cloth to clean the wound the best she could while he groaned and resisted from his stupor. White bone was clearly visible at the heart of the slice. The cowboy yelled out and opened his eyes when Ruth painted the injury with iodine, but was asleep again by the time she bound it with a strip of soft bandage. Storing the leftover rabbit in the cooler, she refilled Lee’s flask and set it beside him, before pouring a sizable shot into a fresh cup of coffee. She stashed the bottle among her underwear in the tent.

At daybreak Ruth heard the cowboy stirring. After some initial groaning and shuffling around outside the tent, all was quiet, so she dressed and pulled back the tent flap to see if he had left. His saddle remained beside the chair. Craning her neck, she saw him down at her spring, washing his face in the pool she

drew water from, which annoyed her greatly. She peed, then built a fire for coffee before he climbed the wash bank. "Guess I got a little drunk last night," he said, coming up beside her. He looked down at his mutilated finger.

"You should keep the bandage on. That's a deep cut," Ruth told him.

"You're not gonna marry me, huh?"

Ruth shook her head. She turned to measure out coffee.

"I might as well go, then," he said.

"Suit yourself. Have coffee first, if you like. Water'll boil soon."

Lee picked up his saddle and carried it to the wash. Ruth had just stirred coffee into the water and pulled the pot off to settle when he led his sorrel up the bank. Neither of them spoke as they sat drinking coffee. His second cup, he doctored with whiskey, then held it out to her. She refused.

"There's leftover rabbit in the cooler if you're hungry," she said a few minutes later as he drained the last of the cup.

"Naw, it's too early for food," he said. "I'll take a hunk with me if you got enough."

She wrapped one leg in waxed paper and put another on the grill to heat for herself, since she was running low on oatmeal. "You want me to rebandage that for you?" she asked as she handed him the rabbit.

"I'll manage." He turned and walked toward his horse. "But thanks for the food." He put a foot in the stirrup and swung the other leg over. For a moment he sat looking down at her. "I don't understand you, gal, I swear. I thought we had somethin' goin'. Makes me wonder just what kind of a woman you are, anyway." He spurred the horse to a trot toward the road, then galloped nearly to the bend, where he slowed to a trot, then a walk as he disappeared at the apex.

Ruth took in a deep breath, feeling the canyon expand at his absence. She ate the rabbit leg, finished off the pot of coffee, and was just wondering what to do with her day when she heard the drone of an approaching motor—a large one, from the sound of it. From the bank of the wash, she verified that the motor be-

longed to Olsen's flatbed. Not only did the flatbed round the bend, but two Model T's followed behind as well. The moment she saw them, Ruth understood. She would be having a house raising! No wonder John had been so mysterious about it all.

Men spilled from the truck and other vehicles like ants from a hill, unloading materials as they came. A few nodded to her. John Olsen gave a wave from beside the flatbed's cab, where Jim was filling a crate. Ruth wanted to hug them both. Besides Olsen's crew, there were Larry Hudson, Jake Tunstall, Vince and George Talmadge, Bob Thompson, and several men whose names Ruth couldn't remember. Amazed as she had been to see all the men, she was even more astonished when Martha Hudson and Jane Thompson climbed out of the automobiles and began lugging a crate toward her campfire.

"Morning, Ruth," Martha Hudson said as Ruth walked up to greet them. The Thompson woman nodded as they carted the crate past Ruth to her rock table. Their polite coolness puzzled her; had they come to the house raising just to snub her?

"Martha. Jane," Ruth said, nodding back. "This is a real surprise. I hardly know what to say."

"I can imagine," Martha said. "It doesn't appear that you were expecting us."

"No one had told me you were coming. Not even you, Jim," Ruth said to the Indian when he appeared with another crate of foodstuffs and dishes. "I was expecting only John and maybe the rest of his men."

"John wanted to surprise you," Jim said. "We weren't sure if we could put it together."

"Certainly, that cowboy, Johnny Lee, we passed on the way up was unaware anyone was coming," Jane Thompson said. "Robert tried to talk him into returning to join the work party. He appeared uninterested . . . seemed insulted to be asked."

"Well, Mr. Lee hasn't been seen since Ruth rode off with him that night. So the house raising must have surprised him," Martha said. "It appears Ruth has seen him, though," she added.

"He's in the canyon often," Jim said, "like other cowboys. Rounding up strays."

The two women glanced at each other. Jane Thompson reached into the crate and brought out two loaves of bread. "I'll bet," she said, setting the loaves on the rock table. "No telling what goes on this far from the civilized world."

Ruth swallowed hard and looked away from the two women. "Kate didn't come?" she asked Jim.

"She said her stomach was troubled again. But she sent up a pot of quail stew and the pastries," he said.

"The men do have to eat after all the hard work," Jane Thompson explained, as Jim walked off to join the others gathered next to the cabin walls. "That's why we're here instead of at May Baxter's funeral."

Ruth put her hand on the rock. "When did it happen?"

"May passed away three days ago. Such a shame. She was a lovely woman." Martha Hudson's face took on a somber cast as she turned from unloading the crate. She looked at the ground and shook her head. "A good woman," she said. "The very best." She pulled a handkerchief from her dress pocket and dabbed at her eyes.

"The burial is in Los Angeles," the Thompson woman said, putting a hand on Martha Hudson's shoulder. "Personally, I think the house raising should have been postponed so more of us could make the trip in. Martha and I both have family there, you understand. Los Angeles is our home."

"That would have been fine by me," Ruth said. "After all, I wasn't even aware anyone was coming."

Martha straightened and turned back to her food duties. "That's why Agnes Rose isn't here; the Roses have accompanied poor Matt to the service."

"Of course, they've closed the store for now. Agnes said Lily will open it again when she returns . . . run it until the man can get over his grief." She turned to Jane. "Oh, he looked so stricken. As if it were all his fault."

Ruth rekindled the fire while the women continued to discuss details of the event that Ruth did not care to hear—the color of Lily's dress, the look on Matt's face, the terrible loss the community had sustained. She didn't know how to extricate herself, so

she hauled a bucket of fresh water, filled the coffeepot, and collected more wood for the fire. Just as she was ready to slip over and watch how the men were constructing the rest of her cabin, Martha Hudson said, "I don't see, Ruth, how anyone can possibly live in this place." The woman shook her head. "Even when your shack is built, you'll never have running water or electricity. It's beyond me why you decided to stay in this wilderness."

"If you ask me, the isolation here is unnatural. You have no one to help you if something happened, nobody to talk to. Any normal person would just go plain crazy," Jane Thompson said. "Whatever do you do with yourself . . . between visitors, I mean? Isn't it boring?"

"I'm never bored," Ruth said, her voice tight with the effort of having to explain. She looked over at the developing cabin. "Constructing the walls has taken most of my time so far. But I like to explore the mountains when I'm not busy. Sometimes I follow animal tracks—Jim's showing me how to read them. He can tell all kinds of things from just looking at a track," she said, forgetting herself as she remembered. "I like to sit and watch the birds and animals too. The canyon is full of squirrels and chipmunks and rabbits and . . ."

"Such pests—you must have snakes, too . . . and mice. How annoying."

"And even lizards in your camp. Those creepy things give me the chills," Jane Thompson said.

"You better move quickly, then, ladies," Ruth told them on a whim, as the sweet sound of hammers echoed off the bluff. "Because there's one right there on the rock near Martha's arm."

Their reaction would cheer Ruth the rest of the day, even if one of Martha's casseroles next to the crate did get knocked off the rock and the bucket of water Ruth had hauled got kicked over by Jane Thompson's left foot when she stepped in it. In all the ruckus, neither of the women saw any sign of Ruth's lizard. But Ruth knew lizards move fast—and there could well have been one. She was not sorry in the least.

The incident freed her to inspect the cabin's construction whenever she liked and to stand around and watch the section of

wall develop above the stone ledge, then rafters and a roof go up. She found it difficult to study the workers' methods, with all the hammering and sawing and measuring going on at the same time. No one seemed interested in answering her questions, except Jim, and she could see that even he would rather work than explain. Finally, John Olsen chased her out, saying that they wanted her to wait and see the cabin when they finished.

The women had pulled the camp chairs into the shade, rising occasionally to tend the food on the fire. Ruth joined them, relating stories of living in the wild that she knew they'd detest. She pointed out the "clothesline" where she hung her rabbits to skin them, going on in detail about the process. While they were enjoying a drink from her water cooler, she showed them the green patch of her spring and bragged about the clean water, with very few bugs and water skaters to clean out when she filled her buckets. Only once, she told them, had she found a dead chipmunk in the pool. There weren't too many bears this low down on the mountain, either, she said, like the one she'd found in her tent. After that story, Ruth was delighted to see how their eyes kept constant vigil on the mountain. She could not understand just why, with their city ways, they would choose to live out on the desert. Even with running water and electricity, the area was still rife with wild creatures. The women seemed to have no liking for anything outside their modern homes. She supposed that if people like that had their way, there would be no desert, but a mere extension of cities like Los Angeles. It was not so much that they were women, she discovered, that made them so different from her; it was some ingrained attitude, as if they were of another species altogether.

The house-raising was completed well before sunset. By that time Ruth was so impatient to see the results that she could no longer sit—or even stand, for that matter—so she busied herself with mixing biscuit dough and filling another coffeepot and water bucket. She knew John Olsen and Jim were coming for her almost before they took the first step in her direction. The two men waited with the rest of the workers while she stood outside her newly hung door and took in a deep breath. Then she swung

the door open and stepped inside. The concrete slab and rock walls she had spent so many hours making had been transformed completely. With just the addition of a bit of wood and roofing paper—window frames, too, though there was yet no glass for them—the place had become a home. She was nearly overcome when she saw they had installed a small two-burner woodstove, which must have come up with the truck. Rust adhered to her palm as she swept her hand across the iron surface. The men had followed her inside and watched as she fought the great wave of gratitude that enveloped her. Ruth did not bother to hide her struggle, knowing that it was in part their payment. She turned to face the group, seeing a pleasure on their tired faces that intensified when she swiped at her eyes and told them, “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Her gratitude was so genuine it extended itself to the women as well—at least it did at the moment when she walked back outside and glimpsed a softening in their expressions, some interest in how much the house-raising had meant to her. “Thank you, too, neighbors,” she said, and meant it. She wondered if perhaps, after all, there existed a connection deeper and more important than all the differences between them. Then the moment passed, their faces tightened, and things went on as before.

The men, who had been helping themselves to bread and casseroles throughout the afternoon, now settled down to Kate’s quail stew and the pot of chili and beans Martha and Jane had prepared. Ruth fixed two batches of biscuits and a big pot of coffee to accompany the meal. When all the cups were replenished and her second batch of biscuits off the fire, she dished herself out a plate and sat down on the ground between John Olsen and Jim, who were already to the point of mopping up the last of their food with a biscuit.

“Jim bring up glass for your window few days from now. First we haul load of onyx,” John said as Ruth settled in between them. Ruth leaned over and hugged his shoulder.

“You know how much I appreciate all this, John. I don’t know how I can ever repay you,” she said.

“You neighbor, Rute,” he said, shrugging off her obligation,

though she could see he was pleased. "Work hard you do. I glad to help."

"Thank you, too, Jim," Ruth said to the Indian, who had been watching them without speaking. He nodded in response.

"I heard those two giving you trouble earlier," he said quietly, his eyes flashing to the women in the camp chairs.

Ruth looked into his face, past the question she saw there. "Thanks for that, too," she said.

"There's talk, Rute," John told her. "You know that."

"I don't care. It's none of their business," she said. Neither man responded.

"He came up drunk yesterday wanting to marry me," Ruth said, softening. Their silence had nudged her. She brought her voice down lower. "Did you see his finger? He threatened to cut it off if I wouldn't say yes. Then he passed out. I like to never got rid of him." John laughed and patted her back. He rose and walked toward the food beside the campfire. When Ruth looked back at Jim, he was smiling. He touched a finger to her upper arm and when she glanced down she saw he was making a bridge for a ladybug to climb from her to him. With the bug aboard his finger, he raised it and the insect flew off into the air.

"You will be careful, won't you, Ruth?" he asked, when the beetle had left his hand. "I don't want anything bad happening to you."

Ruth was never sure whether it was his care with the insect, the feel of that touch, the sound in his voice, or maybe the way his eyes seemed to pull her into them, but something about that moment connected and bound her to him. His eyes remained on her, and she felt some deep stirring in her center that drew her toward him. It was a new and strange sensation, as if she were barely able to force her body to stay where it was, seated next to him, close, but not close enough. She felt heat in her cheeks as she wrenched her eyes away.

The cabin seemed cavernous compared to her tiny tent, and Ruth felt an odd reluctance to sleep there that first night, staying another night in her old surroundings to prepare herself. One of the men, she wrote in her journal, had measured the cabin at 13 feet 5 inches by 19 feet 2 inches, all of them laughing at the idea of someone building a structure of such uneven dimensions. But Ruth had seen no need to measure when she laid out the form for her slab; she simply marked out the area that best fit under the pines. She didn't know why they should think even measurements would be more suitable. Suitable for whom? she wondered, content with a method that suited herself.

The following morning Ruth cleaned up the construction scraps—collecting a sizable pile of kindling for her new stove—

and began carting furniture into her cabin. The bed, chest of drawers, writing table, and chair that had crowded the tent left the room still looking bare. She stacked the two boxes of books beneath her writing table and the crates of groceries in the far corner, then went out to look through the larger remnants of lumber, hoping to find enough to construct a makeshift shelf. The only usable wood turned out to be the sheets of plyboard John Olsen had left, but that was meant for building a shelter around her open privy seats, which he said she would need before long. With the days still hot, Ruth had trouble believing cold weather would soon move in, though twice lately she had pulled up her extra blanket during the night.

She didn't see Jim again for five days and had put the incident at the house-raising firmly from her mind, concentrating on settling into a life that didn't involve hours each morning spent constructing her dwelling, dividing her day between exploring crevices of the surrounding mountains and the pages of books in the boxes. They were difficult books, but interesting, written by men with foreign names that she wasn't sure how to say. She thought it a strange delight to come in from her wild canyon and lie on her cot, reading about people in crowded European cities—which is what she was doing when she heard the flatbed motor.

The sound brought blood rushing to her head. It must be Jim with the windowpanes. She jerked up from the bed, her heart picking up where it had left off a few days before. She paced the length of the cabin twice, then walked out into the yard, down to the spring and back again before the vehicle came around the bend. By then she had regained control of herself and had started to lay wood in her campfire to occupy herself.

With a smile to acknowledge her, Jim extracted two burlap-wrapped panes of glass from the cab of the truck and leaned them against the house. He returned to the cab and brought back something bundled in his red shirt. "For your house," he said, holding out the bundle and pulling aside the shirt so she could look.

Not many things had surprised Ruth as much as the olla Jim

handed her, nor pleased her as much. It filled the space in her arms as she cradled it against her, running her hand around its round bottom, following the circumference that curved up to its narrow neck. The fluctuating earthy colors closely matched those of the shards she found, the small thrill of each discovery now culminating in true wonderment at the whole vessel she held. "Is it real?" she said. "From . . . from somewhere around here?"

"I found it in the rocks near the petroglyphs a few days ago," he said, sliding his arms into the sleeves of his shirt. "Usually I leave them be, but I think you were meant to have this. It was probably used for carrying water, maybe grain. It's an old one."

"What can I say?" she said. "I've never had anything so . . . so special. I'll never be able to repay you."

"Your eyes repay me," he said. "Watching you hold it."

Ruth sat down carefully in the camp chair, holding the olla tenderly on her lap. "I love it," she said, staring down into the dark opening inside the neck.

"I have something else, too, for your house. Something more practical," he said. As he walked back toward the truck, Ruth thought she could be content for the rest of her life, just sitting with the ancient pot, pondering its origins and the people who had used it here in this canyon.

The table Jim brought over was small and irregular, but lovely, fashioned from the trunk of an oak that had been sliced and sanded smooth. "I used to make these to sell from the reservation," he explained, running a hand over the table's surface, "before I came here." He carried the table into the cabin and situated it beneath a window. "You'll need a chair or two," he said, stepping back. "Some shelves also." Ruth propped the olla against the pillow on her cot and came to stand next to him.

"I can get wood for the shelves in town," she said, "if John will take me again."

"He's driving Kate in to the doctor in a few days. You could go with them then."

"She's still ill, then?" Ruth asked, ashamed that she had forgotten all about her friend's distress. "How bad is she, do you

think?" she asked as the two of them walked outside and Jim began unwrapping the glass.

"Some days fine. The next day she doesn't eat much. She keeps shrugging it off, but John's worried about it, I can tell."

Ruth nodded. "I'd like to help you put in the panes, so I'll know how it's done," she said.

"Then I'll do one while you watch, and you can do the other if you like," he said, grinning. "But remember, you won't be watching an expert. I've only done this twice before."

"Twice more than I have." She sat cross-legged on the ground to watch.

The pane wouldn't fit properly until Jim gouged out wood on one side of the frame with his knife. Ruth had the opposite problem when she got to her window—a gap between the glass and the frame in one of the far corners. Inverting his example, she jammed in a slice of wood and generously puttied over it and the edge of the glass. Except for more putty on the pane and a less-than-even strip of it around the glass, Ruth's looked as good as his, or so she thought, being that she'd managed to do it herself.

"I wonder if making clay pots was easier than putting in windows," Ruth said, as they washed putty from their hands in the runoff at the spring. "I'll bet it was more fun."

Jim shook water from his hands and wiped them on his pant legs. "Why don't you try it and find out?" he said. "There's enough clay in that bank to keep you busy for a long time."

"Really? That's what they made them from?" Ruth walked over to the ledge behind the spring and dug in with one hand, scooping out a gooey gob that felt like silken mud between her fingers.

"The whole bank is clay, even the white, dry stuff way up there. If it's too slick, you add sand or debris to stiffen it so it holds its shape," he said, watching her knead it into a ball.

Ruth squeezed her clay and patted it firm. "How do you know all this?" she asked.

"My grandmother," Jim said. "She was a potter. I used to watch her work before they sent me away to school. We would

walk up Black Canyon to gather clay at the place she liked best. I liked to copy her, making clay snakes and coiling them into my own little pots the way she did. But the elders stopped me when I was still very young. Boys weren't supposed to do women's work. Today, no one would know that—or care."

"Show me," Ruth said, noticing how his speech had become more Indian-sounding when he told his story, "how you make clay snakes into a pot. There's no one to stop you here." She held out the clay. "Except yourself."

Jim rolled small sections of the clay into thin strips between his palms. With his thumb he made a depression in another section and began coiling the strips around it. "This is the way to do it," he said, as he built part of a doll-sized jar. "Then you wet your fingers and smooth it all around, inside and out. Or you can use another piece of pottery to smooth it. All it takes is practice." He squeezed the clay back into a ball and fitted it back into the bank.

With the sun low on the horizon, Ruth invited Jim for a simple supper of canned stew and biscuits. She still used the campfire to prepare her meals, having developed a fondness for living outdoors, continuing to eat and sit out almost as much as before, when the heat of her tent had prohibited her from being inside. She loved having the land open before her as she rested in the shade under the pine or ate her supper watching sunset display its dazzle of color. She liked to linger as the light faded to a dusk that sucked all color from the landscape. Then night began scattering stars overhead—a few at first, then so many that the darkness seemed ready to burst into illumination, as it sometimes did when a round moon rose to saturate it with milky light.

Ruth was relieved that she and Jim had fallen naturally into their old friendship, as if nothing different had passed between them. And maybe it had not, she thought, as Jim set the coffee-pot on the grill. Nothing in his manner indicated a change. She stepped back from lighting the fire, wondering if it could have been some mood of hers that caused her to imagine the whole thing, when another ladybug dropped down onto Jim's shoulder, becoming nearly invisible against the red cloth. Ruth

reached out, meaning to imitate Jim's bridge, but the insect flew into her open hand, its tiny black legs tickling the skin of her palm. She laughed and held the bug out for Jim to see. It whirled up in a fiery blur and flew into the air.

"There's a place where they congregate, usually in spring, but for some reason they're doing it again this year. It's on the mountain above my place," he said, "a kind of ladybug land. Would you like to see it?" Ruth laughed at the picture his words placed in her head, a city of little red bugs. "I can take you in a couple of days," he told her. "I have to set swedges for John first. I can come get you afterward." She nodded, though she wasn't sure what she was agreeing to—certainly not the busy bug city that came to mind at his words.

When Jim left, Ruth set the olla on the writing table and took out her journal. She turned the pot slowly, examining the shifts in shades of reds and browns around its sides, trying to put into words the lines of dots and stripes of paint added with an adept fingertip. She ran her finger along the rough patch where a small chip was missing from the olla's lip. She could see why Jim said it was very old, painted before brushes were used and the designs became more intricate. What was the woman like who made this, Ruth wondered in her journal, so long ago? Was she old or young? Had she children? Did she live on the pinyon nuts and acorns that Jim said were diet staples, the way Ruth used beans and potatoes?

Ruth found words, for the first time, for the experience with Jim at the house-raising. She had never felt so drawn to a man as at that moment—and in a way that was not entirely sexual. It was that, too, she admitted, but something else she didn't understand. It puzzled her that the attraction was so completely erased tonight, as if she had wholly imagined it. Yet she'd had the sense, she wrote, when she studied his familiar features in tonight's campfire light, that he was holding something in abeyance, that at any time he might look over at her in that same way and it would all come back as real as before. Or was her imagination in control again, the way it had been with other men? When she turned off the lamp and lay on her cot in the darkness, Ruth

realized that she hadn't thought of Matt in several days, and now that she had, she felt nothing but indifference.

The next morning Ruth woke wanting to get her hands back into the clay. She had dreamed so vividly of her fingers manipulating the silky mud that she was surprised not to find it coating the skin of her palms. In her dream, she had been refashioning the rocks in her walls, changing them to ollas as she shaped them. As soon as her coffee water was on the campfire, she walked down to the spring with a bowl. Unsure of which texture of clay to use, she dug samples from different areas of the bank and carried them back to her camp. After breakfast she rolled and flattened coils of clay, unrolled, kneaded, rewet them, added various kinds of sand and debris to some and worked them again. Before she realized, it was midafternoon.

