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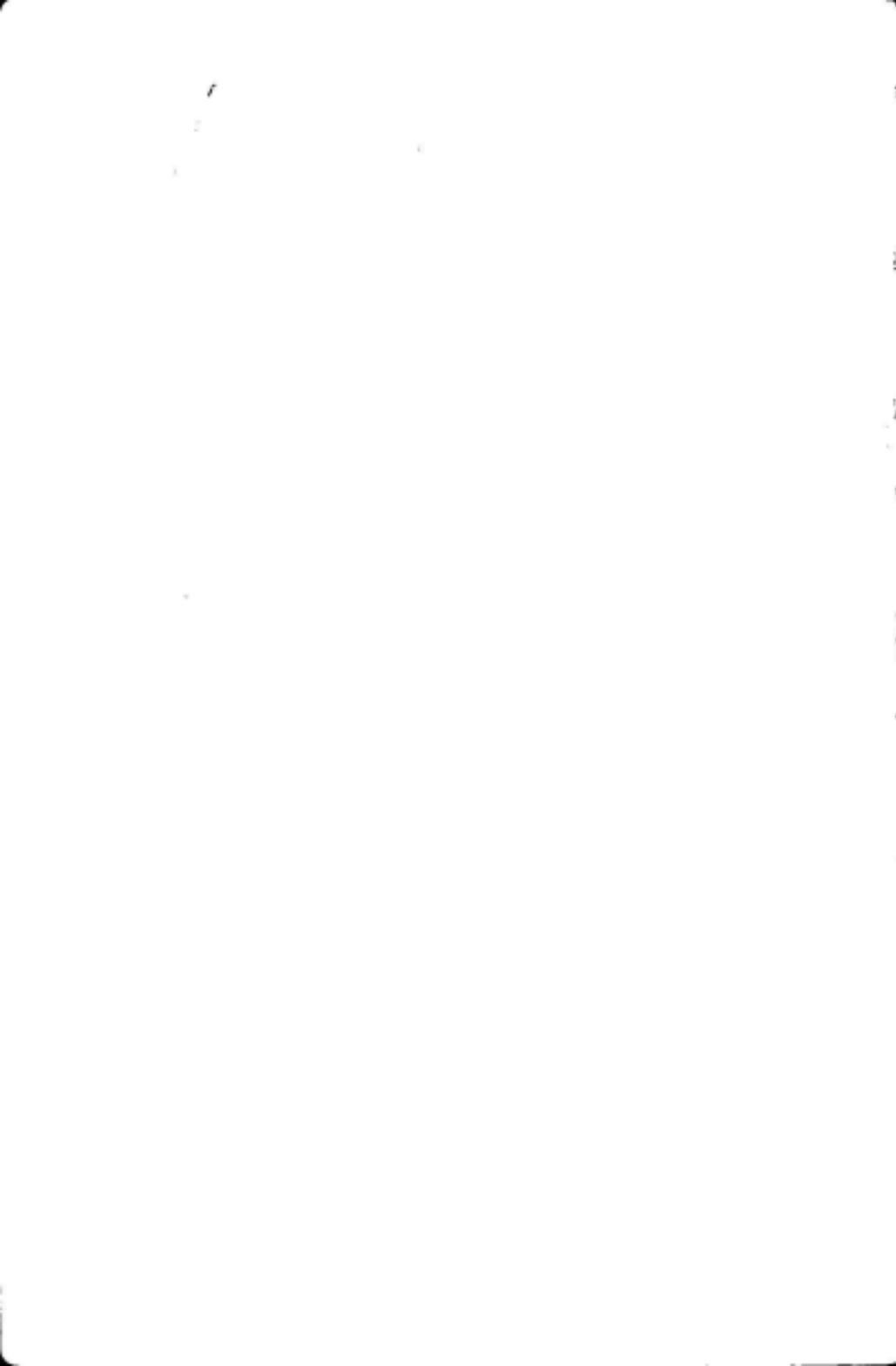
**Hell's Lid Blew Up When They Kidnapped
THE MARSHAL'S DAUGHTER!**

FEUD IN PINEY-FLATS

An ACE
Original
by

**KEN
MURRAY**





***THE MARSHAL'S DAUGHTER WAS TO
BE THEIR SHIELD AGAINST THE LAW-
MAN'S TRIGGERS!***

Ben Dawson was the marshal of Piney Flats when the infamous Rayburn-Maclane feud broke out anew. For several years, his quick trigger hand had enforced the peace, until in one terrible day the town split wide open and hell broke loose! And when Dawson tried to stand between those warring rangeland factions, he found himself the target of fury, his own ranch set ablaze, and his daughter Laurie kidnapped!

The marshal knew that if he holstered his guns his daughter might live but the town would die. If he intervened, he might save a hundred homes at the price of Laurie's own life. What he did and how he did it make a fever-pitched novel. It's an ACE Original about THE MARSHAL'S DAUGHTER, and it has never appeared in any form before.