She had moved indoors when the heat hit, snacking on old biscuits as she worked. Now at the writing table with a shapeless pile of clay beside the olla, she wondered how someone got from amorphous mass to shapely vessel. Making pots was definitely not easier than putting in a windowpane. But it brought more satisfaction, she thought, as she rolled clay snakes between her palms, afterward winding them into layers around a small shape visible only to her imagination. When the coils were a few inches high, she wet her fingers in the dipper and began pressing layers together to even them, trying to make the outside of the coiled olla as smooth as the one Jim had made, as smooth as the sides of the olla he had given her. The process was long and tedious. When she finished, her clay jar looked nothing like the olla. It reached only about a third of the olla's size, its shape was askew and the surface bumpy, even after much wetting and rewetting and rubbing with her fingers. Spots on its sides and near the bottom were left so thin from overworking they felt like the canvas of her old tent flap. Yet Ruth was happy with her crooked pot. She set it and the other olla on the top of her chest of drawers, where she could view them from her bed, and went out to start her evening campfire.

That night Ruth dreamed again that the huge rock she'd buried rose up from beneath the concrete, shards of cement falling

around it. This time it did not disturb her, for in her dream she had realized it was really an olla, and had wrapped her arms around its rounded sides, while hot tears ran down her cheeks. It had come back to greet her like an old friend, never to be parted from again. And then the house surrounding them had become an olla, not like the dream of the night before, when individual rocks were clay pots, but the whole of it became one olla, a continuous flow of substance that contained herself and her olla rock, as alive as she had sensed when she fought its presence on her homesite but now not her enemy. The dream fluid coursing down her face had begun to pool around her feet, allowing sunlight from her open door to mirror itself in the liquid and infuse the space inside with such light as she had never seen. The very walls seemed made of light. *I, too, am an olla, and know now the purpose of my tears*, she had thought in her wonderment.

Ruth awoke enveloped in the awe of her dream, tears wet on her face. On the floor beside her bed, bright sunlight streamed in from the crack under her door, bouncing up from the cement floor to illuminate the clay vessels she had shaped the day before. Overlaid with the images of the dream, the room came alive with joy and light. "So this is my place," her own voice whispered inside her head. The concrete by the door where the rock lay buried appeared as thin as spots in the walls of her clay pot, and seemed to throb with force. For a moment, she thought she heard a drumming come from the ground, then realized it was only the sound of her own heart.

All day, Ruth felt a strong sense of anticipation, as if something important was about to happen. She made two pots by afternoon, neither much better than the first, but felt content when she set all three out in the sun to dry. All the while she kept a suspicious eye on the white billows that had been growing each day above Rocky Mountain, their airy forms mirroring the solid mountain's shape. When she went inside and opened her book, Ruth found herself in the seedy streets of London nearly a century before, and she stayed there until the day cooled. Then she went out to her garden to pluck her very first small zucchini from the bush that had survived the onslaught of hooves. She

admired the tiny green globes appearing on her tomato vine. Already, birds were trying to peck at them through the chicken wire. A new tunnel had been started outside the wire fence. Twice, she had rocked over tunnels dug by rabbits, in the end making a meal of the creatures to save her vegetables. Now she guessed she'd be obliged to dispatch another rabbit soon to go with that next squash already burgeoning beneath the leaves.

Indian Jim came for her early the next morning. Ruth heard the crunch of his footsteps outside the open cabin window, the quiet sounds as he built a fire. She lay back against her pillow to enjoy the comforting sounds of his movement, not rising until the smell of coffee wafted in. Wishing for the first time that she had an indoor bathroom, she walked out to the campfire, where he was examining the clay pots she had placed on the rock table. He looked up at her, his eyes admiring. "You have the knack," he said. "I'm not surprised."

"But they're terrible. It was fun making them, though. I'll keep trying." She took the one from his hands. "Look how uneven it is. I can't seem to get it right."

"You will," he said. He picked up her last piece, where she had actually managed to bow out the sides a bit. "Look what you've done here without any help at all."

"But you helped get me started."

"And we better, too, soon as we put together some food." He set the pot back on the table. "Get started up the mountain, I mean. Before the heat comes in—or before it storms." He looked up at wisps above the mountain. "So far there's just been a lot of noise up there, but today may be different."

They tanked up on coffee, ate biscuits and jerky, then headed up the ridge across the wash. To save time, Jim took her straight up the bluff, not a route she would have attempted alone, she thought, as Jim reached down a hand to help her across one of the steeper stretches on a narrow ledge. When they reached the top of the bluff, Ruth realized how high they'd come so fast. They continued to climb, keeping to ridges that weren't closed off by thickets of scrub oak and manzanita or rugged piles of boulders. As they went up, the pinyon and juniper thinned and

ponderosa began, then predominated, mixing with fir and huge oak trees. Clouds formed feathery pillows above the mountain, cushioning their climb off and on from the sun. Finally, they topped a ridge, and Jim pointed across a deep ravine to a peak that seemed higher than the rest.

“There. That’s the place,” he said, panting. “At the very top.” Sweat glistened on his face, breaking into trickles down his neck when he bent to unscrew the cap on his canteen. “But we have to go down into the ravine and then up that steep slope to get there. It won’t be easy. That old quartz mine up there where the trees start has made the whole mountainside loose. But it’s the only way from this side of the mountain.”

They chewed more jerky, then slid down into the ravine and started up the open strip of rock and sand on the slope, which was in other places furred thick with buckthorn, scrub oak, and manzanita clustered as tight as coils of wool on a sheep. The going was slow. Ground dissolved under their feet as they climbed, pulling them back a step or two for every three they took forward. Chunks of rock that appeared solidly anchored came loose in their hands when they took hold. Even Jim, who was agile as a mountain sheep on the cliff, was here as helpless and ineffective as Ruth, ascending and sliding back, ascending again and sliding back. About halfway up the slope, on their hands and knees like comic supplicants, they looked over at each other and began to laugh—at first a light chuckle at the absurdity of it, then more forcefully as the realization dawned that they had been completely humbled by the mountain, stripped of any sense of their own importance. Ruth felt hefty grains of sand in her boot, down her shirt and pants, in her hair, and she was afraid to think where else. In a spasm of belly laughter, she fell flat on her stomach and hugged the warm, decomposing granite to keep from sliding down further. Okay, I got the message, she thought.

She was still laughing when she felt Jim’s hand cover her own, squeezing it until the fine, rough pebbles impressed the cracks between her fingers. When she turned her head, she saw that laughter had left his face. His look captured her breath and sent a hot current into her belly. She could not move as he inched

toward her, though her insides squirmed against the ground. Somewhere in the distance came the faint grumble of thunder. With one hand he turned her toward him, sand streaming from his clothes and hair as he rose over her slightly, fragments of rock embedded in moisture on the dark skin of his cheek as his face moved toward hers. Jim's eyes never left her own, and when his mouth made contact, the power she'd sensed in his look took hold of her. They began sliding down the river of sand, lips locked in a language that Ruth would have traveled off the end of the earth to learn. They stopped briefly when she felt a sharp rock against her buttocks, but he turned her on top of him and they journeyed on, safely attached to the dissolving mountain, coming to rest, finally, after the flow turned them to one side somewhere near the bottom of the slope. A wave of sand and small rock washed over their faces.

They rolled apart, panting, passion changing to laughter in the deluge. Still laughing, Ruth shook her head to knock tiny rocks out of her ears, then turned away to spit sand and wipe dirt from her eyes, along with the moisture of happiness and mirth. They looked back at each other, then up at the distance they had lost, and became convulsed again with laughter.

Jim reached over and brushed grains from Ruth's cheek. He looked up at the peak. "We better get started again," he said, so flatly that they broke into another fit. When it died, Ruth was about to ask whether they should give up for today, but Jim stood and pulled her to her feet. "You'll be glad when you see it," he said. Then he grinned and looked down at her mischievously. "We can wait," he said. "This is not the place."

So they started up the mountain again, Ruth reluctant, feeling unrequited and unmotivated to attempt the frustrating climb-and-slide slope just to see some ladybugs, which, after all, were plentiful right where she lived. Yet she went along, not convinced, but trusting Jim's judgment enough to participate. Besides, what was she to do, pull him back to her as she had the cowboy in her drunkenness and ride him down? That did not fit what had passed between them.

They battled their way up. Near the top of the slope, they

passed the depression left from the mine, then the rock underneath became more solid and the dirt stayed put when they stepped on it, and soon they were back in forest, with duff underfoot. Jim led her toward a grove of fir just below a cluster of rocks that crowned the top, stopping when they reached the perimeter. "Go ahead," he said, nodding toward the trees. Puzzled, Ruth stepped forward.

She had taken a few steps when she began to see, and the spectacle was so strange and unexpected that she stopped suddenly where she stood. Never had she seen such a thing. Bright red against the green fir needles, ladybugs beaded solid the trunk of each fir tree and adorned most of the branches, right down to the smallest twig. It seemed to her that there must have been a million little beetles, all unmoving, attached like living jewels from some enchanted kingdom, encrusting each trunk and twig with brilliant color, spreading even into thick clusters of needles. She and Jim walked slowly through the grove, marveling at the magic display. When they came out at the foot of the pile of rocks just at the top, to Ruth's further surprise, even the sides of rocks were bejeweled with the same small red dots. Carefully, they moved around to the far end of the rock pile, where there were no bugs, and took a path to the very top.

Except for the rumbling cloud above them, the peak felt like the top of the world. Below them, the mountaintop flattened, dipped and swooped up into several lower peaks and small valleys. On three sides the mountain dwindled away to desert, trailing its ridges outward as they diminished in size until they reached the flatland below. To the west, the mountain dropped down too, but wrinkled into the San Bernardino range, punctuating it like a huge exclamation mark. As they ate biscuits and jerky, Jim pointed out Black Canyon and its reservation embedded in the tangle of canyons and showed her the peak above the onyx mine, at the end of the North Fork off Rattlesnake Canyon. The blue-green lake near Jim's camp at the petroglyphs was visible in a crevice not far from them. When the thunder became more pronounced, accompanied by bright spiderwebs against the dark belly of cloud, they went down the other side of the

peak, making an easy descent across a trail of uncluttered ridges toward the cove of Jim's camp.

The ball of sun slid out from the cloud above as they arrived at the camp, though more clouds were swelling madly behind and had swallowed it whole again by the time they had swum the length of the pond and come out dripping in front of Jim's lean-to. Ruth pressed her front up against the sun-warmed rocks behind the lean-to, absorbing their heat through her wet clothes. She turned, spread her arms, and snuggled her back onto a dry granite surface. Behind her she heard the high-pitched scolding of a chipmunk, its call as repetitious as excited bedsprings. The peak at the top had vanished behind a gray curtain, and a wind had come up, quivering the pond and sending shivers up her spine. Jim came toward her with a blanket, the muscles of his chest swelling beneath smooth skin as he held out the red-and-black patterned fabric. He was saying something, but a clap of thunder drowned out his words. "The rocks are warm," she said, her teeth chattering just a little. "I'll be all right."

"They'll not be warm for long," he said, looking up. "It's about to pour down any minute. Let's go inside." He took her arm and pried her from the wall as a drop splashed her nose. Another hit her arm.

"I'm already wet," she protested, as he wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and led her toward the shelter. "A little rain won't make much difference."

He stopped in front of the lean-to and looked at her. Drops began crackling the oak leaves around them. "You have to get out of those clothes. I'll make a fire." He pulled back the skin flap and ducked under. A huge crash of thunder pushed Ruth in the door just as the deluge hit. She tightened the flap behind her.

Inside, the dwelling was compact and efficient, its bent willow pole frame covered with animal skins and boughs. Squatting with his back to her, Jim piled wood near an overhanging boulder that served as an extension of the structure and left a space for smoke to exit without rain entering. Two flat sitting rocks were situated beside the small fire ring. A section of floor on the far side of the lean-to had been heaped with forest duff,

spread over with fresh willow boughs and sprigs of sage. The fragrance mixed with the juniper woodsmoke, filling the room with a pungent aroma. Ruth sat on one of the two stones, feeling shy and clumsy, while Jim built the fire. She could have undressed behind the blanket, but she took off just her boots and socks, feeling as if now only her cold clothes held her together. If she took them off, her shape would be changed forever. Not until a flame blazed up did Jim turn to look at her. When he did, Ruth thought she might melt to become part of the rock she sat on.

He took hold of her hand and led her to the willow boughs, easing her back against the leaves. Under her back, Ruth could feel the ground give, the soft history of trees make room for her. Above them, the shapes and shades of animals bound together as shelter, deer and coyote and mountain lion, the tightly joined seams visible between them. Ruth felt herself caught up in some great undercurrent, as if this small refuge itself were being carried on the mountain's river of dissolving rock. Jim bent over and kissed her lips softly. "You're so cold," he said, and began to undo the buttons of her blouse, one by one. His eyes stayed with hers, while rain drummed the skins overhead. She felt more quiet than she could remember, finding an excitement so deep in her it hadn't yet reached the surface. She watched his eyes travel over her body as he revealed it, his face loose with desire as he unbuttoned and peeled her wet pants down from her buttocks, her legs, her feet. Then her underpants. He kissed the small bump of her belly. "So cold," he said, lifting her shoulders to pull off her blouse. "We'll warm you."

The Indian knelt beside her shivering form, his hair a darker shade against the brown skin of his shoulders. When he undid his belt and dropped his pants past his knees, Ruth saw his sex rise out of the dark tangle of leaves like a budding yucca. She nearly gasped at the wonder of it, could not keep her hand from reaching out to touch. They remained looking at each other, neither moving, except to quicken their breath.

When they came together, it was without awkwardness, the rhythm of their movements choreographed in an ageless dance,

and when he entered, Ruth knew him as she would know another self. Each touch sent her spinning outward into air and brought her back again to her senses, heightening her pleasure until she thought she might burst with the deliciousness of it. Even her skin was singing. Then as they followed the ancient steps laid out for them, she felt herself stumble, and opened her eyes to find him watching, waiting for her, his dark hair falling into a curtain around their faces. She felt her life shift with their connection. Eyes in contact as intimate as their bodies, they smiled as ecstasy enveloped them.

It was ten days later that Ruth returned to the cabin she'd abandoned in the canyon, and nearly a week before she even thought of going—and then in terms of getting things she wished she'd brought with her, things like a change of clothes and her own brush. Not that she had much need for clothes, with the two of them spending the greater part of each day unclothed around the lake, or inside the lean-to when afternoon rains came. The showers dwindled after the first two days, and they moved outside completely, even sleeping out under the stars, entangling under the blanket to ward off the cool, high mountain night. Each day they found new places and new ways to make love, in the water, on rocks, on the sand at the edge of the lake, standing and sitting or somewhere in between, they explored each other's

bodies and pleasures as they had once explored the land around them, and as with the land, the discoveries they made seemed endless. They dressed only to hunt rabbit or quail for supper or to gather pine nuts, or when the chill of evening set upon them. With clay from a spring that fed the pond, and by copying Jim's every detail, Ruth was able to fashion an olla larger and more shapely than she had made in the canyon. Together they constructed a campfire kiln so she could sometime fire the three pots she had left drying in the canyon.

Ruth felt herself growing into new habits. This was the life she had been looking for, she told Jim one morning when they wakened to a pink, sun-washed dawn. He reminded her that it was not a life for winter and with a little half-smile called her his naked savage. She mock-attacked him, then, climbing astride, whooping and pretending to shoot him with an arrow, then to scalp him with an invisible knife. But he turned his head and lashed out his tongue to lick the nipple whipping his cheek, lifting his pelvis to rock her; thus he was saved from uncertain death.

It was, in the end, concern for Kate that pulled them out of their idyllic state and sent them down the mountain toward Ruth's cabin, where they spent yet another day and night before they gave in to their worries and walked down canyon. As they sat in front of the campfire the night before they left, quiet as they roasted open pinyon cones and ate the sweet nuts inside, Ruth sensed that once they left this place and went back to everyday life, they would never again regain such blissful ease together. She didn't know why she should think that, and didn't want to confess her worry to Jim, in case saying the words would make what she felt more real, make it come true in some way. So she watched campfire sparks pop and leap toward the stars, only to fade and fizzle, and tried to shut out all that pulled at her— anxiety over Kate, the need for food supplies, some vague urge to move on with things. The two of them had used up Jim's small supplies of flour and coffee, and hers were low also. She still had vinegar in the canyon, though Jim had had none. The two of them couldn't just stay on the mountain and exist on pin-

yon nuts and game, she told herself. Even their supply of bullets was low. When Jim spoke, she found he had his own concerns.

"What will we do, Ruth," he said, "you and I? An Indian man and a . . . a white woman."

She looked over at his craggy features, the wavering flame flicker in its highlights. "What difference does that make, except for the man and woman part?" Ruth reached over and took his hand. "And I'm not all white woman, anyway. I told you about my mother. Besides, what do we care what people think? I certainly don't."

"A rumor about your mother doesn't make you an Indian." He turned his face to look at the fire. "You're white. That will make a difference to everyone else. I heard about what Stine called you at the Hudsons."

"I'll be proud to be called squaw woman," she said, squeezing his fingers, "if it's on account of you. But it's none of their business. Why worry about what small-minded people say?" She rose from her chair and began feeding the fire with small branches.

"Their minds may be small, as you say, but their effect is great. It follows me wherever I go off the reservation. That's why I'm here hammering wooden pegs into rocks to make a living." Jim got to his feet as she tossed on the last branch and turned her toward him. "That's not true, entirely," he amended. "This life is what I want. But it would be good to have a choice." For a moment they stood facing each other. He reached down and touched her cheek lightly. "I just don't want their mean notions to affect you on my account."

"People already have notions about me, even without you. But I welcome their knowing about us. I think I'll send out an announcement."

"So lovely," he said, breaking into a smile, "and so damned stubborn."

"Would you want me any other way?" Ruth felt her chest swell with a surge of power.

He shook his head. "But I smell trouble ahead," he said, pulling her into a kiss that in a few seconds had them struggling out

of their clothes again by the fire. They stood naked in the firelight watching each other, restraining their impulse to come together. Ruth stared intensely, as if she were etching each detail of him into her heart, the flow of muscle beneath the bronze skin, the strands of hair she remembered trailing over her skin, tickling, whenever he kissed his way up her body, the dark, eloquent eyes, the way his face dropped down abruptly at the cheekbones to the mouth that had left its imprint on her own. When mere sight caused more ache than either of them could take, they merged more ferociously than ever before, and Ruth felt herself straining to breathe his very smell into her, to inscribe the feel of his touch onto her skin like the fingertip paintings on the olla, listening to his breath and soft moans as if she would carry them always in her ears to mix with the sounds of birds and wind in the pines.

Neither slept much that night, each waking often and pulling the other as close as two beings can get and still stay separated by skin. They made love once more at dawn, then rose to fix coffee before heading down canyon, walking side by side into the birdsong morning. Down by the bend they stopped to watch a mother fox nosing a kit up the sliding bank across the wash, while the rest of the litter waited at the top. Then the little band trotted off toward a snarl of oak and buckthorn covering the knoll.

Just before they reached the North Fork, Ruth heard the sounds of cattle mewling and the pounding of many hooves. "Must be the fall drive," Jim said in response to her inquiring look; it appeared he'd been aware of the animals for a while.

"Heart Bar?"

He nodded. "They're moving them to the desert until spring."

"Seems a little early," Ruth said. "The days are still warm." As they came around a bend, she could see cattle pouring across the road out of the North Fork and rumbling down the wash in front of them.

"Maybe. But it's well into October and they have to get them out before the snow starts." He stopped beside a scrub oak

growing along the rut road and took hold of a branch. "You see how thick the acorns are? And the cones on the pinyons are plentiful. Squirrels are gathering already. My grandmother used to say that means a hard winter." They stopped to watch the procession, then walked on, stopping again when they came to the fork to wait for the cattle to pass. When the main herd had gone by and only a few steers were left meandering down the gully, Ruth and Jim crossed and continued down the road beside the wash. They were nearing the willows when they saw Stine galloping toward them through the brush.

He reined in his big buckskin directly in their path, then, with a smirk, touched his spurs to its flanks, and pranced in circles around them, the horse puffing and snorting as it lifted and swished its tail. They kept walking, Jim moving to position his body between Ruth and the trotting horse. He kept the rifle trained on the ground, though Ruth noticed he had flipped off the safety. This time Stine had a pistol strapped to one hip as well as the rifle on his saddle. When he tired of riding rings of horse nuggets around them, the cowboy whipped off his hat and whacked the animal on the rear with it, then raced off whooping into the wash, his orange-red hair smoldering in the sunlight. It took Ruth a moment to realize he was trying to imitate an Indian war cry, though Jim's face told her the fact hadn't escaped him for a second.

When they arrived at the Swedes', the Olsens' flatbed was not in the yard. From Ingmar and another miner who were out milking the nannies, they learned that John had driven Kate into San Bernardino a few days ago, after waiting some time for Ruth and Jim to come down and make the trip with them. "Ya, should be back now," the Swede added. "We need a load before we go to winter mines," by which he meant, Jim explained, that they had one more shipment of onyx to make before they all left for the mines on the low desert for the winter.

"The whole herd of miners leaves for the desert just like the cattle," Jim said, with a little laugh as they entered the house.

"You too? And John and Kate?"

"John and Kate, yes. I go home for the winter," he said, "usu-

ally.” He looked down and touched her arm. “Maybe I won’t go anywhere this year.” They decided to walk on into town for a few of the supplies they needed and to see if there had been any word by phone of Kate down at the store. With any luck they’d find themselves a ride back.

Carrying empty knapsacks, they followed the trail up a ridge on the small mountain that ran parallel to the base of Rocky Mountain. Jim said this would cut the miles by road in half. The trail was old, said to have been used by Indians and then Mormons long before the present rut road for cars existed. As they climbed, he sometimes stopped suddenly when she came close behind so she would smack against him and he could turn and kiss her. Sometimes he motioned her on ahead, then lunged out playfully to grab her as she passed. When they were nearing the top of the ridge, Ruth looked down at the cattle now making their noisy way down the canyon below them. On the bank of the wash, Charlie Stine and Bobby Key sat on their horses looking up the mountain.

It was early afternoon when she and Jim reached the store. So caught up in her happiness with Jim, Ruth hadn’t thought once about the awkwardness of the situation until she stepped up onto the wooden porch. It was the first time she had seen Matt since the night of the Hudsons’ dance. She expressed her condolences at May’s death, saying she hadn’t known until folks came up to raise her house. He accepted with cool politeness and handed her two letters, one from Cally and another envelope that she knew would contain her allowance check. Her mail had been there nearly two weeks. No one in town had heard from the Olsens, he said, avoiding Ruth’s eyes and ignoring Jim altogether, though Jim had been the one who asked the question. Matt hadn’t known about the Olsens’ trip in to see the doctor, he said, since they had not stopped on their way to San Bernardino.

Lily Rose came in from the back room carrying a pile of empty flour sacks. “Ruth,” she said, laying the sacks on the counter and stretching out a hand, “how good to see you. Have you come in with the Olsens again?” Lily seemed not to notice Jim.

“Apparently the Olsens went in to the doctor’s some days ago. Ruth’s come to inquire if we’ve heard from them,” Matt told Lily as she came to stand alongside him.

“We’ve both come to inquire,” Ruth said, turning toward the shelves, where Jim had already begun to select items. “And to get a few supplies, since we’re almost out of everything.” Ruth walked up to the Indian and took hold of his upper arm. He smiled slightly, despite himself. She didn’t have to glance up to see the look the pair at the counter gave each other. After a silence, Ruth heard footsteps, then the back door shut. When they brought their items to the front, only Lily remained in the room, busying herself with rearranging canned goods on the shelves behind the counter.

They kept their packs light, each buying a small sack of flour, some coffee and lard, a few canned goods, and a couple of boxes of shells, for they were not sure whether they would go back over the mountain or keep to the road and hope for a ride. Yet neither of them much cared which way they traveled, as long as they traveled together, and they walked along the wide dirt road feeling carefree under their burdens. Dust devils spiraled skyward in the distance, churning apart in the air at the top. Beside the road, Joshua trees shook spiny arms at them in the strengthening wind. Two cars passed on the stretch of road that led to the trail at the edge of town, but neither car carried anyone who lived in the rimrock country that skirted the base of Rocky Mountain.

Ruth stopped to kneel and bury her nose in the velvet petals of desert primrose that bloomed on the sandy shoulder, finding a sweet earthiness in the flower’s faint fragrance. The delicate, papery petals asserted themselves in tender defiance, one last burst of transformed earth before the ground froze over. Ruth loved the feel of powdery pollen that clung when she dipped in her fingertips and traced them over her cheeks.

“The bees will think you’re a flower,” Jim said, squatting beside her as she lifted her head from a cluster of blossoms. “Your whole face is streaked with yellow. I wonder if you taste like a flower.” He took hold of her face, his tongue darting out, bee-

like, to taste her cheeks, as she squirmed and giggled, moving his lips down till he reached her mouth. He sampled its flavor with a sweetness that no honeybee ever imparted.

They moved apart at the approach of a car, which happened to belong to Jake Tunstall, from out in the rimrock. He said he'd carry them as far as the mouth of Rattlesnake Canyon, a short four-mile walk to the Swedes'. Even before she got in, Ruth could smell whiskey, and the way Jake simply approximated the road told her he had been at it a while. He kept up a steady barrage of slurred song as the car's tires slipped in and out of the ruts, half the time two on one side crushing brush on the road-side, while the other two squirreled in the sandy middle hump. If the mesa hadn't been fairly flat and free of boulders, they would have asked him to let them out, or would have started walking one of the times the car got hung up on sage or sand and they had to get out and help him push it back onto the road. Even with four miles left to walk, they were glad to be let out at the canyon's mouth.

The sun was gone by the time they got to the willows, and dusk had come with a round moon rising as they walked into the Olsens' yard. The miners had put together a stew with goat and vegetables from the garden, though it was lacking in spice and the meat had not been braised first. Tired as she was, Ruth did what she could to rescue it, and she and Jim made fresh biscuits that the men seemed grateful to have. The miners had become so used to Kate's skills, they hardly remembered how to cook without her. Their anxiety for her return in some small part, Ruth suspected, had to do with their eagerness to have a decent meal. Throughout the day, concern for Kate had stayed with Ruth, though there was no use speaking of it or dwelling on it. She was certain that Jim felt the same. Now, as they sat with the miners at Kate's table, her absence spoke loudly for itself. No one joked, as they had while preparing supper, about Kate's needing to be there to keep them from starving; they merely ate in silence or talked of things at hand—the billy that fell from the rocks the day before and broke off half a horn, the row of squash decimated by rabbits digging under the fence and avoiding the traps.

"That Stine today, he ask too many question," Ingmar told them, nodding his head as he spoke. "Want to know when you been at Rute's place. How long. Where John gone. I not tell him nothing." He rubbed at his moustache. "Not like that fellow," he said. "Mean look to him, ya?"

A goat wandered in the open door and jumped up on the end of the table, trying to get his head in the pot of goat stew. Another poked a head inside the door.

"Cannibal," Ingmar said, and they all laughed, but no one chased the goat away until Ruth got up to bring over the coffee-pot. While the men were pouring, she shooed the goats out and shut the door. The evening had begun to cool anyway. The place was deteriorating without Kate; Ruth could see several small yellow poolings near the door that told her chickens didn't always get chased out either. The men were so used to spending time outdoors that they didn't seem to know where the boundaries lay, much like herself. But she surely would know to chase the chickens out.

"Do you think they'll be back?" Ruth asked as she sat back down. "The cowboys, I mean."

"In spring," Ingmar said, "when they drive cattle back again."

"We'll see them here in a few days," Jim said, "on their way back up to the Heart Bar. But they'll go up the North Fork, shouldn't come by you."

"The first time they showed up at my place, they came looking for strays that had missed the fork and wandered up my way," Ruth said, filling her cup.

"That only happens in the spring, when they drive the herd up canyon to the Heart Bar. But the cattle stay down in the desert until then."

"Good riddance," a miner said.

"But," Jim added, "if they do come your way, it won't be the cattle they're after." He placed a hand on her forearm. "Keep that shotgun handy in case I'm not there."

Some of the men had begun conversing in Swedish as Ruth and Jim talked. From the tone, she sensed it was about the two

of them, though she had no way of knowing for sure. Others joined in and soon she could tell the conversation had moved on to places far from the canyon, the men laughing and telling stories. Ruth enjoyed listening to the foreign words, the different rhythm of the sentences, and the abrupt shifts that turned the sounds around, somewhat like the German that she used to enjoy hearing Karl speak. Its sound was quite different from the Mexican spoken by workers at Aunt Myrtle's, different yet from the sounds of Mexican Indian languages she'd listened to on the streets of El Paso. Ramon had taught her to say a few Mexican phrases before she was sent away, but she could never make them sound like he did. She wondered what Jim's language was like, if he would speak it for her.

Since they had rested, and since the moon was so bright, they decided to walk the rest of the way to her place that night. The miners promised to fetch them as soon as John and Kate returned. Ruth wore one of Jim's long-sleeved shirts over her short-sleeved blouse to keep out the cold, though the air warmed once they got past the willows and water. "I think it's time we get you some winter wood in," Jim said as they walked along. "And that shell built around the privy shelf as well."

As much as she appreciated his use of "we," Ruth didn't much like the idea of someone else building her privy, even Jim. She was ready to protest until he added, "I know I sure don't want to sit out exposed while I'm here."

"When will that be?" Ruth asked, looking down the stretch of open road in front of them, where moonlight pooled in dips and ruts between the shadowy brush along the sides. "When will you be here with me?" As they walked along, Ruth thought about how much she had yearned to be alone in the canyon. It gave her freedom to do as she pleased. Yet Jim's presence was not an intrusion. She never longed for him to be gone, as she had others, even Matt. Jim's proximity didn't take away from being alone with her canyon but added a dimension, as if he were a way into its wildness. It wasn't simply the way he shared his knowledge of its mysteries, or the way he had of matching his ways to the land

around him, but more that she loved him in exactly the same way she loved the wildness around her, with its rocks and streams, its deer and bear and burgundy-streaked sunsets.

Minutes went by before he answered, both of them thinking over her question. They were nearly to the far bend when Jim said, "I'll be here whenever you want me to be here, Ruth, though for your sake I shouldn't be." The quiet canyon swallowed his words, leaving only the wavering voices of a few crickets still braving the chill evening and the steady crunch of footfall on the sand.

"I want you with me as much as you want to be. But don't tell me you shouldn't be," Ruth said finally. "Who are those people to tell us what we can do—should do? What they think is not important. I know what I want, don't you?"

He took hold of her arm to stop her, and she turned to face him, his face half in moon shadow. "While there was still community among my own people," he said, "it would have been important to me what the people in the tribe thought. That is a difference between us. But these are not my people."

"They're not my people either." Ruth shrugged him off and crossed her arms. "White people don't have tribes, just a lot of people living close by who like to stick their noses in everybody's business and tell them how they should live."

"All cultures are like that, not just yours. Surely you must know that with all the books you read. It's not just ourselves we're responsible to."

"It is for me." Ruth started to walk on, then swung back. "And how can you talk about being responsible to people who treat you the way they do?" She heard her voice go shrill. "You think you owe them anything but contempt?"

"I don't, but don't you?"

"Me? Owe them?"

"The house-raising, the trips to town for groceries."

"But that was all John's doing. He's different. I don't mind being responsible to him and Kate," Ruth said as they walked on.

"Then what do you think John would say about us being to-

gether? You think he would clap his hands in celebration?"

"Of course he would. He . . . he told me right off how smart you were, how he likes you."

"Yes, he likes me—and he lets me work for him. But this is another matter, this . . ."

"He'd never say anything against us being together."

"He already has . . . not directly, but he let me know how he feels."

Ruth stopped again, the peaked cabin roof broadcasting a sheet of reflected moonlight ahead of them.

"He worries about what people would say—for my sake, like you do," she said, moving on. "I can't believe it's more than that with John."

"Maybe not, but he's the one who told me what was said at the Hudsons' after he left. He said people were talking already. And that was before . . . before . . ."

"Before we were lovers."

"I told him we were just good friends," Jim said as they walked up to the front door. "But I knew I wanted more from you, that there would be more. He knew it too."

Ruth struggled the key into the padlock, turned it to snap the hook open and pull it from the latch. "So what was the more you wanted, then? My body?" She gave the door a shove and looked up into his face, dark against the moon behind his head.

"Not just that," he said.

"What, then?"

"Just what you've given me," Jim said, brushing the hair back from her forehead. "The rest of you." They stood in the doorway looking at each other, his hands gripping her upper arms. "There are words in your language for what's happened between us, but they cheapen it. Silly words compared to what we feel. My people have some that are better, but I see now that even they are not enough." He stopped and spoke sounds to her that she did not understand, but she pleased at the way they felt in her ears. She smiled and he said them again. "I don't know how to explain what that means," he told her. "Something in the spirit of

another self—‘man who finds the woman living inside him with woman who finds the man dwelling in her;’” but that doesn’t really come very close.”

“They’re nice-sounding words. Say something else.”

When he spoke again, Ruth listened with her tongue, drinking in the movements of his mouth; she could almost feel the slidey sounds coming from her own lips, carrying forth the same lovely thoughts into the air. “Mmmm, what did you say?” she asked when he stopped.

“I said tomorrow we have to make a shithouse and bring in firewood before we freeze to death.” Ruth gave him playful push and stepped through the doorway.

The next morning they went to work, first building the frame for the outhouse, then heading up a draw in the afternoon with an axe and a saw, to a place where Ruth had come across three dead pinyons, one of them blown to bits by lightning. They chopped and hauled branches the rest of that day and the next, falling asleep each night tired-sexless and tattooed with patches of black pine pitch wherever their bodies had been left open to air. On the third morning, Jim was ready to spend the day hauling down the rest of the wood they’d left hacked into stove-size pieces, but Ruth convinced him they could go back for it in days to come—she hadn’t labored so many hours nonstop since her days with the boulder and the slab, and wanted to get back some of the easy time the two of them had spent before they went to Juniper Valley. So they took turns hauling water to fill the #8 tub, then went to work with kerosene on the adhered sap that threatened to become part of their skins, exchanging their scratchy blackened patches for red and tender ones that they uncovered and enhanced by scrubbing with paraffin, which they promptly removed with soap and water.

Free of the pitch, they stood in the tub and began lathering each other’s bodies, laughing and tickling and pausing longer at strategic spots, so caught up in the frolic that neither heard the horseman approach until he spurred his mount up the bank of the wash and his partner rode up behind, neither man stopping until the horses’ heads were hung over the tub. Ruth and Jim

stopped cold in the moment, each still holding the other's soapy, dripping body as they stared at the cowboys. "How these thirsty horses gonna drink, Bobby, when this here water's full of garbage? Damned if it ain't that Indian and his squaw pollutin' up another water hole," Stine said. He kept one hand on the handle of the pistol on his hip. The air was saturated with the smell of sour liquor.

All Ruth could think was that the rifle and shotgun were in the cabin. What she said was, "You have no business here. Get off my property, Mr. Stine, right now."

Charlie Stine laughed. "'Mr. Stine,' is it? At least it shows respect. Well, you don't got nothin' to say about it this time, whore." As he moved his horse toward her, Jim leapt out of the tub and ran for the cabin door. Stine swung off his buckskin after him, Ruth pursuing them both until Bobby Key rammed his horse between her and the door, his boot catching her in the ribs. She went down just as she heard the soft thuds of metal striking flesh. Key was off his horse before she could get to her feet, kicking her off balance. She went down flat on her belly, where he pinned her tight, his legs kneeling on her thighs, his hands pressing her wrists against the ground. Thuds still sounded from inside her cabin. She could do nothing but watch from under the horse as Stine's arm lifted and came down again and again, as she stifled screams of outrage and horror.

By the time Stine stepped out of the cabin, fear for Jim had made her silent and cold in her anger, though she could do nothing to stop the flow of tears. "That damned Indian was going after a gun, Bobby. Can you imagine that?" he said, as he came through the doorway. "I had to defend myself. Their kind never learn. He was no different than the one who murdered my grandpap." Stine stopped when he saw Key holding Ruth down, a smile spreading over his face. "Let 'er up, Bobby."

"Don't know about that, Charlie. She'd be hard to pin down again. 'Sides, I kinda like the view from here."

"I said get off her." Stine gave him a shove. As soon as the man's weight lifted from her, Ruth was on her feet. "Well, looky here. You're makin' it easy for us, naked and all," he said, sending

his eyes up and down her form in an exaggerated manner. "But too bad you had to get yourself all dirty when you was so nice and clean for us." Ruth ran for the door, but Bobby Key grabbed her from behind as she went past, lifted her, and trapped her arms at her sides. He looked down over her shoulder, his breath hot against her neck, "Jesus," he said. Stine walked around in front of her. She wanted to gouge out his eyes and squish them in her palms like grapes. "So you been givin' all that to an Injun, have you?" he said, attempting to get a hand between her fighting legs. "Guess I'll have to remind you what a white man's like—in case you forgot after that Johnny Lee feller." Like a striking rattler, he reached out and grabbed her breast, twisted and pulled, as if he would rip it from her body. She kicked out at his groin, but he moved aside and her bare foot merely brushed his leg. Key tightened his hold around her arms and ribs until she could barely breathe and clamped one of her legs between his while she kicked back at his knee with the other. Stine took possession of the free leg and jerked it out to one side, slapping her face from cheek to cheek at the same time. When he quit she spit blood at him, and he hit her again, harder.

"Can't hold on much longer, Charlie. Let's get on with it," Key said. He pressed his pelvis tight into her buttocks.

"Don't let yer horse out of the barn yet, Bobby," Stine said. He looked around, then pulled at the buckle of his gun belt, jerking out the pistol before the holster fell. He lifted Ruth's leg higher and shoved the cold metal barrel into the tender flesh between her struggling legs, pushing his face next to hers and exhaling putrid breath as he spoke. "You know what I like to do to squaw whores?" he said, applying pressure with the pistol. Tears came, but she did not cry out, thinking that Jim might still hear her. She could not bear to pain him further. Ruth did not take her eyes away from Stine's, sending her message clearly: I will kill you, she promised silently as he jammed the barrel deeper.

"Christ," Key said, his pelvis already rocking behind her. "Let's get on with it before it's too late."

All at once Key let go and moved his arms away, and Ruth felt Stine's fingers dig into her breasts, using them as handles to fling

her to the ground by her cabin wall. A sharp pain sent light cracking through her brain, and the world went hazy and far away, where she could no longer see it. She heard ugly sounds in the distance, where there was pain and bad things being done to her, but it was all happening so far away it ceased to matter. Then came a loud noise, like the blast of a shotgun, a shout, then silence for a very long time.

Nausea overruled Ruth's dark place, and she managed to turn to one side and dry-heave, though her head was a wounded thing and her body throbbed and pushed her back into black space. But the urge to vomit kept needling her into a dazed awokeness that she fought with every bruised cell until it finally pried her eyelids up. In the haze she understood she was lying on the ground in front of her cabin, chattering with cold, though the sun shone down on her. Jim lay not far from her, near the door, his face turned away and his long hair fanned out behind his head. After several more dim bursts of consciousness, she began to crawl toward him to see if he was as cold as she was. The inches between them were long, and she had to pause several times for dizziness and retching before she could reach him.

Jim's skin gave off no warmth, but she hugged herself up to his body so heat could grow between them. She saw that there was blood matted in his hair, but could not remember why.

Then someone was lifting her away from Jim, wrapping a blanket around her. John Olsen was there, though his face kept wavering. They were carrying her inside. On her bed. She tried to tell John not to forget Jim, that she knew he would be glad for them, but her stomach spasmed instead, and she fell back into the cave of her head's pain.

Ruth bobbed up several times more, gradually understanding that John Olsen sat in a chair next to her bed. The room still undulated behind him, but it became clearer and more still each time she blinked her eyes open. It pained her head to wonder what John was doing there, yet she hadn't the strength to question him. Slowly memories began to come to her, stinging pieces that squeezed tears from her eyes, left them trickling down her cheeks to fill her ears. Olsen reached out and took her hand. His red eyes looked into hers. He swallowed, but didn't speak. Ruth wanted to give voice to the fear inside her, to sit up and yell, "Jim, where's Jim?" But Olsen's look told her what she didn't want to hear.

She closed her eyes. "No," she whispered, her split lip reopening. "No." She felt John's lips on her hand, the sharp stubble around his mouth, his tears dropping wet and warm on her arm. She remembered the soft brush of Jim's lips on the same hand and heard a cry escape as she drew in her breath at the memory. Jim had become a part of her so quickly. Behind her eyes his face looked out from a thousand angles, his eyes meeting hers with an affection to match her own. She remembered standing with him in the doorway when they walked back from town, felt his hand brush back the hair from her forehead, just as John's was doing now. With a large, rough finger, Olsen wiped tears from under each of her eyes, wiped away her snot with his handkerchief. He lifted a glass of water toward her, and she turned her face away to refuse, though her tongue was dried fast to the roof of her mouth.

For some time anguish took precedent over the pain pounding

her head and the ache of her body; even those remembered fragments of her own attack held little meaning for her. After a while, when her quiet sobs eased and her breath spasms stopped, John rose and began stuffing the stove with wood. She heard him fill a pan with water. When he returned to the chair, she opened her eyes and forced out the words. "Tell me," she said.

"Ingmar went for sheriff in San Bernardino. He be back to-day sometime." Olsen looked out the window at the moving pine branches.

"No," she said. "About Jim." John looked back at her, but still didn't say anything. Ruth turned her head toward the wall as the tears came back. She knew what John would say but couldn't conceive of that truth. It seemed she and Jim had just risen from this very bed. But then she remembered him on the ground, his lovely hair spread out and streaked with red. After a few minutes, John went over to fix the coffee. When he came back carrying two cups and set them on the floor, she said, "Say it, John. I need you to say it."

"Jim dead, Rute. You know that." He swallowed and clenched his jaw. "He was good man. We get those cowboys. What they do to you . . . men like that not deserve to live." He twisted his fists, one on top of the other. "The whole world gone crazy," he said.

How could Jim be dead, gone so soon from smiling and alive with his hands lathering the skin of her body? Then she remembered other hands and sat up like a shot, pulling the blanket up to cover her breasts. "I'll do it. I'm the one to kill them," she said, imagining herself snapping back the trigger of a shotgun and watching buckshot tear through Charlie Stine's gut, splattering brains out of Bobby Key's skull, the way she'd seen it happen to rabbits after a bad aim. The image surged into her with a blast of black joy.

She registered the shock in John Olsen's face as he nodded and picked up one of the coffee cups, holding it out toward her. "It matter for the sheriff," he said. "I want kill them, too, but we let him handle it." He picked up his own cup and stood. "I go out now so you can dress," he said.

When he shut the door, Ruth set the coffee cup on the chair and moved gingerly out of the bed, her leg and back muscles stiff and sore. Her head swam as she rose. She looked down to see that her breasts were marked with dark streaks and finger-dot bruises, as were her arms and thighs. Dried blood was caked between her thighs. Keeping her balance, she shuffled across the room to the chest of drawers with small, careful steps. She dragged her clothes back to the bed and managed to put on a blouse and skirt and boots without socks, then started toward the front door, her bladder ready to burst. Yet it was a moment before she could bring herself to yank open that door, so afraid she was of finding Jim still on the ground in front of her cabin. But when she pulled it open, he was not there. Their bathtub had been emptied. Ruth looked around. Where had they put him then?

She saw John Olsen down in the wash heading for the spring with a water bucket; she would have to wait to ask him. Ruth began limping toward the outhouse she and Jim had finished, but got only as far as the edge of camp and stopped, easing down on a rock. She winced as her sore flesh met the hard surface. The difficulty of movement, her pounding head, made the privy too far to reach. She got up and hobbled around behind a juniper to relieve herself in a position that further aggravated her racked muscles—but more painful was the sting of urine as it left her. It was all she could do not to cry out and alarm the Swede.

By the time she found her way back to the cabin, Olsen was pouring water into the container that she'd moved inside. "Where is he, John?" she asked, stopping at the cabin door, one hand grasping each side of the wooden frame.

"The dugout. Ingmar, he carry him there till sheriff come. Dugout keep body cool." John slapped the tin lid on the water cooler and picked up the bucket. "I heat water for your bath on campfire, ya." Ruth pictured Jim's body lying in the darkened earth cave where Kate stored her meat carcasses and the photographs of her dead daughter.

"I want to see him," Ruth said, taking a few steps toward the bed and lowering herself onto the mattress until she could lean back against the pillow.

"They be here, Rute. Bring Jim back today."

"Today?" she asked, confused. It was not yet noon and they had just left. "How . . . how . . . can they be back?"

Olsen stopped beside her bed. He lifted the coffee cup from the chair and handed it to her. "Here. You feel better, Rute." She could not bring herself to drink. He sat watching until she brought the cup to her lips and pretended to sip the liquid that stung yet tempted her tongue, its flavor calling out to the life in her she would not heed. John Olsen touched her arm gently. "That good now." When she nodded, he rose, picked up the bucket, and walked the rest of the way to the door, where he turned back.

"It was yesterday, Rute, when they go to San Bernardino. It happen yesterday. You sleep a long time," he said, then walked outside, leaving the door open behind him.

Ruth set the coffee on the floor, but drank the glass of water next to it. Water, she decided, was not an enjoyment; she needed it to stay alive—and she wanted to stay alive to see to it that Stine did not. Her head a bit clearer, she wondered why Kate was not here with her, then worried about why. What else might have happened she hated to think. In such a world, anything might occur. After John had the water heating, she asked him.