***Turn this book over for
second Ken Murray Western novel.***

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BEN DAWSON

Marshal of feud town, his loyalty was torn between his lawman's oath and his father's duty.

LURIE DAWSON

She was to be the hidden ace in a killer's game of pistol poker.

MARK GUTHRIDGE

As mayor of Piney Flats, he kept his guns oiled and his eyes sharp for the winning side.

DUD MACLANE

He taught his sons to treat Rayburns the same way they'd treat rattlesnakes.

LINC RAYBURN

When one of his kin was bushwhacked, he decided the time had come to clean out the Maclanes once and for all.

FRENCHY LAFARGE

When good men fall out, bad men have their day, and this looked like Frenchy's big opportunity.

FEUD *in*
PINEY FLATS

A Marshal Dawson novel

by KEN MURRAY

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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HELLIONS' HOLE

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Chapter One

SUNDAY MORNING was bright with sunshine, but not yet too hot as Ben Dawson rode the big gray gelding across the rolling rangeland toward his own spread. He rode smartly but not pushing the horse too hard; a man with consideration for an animal in spite of his eagerness to get home.

It had been a bad twenty-four hours that he'd been away, the worst since he'd taken over the job of town marshal in Piney Flats. It had started when the old, long smoldering Rayburn-Maclane feud had again flared up in sudden violence and threatened to engulf the whole town. But the worst was over now for a while and he'd smoothed things down, he was pretty sure. There would be little trouble in the town today, a Sunday.

Nearing home, Dawson grinned and pushed his Stetson back, letting an unruly shock of crisp, prematurely white hair bush out over his forehead. Strangely enough the white hair made his square-jawed, deceptively good-natured-looking face look younger than his thirty-five years. Especially when he smiled. The fine web of laugh lines deepened about his blue eyes now as he thought of his daughter, Laurie, the way she'd come war-whooping from the house to greet him, overjoyed that he'd gotten

home in time for breakfast. Her blonde pigtailed would be flying and she'd be bursting with news of the new colt she'd broken or wanting him right away to witness some trick shooting she'd learned from one of the hands.

After a few moments, though, the grin slipped a little on Dawson's face. He wondered if maybe he'd better take Laurie in hand a mite. He wondered if maybe even for a nine-year old girl whose mother had died at childbirth, had been brought up in a world of kindly but rough-talking, rough-acting men, she wasn't getting just a little too wild, a little too tomboyish. But then he remembered the way her face lighted when he'd bring her a new dress from town, the way she liked to doll up sometimes for Saturday night dinner and told himself that he had nothing to worry about with Laurie. She was everything a man could ask for in a daughter. She'd grow up to be as pretty and proud as her mother had been and with the wit, strength of character and understanding of men that a woman needed so badly in this still partly uncivilized land. All too soon, too soon.

Crossing an old stage trail, splashing through a shallow creek, Dawson finally moved onto his own land. He reined in on a little rise of ground and looked around for small bunches of cattle which always grazed in this section because of its nearness to water. Not a critter was in sight this morning. Dawson frowned, wondering about that. An unexplainable feeling of anxiety began to gnaw at him. He spurred Nero on. His anxiety increased, became more solid as he rode deeper inside his own line and up to a mile or so from the ranch buildings, still without seeing any of his stock, nor any of the five hands who helped

him run the Diamond D. He passed a drift fence badly in need of repair and remembered that Alf Belanger had promised to fix that fence first thing Sunday morning. And when Alf promised something he'd crawl from his deathbed if he was physically able to keep that promise. Alf would have been up and around long ago and out here working on the fence—if everything was the same as usual.

Dawson forced Nero, the gray gelding, until finally, with his stomach jumping nervously, he rode over the last swell of ground and into sight of the ranch buildings. Then he reined in so hard the gray came to a halt with his front hooves pawing the air. Dawson shook his head, rubbed his eyes, wondering if he might have accidentally ridden in the wrong direction, that perhaps this wasn't his spread at all. Then he saw part of the corral fence still standing, diamond-shaped, and he knew that this wasn't any bad dream and that he hadn't made any mistake.

Sick and dazed, he rode closer. A hundred yards from where the house had stood, he swung down from the saddle. A man was sprawled beside the trail. He was a big man. His huge bulk was grotesquely emphasized by the fact that he was wearing only a knee-length nightshirt. One side of his grizzled gray head was bloody and smashed from a .45 slug. Other bullet wounds were visible in his arms and shoulders. In each big, gnarled hand, the dead man clutched a Colt. Their cylinders were empty.

Dawson knelt beside him. "Rick," he said. His voice broke and the name got stuck in his throat but he forced it out, saying it over and over. "Rick! Rick Butterfield! What happened, Rick? Who did it, Mister? Who did it?"

Crouched there beside the corpse of his dead fore-

man, Dawson looked back past the dead man's feet. He saw the bloody trail through the dust where Butterfield had dragged himself, still firing, until his guns were empty, fighting with his last breath the ones who'd attacked the ranch and burned it down.

Sobs ripped dryly at Dawson's throat. He swore until there wasn't an oath left in him. He finally forced himself to his feet, muttering: "The dirty murderin' buzzards! I—I'll get 'em! I'll get 'em for this if it takes me the rest of my life!"

On a stumbling run, half-blinded by a blur of tears, Dawson made for the leveled, blackened ruin of the burned-out buildings. He heard himself yelling: "Laurie! Laurie!" But the voice sounded like a stranger's. He hardly recognized it. "Laurie, you've got to still be alive! Answer me! They—they couldn't kill you, too. They couldn't!"

There was no answer. There was only the now hot, deadly, Sunday morning silence. Closer to the ranch, he found the bodies of two more of the Diamond D's hands, Belanger and Nemo Klee, the cook. He stopped and looked down at them, briefly, numbly. He walked around the ashes and charred rubble of the different buildings without finding any more corpses. Then he plunged into the blackened ruins, kicking about madly, bending, tearing at the half-burned remains of pieces of timber. He found the dead bodies of the two other hands, Abramson and Cavanaugh, in what was left of the bunkhouse.

In the ashes of the main ranch building he found the sickening, charred remains of a female corpse. For a moment, black despair and insane rage tore at Dawson as he stood there looking down at the macabre mess of bones and blackened flesh and charred pieces of a nightgown, thinking that it was

Laurie. Then a little reason returned and hope rose in him again as he realized that the corpse was far too large for a girl of nine years; that this was what was left of Mrs. Butterfield, the foreman's wife.

Further search through the ruins failed to turn up any sign of Laurie. Slowly, relief seeped through him at the realization that in some miraculous way she had escaped the murderous raid and burning-out of the Diamond D. Then that momentary relief gave way to the worry about what had happened to her, after that. Where had she gone? At the end the realization that she might possibly have been taken off by the raiders, kidnapped, smote him with sickening suddenness.

Exhausted with shock and expended emotion, he staggered out of the ashes of the building, trying to gather his thoughts together, to think this thing out. He had to figure who had done this and why. Near the corral, he found part of the answer. It was the bullet-riddled corpse of a young cowhand who didn't belong there either dead or alive. Dawson turned the body over, looked at the thin, weak-chinned face and protruding dead eyes.

"Mitch Maclanel!" he said. "That's what happened. They came here after him. The trouble must have started up again and young Mitch came here looking for me, looking for protection. But the others—those loco, vengeance-hungry Rayburns—knew he was here and came after him! They got him, too. And wiped out all of my boys and burned down the place because they took Mitch in, tried to shield him."

It came to Dawson then, that he might now well have the answer to what had happened to Laurie, why she hadn't been killed, too. Laurie's mother had been a Rayburn. They wouldn't likely kill one of their

own kin. They'd probably taken Laurie back to their own spread. They knew Dawson would figure out what had happened, come after her. That would give them a chance to square things up with him for interfering yesterday, when all the trouble started.

"Well, they're goin' to get that chance," Dawson said, grimly. He eased his silver-mounted sixes from their holsters, checked them and slid them loosely back into place. Then he strode toward the gray, mounted and turned the gelding's head toward the Rayburn place.

As he rode, Dawson's mind turned back to the events of the day before, the violence he had partially blocked and thought he'd prevented from breaking out any more; the gun-crazy madness that had come suddenly and irrevocably alive again this morning and caught him right up in the middle of it. . . .

Chapter Two

IT WAS Saturday morning that Dawson first heard about the killing of Cal Rayburn. Right away he knew that it was going to mean trouble, even though nothing actually happened for a number of hours after that. It was noon time before men from both spreads began to drift into town and gang-up into widely separated groups.

All afternoon, the thing began to build and fester.

It was like the hot and deadly fever period of the pox before it broke out and made itself known. During that long, taut period simmering heat from the white ball of sun high overhead scorched the cowtown of Piney Flats. Pitch bubbled from the new false front over Morgensterns' Mercantile. Dust devils swirled and danced between the plank walks and about the booted feet of the men clumped at scattered intervals along the street.

They didn't move much, didn't talk much, these men. They mostly stood and scuffed at the dust or spat in it and watched the tiny mud ball roll and dry instantly. And they waited, the gnawing strain of this waiting like a live thing in them. Late afternoon, the thing they were waiting for happened.