"Ya," he said, sitting again in the chair next to her bed. "Kate in San Bernardino hospital. I bring her home next week."

"Is it cancer?"

John shook his head. His eyes sparked up as he said, "She have operation for the gall bladder. She be fine."

"I'm glad, John. Jim . . ." Ruth stopped, blinked away the moisture that wouldn't leave her eyes, forced her tightening throat to swallow, then continued, "Jim and I were worried. We walked into Juniper to see if anyone had heard from you."

He nodded. "Ya, I stop at the general store for supply. Baxter tell me. I hear what Stine say at Lone Star—that he come after you. John Lee tell me. I drive fast as I can, pick up men to help. But too late."

"Are you saying he told people what he was going to do?"

"People say he yust had too much to drink. A bragging cowboy, ya. But Lee, he think different, come to tell me."

Ruth recalled Stine's remark about her and Johnny Lee. Lee couldn't have been too worried; he'd bragged a bit himself—and he didn't bother to check up, either. So Matt had heard too. She choked up again at the thought. What a conversation those drunken cowboys must have had at the Lone Star, except Stine didn't really get drunk, but mean. The image of Stine's hand lifting and coming down again and again inside her door jerked through her head like the silent film scenes she'd watched in El Paso movie houses. Oh, my poor Jim, what that bastard must have done to you, she thought. Her mind substituted another picture, one of Stine's belly blown open. After she shot him, she would take a knife to him, not to the scalp of his head, but lower, much lower. "How long before they bring Jim back?" she asked to settle herself. "Will the sheriff be here right away?"

John shrugged. "I hope so. Everyting a mess down there, Rute, in San Bernardino. After the crash." Nothing registered with Ruth, preoccupied as she was with seeing the proof of her loss, until John said, "Stock market crash, Rute, you heard?" But she had no interest in such fabricated abstractions, and no understanding that they could affect the real lives of almost everyone she knew.

By the time the bucket of water on the campfire boiled, John Olsen had dutifully filled the tin tub with buckets of water from the spring. He added to that more boiling water from Ruth's large enamel coffeepot, rendering the bath water a more comfortable temperature than the cold water Ruth had been bathing in all summer. Its very comfort at first caused her to refuse, but Olsen's concern, and her own knowledge from nurses' training, changed her mind. When Olsen shut himself inside the house, Ruth lowered her body carefully into the warm water, taking time to adjust to each level of smarting as she settled deeper. When she was immersed in the tub's soothing liquid and the stinging had quieted, another concern came over her. She had used no vinegar or herb after the attack, and for the first time she truly feared for herself. It was too late now, she thought, and the idea of rinsing her sore parts with vinegar made her shudder.

Ruth let the warm water clean her wounds, while sun warmed

her shoulders above the water. Birds flitted and chirped among the pinyons, and a squirrel with a green cone in its mouth ran down a trunk. High overhead, a hawk floated down canyon. But it all seemed removed from her, as if something invisible now stood between her and the world, encasing her in a glasslike bubble. The squirrel trotted toward the tub, stopping to raise up and use two front legs to readjust its pinecone. It stared right at her with tiny, beady eyes. Another squirrel ran toward the first, and the two tore off toward the wash. She recalled what Jim had said about needing to get the pine nuts before the squirrels did. They had filled two gunnysacks with cones. Now he was gone and the squirrels would have the rest to themselves forever.

Ruth pushed away the thought and stood, blotting her skin gently with the towel before stepping out onto the sand in her bare feet. She dressed again in the same skirt and blouse, realizing it would be a while before she could hazard the pants she usually wore. She wished she could examine herself in the small mirror in her chest of drawers, but that would have to wait until John Olsen left. After calling out to John that she was dressed, Ruth walked cautiously to the chair beneath the pine, avoiding the sturdy pinyon needles that tried to penetrate the thick callus layered onto the soles of her feet, the way memories of her attack wanted to penetrate every waking thought. She wouldn't let them, though. She'd had no way to stop the men from hurting her, but she could keep it from happening over again in her mind. She could still deny them the shame they had left with her, though doing so did leave a crust around everything else.

When Olsen came out to empty the tub, he tried to get her to eat some of the canned stew he'd warmed and to go in and rest. But Ruth wanted to be awake when the men came back with Jim's body. She positioned her chair so she faced the cliff on the mountain, putting the area of yesterday's scene behind her back.

The sun was midway to the horizon before they heard the sound of the flatbed engine. Ruth had dozed in her chair, but she jerked awake when the truck rounded the bend. Tears stung behind her burning eyeballs, and she had swallowed several times to dam them by the time the truck pulled up in front of her

cabin. And there, behind the cab, she saw the red-and-black blanket—faded but similar to the one they had slept under in the hut. Wrapped in it were the remains of the only person in her life she had ever loved completely, proof that he would never again descend from the bluff to surprise her. Never fix biscuits with her, never kiss her lips.

“Olaf be up later with sheriff,” Ingmar told Olsen as he got out of the truck. “I show him the way. They be here soon.” He walked over and stood beside Ruth’s chair, the others milling around her. The big Swede said nothing, but clamped a hand on her shoulder.

“Did sheriff get Stine?” Olsen asked.

Ingmar shook his head. “Stine, he show up at Heart Bar last night. Rode off somewhere. No one seen him after.”

“Key?” John Olsen asked. Ingmar shook his head. One of the men spoke in Swedish. “Posse out looking for them,” Olsen explained to Ruth.

The men had brought a huge can of stew with them and heated it on the campfire, along with water for coffee, then sat drinking and eating as they waited for the sheriff to arrive, which didn’t happen until just before the sun went down. Ruth refused all but the water offered her, though her stomach had started to make its demands known, and her continued dizziness had as much to do now with hunger as with her injuries. Yet she was resolved to ignore it.

Ruth observed the sheriff as he stood talking with the miners by the truck. She turned away when he inspected the bundle. The law officer was a large man, with a huge belly swollen over an oversized belt buckle that cut up into his stomach. He had a walrus moustache and a habit of chewing the inside of his mouth as he stood thinking, giving the impression that the bouncing gray bristles had a life of their own. When he and John Olsen walked over to confer in front of the cabin, Ruth heard for the first time a description of the scene the miners had come upon when they drove up that day.

She had understood that they found the two of them together naked on the ground, for she remembered wrapping her

arm around Jim earlier. But she hadn't known that Jim had the shotgun under him, nor that there was a blood trail leading away from the front of the house to the wash and beyond. It didn't jibe with the picture she remembered, Stine's arm coming down and Jim left on the floor of the cabin. But now she wondered how Jim got back out in front where she last saw him. The sound of the loud blast came back to her. Of course.

Ruth explained to the sheriff what had happened, how she and Jim were in the yard when the cowboys came, how the men threatened them and Jim ran for the gun, with Stine going in after him. How they went after her when he came out. The men shuffled and looked away when the sheriff asked if she and Jim had been bathing together when the cowboys rode up, another part she'd skipped over as she told her story, but one that seemed to interest the sheriff. She nodded, took in a breath, and filled in the details of what Stine had said, though she didn't see that the cowboys' reasons were anything to consider. The sheriff studied her as she spoke, one hand massaging his chin. His mouth fidgeted, and his head bobbed subtly in a knowing nod. Ruth felt more than saw the shift; even in the dimming light Ruth could tell that his pale gray eyes were the deadest she'd ever seen.

"How long did you know the two men before that day?" he asked, studying her.

"I don't know, since sometime in spring—after I started my homestead. April, maybe. If you can call it knowing them." He continued to stare at her until she explained further. "The first time we met, their cattle trampled my garden."

"So you didn't know them in any other way?" He looked down at his boot, rubbed its sole in the sand and tapped its toe, then looked back up at her. "Like you knew the Indian, I mean."

Blood rushed to Ruth's head so fast her ears rang. The moment throbbed under his question. No one moved or spoke until the sheriff said, "I mean, it seems like a lot of damage for those boys to do for no reason at all."

"They bad men, I warn her . . . no good . . . no good," John Olsen started to explain, his face pained for her, but the sheriff raised his palm to stop him.

"I asked the lady a question," he said. "Let's hear what she answers." But Ruth was far from answering, her eyes fixed firm on the six-gun strapped to the sheriff's hip, ready to lunge for it at his next word and blow his simulated pregnancy to smithereens.

John Olsen came around behind Ruth's chair and set a firm hand on each of her shoulders.

"I ran them off with a rifle the first time they came here," she said, her jaw clenched and rage roaring into her ears that she had to say it. "Jim did the same once when they threatened us down at the willows. That seems like reason to me. They harassed us again a few days ago."

"Rute punch Stine at the dance once," John added. "Everyone see it."

The sheriff stood rubbing his chin and tapping the toe of one boot. "She didn't answer my question," he said.

It took all the restraint Ruth had not to jump up and claw him. She wanted to draw blood, even if it was simply with fingernails. Only the granite of Olsen's hands kept her from flying apart. "What difference would that make?" she said. "They killed Jim and . . . attacked"—she forced out the word to correct herself—"raped me." When the sheriff's moustache began to rise in a knowing smile, she swallowed hard and said, "But to answer your question, no, I did not know the men, either man, in, as you put it, the way I knew the Indian. The man's name is Jim, sheriff, Jim Daniel." But she could see it was too late to make him believe her—if he ever would have.

"Was," he said. "Was Jim Daniel." The sheriff strode over to the front of her cabin and squatted down to examine the ground. With a soft squeeze to brace her, John let go of Ruth's shoulders and went to stand over the lawman. She took in a breath and found she held together. Ingmar gave her a kindly nod.

"I have to establish motive, that's all, Mr. Olsen," Ruth heard the sheriff say in response to something John said in low tones. "I'm just trying to find out what went on here."

"Rute tell you that. I tell you what Stine say at the Lone Star,"

Olsen said, his voice raised, but strong with authority. Ruth imagined the sheriff chewing furiously on his inner lip.

"I'll check all that out later," he said. "But this is a serious matter, serious charges to bring against a man. I have to be sure first." He sounded almost reasonable until Ruth heard him say in a lower voice, "With a woman like that men are sometimes driven to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do."

"And what kind of woman would that be, Mister Sheriff?" Ruth said, rising from her chair with a force that surprised her and everyone else. She closed the distance between them.

"I was speaking to Mr. Olsen here," the man said, his face a steel wall. Even the moustache had stopped bouncing. Ruth felt the miners gathering behind her.

"You were talking about me. At least you could say it to my face."

"I'm surprised you'd want me to." He looked square at her. "The kind of woman that cavorts naked with Indians needs no further explanation," he said.

Ruth swung around and flew inside her house, heading straight for the mattress. The gun was already in her hands when John came rushing in behind her. From the yard came the loud voices of miners arguing with the sheriff. In one motion, Olsen held fast her arm with a huge hand and with the other took the rifle. "Give it back," she hissed, her entire body shaking, her blood an axe-thumping pain against the top of her skull. All boundaries of behavior lay behind her. What else could she lose?

Olsen shook his head. He tossed the .22 onto the cot and pulled Ruth into his arms, holding her fast as she struggled to free herself, as if that would loosen the grip of emotion about to overpower her. In the end, the turmoil was too strong for her, and, bit by bit, she gave in to it, sobbing into Olsen's barrel of a chest as he held on to steady her.

The next morning Ruth was grateful for the thin sheet of cloud dimming the sun's light, a physical presence that gave body to the shield between herself and the world. A warm wind whipped at what was left of her hair as she watched the men carry Jim's wrapped body to the grave at the foot of the bluff.

The rest of her hair she had hacked off and coiled inside her first small olla, and when the miners laid Jim in the shallow depression, she knelt and placed the rough clay pot into the space where his arms came together under the blanket. She almost stopped the men, then, when they lifted the shovels and stood waiting as John walked over to move her back from the edge of the grave, fighting her desire to unwrap the blanket and pull it back from Jim's face, sure that he would wake up; yet she knew well that he would not and that his face would not now resemble the face of the man she had loved. So she allowed Olsen to raise her and stepped back from the rim so the men could throw on their shovels of dirt, hiding the faded patterns that defined Jim's shape. When earth began to cover his face, she found herself drawing in huge, deep breaths against a sensation of suffocation, as if she now had to breathe for both of them.

After the crevice around the body had been filled and sand mounded over, the miners covered the loosened earth with rocks brought up from the wash until several layers were piled over the site, so that nothing could dig Jim up. Olsen and the miners had wanted to construct a coffin, but Ruth could not bear to encase him, and they had agreed to use the rocks instead. Once the burial was complete, they went across the wash to roast slabs of John's billy kid over Ruth's campfire. John Olsen had tried hard to persuade Ruth to have supper and stay the night at his place in the willows, but she would not hear of it, nor would she allow anyone to stay with her another night.

"It too soon for you to be alone, Rute. You need be with others," Olsen said late that afternoon as the men sat eating around the campfire; Ruth, weak from no food, remained stalwart in her fast. "You not ready yet," he said. Ruth glanced at him, then back up at the bluff, as if she expected to see Jim suddenly rise up and ascend the rock face.

"Those cowboys might come back, ya," Ingmar told her. "You need we stay."

"The sheriff thinks Stine went back to Texas and Key with him, remember," Ruth reminded him, referring to the conversation John Olsen had with the sheriff when he returned earlier

that morning. Ruth hadn't wanted the lawman there for the burial, so they'd waited around for him to leave. In the end, Ingmar had to make Ruth's request clear to him before he would go, which he did in an ugly humor.

"But you eat nothing," John Olsen said. It was as if he had become Kate in her absence, seeing to it that Ruth was fed. "Not good lose your strength. Jim not like it." Ruth took long drinks from her water to fill her stomach. The smells of food and coffee were getting to her; it had been nearly two days now since she had eaten, three if she counted the day of the cowboys' attack. The wind had cooled and increased in the gray afternoon, and she was finding it hard to resist the thought of hot coffee. But what would it say about her love for Jim if she ate so easily, as if nothing had happened?

"I'll eat," she said. "Soon. I'm not ready yet."

"I stay one more night," Olsen insisted. "Then I go." His tone told her no amount of arguing would change his mind, and Ruth was surprised to find herself glad of it.

The setting sun broke through a crack in the cloud, painting a sheet of red over their heads, and when Ruth looked up from the bluff, she found the color disturbed by huge black birds circling silently beneath the glowing surface. Buzzards, hundreds of them in spirals along the length of the open canyon. Before the others had seen to stop her, Ruth went in for her .22. She stepped out the door and aimed into the moving targets.

"Rute," John said, rising from his chair. "Buzzards go south for winter. Stop at willows for water. They not after Jim." But her shaking finger had already pulled the trigger.

Ruth's bullet lost itself in the sky and the buzzards continued their slow spirals without disruption. Afterward, she saw that they were indeed gradually moving away down canyon, and most were out of sight soon after the sun disappeared. A few that weren't dropped down into the cottonwoods behind the spring to roost, the weight of their huge bodies sending some of the weaker branches crashing to the ground.

Ruth moved her chair to the bank of the wash and kept watch

over the grave until long after the black birds had blended into the dark. Despite more assurance from John Olsen, and from the miners before they left, she kept expecting to see the creatures flap big, whooshing wings over to the pile of rocks and sweep the stones aside, digging ugly beaks deep into the earth to get at Jim's body.

"You need go back home, Rute, to El Paso," John said later that evening, after the others were gone and the two of them sat inside, Ruth at last allowing herself one cup of coffee and a small piece of goat meat, choosing one that had been charred tasteless. "This no place for you, now. Maybe you come back when things over."

"But this is my home, John. I have no other," she said, surprised. "This is the only place I want to be. Jim's here."

"But you have family, Rute, in El Paso. They take care of you."

Ruth stifled a laugh. Take care of her, indeed. Besides, she felt it might kill her to leave this place now. Where in Texas, she wondered, did Stine run to? Texas was a big place—huge and ugly. She would ask around when she got stronger. "I might go back, but not now. And not to stay," she said.

Her answer seemed to satisfy the Swede, and he got up to lay out the mat he'd brought to sleep on. Ruth knew he would wait for her to make a trip outside before he settled down for the night, so she went out to pee near the bank of the wash, finding it slightly easier each time, both to squat and to release the fluid. The afternoon's wind had turned chill, and there was now a dampness in the air. Thin, high clouds diffused light from the waning moon and spread brightness across the canyon; Ruth stared hard at the gravesite but saw no hovering black shapes above it.

When she returned, John Olsen blew out the lamp, and Ruth lay back in the dark cabin. The images of Jim's body being lowered into the ground, the dirt thrown over his form, the dark birds spiraling against a bloodred sky loomed large in the room, kept alive by Olsen's prolonged snores. Ruth's eyes stayed hot and dry. Then other images came to take the place of the first,

comforting her as they nudged her toward sleep. She saw the wide-open El Paso plains, a rotting body with buzzards circling purposefully above, while a few on the ground dug big beaks into flesh just below a bright patch of orange hair.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Once Kate and John left tomorrow for the winter mines, Ruth would not see them until spring. The couple would have been gone a month ago had it not been for Kate's need to recover from surgery. Then the word came down that the desert mines would stay closed this year because of the crash. Yet a week ago they received new information that excavations would start on schedule—though wages had taken a cut—and the Olsens had spent the last few days preparing for their yearly move. Ruth expected they would be up today to say good-bye, and no doubt leave her more food. Kate had wanted to leave a nanny with Ruth for the winter, but Ruth would not accept it. They also tried to force several laying hens and a few pullets on her, claiming that they needed her to keep them. But Ruth knew

they always took the animals with them. John insisted on driving her to town to get stocked up before the snows hit; already there was a thin coating of white at the top of Rocky Mountain. Ruth herself had lost all interest in addressing her needs—which was why the Olsens insisted—but she had hoped letters from El Paso would be waiting for her at the store, so she allowed them to take her. Yet no mail awaited her.

Ruth had gone along with several of the Olsens' plans for her, wanting to be grateful, though the most she could manage was a sense of obligation not to appear ungrateful. John and Kate cared for her—whether she wanted them to or not—and were more family than she had known in El Paso, where she had simply played a role in ongoing dramas. Now, because of the Olsens she walked and ate and spoke as if she were really herself and not, like the crusty locust shells she found attached to trees, emptied out. All that remained of her was the lust to obliterate a man with orange hair. All the softness inside her was gone, replaced by hate. It had been a blow to find no letters at the store yesterday. In her correspondence to Aunt Myrtle three weeks ago, Ruth had enclosed another letter, this one to her uncle Ben, asking the lawman if he could find out where in Texas the fugitive Charlie Stine had gone. Ruth had written to her aunt for that purpose alone; it had been a silly letter, really, meant to disguise any sign of Ruth's trouble, and mentioning casually at the end that she had told the local sheriff that she would personally ask her uncle, the well-known El Paso police chief, for his unofficial help in a matter—so would Aunt Myrtle please give him the letter? The enclosure to her uncle detailed the matter further—but left out Ruth's involvement in it. And, of course, Ruth had told the local sheriff no such thing, knowing he could care less if Stine were ever found and certainly would never share with Ruth any information he gathered. But Stine's escape was real enough and would be listed in the proper bulletins, where her uncle could verify the information. Since she had not revealed the name of the fictitious sheriff, Ruth hoped her uncle would be forced to go through her to answer the fictitious query.

Other than the loss of considerable weight, and a temporary

loss of strength, Kate had come back from her illness much her old self, and for that Ruth really was grateful. The woman had said nothing about Jim or the attack when John brought her to see Ruth that first time, but had taken Ruth in her large arms and rocked her. Ruth felt some slight stirrings then, yet since that day with the sheriff, her eyes had stayed as dry as desert sand and as parched as she felt inside.

It was midday by the time the flatbed rounded the bend, with Kate and John in the cab and the miners on the back. Kate had prepared a supper as well; one look at the bounty of strudels and bread told Ruth that Kate had spent the morning baking, which accounted for the returned paleness of her face. Guilt peppered Ruth's armor, angering her, until Kate reached out with abundant arms and cushioned Ruth's steely form inside them.

"Strudel for you. Make you strong," Kate told her, reaching into the basket she had set inside on Ruth's table. Ruth closed the door against the November gusts, while Kate piled kindling into the stove. The miners had gone up the draw for the rest of the cut wood, and John and Ingmar set to work constructing a shelter over the wood supply that she and Jim had piled high alongside the house. Ruth watched their industry with some dismay, not knowing what else she could do to discourage such well-intended intrusion.

"You be glad, Rute," Kate said, laying a hand on Ruth's back when she saw her watching the men out the window. "When cold and snow come." How could Ruth tell her that the weather outside could never be as cold as she felt inside? She merely nodded and spread her lips into a smile so forced she thought her cheeks might crack.

Kate patted her and went back to filling the coffeepot with water. Ruth put Kate's big pot of chili to heat on the back burner, dreading the nausea she expected to feel at the smell of food. While the pots were heating, Kate set Ruth's two chairs to face each other in front of the fire and sat in one of them. "Come sit, Rute," she said, patting the other chair. Ruth made her legs obey.

"I so sorry for what happen to you," Kate said, taking Ruth's

hand, her face so full of feeling Ruth could hardly make herself look at it. "You be okay. You young woman, life ahead of you."

Ruth looked out the window. Stine had taken whatever life she had in her. The only way to get it back was to find him. She didn't care what happened after that. John himself said the man didn't deserve to live. Even so, Ruth couldn't imagine herself living afterward. Her former exuberance seemed to her as silly and excessive as the way she used to glamorize the men she was attracted to. Before Jim came along. He alone stood solid in his worth. And now he was buried like the boulder.

"Rute," Kate said, giving Ruth's hand a soft squeeze, "I wish I could stop the bad happening. But no one can. When Sarah die, I want die too." Kate's face brimmed with suffering. "But I have to go on."

"But were you ever the same, Kate?" Ruth said. "I mean, was it still you, really?" She stood up and walked to the window looking out onto the bluff. "Was the Kate that went on really the same you?" Ruth walked back and sat down again. The woman was looking down at the floor, her eyes fixed far away. "Sometimes I think, Kate, that you made the whole world your daughter—always making sure we're all fed, as if we are all your children."

"Specially you, Rute," Kate said, looking up. "You just like Sarah—full of life."

"But I'm not. I'm not full of life." Ruth jerked up from the chair. "Stop saying that." She didn't want that kind of love. It didn't belong to her; it belonged to their dead daughter. And love brought its own entrapments—even the best of loves, like Jim's—which is why she had been cleaned out inside, like the rabbits she had dressed out. A carcass ready to be cooked and eaten.

Ruth looked back at Kate's face. It had been easier to ignore Myrtle's concern born of duty and spite for Cally, and to disregard Cally's self-centered mothering. Ruth understood those things. But this kind of caring caught her off guard, obligated her in some way she couldn't defend against.

"It take time, Rute," Kate said, getting up from her chair. At

the stove, she lifted the lid from the chili pot, and the spicy smell wafted across the room as she stirred. Ruth found the aroma appetizing and wondered if she might even eat for the first time in days. Almost hopeful, she considered for a moment not sending her letter to Cally with the Olsens, but decided she wouldn't take the chance: if her fears were justified, she would need Cally's mysterious herb—too much was at stake now to trust to fate. And she would send a reminder to her Uncle Ben that the information about Charlie Stine's whereabouts was still needed.

When the men came in, Ruth poured coffee into the cups Kate had laid out on the table, distributing them once the bowls of chili had been ladled out and the men seated on the cement floor to eat. Ruth found it easier these days to put aside the unpleasantness of being beholden; there were now far worse things to keep out of her reach. John and Kate ate without conversing, as if leaving Ruth weighed on them, but the miners joked about their having to get out before the snows came, and told her how the snow would be so huge it would close over the windows, and how she would wish the privy sat right outside her front door. Ruth appreciated their lightening the situation, but she wondered if such a winter were really possible here in this canyon. The miners' descriptions, Olsen said, were exaggerated, but old-timers had told of hard winters. They weren't leaving because of the threat of snow, he told her, but because the snow on Onyx Peak made mining impossible for the winter months, so they had in recent years worked the salt mines in the lower deserts. Several snowfalls of a few inches each were normal, he said, but some winters could get extremely cold in the canyons below Rocky Mountain. "Canyon no place for woman alone," he added, as if he hadn't already said that many times, trying once again to talk Ruth into going to El Paso for the winter.

She had no care whether or not the snow buried her and her cabin completely—the idea of being encased in ice seemed appropriate. Yet she wanted to be able to walk out to Juniper Valley and get word of Stine's location from Uncle Ben. She would go after him—even if she had to hitch a ride again, as she had

when escaping from the girls' school. And the response from Cally could be crucial. Not knowing the contents of the letters she handed them, the Olsens seemed eager to mail them—the correspondence with Cally alone might have caused them to drag Ruth away to the mines if they'd known, so she allowed them to think she was considering a return to her family's comforting arms. And she might well return to Texas if she could learn the cowboy's whereabouts, though no one there would comfort her, as the Olsens thought. That family had no capacity for comfort, even if she should need such consolation. But she did not.

Once the supper mess had been cleared away, and Kate and John had given her several hugs and several more warnings about keeping in a supply of water that wouldn't be frozen, and wood inside for the stove and many other details that Ruth couldn't keep track of even had she wanted to, and Ingmar and the other miners wished her luck through the winter—and she them—the group gathered up and drove off. By then it was well past dark, and Ruth stood outside her front door watching their headlights illuminate the brush along the road as the vehicle traveled to the bend and out of sight. Then she was finally alone, opening up to the mournful whine of pines while cold wind harassed the few whips of hair left on her shorn head.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ruth's decision to climb Rocky Mountain had come of a sudden, after weeks of clouded days, both inside and out, where she had warmed herself by the embers of her hatred for Stine. Then she had woken one morning from a dream where the olla of her house shattered to pieces around her as she used her arms to shield her face and head from heavy shards that kept cracking down on her. A nightmare no less real than her life had become. She had been relieved to find the rock walls around her intact, though she shivered in vivid dream residue and pulled up the covers under her chin. Ruth closed her eyes, and memories came to her of the days she had sat naked in the sun with Jim, coiling clay into ollas that they pit-fired a few days later. The two clay pots were still up in Jim's house of boughs and skins. She pic-

tured them there, side by side, where they left them on Jim's red-and-black blanket—if his spare shelter had withstood the wind and storms that buffeted the mountaintop as Ruth watched from her window. Too much of her time she spent staring out that window at the bluff, as if the winter face of the mountain, with its frequent cap of foreboding cloud and rush of flurries, contained something for her. Her memories of those brief days with Jim were dimming until she had trouble believing them. Only her hatred remained real and constant. Until this morning, when the dream of ollas and a warm red blanket appeared like a tangible answer for her to seek from the mountain.

Ruth put her good pair of wool slacks over the ones she'd worn for the last few days, and another flannel shirt over the one covering her cotton undershirt. Each layer went on easily, her clothes now hanging loosely. An extra pair of socks made her boots a bit too snug, but she knew they would stretch as she walked. With her wool mackinaw covering all that, it took some doing to move her arms and she felt like a child's stuffed animal. Even warmly dressed, Ruth knew she took a chance climbing the mountain with the storm that seemed to be developing. This morning's clouds were not just a helmet capping the peaks, but gray racing rags overhead that spit an occasional flake against the windowpane in warning. To ignore the risk gave her a sense of satisfaction, as if she dared the world to care less about her than she herself did. It was a way to take back control and defy her body's betrayal.

Her nausea had subsided in the weeks since the Olsens had left, leaving a raging appetite in its place. That appetite seemed a hunger other than her own, and she had stood firm against it, not wanting to give in to the needs of anything alien inside her. As yet no curse had come to her, and the continued tenderness of her breasts long after the bruises had faded convinced her that her fears were justified. But still no word—or herb—from her mother, though she had twice made trips into Juniper Valley to check her mail. It angered her that such a plague, like the damnable curse she now longed for, was not one visited upon the men that caused it. Even more insidious than her bodily changes

was the growing change she felt in her thinking; already she had to resist impulses to protect and care for herself in ways that were not natural to her. And she had to fight an overwhelming desire to sleep more, to eat foods that didn't usually appeal to her. The condition had not gone this far the time in El Paso. It was as if something had taken root in her and was now wanting to take charge completely. At times her thinking was no longer her own, though she could still distinguish it through blurred lines. It galled her to know that she had struggled for so long to escape the control of those around her, to control her own life, and now found control wrested from her from the inside. Only Cally's remedy could save her, and each time Ruth returned empty-handed from town, her hatred of Stine deepened. She had not yet heard from Myrtle nor her uncle—had expected at least some word or gift for Christmas last week, but received nothing from anyone. And according to Jack Hudson, who gave her a ride back to the mouth of the canyon on her last trip, the sheriff had found no trace of Stine. As if he were actively looking. Unless she heard something soon, she would be forced by weather to wait until spring to go after him. She also learned, for the first time, that Bobby Key had been found dead of buckshot. It was believed that Jim had crawled outside and shot the man before he died and that given the trail of blood leading away, Stine might have been injured as well.

Ruth walked to Jim's grave before she left, welcoming the bitter blasts that blew under her coat collar, even as she tightened the opening against them. She squatted and stared down at the pile of stones, fragments of mountain that covered over her lover. Reaching out, she placed her palm on the cold surface of a rock. A snowflake landed on the back of her hand, and she watched it melt into her skin.

The few flakes that sputtered down in the canyon became a light gauze around her as she traveled up Rocky Mountain, though only a thin sheet of snow covered the ground, the rest swirled into tiny drifts against rocks or pooled under the bottoms of brush. She hurried upward before the snow stuck enough to hide the familiar features she was following toward

Jim's camp. Yet the flakes continued in fits and starts, not serious enough to hide the ground completely, but deepening to almost an inch from earlier snowfalls near his camp.

Rushing clouds thinned overhead and a patch of blue looked ready to show through just before Ruth reached the pile of boulders that guarded the entrance to Jim's camp, then thickened again as she slid through the opening between the rocks, and the lake came into view, its surface mottled with dull frozen patches. She stepped in further and caught sight of the whitened exterior of the hut front. Hugging her back against the cold boulder for support, a few stray flakes feathering against her face, Ruth fought an impulse to turn and flee from this place that had offered up a man to love and took him away quicker than it gave him, the way a stroke of lightning at night offers up a view of the world, then snatches it from you so fast you aren't sure you really saw it. Ruth wondered now if anything she felt those few days had been real. But she had come this far and so strode boldly across the clearing and undid the flap of the hut, the way she had once jumped abruptly into the cold water of the lake to get the shock over as quickly as possible.

Emptied of Jim, the shelter appeared forlorn. Bits of chewed pinecones lay strewn on the red blanket around the two ollas. Inside one of the ollas, Ruth found a small stash of pine nuts, where a squirrel had stored a portion of its winter food. She knelt beside the bed, took her hands from her jacket pockets, and put an arm around each of the ollas. Their rough surfaces felt warm against her frigid palms. Emotion surged up at their touch, roared out of her chest in harsh shouts, and somewhere in that tempest Ruth gave over and lost herself. It wasn't until she stood outside in front of the petroglyphs, one olla lying in shards among the snow-covered rocks, the other half buried in a drift, that she came back to herself. Snow was falling in a heavy curtain around her, the icy tinkle of colliding crystals soft against the rocks. The landscape had been glossed over with a thick coat of white. Where she had been and for how long she didn't know, but she dropped down and began gathering up shards, then let

fall the pieces and rushed over to find the other olla intact. Jim's olla had somehow missed the rocks and survived.

Bone-chilled and shaking profusely, Ruth took the pot tenderly in her arms and carried it back into the hut. Hands red and white with cold, her fingers could barely manipulate the wood as she piled kindling and logs into the fire ring. She dug out a match from Jim's coffee can supply and struck it on a rock. Beyond exhaustion and emotion, she wanted simply to be warm and held out her palms to the fire as it blazed up. When the flame took hold fully, Ruth turned her back and sat stupefied in its heat, her mind blank as the snow-coat outside, no emotion or thought left in her. After a while, she crawled over to the blanket and under it with the olla, curling her body around the clay container.

A dim, blue-gray light permeated the hut when Ruth opened her eyes. The fire was out and her face felt like ice above the blanket. Crawling to the door, she pulled back the flap, squinting against the glare of surfaces brighter than the air around them, daylight fast draining away into night. Ruth leaned out and measured the snow with her hand. It reached from the tip of her middle finger to about an inch above her wrist. Pulling back her hand, she rubbed it under her other arm, straightened, and latched the door flap. It was too late to make it back to her cabin; she would be caught out on the mountain in the dark.

Ruth checked the supply of firewood against the wall. Several more logs and some kindling. Not a lot left, especially when caught in a snowstorm, she thought, picturing the wood supply back at her cabin, useless to her here. In the morning she would have to try to reach her place. The important thing was to keep herself warm till then.

The embers in the fire ring yet had heat, and a few ends of logs remained unburned. Ruth used those, along with a small helping of kindling, to revive the fire, holding open the front of her jacket to let in the warmth. Her stomach complained of its emptiness, but she had nothing to give it. At once she remembered the quail Jim had roasted over this very fire ring, the taste

of the succulent bird coming back to water her mouth anew. She had been sad when they killed the quail; somehow it felt different than with rabbit. Jim had stopped to apologize and thank the quail. His people once had a proper way of thanks, he said, for the killing of game, but he didn't know it, so this would have to do. Since his death, she'd been killing the little birds herself, and without an apology, in fact, enjoying the sight of their innocent heads gone limp, black topknots lying against the ground. She took perverse pleasure in ripping the feathers from their still-warm bodies. She ate the birds, too, of course—and maybe that was enough—but it was no longer the point of it.

They had used up all Jim's supplies—coffee, flour, and everything else—before they'd left, but she dug around in the food tin and found several dried green sticks of the kind he'd used for tea the first time he brought her here. She packed snow high over the sticks in a small pan and set it on the fire to boil. She also found a jar with tiny black and gray seeds. Chia, he'd once told her, sprinkling some in her hand, good food for hiking. She shook out a pile into her palm, touched her tongue to it, and ground the seeds against her teeth. The flavor was something like a spicy nut. She ate about half the seeds and put away the rest. The tea was slightly bitter and tangy, but she drank it, then added more snow and boiled herself another hot cup of it. Afterward, she put a few more logs on the fire, setting some aside for morning.

Easing a warm stone from the ring, Ruth buried it between the top and bottom blankets, near the foot, then pulled Jim's red kerchief from the snag and tied it around her head for warmth. She considered removing her boots, but decided against it, buttoned her coat collar and got under both blankets, lying directly on the mattress of leaves and debris. It took some time before the stone's heat penetrated and she could stop shivering, but gradually even the duff warmed under her.

For a long while Ruth lay awake; the animal skins overhead prancing and alive in the firelight. It seemed strange to her that she should desire to stay alive now, when only this morning she'd had no interest in it at all—or thought so at the time. She

wasn't sure why she was so determined to survive; she told herself it was to fulfill her promise to kill Stine, though she had not once thought of him since she woke from her unplanned nap. Yet given the alien she believed lodged inside her, it might indeed be easier to fall asleep in this hut and not wake up. Here would be a good place for her bones to stay, where she and Jim had been. No one would know what happened to her. When they returned, the Olsens would think she went back to El Paso.

But she wouldn't die tonight, she knew, would not just fall asleep and never wake. That would be too easy, and things had never been easy for her. More likely, if she did die, it would be out in the open on the way back tomorrow, trudging through deep snow and losing her way in a changed landscape. Ruth wondered how much snow would fall tonight, but it didn't matter—she would walk down the mountain in the morning. And no amount of snow would stop her.

Morning had brightened the hut when Ruth surfaced from a sleep that had finally come to her like a belated gift. For a few moments she kept still so as not to disturb the warm niche she had made around her. Her comfort extended beyond the physical, the remnants of dream encasing her like a campfire's warmth, furnishing the cold hut with the intensity of her feeling. There was Jim above her, his long hair draping a curtain around their faces. "I love you, Ruth," he whispered, as he had not said before—though she had never doubted it. "And I love you, Jim," she had said, speaking into the lips already touching hers. Now she lay steeped in gratitude, longing, and regret. Gradually, the residue faded and the need to pee overruled her desire to hold on to the emotion. She pulled back the covers and confronted the air, rose and unlatched the flap. She found the snow level risen, but not dramatically, now reaching from her fingertip to halfway to her elbow. The sky was overcast, but no snow was falling.

Ruth walked out into the white expanse, fluff falling away from her feet at each step. When she reached the edge of the lake she turned around and looked back. The hut had become a white lump, the rocks beside it bumps in a pool of cream, the tree branches above the ledge draped with a layer of snow. Below

them the wall of rocks with petroglyphs had been framed in white, intensifying their etched patterns. It would have been beautiful to her, Ruth thought, such a short time ago. Now it simply sat there, frozen into fact.

She ate snow, heated water to warm herself, and finished the rest of the chia. Standing at the door of the hut, Ruth looked back at the olla and the blanket. They would be harder to carry back in this storm. But she couldn't countenance the thought of leaving these remnants of her lover to freeze here on the mountain, so she wrapped the olla carefully in Jim's blanket and started down the mountain, the bundle over her shoulder. Her worry about getting lost was well founded, she realized, on the transformed mountainside. Even her ability to estimate the location of Glory Springs by sight had been made impossible by the low cloud cover against the mountain, which allowed her to see only a short distance in front of her—about the space from her cabin to the bend, she thought. All she had to go by was down, but she knew she'd end up somewhere at the bottom—as long as she was careful not to walk off the edge of a snow-covered precipice. But no telling where at the bottom she might arrive, for she had learned from experience that a small step in the wrong direction at the top could land her miles from where she intended—not much to worry about on a warm summer's day, but another matter during a snowstorm.

On the first few ridges she followed, she felt confident of her direction. As she went on, the web of ridges became more confusing. Nothing looked familiar buried under the mounds of snow. Confronted with the maze before her, she tried to remember the reverse direction from the way she came up, whether it was to the right or left, but soon would forget whether she'd chosen the ridge to the right or left the time before. Feet aching with cold, and blanket ends wrapped for warmth around the bare hand that carried the olla, Ruth began choosing direction by which way looked easier to negotiate. She tried tying the blanket and olla around her waist to free her aching arm, but kept bashing into brush and getting hung up, so she untied the blanket and lugged the pot over her shoulder again. For a while

she progressed downward smoothly until, just at the point where she became the most confident—after thinking that she recognized a stand of oak beside a certain pile of boulders—she found herself trapped in a cage of scrub oak and manzanita, with no way to go but down a sheer dropoff or back up the way she had come. So she backtracked to the place where she had another choice of direction. After that she tempered her choices with intuition.

When the fog finally thinned, lower on the mountain, and Ruth found herself walking in snow above her ankles instead of halfway up her calf, she still found nothing to recognize about the white ridges visible below or the canyons between them. What she did recognize was the fresh trail made by two deer heading down the side of a draw—but in a direction other than she had planned to go. She stood for a moment considering: she was totally disoriented, without a directional clue except which way was up and which down, and she had begun to doubt even that; she could imagine herself wandering around the huge mountain until nightfall if she chose wrong; a few flakes had begun to fall again, and the window of clearing below was starting to close. Ruth took a deep breath and followed the tracks, hoping the deer knew the way better than she did.

The trail cut diagonally across the steep draw and angled up the ridge on the other side, then over a hogback—not a route Ruth would have otherwise attempted, deer being more skilled climbers than humans, but she found the way surprisingly efficient, at least downhill, and snow was easier to walk on than the loose sand she knew was underneath the snowy sides of the draw. The tracks followed the ridgetop for a long stretch, looping down the side again and back up when the top got too rocky and brush-covered to be passable. The trailblazers' familiarity with the landscape reassured her, and she found herself absorbing some of the confidence that came of the creatures' conversancy. She walked past places where they had stopped to nibble scrub oak leaves on the bottoms of snow-covered branches, leaving in exchange fresh brown pellets melted into the white ice. The scattered flakes had increased to a light snow,

but unlike yesterday's it wasn't coming down around her, but blowing by on a slant in the wind that had come up, hindering visibility even more. Ruth hastened along, afraid the deer tracks would fill up, her own feet dragging deep streaks in the snow behind her feet. Her fast pace served to keep her warm, even in wind, except for inside her boots, where each foot had turned to a chunk of wood or ice, and her face, which had gone numb against the falling flakes.

When a steep section of trail led off a ridge onto an expanse of level ground, and she saw the hazy outline of another mountain in front of her, Ruth still didn't realize that she'd reached bottom. Then she tramped across a wide path of white stretching as far as she could see in either direction, which was by then only a few yards. She continued to follow the tracks well past the patch before she recognized its significance, before she turned and backtracked. It was indeed the rut road through the canyon. Relief and a faint joy washed over her; she turned to her left and followed it up canyon, already imagining the blaze of fire she would soon have in her stove, the biscuits she would make to go with the can of beans she would open. She could almost taste them. Blessed, delicious beans, hot in her mouth, her stomach mumbled in a language of its own.

She had traveled a few bends up canyon, preoccupying herself with thoughts of the comfort she would soon have, when she noticed a dilapidated wooden structure to her right, then another beside it, beyond that yet another. She came to a standstill. There were no such structures in her canyon. This was not her canyon, not Rattlesnake at all. She had thought this canyon narrower than she remembered, the walls more sheer, but she couldn't see clearly enough in the snow to be sure. Now she remembered that she had turned left to go up canyon, when she should have turned to the right.

After the initial stun of disappointment had turned to a cold knot of fear, Ruth trudged through the wind and blowing snow to the first structure, which she found to be nothing more than three splintering walls left after the roof and another wall had caved in. The rough-hewn planks had darkened with age. She

stopped to eat a handful of snow, then made her way to the next structure. All looked long deserted, the wood old and coming apart, but she hoped there might be something left around to eat, her stomach still fixated on the beans, and a place to warm herself. Maybe she could at least find some clue to tell her where she was. The door of the next shack had been nailed shut with a plank, so she walked around the side and peered in the low window whose pane had long since disappeared. The tiny room was more intact than the last; a pile of old clothing lay heaped in the middle of the floor, the trunk around it split open and fallen away. A fireplace, the rocks partially fallen in, occupied the far corner; in another corner, a kangaroo rat peered out at her from its pile of sticks, then vanished back into its nest.

Ruth hoisted the blanketed olla through the window and climbed over the sill, stepping into the drift of snow that had blown in. The room stank of generations of rodent urine. She squatted to examine the pile of clothing, thinking it might hold a clue as to her whereabouts. But when she took hold of the thinned material, it came apart in her fingers. With her boot, she moved aside the top of the pile, rat pellets dropping and bouncing onto the wooden plank floor. She turned her face to avoid the stench. Underneath, the cloth stayed firmer, and she eased out one of the garments, a woman's dress of dark green velvet, now so fragile she could pull the cloth apart with her fingers. Carefully, she spread the garment out, noting the high-button collar, the puff sleeves at the shoulder, the bustle bucket at the back. A woman's high-button shoe lay beneath the dress, its leather twisted and gnarled with age.

Snow blew sideways outside the window, while gusts whistled through cracks between the planks. Stopping her motion was having its effect; Ruth's teeth had begun to chatter. She felt a shaking coming on so deep she was afraid no fire could ever reach it. Rubbing her hands together, she stomped her feet, but it made them hurt. She tried wiggling her toes inside her boots, but couldn't feel much past the pain of moving them.

She decided to clean the litter of rat pellets and debris from the fireplace, but wasn't sure whether the caved-in side would cause

the shack to catch on fire. She didn't care, she decided, if this shack burned, she would move to the next one down, and the next, burning them all as she went to keep herself warm. As Ruth looked for something to scrape with, picking up the shoe to use as a tool, she realized she hadn't thought to bring a match with her from the hut. With that she sank down against the wall and buried her head in her hands. She could feel defeat gathering behind her eyes, but knew if she dared give in to it that might be the end of her. What, then, were her options? Walk out into the storm, not knowing where she was or where she was going, or stay put without fire or food, keeping company with the rat until the storm was over. But she had no idea how long that might be. She was already weak and dizzy with hunger. She couldn't even boil up the shoe, she thought in a burst of black humor, as she'd read sailors did when starved at sea, and she had no desire to tackle the hard lump in front of her. What an odd thing to find here, really, she thought, remnants of some woman's life long ago, the very kind of life she'd been fighting to escape.

As Ruth sat examining the shoe, turning it in her hand while her thoughts rambled, a notion struck her. She remembered John Olsen saying something about the Rose Mine being up the North Fork on the way to the onyx mine—and Kate later telling her that there had once been a small settlement there at the end of the last century, now fallen into ruins. Could that be where she was—up the North Fork that connected with Rattlesnake Canyon?

The idea propelled her to her feet. She might be only a short distance from her own cabin, from fire, hot beans, and her warm bed. Glory Springs was less than two miles from the intersection at the North Fork, though she wasn't sure just how far up the fork the Rose Mine was, since she'd never explored that area. But from what the Olsens had said, it must sit midway to the onyx mine. That would make it two miles from the fork itself—surely not more than four, since she knew the onyx mine itself was only four. So she might be four or five miles from home by road. If this were indeed the Rose Mine.

Yet, four or five miles was a long way in a snowstorm, and she

feared for her feet, having book knowledge of the results of frostbite. She stopped pacing and wiggled her toes inside her boots. She could feel them better now, after only a short while out of the snow. That seemed a good sign. If she decided to go on, she should leave now, before the snow made it impossible to walk. But what if she walked down canyon and the road didn't meet up with her own, what if she wasn't where she thought she might be, and only letting hope make her decision for her? Then she'd just have to continue on down canyon, she decided. Wherever she was, down was where the desert was, and where other people lived. The snow on the ground would likely lessen as she lost altitude, as it had when she'd descended the mountain. Fortified by that reasoning, Ruth took hold of her bundle, set it outside the window, and followed it out into the storm. When the first gust of snowy wind blasted her face, for a moment she felt unsure again. But she could see the blank path of the road through the storm, and it felt good to breathe air free of the stench of rat urine, even if the wind and snow froze against her face, so she swallowed her fear and went forward, turning down canyon at the road that she hoped would connect with the way home.

Ruth followed her tracks, which had been nearly smoothed over, around the two bends, then to the place where she'd come into the road, and started down the road in the other direction. The cold that had crept into her when she stopped at the shack was still with her. The rest of her body began to feel the way her feet had, as if her clothes were full of icy bones that she was forcing to act as legs and arms. She couldn't pull the collar of her coat tight enough to keep snow from blowing into the space at her neck between the kerchief and coat. Since she no longer had to negotiate the brush, she stopped and tied the olla blanket around her neck, the pot hanging down her back; it closed the crack at her neck but choked her, and she had to move it down and tie it about her waist, continuing on with the huge mound bulging from her back like a reverse pregnancy.

Not long after, she began feeling drowsy, found her pace slowing as she continued moving hypnotically, feeling as if the blank

whiteness had seeped inside and emptied her mind, leaving her feet free to trudge without thought. In this state she nearly missed the road she sought, and it was only when she was forced more awake by fighting her way up the steep wash bank where the North Fork wash intersected Rattlesnake that she realized where she was. Ruth turned around and fought her way up the opposite bank, which had to be the road up Rattlesnake Canyon. Even her flash of elation at the discovery was subdued by her semi-stupor, though the thought that she had less than two miles to go bolstered her stamina and quickened her pace for a while.

She vaguely wondered what time of day it had gotten to be; it had to be sometime in the afternoon, she was sure. Even as she squinted against the glare, she thought the daylight might be dimming, but with the brightness of the growing blizzard, she had no way to tell. Her senses and thinking had been dulled the way a thick layer of snow hushes the shapes of small brush and rocks, turning them to indistinguishable lumps. Nothing around her appeared real, not even herself. It was all less real than a dream, as if she weren't really moving as she walked, but was caught in some kind of snow motion, putting one foot in front of the other but going nowhere into endless white. And she was tired, so tired and numb with cold. Flakes were falling fast and thick, mixing with what the wind whipped up, and twice she walked off the road into small gullies, which were brushless like the rut road, understanding her mistake when she felt the lumps of stones under the snow. If she just had a place to rest until she got her strength back—maybe the blizzard would ease meanwhile—she could go on the rest of the way. Somewhere in the back of her brain, she was opposed to resting and kept herself marching on, but the idea of a respite had taken hold, and her eyes kept watch for some place that might shelter her for a while so she could gain back her failing strength. She had to summon her resolve again and again as she labored, a step at a time, through snow now halfway to her knees, not knowing how much further she could go. Yet somehow each bend inched closer, and she made her way around it, then around another that had seemed an impossible distance. She kept moving, often

dizzy, not knowing if any moment she might fall face first into the snow. Then, near the road, she spotted an overhang of rock where a juniper and two pinyons came together and remembered resting there in the shade during the summer. Ruth began walking toward it. If she just sat down for a few minutes to wait out of the storm, she told herself, then she could walk the rest of the way home. It couldn't be more than a bend or so away.

As she eased under the lower pine branch, careful not to bring down the thick clumps of snow on its branches, a doe and large fawn rose up suddenly from under the brush, the shock of it whacking Ruth and her olla into the pinyon branches. Her sudden movement and the deer's quick escape sent a shower of snow down on her head and shoulders. She ducked her face, raising her arms to ward off the plague of ice raining down on her, and stumbled into a branch of the juniper. An avalanche dumped over her, flinging her backward out of the shelter. She landed sitting in a snowdrift, held up by the olla, which served as a pillow to prop up her shoulders against the slant of snow, as if she had arranged herself there to wait out the storm. Which didn't seem like such a bad idea—with snow swirling everywhere and building up fast around her, she had lost the desire to push on, had no strength for such efforts anyway. Besides, she was quite comfortable, really, didn't even feel cold anymore, she realized, closing her eyes and laying her head back into the fluff of snow. Even the flakes falling against her face felt warm and feathery on her skin. She found herself melting into the cushion behind her, soft, like the goose-down quilt on her bed; she couldn't be more content in her drowsiness if she were by the fire in her cabin—and then she saw her woodstove there in front of her, as if by magic, and held out her hands to warm them. She felt herself drawn toward a deepening state of rest. Yet something was still holding her back, a voice, faint at first, then louder, saying clearly: "Get up, Ruth."

She opened her eyes. Jim was leaning over her, that curtain of hair blocking the rest of the world from her view. "Come with me," he said, straightening and stretching out his hand. His smile was a patch of blue in the gray sky. She took hold and

pulled herself up. As he led her back out to the road, she marveled that the snow had disappeared and she felt the sun's warmth on her body as they walked. It was easier to walk without the snow. Jim was just ahead of her now and she hurried after him. When her cabin came into view not far around the bend, Ruth was startled to see it covered with snow on such a day, but when she looked around, she saw that the good weather was confined to a small spot around them. In amazement she tried to call out to tell Jim, but her words had been hollowed of sound and blew away in the wind. She followed his figure across the clearing in front of her cabin, anxious to catch up and wrap her arms around his warm body.

The cabin door was shut when she reached it. Thinking he must have gone inside, she dug out her key and clicked open the padlock. Inside was dark and cold. She latched the door and looked around but didn't see him anywhere. Yet there was her bed with its down comforter. She untied the olla and set it beside her pillow, then pulled back the comforter. "The fire, Ruth, light the fire." Jim was standing by the stove. She saw the matches as she came toward him, so she opened the firebox and struck the match to the wood she had laid in, stumbling backward against her chair and falling into it as the flame leapt up from the open burner. She couldn't take her eyes off the hot orange glow, its blaze hypnotizing her and driving all else from her mind. She forgot even Jim, who stood behind her chair with his hands on her shoulders.

Ruth became aware that she was shaking violently. She scooted her chair closer, holding her hands above the hot metal. The heat sent unbearable pain into her fingers, and she had to move them back. Her wet clothes sogged against her skin, keeping the fire from reaching her, so she got up and took off her coat. The shirts underneath were wet also. She looked around to see if Jim was watching, but he wasn't there, so she peeled away the shirts, along with her boots and pants, then rushed to her dresser to rummage for her flannel nightgown and dry pants and socks, returning quickly to the fire to dress.

She stuck more chunks of wood into the firebox and put her feet up on the bottom rail so the heat could reach them. She

looked around again for Jim, then wondered why she should think he'd be there. But he had been there, she remembered, picturing herself following him in. But how could he be? It was impossible. She recalled falling back into the snow, then thinking herself here by the fire, starting to realize her mind was playing tricks on her—but which was the trick? Was she still lying in the snow, then, simply thinking she was here? The odd thought struck her that maybe she had died and now only imagined she was still alive. Nothing around her seemed real. But Jim had seemed real—and he was not. The room she sat in, the woodstove, the darkness at the windowpanes were all obscure, as if underwater. The only thing real was the pains stabbing her fingers and toes as they warmed. When she rubbed, the pain became worse, so she stopped and tried to endure. A word floated to her through the watery air: *frostbite*; she saw it printed on an airy page as if it were the spirit of an expired medical journal, and she tried to read the directions that followed, but they dissolved in front of her eyes. She took in a breath at the intense pain that squeezed her hands and feet and gritted her teeth to bear it.

Gradually, pain cleared her awareness and she looked down at her hands, but it was too dim in the room to see them clearly, so she rose and struck a match to the lamp on the table. Her white fingers were already blushed with pink—a good sign. She held up a foot, toes still white and bloodless, though they were beginning to tingle. A sizzle hissed from the coffeepot she had left on the back burner, as if to remind her of what she had learned in nurse training, and she took the enamel basin from the table and poured some of the old coffee into it. From the steam rising, Ruth could tell the liquid was too hot, so she mixed in water from her jug till it was barely lukewarm, then took off the dry socks and put the soles of her feet to the surface of the water. Water needles stabbed her toes, but she lowered them and forced her feet to the bottom of the basin. When she could stand it no longer, she lifted her feet, then pushed them back down again, repeating the process several times until she could leave them in the coffee water, making herself add hot liquid as the mixture cooled. She was alive, all right, if agony was any indication.

When her senses came back, Ruth put on her socks, rinsed the coffeepot, and tossed the grounds out into the snow, the dirt of her front yard now only a memory buried beneath white ice. A layer of flakes blew in the door before she could close it. Ignoring the ache that pounded with each step, she walked back to the table and filled the pot with fresh water. When it was on the stove, she opened a can of beans and set that on a burner as well. The world was coming into focus. She could wiggle her toes now, though it hurt badly each time. She'd gone up the mountain and come back. In between was a blur. It could have been the same day, or it could have been a year later.

She drank several cups of coffee, but could eat only a few spoonfuls of the beans—and then she had to force them into her stomach as if she were her own nagging nurse. Her cold bed would have been unbearable if it hadn't been for the heating stones Kate had left in the back of her oven, something Ruth had rolled her eyes over, then forgot about, until last night in the hut, when she saw the campfire stones. She embedded Kate's stones under her covers, finding it slightly less painful to walk, and went back to the fire to sip her last cup of hot coffee. When she closed her eyes, the memory of her dream in the hut came back. Then she saw Jim's back as she followed him home. Why was that more real than anything around her now? It was that vision that gave meaning to the rest of her life. But she couldn't understand what such a thing meant, and the idea slipped away whenever she tried to pin it down. Even building this cabin had been easier than understanding such strangeness. Anyway, she was too tired to think.

Ruth rose and stuffed as much wood as she could into the firebox. After she put on an extra pair of socks, she peed half the slop jar full, then set it in the far corner and got under her down quilt, the hot rocks having made her bed a cocoon of comfort. When she closed her eyes she was glad to find herself back inside the hut. She heard Jim's soft voice as he bent over her and smiled. "Remember, Ruth, our home is a hut on the mountain." She breathed in the smell of him as she felt his lips touch hers.

more than anything else when Ruth woke sometime the next day, she wanted a long soak in a hot bath. Her body's assertions had finally pried up her eyelids, leaving her with throbbing feet and hands, hunger, and a need to pee. She woke in confused turmoil, her painful body pulling her back to the assault, and she clung tightly to the edge of sleep as long as she could. Then yesterday's storm came back to her, and the days before, memories so thin and dreamlike that she opened her eyes and pulled her head out from under the comforter to see what was real.

Through the frigid air of the cabin she saw the row of icicles outside the window, where flakes were still coming down, shivered, and pulled the quilt tightly around her neck. Her wet clothing lay heaped near the stove. She pulled her hands from

under the quilt and inspected the reddened fingers that hurt to move. So did the rest of her, especially her toes, yet it all seemed to function. Getting out of bed, Ruth tucked in the blankets to save her warmth and danced over the icy cement to the stove, making a detour to the slop jar. Ravenous, she spooned icy beans from last night's open can into her mouth, while stuffing kindling and small chunks into the firebox. She struck a match to the wood, emptied the coffee grounds into the basin, and filled the coffeepot with the last of the water from her jug. She should have listened better to Kate's advice about bringing in more water, she told herself in her shivery race back to the bed.

Her hoarded heat had greatly diminished, though not faded completely, and she concentrated on absorbing its residue to stop her trembling. When she looked up at the windowpanes, the bottoms crusted with ice, her longing for a hot bath began, her body vividly remembering luxurious hours in Aunt Myrtle's porcelain tub. She had never appreciated that comfort more than at this moment when it was entirely out of her reach, had not even understood what a luxury a hot bath really was, out of the question here when she most needed it. Here she would have enough trouble simply keeping herself supplied with water for drinking and kitchen. It took a huge mound of snow to melt into a small amount of water; she imagined her spring would surely be frozen over, and even if it weren't, the distance to it had lengthened with the deep snow. Now she understood the reasons most people chose to live in places with running water and electricity.

When she heard the coffee water sizzle, Ruth fed the fire with larger wood chunks and set a can of stew on to heat. While she waited, she made a batch of biscuit dough, mixing in sugar and a bit of the cinnamon Kate had left, and when her food was ready, she stuffed the stove once more and carried her repast over to the bed, where she consumed every bit of the stew and biscuits, washing down each bite with coffee until only grounds remained in the pot. She savored the sharp tastes she had been denying herself. When every crumb was gone, she sat wanting more, though her stomach would not have held another morsel.

It had stopped mattering whether or not the hunger was hers; her body owned it now.

Her appetite did not diminish in the weeks that followed, though it took nearly three more before she was down to flour—which she still had an entire sack of—and a few cans of beans and a bit of jerky. That she had anything at all was due to the forethought of the Olsens, who had stocked her thoroughly. Ruth herself had picked up only minimal supplies on both trips to town, so intent had she been on collecting her mail. And she was not motivated to carry much. She thought she'd be making a trip back soon, never anticipating the ferocity of the storms to come. And come they did, not easing up until a week later, when the snow reached nearly to her hips and approached the bottom of the windowsill, though did not bury the panes as the miners had joked about. It was enough, though, to discourage any thought of making the long walk to Juniper Valley. Once the storms stopped during the second week, the temperature plummeted, making travel even more difficult. And she had learned from her experience on the mountain not to foolishly test the patience of the wilderness, so she stayed put in her cabin and took comfort in a landscape that appeared as alien as her life now felt.

Ruth could not understand what had happened to bring her in from the storm that day. Her memory of it became more vague as the weeks went on, and she rarely thought about it as she brought in loads of wood to dry by the stove and heaped snow into her tub to melt into a water supply. She even treated herself to a hot bath one day—not the long soak she'd dreamed of, but a splash in a few inches of water to get the stink off her body. Afterward she cleaned the tub with a pot of boiling water to purify it again for holding drinking water. What she did find to immerse herself in those housebound days were words, finding a snowless road out of the canyon that led directly to London, Paris, and Moscow, imagining herself in lives and love affairs that had no connection with anything in the life she had known. She began to wake each day anticipating whatever world she had left behind the night before. Sometimes she would look up from a book and be shocked to find herself alone

in a snowbound cabin in the wild, rather than in some dusky Old World salon having tea and repartee. Occasionally, she would get up and walk out her front door, standing a few minutes in the cold to remind herself which world was real.

By the time the weather warmed considerably a few weeks later, Ruth's food was running low—she had begun to ration her coffee and count out the cans of beans, noting the single strip of jerky left to her, roasting open some of the pinyon nuts to supplement. The books at first served to distract her from her hunger and her worry about getting some of Cally's herb in time. But as the days wore on, she found herself at the window more often, checking the snow level, and finding reasons to walk outside. After the weather had been warm for a while, she walked down to the spring to see if it was still frozen. Because her spring was on the south-facing slope of the wash, the ice covering the pool had become mushy with the day's sun. By now snow had vanished from the tops of bushes and rocks over most of the south face of the lower mountain. She began considering the trip to town that she had postponed. If the weather held, she might be able walk out in a few days.

The cloud cover returned a day later, along with a few flurries, enough to worry, though not to discourage her completely, and she waited to see how serious it got. Mild flurries continued for the next two days, while she occupied herself with her reading. But with her canned goods diminishing, it became harder to believe in those tenuous worlds of print, and she would end up putting her book down to pace the small floor of the cabin. Ruth waited two more days, then, after a breakfast of biscuits without coffee, decided she would try to make it out for supplies. The morning's flurries had turned more serious, becoming a light snowfall, and wind moaned through the window cracks. If a big storm came in when she had so little food left, she would be in trouble—and she'd be locked in without knowing if Cally had sent the herb or if her uncle had news for her, Ruth thought as she hurried on her layers of clothing. If she could get out of the canyon before the weather got severe, she knew the snow would likely diminish by the time she reached the high desert mesas.

She slid her belt into the scabbard of Jim's hunting knife, noticing she was no longer at the last notch of her belt, and picked up her .22. With a few leftover biscuits in her pocket and a pair of wool socks for gloves, Ruth stepped out into considerable snowfall and started down canyon.

She kept to the south side as she walked, where more snowmelt had occurred. In places the snow level fell to her knees. Even so, movement was slow and laborious, more difficult than in fresh snow that could simply be moved aside or packed underfoot, and she had to jerk her feet up again and again when they broke through the ice crust that had reformed. She was glad she was at least traveling downhill this time.

At the North Fork wash, Ruth spotted movement behind some brush. Branches appeared to be in motion. She stopped, straining to see more clearly through the falling snow. A buck with a huge tree of antlers moved out from the scrub oak clump, turned his head and looked straight at her, unafraid, his coat chocolate against the cream of snow. There was her supply of winter meat. Ruth pulled her hand free of the sock mitten and raised her .22. At the sound of the shot, the animal bounded up the bank of the wash. When she fired again, she thought she saw him flinch, though his pace increased as he fought his way through deep drifts up the far bank. Cocking the .22, Ruth fired again, then cocked once more to get off a final shot before the buck reached the top. But the shell jammed in the chamber, and by the time she turned the rifle on its side and shook the bullet out into the snow, the buck was gone. After putting a new shell in the chamber, she hurried after him.

Small dots of blood interrupted the deer's tracks, which headed down canyon toward the willows. The animal's legs had swept a pair of ruts through the snow as it went, punctuating them with sharp impressions of hooves. The injury didn't appear to be slowing the deer down.

Ruth tramped after her quarry, the deep trail allowing her to move easier in the snow, which now began to come down for real. She didn't have much hope of catching the deer, unless the injury inflicted by her .22 had done more damage than it ap-

peared. A .22 was not the appropriate rifle for shooting such a big animal, she knew, but she had acted out of some kind of desperate impulse. Now she felt obligated to find the creature she had wounded. About half a mile down the road, where willows began to line the wash, the tracks left the road to follow the edge of the small stream, merging with the imprints of other deer who had come to the willows to water. Ruth joined the crowd, continuing down the trail, which was packed and easy to traverse. She moved as softly as she could through the scrunching snow as she approached the deeper thickets, peering through the bare branches of willows in hopes of seeing the buck. The falling snow shushed its sound against the brush around her.

Half hidden behind scrub oak, the buck's dark shape became visible in front of a willow. Surprised that she had overtaken it, and even more so to see it calmly nibbling on oak leaves, she took time for careful aim at the deer's neck. She pulled the trigger and the head dropped from view. After the pop of the rifle, Ruth heard nothing but the faint whisper of falling flakes. Had she been mistaken about the deer's shape, imagined its presence out of need, as she had conjured up Jim when she needed him, her mind already playing tricks and she had not yet gone three miles in this storm? She plowed forward to see.

Discovering the deer's form sunk into the snow was a great relief to her, the red ice around its head proof of her sanity. The kill had saved her from having to walk another nine miles in this growing storm. In her gratitude, Ruth remembered Jim's words. "Thank you, deer," she said, meaning it, as she squatted to pat its shoulder and look down into the one glazed eye. But what happened to the antlers, she wondered, seeing the smooth top of the head between the animal's large collapsed ears. Puzzled, she reached down and ran her hand over the ridge of hide, looking closer at the creature's body. This was not the buck she had chased down the canyon, but a doe, and her belly was hugely swollen. The realization knocked Ruth off her heels into the snow. She stared up at the willow in front of her . . . she must have thought the bare branches were antlers. Gritting her teeth,

she reached over and pressed a hand to the bulge at the deer's side. Even through her sock mitten, the heat was intense.

What a bloody cycle she was now part of, she thought, since that first shooting of a rabbit that had disturbed her only a few months ago. But this was such a large and beautiful animal—and she had made such a mess: with a wounded buck off somewhere and now a doe and maybe a fawn dead at her hands, perhaps the same doe who had come to drink with her fawn at Glory Springs last spring. She remembered the way the doe had looked up, startled, when Ruth appeared at the bank, then led her fawn away up the draw. “I’m sorry,” Ruth said to the creature whose head and shoulders were now covered with a thin white sheet of snow. “I didn’t know.” But would it have made a difference, she wondered? What did it matter whether a buck or doe, pregnant or not, when feeding her own child was at stake? “Feeding my own self,” Ruth argued aloud, appalled that the idea had occurred to her, “feeding only myself.” She did not, would not, care about this cat’s-claw root, this boulder stuck inside her; she would certainly use Cally’s herb soon to loosen it. What caused such a thought—who inside her thought to protect this obstacle that might be the result of a monster, probably not Jim’s at all? Not any Ruth she’d ever known. She would be no doe, subject to forces inside and out of herself, who neither wanted nor did not want the fawn but simply had it, obeying powers she could not understand, much the same way women wound up in knitting circles.

Angered, Ruth got to her feet and took hold of the doe’s hind legs, pulling them up against her chest. She turned around and gripped the forelegs like handles, dragging the carcass toward a cottonwood near the edge of the wash, jerking it an inch at a time through the snow. She would not waste time moping. Snow was still coming down steadily, the clouds overhead thick and unbroken. She had shot the doe and that was that; now it was her food, and she had to concentrate on getting it back to her cabin—which wouldn’t be easy.

Unbuckling her belt, Ruth used it to lash the hind legs together and, in short jiggling motions, hoisted them up a low

branch of the cottonwood, balancing the rear against the trunk of the tree and leaving the deer's head and shoulders on a snow-covered rock to bear most of the weight. Ruth pulled her knife from its scabbard and bled the deer, then made cuts below the ankle bones the way she did with rabbits. The thick skin was tougher to pull down than rabbits' skin, though, which almost melted off beneath the mucous membrane. She had to jerk hard again and again, yanking the hide off in thick strips, all the while fighting against nausea at the meaty sweet smell of blood. She continued until most of the hide up to the ribs draped like a ragged fringed skirt around the deer's front legs and shoulders. She need do only half the deer, she realized, since that was all she could possibly carry. Though the wind had eased some, snowfall was heavy now, collecting on her arms and shoulders, and her memory of that last walk home prompted her to make haste.

For a moment she hesitated, then swallowed and held the knife to the bottom of the belly, slicing straight down the middle of the ballooning flesh. The huge mass of guts sagged outward and down, spilling over onto the raw hide skirt. The sickening sweet smell increased nearly beyond her bearing as she reached her hands into the warm blood to lift out the loops and coils of intestines, ripping away stubbornly attached organs. She averted her eyes from the tangle she was removing, but at the periphery of her vision, she saw, or imagined, a curled shape wrapped in membrane, a small head and dainty hooves. Huge liquid eyes.

Ruth turned to one side, dropping to her knees in time to cover the snow with the contents of her stomach. After the retching eased, she got up from the ice and walked a few feet away from the bloody scene, taking deep gulps of the clean air. When her stomach settled, she scrubbed her bloodied hands with snow and put her makeshift mittens back on. She couldn't allow squeamishness to stop her now. Looking away from the pile of entrails below the carcass, she pushed them to one side with her boot and covered them over with snow.

Knowing it would be struggle enough just to carry half the deer home, Ruth cut through the flesh around the deer just un-

der the rib cage, until the gutted torso hung attached to its skirted half simply by the bony rope of spine. To sever the linked spine bones, she hacked and pried at the seams of the joints, but the attachment would not break. Short of a cleaver, the only way to separate this spine would be to break it the way she snapped the ankles of rabbits—but it would take a giant to snap these big bones. Then another picture flashed into her head, one of boulders and broken planks. She unlatched the belt and let the deer drop, kicking snow off the top of the rock until the stony surface was exposed.

After kicking away snow from two sides of the rock, Ruth dragged the deer over and draped the carcass backward over the stone. Climbing on the slippery meat, she straddled the rock's shape under the spine, one boot on either side, holding on to a branch above her for balance. She made several small jumps. When she felt the spine bend back against itself, Ruth increased her force, and as something began to give, she came down with all her weight. The bones snapped, and she plunged from the rock into the snow, gigantic in her triumph.

Her elated moment of conquest dwindled to ordinary exhaustion on the journey home. Only hunger-induced visions of roasts and steaks kept her from leaving the prized hind end to freeze by the roadside. Though it was too late, she knew now that she would have been better off making the trip into town for provisions, maybe staying with one of the families until the weather eased, then catching a ride back to the canyon's mouth. Perhaps she could have wangled herself a hot bath or two in the process. Surely they would have insisted that she clean up, she thought, remembering the pungent odor of John Olsen when she first encountered him, an odor she later ceased to notice with changes in her own hygiene.

Ruth left the meat outside her door and went in to fire up her stove and put on water to heat, drinking it without the coffee she so craved—which she would have by now if she'd gone into town, she realized. When she had warmed, she dragged the meat inside and cut pieces off the carcass to store in the woodshed, where she could best protect the meat from other predators that

might show up once they cleaned up the mess she left at the willows. But she knew that once the pieces froze, they would have little odor to attract animals. If the weather warmed . . . well, she'd figure what to do if it happened.

The section of deer had begun to look more like meat than freshly killed animal, though it was still bloody and raw. The cuts she made looked like none she'd seen in a butcher shop, but they would cook and eat just as well, she suspected. Saving out some steak for dinner, Ruth fried it up to eat with a batch of biscuits. The meat was tough and hard to chew. Its strong taste made her stomach lurch, and she had to keep herself from spitting it out. But she needed to eat it. Something about that taste was familiar. She held a chunk to her nose, closing her eyes and breathing in as she chewed the meat in her mouth. And she began to understand. It was the taste of oak leaves and scraggly pine, of sage and juniper that grew in the rocky canyon, the taste of the canyon and rock itself that she was eating. Her own land, she told herself, though something in her didn't believe the land was hers. She had meant to make the canyon hers, but the canyon was more powerful than she was, she realized, as she looked out the window, where wind was hissing snow against the darkened pane, and it was she that had come to belong to the canyon—becoming simply another one of its creatures, not so different from the deer after all. The idea both frightened and comforted her.

The snow stopped after another foot had fallen. And again, the temperature dropped, then rose after a few cloudless days. During the next two weeks, Ruth broke up her hibernation with routine: after she emptied her slops and fired up the stove to heat the cabin, she would walk to the spring to check how much ice covered the pond. With a pine twig, she would measure the falling snow depth, scratching the promise of her coming liberation into the thin bark. On some days she would pluck leaves from various shrubs and boil them in hot water when she returned to the cabin, but never found any to her liking except for the long green stalks that Jim had used, so she stayed with those. She continually longed for coffee, dreamed that she drank cups of it at night, when she replaced other missing things she loved;

Jim was a frequent visitor in her sleep. Several times a day she collected snow and icicles to melt for water. In the afternoons she settled in to read and to write in the journal she had begun again, for the first time since Jim died. Her reading had inspired new ways to use the journal, and sometimes she spent most of an afternoon simply perfecting her description of a place or an event. She even wrote of Jim and the days they had together. But she stayed away from the event that most troubled her. To save kerosene, she now ate while it was light, looking forward to the hour when light dimmed and the windowpanes darkened. Then she would warm her comforter with hot rocks and secure herself under it to dream.

On a day the third week after her kill, as she was pulling her measuring stick out of the snow, Ruth thought she heard the sound of voices. She listened closely but heard nothing more, so went on to scratch the snow level into the branch. Each day she'd watched the snow become more subdued by the few hours of sun, and she planned in a few days to make the trip into town. On her way back across the wash, Ruth heard the voices again, and they continued until she climbed the bank to her yard. By then she could see three riders rounding the bend. Heart pounding, she tried to make out who they were. When she couldn't, she bolted into the cabin to get ready.

Both the rifle and shotgun were already loaded, but she checked the chambers to make sure, then put aside a pile of ready ammunition and waited, her door latched. She had seen no big buckskin, but Stine might have gotten rid of it by now; if he had brought back friends thinking he would damage her again, he was dead wrong. This time she was ready for him. Entirely ready, she thought, taking in a breath to steady her shaking hands.

The riders' conversation was constant as they came closer, Ruth staring out of the window for her first view. The fact that they were not creeping up on her lessened the tightness in her bowel, though her fingers still shook as they gripped the trigger of the shotgun pointed at the glass windowpane. Delayed hate and horror took hold of her. When the first up the bank turned

out to be Larry Hudson, and the second Jake Tunstall, followed by another familiar neighbor—a tall, thin man whose name Ruth didn't remember—she was almost as disappointed as she was relieved, having already pictured herself blowing a huge hole in Stine's gut. When she heard her name called, Ruth put down the shotgun and sagged into a chair, burying her face in her hands for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and walked to the door. It seemed a strange thing to be opening her door to company; confused, she reached up to adjust her kerchief, then dropped her hand and undid the latch. Swinging the door open, she stood looking at the three apparitions who were dismounting at the side of her house.

"It appears you've survived the winter storms just fine," Larry Hudson said, pulling his hands from gloves as he and Jake walked toward her. Their neighbor led the horses over toward a juniper by the bank. "A lot of folk were worried about you. Afraid we'd find you either starved or froze to death."

"I can take care of myself," Ruth said, though the quaver in her voice caused the men to sharpen their focus on her. They were the first words she had spoken aloud in weeks, except sometimes to herself. Her voice sounded weak and unnatural even to her. "Anyway, I appreciate your concern. Come on in and warm yourselves. I'll get a good fire going."

The two men stomped snow from their feet and followed her inside. "I'm sorry I can't offer you coffee," she said, as she fed sticks into the firebox, "but I've been out for weeks."

"Maybe we can do something about that," Hudson told her, as his neighbor came in carrying two sets of saddlebags over his arm. The man took them over to her table, shedding them on the floor next to the wall, then crouched to dig inside the pouches. "You don't think we'd come all this way up here empty-handed, do you?" Hudson said when the neighbor began setting dry and canned goods on her table. About halfway through his unpacking a coffee can appeared.

"I don't know what to say," Ruth said at the sight of the coffee. She picked up the can and held it to her. "And look at the sugar. And oatmeal. How can I thank you for this?"

"Just being neighborly," he said, "that's all. Told Olsen I'd bring them up. He was in town a couple weeks ago when the last storm hit, him and that big Swede. Saw them at Baxter's store."

"Folks were already talking about stocking you up then," Jake Tunstall said. "Nobody'd seen you since that first big snow hit."

"Got these for you, too." The tall neighbor held out her mail. Besides the check, there was an envelope from her aunt and a package from Cally. Ruth restrained herself from ripping both open at once and flung them into the drawer of the writing table.

"I'll get the water on for coffee," she said.

"This looks like venison," Hudson mused, examining the meat Ruth had set out by the stove to defrost. "Where'd you get venison?"

Ruth dipped water from the snowmelt tub into the coffeepot. "I shot it," she said. "Got tired of beans, and I'd run out of everything but flour, anyway." She stood to place the pot on the stove. "Now I'm tired of venison, since that's about all I've got, so I'm sure glad to see corned beef and stew again. But the deer saved me."

"I only see a twenty-two and a shotgun," Tunstall said, glancing over at the rifles leaning next to the window. "Seems puny for bagging deer."

"I got a close shot with the twenty-two down by the willows."

"Must be a dead eye. Pretty impressive for a woman," the neighbor man said, hunkering down by the stove.

"Not surprising for Ruth, I don't think," Hudson told him, holding his hands out over the stove.

"You're welcome to take some back with you," Ruth said. "Why don't you? It would help me repay you. I've been having to pack it in snow on the north side the last couple days till the night freeze comes." She opened the drawer of her writing table. "Meanwhile, I'll reimburse you for the cost of the supplies."

Hudson shook his head. "Olsen had Baxter's intended, Lily Rose, start a tab for you in the store. Said you can pay them when you get to town."

Their engagement came as no surprise. Ruth was almost glad

of it. "That won't be long if the weather holds," she said, turning to set out cups for the coffee. "Is there more news?"

"Jack Rider ran his Studebaker in a ditch, broke his arm. Marie Hardesty took sick again with the weather. Another pneumonia, the second since the stillborn," the neighbor said.

"Things are tightening up after the crash, but nothing like the hard times hitting the cities," Hudson told her. "That's about it."

Ruth measured out the coffee and dumped it into the boiling water. "What about . . . what about . . . has anything more been learned about Charlie Stine? His whereabouts, I mean?" She stirred the grounds and pulled the pot to the side of the stove. The men were silent.

"Not that I've heard," Hudson said. He looked down at the floor. "We heard about your trouble," he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry about it. You're a capable woman, Ruth, more than most. Young. You'll get through it." Ruth kept her eyes on the cups; if she looked up, it would all start. She wondered just how much about it they had heard.

"The Indian was a good man, too," he said, removing his hand from her. "I didn't approve, but he was a good man for an Indian."

Ruth looked at him now. "Good for any man," she said. "The best." She took hold of the coffeepot handle, though it burned her hand, held a cup to the spout of the tipped pot, and poured it full. "Charlie Stine was the worst."

"I can agree with you there," Hudson said, taking the cup she offered, "and I hope they catch him. Even that buckskin he rode was mean."

"Reminds me of that one bucked me off every time I climbed on board," Tunstall said, and the conversation lightened while the men drank and refilled their cups. Ruth was glad of it, not really wanting the men to leave so quickly. All three refused her offer of a corned beef and biscuit sandwich, saying they'd brought their own eats, not wanting to use hers up, since another storm could still come in. Hudson did accept a roast of venison when he left, but the others said they greatly preferred beef or chicken.

After their good-byes, Ruth stood out beside Hudson's horse

as he mounted. "Thanks again for everything," she said as he drew up his reins.

"Think nothing of it," he said. "I enjoyed the ride, and especially the visit."

"I did, too," Ruth told him. "Yours are the first faces I've seen in a while."

"Let's hope the storms hold off. March is right around the corner now, just a few weeks off." He tipped his hat and turned his sorrel toward the wash, where the other two men were already descending the bank.

When they were out of sight, Ruth went in and put on a small pot of coffee for herself. She would be sparing with the amount, had spent enough time without, remembering how much excess she had tossed onto the ground each time she made a new pot. She sat at her writing table and opened her aunt's letter, reading through all the innuendos about Cally's behavior and admonitions about the kind of life Ruth must be exposed to in the wild, hoping for the information she'd waited so long for. She found information this time, but it was not at all what she wanted to hear. "Your Uncle Ben says to tell you that he doubts the man you seek has come back to this state. He learned of a Charles Steiner who left Dallas two years ago and is wanted on suspicion of murdering two people, one of them a woman. He was a man fitting the description you gave, especially the unusual color of orange hair. Ben said he has sent this information to the authorities in your area."

"Damn it, damn it, damn it." Ruth clenched her fists and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Tears were no substitute for rage. She did not know how to rid herself of the rage without killing Stine. The comfort that had come to her with the visit was quickly lost in the light of this news. "Damn it!" This time she yelled it, then quieted, in case the men might still be close enough to hear her shouting, her remaining outlet being to rip up the letter and throw the pieces into the firebox, shoving wood in on top of them. "Wherever you are, you bastard," Ruth said, "I hope you burn in hell."

She untied the string from the parcel Cally had sent, some-

what puzzled by the elongated shape of the package. Pulling apart the wrapping paper, she dug around until her fingers found the dry softness of the herb packet. She was thankful Cally had come through and plucked the folded letter from underneath:

I knew you were too willful to take care of yourself, even after all I taught you. You certainly knew how. Now you tell me that you may be carrying a child belonging either to an Indian or to a man with orange hair who you say raped you. None of this would be the case if you'd come back to El Paso as I told you—or if you'd never left in the first place. I tell you now to come back at once so nothing more happens. You were never meant for nursing and I can surely put you to work, for I need assistance around this place.

As for your problem, I suppose there's no sense in bringing you back in the family way. You wouldn't be much good to me here in such condition. You can see that I've sent the herb you requested. Take it without delay, for it must be used in the very early stages for it to have the proper effect. With the time passed sending it through the mail, it may already be too late. I have sent two packets, each with a strong dose. You will remember how it is used. If something doesn't happen the first time, let a day pass and take the second dose. Be prepared, the nausea is especially bad if you take it twice, much more severe than you had that time here in El Paso. In case neither works, because of the delay, I have included the alternate remedy women have used for ages. Your training and nurses manuals do not cover such a subject, but from what they have told you, you can figure out what to do.

When the letter went on to include a paragraph about Myrtle, Ruth put it down and dug deeper into the package. There to one side she felt something long and hard and tore through the layers of paper until she extracted the object and brought it out into the light. Her puzzlement at the sight of the knitting needle slowly turned to dazed comprehension. She had wished to dig the root of this weed from her body. Now Cally had given her a tool to use. A strange feeling cast itself over Ruth's memories of women she'd seen knitting at every gathering, May, Mrs. Rose, and Martha Hudson. Chills climbed her back at the thought that occurred to her. She shook them off and stood up. She

hoped it would not come to that, but with the snow, the delay had been long. Dumping a packet of green-black herb in her coffee cup, Ruth poured in hot water from her pot and began the softening.

The excruciating nausea that developed with the second dose of Cally's herbs pinned Ruth firmly to her bed, her head by the edge where she could hang it over and retch into the basin on the floor. For hours, if she dared move, the heaves would continue long after she lay still. She feared she had poisoned herself along with whatever else was in her. In the spring, the Olsens would find her retched to death in her bed. So this was what she had saved herself for. She would have had a far kinder death freezing in the snow, believing she was cozy by her fire. But as the afternoon wore on, any kind of demise began to seem preferable to the state she was in. It was a very long time before she was allowed even the temporary oblivion of sleep.

She woke to find the room bright with moon, her mouth so dry her tongue clung to its roof. The odors that rose from beside her bed nearly set her to retching again, but she turned her head away and waited for her stomach to quiet; it felt like she had taken it out and beaten it like a rug on a clothesline. Holding her breath, she reached under the bed and felt for her canteen, attempted a few small swallows, then cuddled the canteen to her chest and dropped back into sleep. Whenever thirst asserted itself, she unscrewed the cap to quench it.

When morning came, Ruth fought her body to sit up. Every muscle in her sorely protested when she got to her feet and carried the slops out the front door, not even bothering to put on boots. But she could stand no more of its smell. Snow jolted her bare feet, prodding her legs to hurry toward the outhouse. Checking herself there, she found no blood; dejected, she returned to the cabin. The brisk air had revived her body, enabling her to put on boots and go out again to clean the basin and bring in a batch of snow for melting. She would give herself two more days—it was still possible that her release would come. If not, she must resign herself to the other measure. After making a broth from venison and heating water to clean herself, Ruth went back to bed for the night, though the sun had not yet dropped behind the mountain.

The next day flurries returned, but the sun soon came out and tore the clouds apart, scattering them in pieces across the sky. No snow accumulated. She measured again, for the first time since the men had left, and was glad to notch down another couple of inches on the stick. Small patches of dirt could now be seen in places where her old footprints had melted. She replenished her water supply, brought in wood, and tidied her cabin, checking often to see if the remedy had worked. She could not keep her mind free, and gave up any idea of reading. By the end of the day, she was resolved on what she had to do. Pulling out her medical manual, she set it beside her cot, though she did not yet open it.

The following morning was much like the one before it, the

sun borne away often on fast-moving clouds, while wind moaned against the windowpanes and pinyon branches scratched the cabin roof. After coffee and forcing down some oatmeal, Ruth opened the manual and studied the diagrams on female anatomy, which she didn't find terribly helpful—and she did not like the book's impersonal naming and diagramming of the body parts she knew so intimately from experience. But she verified what she was afraid was true—that she would have to pry open the aperture to her womb. Ruth ran her fingers along the long, cool body of the knitting needle on her lap, down to the sharp tip at the end; she could see why it made such a perfect instrument.

It had to be boiled, of course, along with a towel for the blood, which Ruth did and set them in the basin by the bed, along with alcohol and a coffeepot of boiling water. Taking the small vanity mirror from her dresser drawer, she pulled up her nightgown and held the mirror down between her thighs, trying to determine where to put the point of the needle. The sight of her own opening was a shock to her; she had never before had such a perspective. The view repulsed her at first—she didn't want to acknowledge the presence of such a primal place inside her, but she spread her legs and made herself look into the darkened cave between them. Not that she could see far into the fleshy internal folds, even when she contorted her body to bring more light into it. But she could not devise a way to see clearly to the core she knew lurked there. Finally, she found it by feel, with a finger, a bumpy knot at the back. She knew where it was now, and just had to make herself force it open and release its contents.

To be sure she was at the right place, Ruth pressed down on her stomach just below her navel, feeling the push of a soft flesh-covered lump against her fingers. That she was forced to rip such a thing from her own flesh, to risk infection and hemorrhage, filled her with bitterness. Why should she have to further the violence already perpetrated on her? An image of the fawn in the membrane came to her, and Ruth felt a sudden wave of sympathy for whatever creature was growing inside her, caught in such

turbulent events. It must have suffered the same nausea she did, found its blood gripped by the hate running through her own. But she shook off such pity; it would not help to get the job done. The creature's root had taken deep hold in her already, spreading its tendrils into her thoughts and feelings. She found it harder each day to separate herself. What would those tendrils do to her once she had cut them from their source?

And what if the thing . . . this being unfolding in her—she shuddered at the thought—were of Jim's and her doing? What difference then? She saw how life worked now, seducing with its pleasures until it was ready to extract the cost. How different the experience—the heat and ecstasy—from the consequence—this oddly pulsating lump of flesh. How corporal and bloody the world was, really, compared to the words and manners people tried to dress it in.

Ruth positioned herself with the knitting needle against the knob on her cervix, recoiling at the prick of the sharp point. She was about to jiggle the needle in when the image of the fawn came back again, that miniature curled body and those unborn eyes. Had she really seen such a thing? Real or not, with that image came the nausea she'd experienced at the doe's evisceration by her own hands. She lay back and waited for her stomach to settle, then sat up again and repositioned the needle, started to ease it in the opening, but the squeamishness returned and her stomach convulsed. She knew of no way to argue with a stomach about to heave. It forced her to wait another day to recover before going through with the procedure. Pulling out the needle, she dropped it into the pot and fell back on her pillow, glad for the reprieve, but determined that it be only a postponement.

That night Ruth dreamed she and Jim were making a pot by the lake. Sun warmed her shoulders, and the air was full of birdsong, as she watched him coil the clay snake around the vessel. The two of them shaped and smoothed the squishy substance until it held firm, happy with the feel of earthy slime again between their fingers. There was a crying somewhere, and Ruth glanced over to see a child with long dark hair beside them. Sur-

prised, she looked up to tell Jim, but she could tell by his smile that he already knew. Yet the crying didn't stop, and now it sounded more like a woman screaming, and when she looked again there was a woman on the ground screaming, then she was that woman struggling to free herself.

Ruth woke thrashing. She lurched to a sit, but the screaming continued. It took her a moment to realize it was not herself screaming but something outside. A mountain lion. The cat sounded very close, closer even than her spring. Throwing her legs over the side of the cot, she slid on her boots, picked up her rifle, walked over, and pulled open her door. As it swung open, the screaming stopped. Snow crunched underfoot as Ruth took a step out into the night. Above the pinyon hung a brilliant moon. She had never seen such a night, where the whole world became a sparkling crust of light, and she stood gawking in awe. Then a movement in the pinyon caught her eye.

Ruth turned her focus toward the dark tree but saw nothing. Then another movement. She took a step back into the shadowed door frame and waited, gun in place, while the big cat dropped gracefully from the tree onto the snow. The cougar stayed still, tail twitching as it studied her, the moon making large green circles of its eyes and golden fleece of its winter coat. Ruth wondered if she had only dreamed she was awake, though the bite of the air reassured her the scene was real. How hard it was, she thought, to tell the difference lately. She felt as if she'd stepped through her door into some world left behind as a child in fairy tales, and if she took one step more, she would be in that world for good. The magic cat had come for her. It would be like walking into the pages of one of her books about other times and places. At the same moment she knew it was a real mountain lion out there, and if she took a step forward it would run away and she would be left standing alone in the cold snow. The real cat hadn't come for her, she knew, but for the venison in the woodshed. It was a creature belonging to the same world as the dead fawn. Ruth had come to Glory Springs wanting a life of freedom that was a part of the moonlit fairy-tale world, but what she had found here was the place where the cat and the fawn

lived, a place with blood and suffering that offered another kind of freedom entirely. A pricey freedom that had not magic but mystery surrounding it.

The feline turned and glided away into tree shadow, its soft paws muffling the compression of snow crust, a gilded movement against the moonlit glitter of frozen snow. The cougar continued into the scrub oak on the knoll. When it was out of sight, Ruth went back inside and latched the door against the cold. She built a fire and made herself a small pot of coffee, then sat letting images sort themselves out in her head. She wondered whether the knitting needle could unravel what had been done to the fabric of her life—it could undo yet not touch what had happened. She thought about her dream of Jim and the child, of the screaming woman—and of the way the cat had come to bring them to her with its cries. That was the kind of mystery that interested her, the one she wanted to live with.

Thin patches of snow still clung under shaded thickets and on north-side stretches of road, diminishing as Ruth traveled down canyon, and disappearing completely at the mouth of the canyon. The melt had been slow through most of February, with many days like this one, flurrying, with sun in and out of clouds. Yet another big storm had never developed, and she was grateful for that much. She could have made the trip a week ago, but had waited until she was out of nearly everything, including coffee, before tackling the long walk to Matt's store. Without expecting letters, she had no reason to go in except for her need for provisions—and plenty of reasons to stay away.

By the time she reached the widened stretch of road that ran between Mound Springs and the surrounding rimrock country

toward Juniper Valley, the air had warmed, so she peeled off her coat and carried it hanging between her back and knapsack. The clouds that raced across the horizon up canyon dissolved over her head as they encountered the high desert sky. Spring was closer on the mesas than near Rocky Mountain, and Ruth relished the feel of sun seeping into openings in her clothing. Already patches of gray green were breaking through the dirt shoulder along the road, the beginnings of primrose and lupine. The sight lightened her step, and she walked along with the idea of flowers opening in her chest. She had thought such feelings were gone from her. Yet even this celebration she experienced at the sight of emerging leaves was tempered with a new poignancy, knowing the hard winter it took to bring them.

As Ruth walked, she thought about purchasing her own transportation to town, a pony maybe. Better yet, her own vehicle. She had most of two allowance checks saved up, and there would be a third awaiting her at the store. Maybe she would put the word out. When she had gone about half the distance to town, she heard the neigh of a horse somewhere behind her. Ruth checked her desire to step off the road and conceal herself behind a bush. She made sure shells were in the chambers of her shotgun and looked over her shoulder several times until the approaching horse and rider became a bobbing shape behind her.

As soon as she made out the rider to be Johnny Lee, she moved to the side and walked on as if she had no awareness of his approach, careful not to look over even as he rode alongside and slowed his horse to walk at her pace. She sensed he was studying her as they continued to move down opposite sides of the road, hoping he would ride on and not speak to her. The longer he stayed, the less chance of that happening, and sure enough, after some time he began to guide his horse closer. "Want a ride into town, Ruthy?" he asked. She ignored his question and continued on indifferently. "It's a long ways to go," he said, bringing his horse a bit closer. When she still didn't respond, he slid off the sorrel and led it as he walked beside her.

It was all Ruth could do to keep from turning around to

punch him or bash him with the shotgun butt. Finally she said, "Get back on your horse, Johnny Lee, and leave me alone," lacing each word with gall. When he made no move, she turned toward him. "Go on, get out of here," she told him. The contrite expression on his face surprised her.

"I didn't mean nothin' by it, Ruthy. Soon as I said it, I knew I'd done wrong. I . . . I was just mad at you, that's all . . ."

"Stop calling me Ruthy. My name is Ruth."

"I didn't mean no harm to come to you, Ruthy . . . Ruth . . . but when he said how he found you and the Indian naked in the willows . . . well, guess I got jealous and shot off my mouth. There was already talk." She did not answer, and he said, "I got worried, you know, afterwards . . . told Olsen all about it next day at the store. You can ask him."

"You didn't exactly come up to see for yourself if I was all right, did you, if you thought Stine meant me harm," she said, looking straight ahead as she walked.

"I know I didn't," Lee said. "I wish I did. I didn't want to go up there and find you and that Indian together either."

"His name is . . . was Jim."

"Indian Jim, weren't it? Anyway, I'm sorry about your Indian. I wasn't at first, to tell the truth." He fell silent and they continued on for few minutes. "Anyway, Ruthy, I'm glad to see you're looking so good. I was afraid you'd be ruined by it all. But you look pretty as before—even with that red thing on your head you look mighty good to me." Ruth glanced over at him sharply, and he said, "I didn't mean nothin' by that neither. Just wanted you to know you look like the same Ruthy to me."

"That's because you can't see inside me," she said.

"You always were a lot of woman to handle. Too much for me, I guess. But you can't say I didn't try." He pushed back on his hat brim. Ruth turned her face away so he couldn't see her expression softening. "Sometimes I think you're more like us—like a man. Most ladies couldn't go through what you did, do all that homesteadin' and still come out good as new," he said. "You look like a woman an' feel like a woman, but inside you're more like us."

"That's what I used to think, Johnny. But that was because I just didn't know what being a woman was supposed to be like. Maybe no one knows."

"I remember that night you was so mad you punched that Charlie Stine, right in front of everyone."

"I wish I'd shot him instead."

"Well, somebody sure did."

Ruth stopped cold. "What do you mean?"

"That's what I heard last week. He was shot to death in Oklahoma sometime around Christmas."

"Is it true?"

"Frank Thomas was there. Said some troopers were trying to bring him in. He shot one of 'em and they killed him dead."

Ruth suddenly felt removed, like she was floating through the landscape. She watched her feet begin to move again over the ground. Maybe the story wasn't even true, she thought. She'd have her uncle find out for her.

"Let me ride you on to town, Ruthy," Lee said after a few minutes. "Please. I can't leave you out here walkin' all alone. It's a shame."

"Would you worry about leaving me if I were a man?"

"Nope, I guess not."

Ruth tried to meet his grin with a slight one of her own.

They stopped to face each other. Johnny put an awkward arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick brotherly squeeze, then walked to his horse. "Damn," he said as he pulled himself up. "I still wish . . ."

"Don't even let it enter your mind, Johnny," Ruth said, standing at the side of the horse. "Not ever again in your whole life." She raised a hand for him to lift her.

"Aw, I can't help if I think about it once in a while," he said as she settled in behind him.

Ruth didn't lean up against him as they rode. The idea of sex with this good-natured but weak cowboy after Jim made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. Then the thought that she would never replace Jim sobered her. He was not replaceable, ever. As they rode on, the shotgun positioned across her

lap, Ruth put a hand on her belly to steady it against the jostling of the horse's gait.

Lee let her off at the general store, going in himself for tobacco to take out to the men at Desert Star Ranch, who were starting the cattle drive back to Mound Springs. She refused his offer to ride her back as far as the canyon's mouth, saying she'd probably find a way. Martha Hudson was in the store when they came in, conversing with Agnes Rose by the counter. Here was a possible ride, though Ruth knew the woman didn't drive herself and was most likely waiting for her husband. Ruth selected her items carefully, knowing she'd be carrying them at least half the way back. She packed her knapsack with as much as it could hold and brought it up to the counter. Martha stood to one side as Ruth walked up, put a hand on Ruth's back as she unloaded her knapsack. "My dear," she said, "I was so sorry to hear of your trouble."

Mrs. Rose tidied the items next to the register. "I'm just minding the front while Lily gets ready," she told Ruth. "We're taking her in to buy her trousseau today. I'll let them know someone's ready for checkout." She disappeared through the door behind the counter.

"I appreciate your concern," Ruth said to Martha Hudson. "Will your husband be taking you home soon?"

"No, dear, Bob and I are taking the Rose women in to San Bernardino for the shopping." She looked out the front store window. "If ever he gets back here." She turned to Ruth. "Oh, dear, you must need a ride back yourself."

"I'll find one," Ruth said, as Larry Hudson walked in the front of the store. "Or I'll walk."

"Ruth," he said, giving her a quick hug. "You're looking better and better."

"I was just telling Ruth it was too bad we aren't heading home. We could drop her off."

"I'll be glad to run you out as far as the mouth of the canyon before we get on the road," Hudson said.

"I don't mind walking," Ruth told him. "But I'm thinking of buying my own vehicle. Have you heard anything about one for sale around here?"

"Don't know for sure," Hudson said. "How about you, Matt?" he asked as the store owner came in to ring up Ruth's groceries. "Ruth here's looking for a car. You know of any for sale?"

Matt gave Ruth a nod, his eyes lingering on her face. "Not right off," he said, "but I'll keep my eyes open, spread the word." He began ringing up the items.

"I owe you for the stuff John Olsen bought, too," Ruth said. "And I'd like to cash my check—two of them if you have enough cash. And get my mail. Should be another check here by now."

Matt stopped to dig through the mail tray. "There is a letter here for you, but it didn't seem to be your usual check. Has a Boston postmark." He handed Ruth a long blue envelope. A glance at the return address confirmed it was from the Stacels, her father's family. Ruth put it in the knapsack.

The back door swung open and Lily flounced into the room, her golden curls bouncing against her shoulders. She blinked at the sight of Ruth, then smiled at her and stood by her mother, who had come in behind. "We're ready," she said.

Matt opened an arm to receive Lily's tiptoed kiss to his cheek. A quick look sparked between them, before Lily followed the Hudsons and her mother to the door. "So nice to see you again, Ruth," she said, bells sounding as the door swung shut behind her. Ruth began repacking her bag.

"I'll run you home, if you like, Ruth," Matt said as he counted out the change on the counter from her cashed checks. "No sense you having to carry this all that way. I can close the store up early in two or three hours. We can go then."

Ruth looked up in surprise. His expression seemed one of honest concern. For a moment she was tempted. "Thanks for the offer," she said finally, "but I really don't mind the walk. If I leave now, I'll be home well before dark." She shrugged her shoulders into the straps, half regretting her decision as she felt its weight on her back. "But you can let me know if you hear of someone with a vehicle for sale," she said, escaping down the aisle. She pulled the door open so forcefully, she could still hear bells rattling all the way across the parking lot.

Her regret grew as she trudged down the road with the knapsack of groceries, though she knew she would refuse again if he asked. Maybe someone would come along. But her hope for a ride dimmed the farther she went. When she reached the intersection at the mouth of the canyon, she took off the pack and sat down to rest her back before starting up the rut road. Thus far, the uphill had been gradual; in the canyon the grade would intensify, was steep enough so that John Olsen coasted his truck all the way down to the intersection. As she rested, Ruth remembered the letter in her knapsack and pulled it out. She read the neat script of the handwriting with increasing astonishment. When she finished, Ruth sat looking around. Everything looked clean and new.

The letter was from a man named Theodore Stacel, who said he was her late father's brother. He told her that her father had placed money in a stock account for her a few months before he was killed, and it was from that account that her allowance had come. He had been planning to remit to her the entire amount this year, since she had turned twenty-one. At the time, the account had prospered, being worth over a hundred thousand dollars, but most had disappeared in the crash of the market. The brother had managed to extract a small portion just before everything slammed shut and fell to the bottom. He enclosed a check for the amount, the last she would ever receive, and said he was sorry it was so little, but he himself had lost a third of his fortune in the event. The check was for \$6,764.29. Ruth was a rich woman.

She folded the letter with the check inside and fitted it carefully into her pack, hardly daring to think what it meant to her life. It certainly would make easier what was to come. She was used to having so little to live on, the money would last for a very long time—years. It would give her time to find a way to make her living—perhaps making pots to sell somewhere. And she could actually buy herself her own car, a good one. She saw herself driving over to the Black Canyon Reservation to see where Jim had come from. Then her new elation leveled and sank to bittersweet, knowing that he would not be there to share in her good fortune.

Seeing that the sun was halfway to the horizon, Ruth hoisted her pack and gun and started up the rut road, her mind brimming with fresh possibility. She did not stop to rest her shoulders again until she reached the Olsens' yard at the willows. There she lowered herself onto a rock and looked at the empty stone house, the dirt yard swept clean by winter snows, forlorn without the goats and chickens running everywhere—and especially without John and Kate. She wished they were there so she could tell them her news. It made her happy that they would be back soon, by the middle of March, in about three weeks. They could ride in together to San Bernardino to purchase her a car, and she could put them all up in a nice hotel.

As she rose and put on her pack, Ruth thought she heard a motor. Even when she listened closer, it continued to sound like a motor, and she felt a blast of gladness that it might just be the Olsens returning early—and at the very moment she was passing by. This seemed like a day for miracles, she thought, as she stood in the road to wait for them. Yet the vehicle that came over the knoll was not the Olsens' flatbed but Matt Baxter's Model A. He pulled to a halt in front of her and leaned out the window.

"I couldn't stand to think of you walking all the way up this canyon carrying that heavy load of groceries," he said when she stepped up to his window. "Besides, I wanted to tell you about a way you can get a car for yourself. Get in and I'll explain it on the way up."

Ruth watched his eyes as he spoke, searching for some hint of insincerity, and though she saw none, she was yet uncomfortable with the change in this man, who had been first indifferent then ugly toward her in his jealousy. But perhaps what had happened to her had softened him, or maybe his love for Lily had really changed him the same way hers for Jim had changed her. Maybe the deaths had given them an odd bond. "All right," she said quietly and walked around to the door on the other side.

His idea about the car seemed hastily thought out. It seemed he had been thinking and now had suddenly decided that he needed a larger vehicle than his Model A for small in-between grocery hauls from San Bernardino, so he wouldn't have to use

the huge truck for such things. He proposed that he make her a very special kind of deal on the Model A if she was interested, though he wouldn't go into detail. Nor did she respond, not wanting to reveal why she now had less need for a deal.

When they drove up in front of her cabin, Matt seemed surprised at the sight of it, as if he had pictured her living in her tent through all these winter months, though he must surely have heard about the house-raising. He followed her to the door, remained standing in front of it to inspect the walls as she set her knapsack on the table and leaned the gun against the wall. She realized she would have immediately invited anyone else who had given her a ride to come inside. "Come on in, Matt," she said. "I'll put on a pot for coffee before you go."

"Who did the rock work?" he asked, settling into the chair by the stove as she filled the coffeepot with water from her container.

"Me, mostly. Took most of the summer. Then folks came and put up the rest."

"So I heard."

"It was a bad day to schedule a raising, I know," Ruth said, setting the pot on the burner. "But I knew nothing about their coming until everyone showed up at the bend. It was Martha Hudson who told me that day about May." She laid kindling into the fire box and struck a match to it.

"The last time I was here you were cooking on a campfire. A stove must make things a lot easier for you."

Ruth pulled the coffee can from the knapsack and set it on the table. "It took some getting used to. When the weather was still warm I cooked outside. But I was sure glad of the stove when winter came on."

"No other woman I know would want to live like you do. I'll never understand what you like about being up here without conveniences."

"Conveniences aren't everything. If I were somewhere with conveniences, I wouldn't have the rest of what's here."

"And whatever might that be, Ruth? There's not a soul around for miles."

"No people, you mean. But there are other kinds of souls. Sometimes I think this whole place has a soul of its own."

"Strange talk, even from you. Lily's nothing like you at all. I've missed you, Ruth," he said, rising. He paced across to the window and looked out toward Rocky Mountain. "You don't know how many times I've thought of how it used to be between us."

"What kind of price are you proposing for your car?" Ruth asked quickly.

He turned toward her. "I think about you each day that goes by. It can't really be over between us, can it? I don't want it to be."

"You made a choice a long time ago, Matt, and it was the right one. I'm glad of it now. Your bride is out buying her trousseau as we speak. It's too late for us. Far too late."

Matt walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Not if we come to some kind of understanding, Ruth. You take the car. And I can come up and see you once in a while. It can be like before."

Ruth shrugged his hand off and stepped to one side. "I'm not interested in that kind of a deal," she said. "If that's what you're offering, you might as well leave."

Matt was silent for a moment, and when he spoke again, there was a familiar edge to his voice. "I wonder what you did up here alone all winter?" he asked, looking around at her bed. "Or maybe you weren't alone."

"I asked you to leave, Matt."

"I noticed how you rode up with that cowboy today . . . and I know what he told the boys at the Lone Star." Matt reached out with one hand and tried to turn her toward him, but she resisted. "I heard those stories about you naked with that Indian."

"How dare you! You have no right to accuse me. What I do is no business of yours." Ruth kept her eyes locked on the coffee she was now returning to the can. "Get out, Matt. Now."

But he wasn't listening. "Oh, I remember how you are, all right. I'll never forget that day on the fender of my car." He shook his head and drew in a breath. "All those times we

had. . . . I haven't been able to think of anything else since I saw you in the store today."

"You're getting married, Matt. That's what you'd best be thinking about." Ruth marched to the cabin door and swung it open.

"What difference does that make? I was married before. My wife was dying and it didn't stand in your way then."

"Well, it makes a difference to me now. I was stupid then." She stepped outside and turned back toward him. "This makes the fourth time I've asked you to leave. This time it's a demand."

He walked halfway to the door, stopping beside her bed. "You were ready enough to give in before, remember? And why not? You've given it to everyone else on the desert."

"I didn't give anything away that I didn't take back for myself," she said. "That's the kind of woman I was. But that was before Jim. Jim changed all that."

"Then," he said, "who's going to keep a woman like you satisfied way up here in the wilderness?" He crossed the distance between them and stood facing her, his breath hot vomit in her face. "It's not over between us, Ruth. I know what kind of woman you are." His eyes glazed over with a hostile lust not so different from Stine's, and for once she was comforted by the fact that Matt was a coward. "What happened up here that day, huh, Ruth," he hissed, "really? Too many men in your bed at one time and someone got jealous? Well, just don't forget your buck's gone for good now."

For a moment Ruth considered going for her rifle and requiting her need for revenge on this poor substitute for the real villain. Then her arms sagged to her sides along with her rage. "You make me sick, Matt Baxter. The whole of you isn't worth as much as any single hair on Jim's body," she said. "I can't stand to think I ever wanted you. I wish Lily could see you now and know what a prize she's getting. You're a pitiful excuse for a man." She looked up into the shallow face beneath all that butterfly hair she'd once adored, a rock calm coming over her.

"Here's what, Matt," she said. "You get in your car and drive back to town. If you ever even look funny at me again, I'll make sure your wife knows about it."

“Who would believe you? You a . . .”

“I’ll make sure she does believe me. Make no mistake about that. And here’s what else. When I come into the store—since yours is the only place around here a person can buy groceries—you act like nothing ever happened between us. Not before, not now. You treat me with respect, because you know what will happen if you don’t. Now, get out of here.”

Ruth stepped back inside and latched the door, free even from the words he sent after her: “Bitch,” she heard him shout, then, “Whore,” before his car engine caught and his wheels spun up a whorl of dust as he made his exit.

Ruth gazed absentmindedly out the window, pen poised on a page in the journal she'd been filling daily since the letter came three weeks ago. Her eyes fell on light specks whirling through the air outside. If someone had asked her, she would have said the specks were part of the flurries that had persisted long after snow melted from the ground and daily winds ripped holes in clouds, leaving fragments afloat in large lakes of sunlight. The fact that the flecks were not drifting, but exercising some kind of control, finally occurred to her, and she leaned her forehead against the pane to see more clearly. These were not escaping flakes, she soon realized, but tiny insects, spreading wings and circling. She shed the red-and-black blanket from her shoulders

and walked outside to inspect this unexpected awakening. She couldn't quite make them out, but the shapes indicated several kinds of insects swarming in the patches of sunlight. She leaned back against the stone wall and savored the warmth on her face. A faint tickle on her skin caused her to look down; a ladybug preened for a moment on her forearm, then peeled back its shell, opened wings, and whirled away.

Ruth watched the bug's flight, remembering the beaded trees and rocks Jim had shown her on the mountain, the delight she had felt at that moment—and other moments in this place, as when she stood a spring ago, elated amid the flowers, her new life a shining beacon in front of her, her biggest worry a boulder where she didn't want it to be. Some boulders were harder to bury than others. Squatting to retrieve a shard from the ground next to her cabin, Ruth took it up into her palm and studied the patterns on its surface. Without thinking, she sank down and spread out her arms over the ground. Its texture was airy from melted snow, like a sponge thirsty for the warmth of sun. The earth seemed to have endless capacity to soak up tears and blood before it gave birth again to lupine and bluebells, she thought, yet lay her wet cheek against the pebbly surface as if it were a lover's chest. This place had claimed the whole of her now; she could feel it in the marrow of her bones.

Would she ever be done with this crying? she wondered, but allowed her moisture to saturate the dirt under her face. Then something caused her to open her eyes. She blinked once or twice to see more clearly through her watery vision; it was odd, even so, to imagine she saw tiny pebble-size rocks hopping. She squeezed her eyes shut again, then swiped tears with her shoulder and looked more closely, her elbows on the ground, chin propped on her palms. It was unmistakable. The pebbles really were moving about, making barely discernible hops. The sight was so strange that she forgot all about her pain and laughed out loud. Small rocks rising.

But how could that be? Rocks were immobile, had no capacity themselves for life, even if everything about her had sprung

from rock. Yet here they were, like tiny chips of boulder come back to life. Close up, she began to make sense of that movement; these were not rocks she watched, but camouflaged creatures, cleverly designed to appear as rock, the way imagination shapes words so they seem solid.

Ruth watched the insects a few moments more, then turned over on her back and opened her arms to the sky. A small cloud was forming in the blue patch overhead. It stayed to stretch out arms and legs, a long mane of hair sweeping away from its face. Ruth smiled as it changed shape and moved on.

She sat up, feeling the now familiar flutter of wings in her abdomen, as if she had a butterfly inside her. Yet she had written in her journal only last week that if the child were born with light skin and orange hair, she would hack it up like the cat's-claw root, and bury it, as she had the boulder—or stake it out for the coyotes. But already such a thing was impossible for her. Something powerful had taken hold, melting away the Ruth she knew like sun disperses snow, then reshaping her like an olla. All her life she had seen the ways of Myrtle and Cally as the choices open to her, other women appearing to be variations of those extremes—the persnickety busybody or the bitter bohemian. For a short time she had been drawn to the promises of flapperhood, but like Cally's defiance, it turned out to be empty and going nowhere. Ruth had come to this canyon to escape those extremes, to make her way like a man was allowed to do.

But now she knew she was strong enough to walk between the extremes and be another kind of woman entirely. She wasn't yet sure what that was, but it didn't worry her. The canyon would teach her. All she had in mind at the moment was climbing the mountain again to see the ladybugs, digging up clay from the spring to make pots a lot like the ones made here long ago. This year she would plant a decent garden. Buy goats and chickens from the Olsens. She was glad Kate would soon be back and they would sit down together and talk over coffee. A child she hadn't planned would be born, and even if its skin were dark and hair black, as she believed it would be, it would not be Jim come back. But she would not blink when people looked

askance at her. She knew lupines and bluebells would soon grow again, another doe bring her fawn to water at the spring. Ruth was, after all, akin to them, the child in her an embodiment of the power she sensed in rock. She would do her part in its rising.