A voice in one of the waiting groups rose in anger and a man broke away, started upstreet toward the Golden Glow saloon. He moved with a grim purpose that drew all eyes. He was a strange looking man, beefy big, almost to the point of being fat, from the waist up. His legs looked too long and spindly for such a bulky torso. He looked topheavy and awkward, this man called Porky Rayburn, as his boots kicked up little dust spurts. The sun flashed once, brightly, from the barrel of his .44 as he loosened it in its leather. . . .

The cool dimness of the Golden Glow was almost empty. Behind the bar, Early Hines, owner of the Golden Glow, polished a shot glass over and over. He was a slow moving, hang-bellied man and every once in awhile his sad, hound-dog eyes would move from one of the two men to the other, then shift toward the batwings and the slanting bars of dust-swirling sunbeams above and below them. He'd stop his eternal polishing and cock his big shaggy-haired head

in a listening attitude. But there was no sound from the street. Hine's loose lips would twitch nervously at the corners, then. Finally he could stand the heavy, smothering, nerve-ripping silence no longer. His voice high and breaking, he said:

"Marshal, what you goin' to do? You got to *do* somethin', soon."

Ben Dawson wasn't big. He was average height, average weight, but there was a compactness to him that made him seem larger, taller. He gave the impression of great latent power, and tensile strength. He dressed like all the other men in the town, overalls tucked into riding boots, cowhide vest over cotton workshirt. A flat-crowned black Stetson was tipped back on his head, its darkness in striking contrast to Dawson's thick, unruly shock of prematurely white hair.

Against the dust of his vest, his town marshal's badge shone brightly. At the sound of Hines' voice, he raised his head. He looked like a man who was easy going, who enjoyed life and laughed a lot. There were few lines of bitterness in his face. His mouth smiled easily and little fine laugh lines were always visible about the corners of his eyes.

Yet the sharp observer could tell that this man, Dawson, didn't have to put on a show of being a hardcase. He had no inner weaknesses to cover up that way. Anyone who really knew men could tell that Dawson's very ease and obvious sense of well being was the tipoff that here was a man who couldn't be shoved around, who might not rile easily, but once pressed too much, would fight back hard.

Looking at Early Hines, Dawson's lips flattened and the pupils of his eyes darkened a little. "Do some-

thing?" he said, softly. "About what? Something wrong somewhere, Early?"

"Now, Ben!" Hines wiped thick, dirty-nailed fingers over his soiled apron. "You know blasted well that all Hell's about to pop in this man's town, any minute. You know everything's too damned quiet. It—it ain't right to just—just stand here and wait for the thing to explode in our faces. It'll be too late to do anything, then. Hell, man, you don't just sit on a keg o' powder and wait for it to explode and *then* try to do something about it. You snuff out the fuse before it sets off the powder."

"Is that so?" Dawson said. He sipped at a thick mug of steaming dishwater-colored coffee. He touched the badge on his vest. "Perhaps you'd like to tote this awhile and take over? You seem to know just what to do about a situation like this, Early."

The fat saloon owner put up his hand, palm-first, his sausage-like fingers splayed. "Quit, Ben," he whined. "You always twist words around in a man's mouth. I didn't mean that. I meant you ought to mebbe sashay down the street and lay down the law to them Rayburns, run 'em out of—"

"Hold it, Early," Dawson cut in. "You're gettin' all worked up and runnin' at the mouth like an old woman. The Rayburns already *know* the law. I don't have to lay it down to 'em. They know we don't settle differences with gun-talk here in the Flats any more. They know they can make a charge against young Mitch Maclane, here, whenever they're ready and we'll rig up a court o' law and settle it legal-like. And if they've got any kind of real case against Mitch, they'll see justice done. Other than that, nothin's going to happen."

The man at the bar next to Dawson spun around.

His thin, weasly face was oyster-colored, sheened with sweat under quarter-inch blond beard stubble. His normally protuberant green eyes seemed about to bulge from their sockets like squeezed grapes. The fear glazing them was a sickening, ugly thing. Mitch Maclane's overful lower lip trembled and every few seconds his receding chin puckered as he fought for control to keep from bursting into childish, terrified sobbing. He was twenty years old but the threat of death had turned him into a sick-scared, trembling boy.

"That—that's the trouble, Mr. Dawson," Mitch Maclane said. His voice was shrill and raw. "They haven't *got* a case. They know that there's no chance in the world of really provin' I bushwhacked ol' Cal Rayburn. They know that. But they don't care. *They're* convinced I'm guilty and that's all that matters to 'em. They won't give me a chance. All they want is revenge. They. . . ." His voice faltered, broke off. His chin began to work. The bulging eyes filled. But at the last minute the tears didn't come. He picked at the nails of one hand with the other, went on:

"All the Rayburns hate all of us Maclanes, anyhow, Marshal. You know that. They have for years. The feud of forty years ago never really ended. There was just a—like a—a armistice. Now it's broken out again. This is all the Rayburns needed for an excuse to start the killin' all over again. You know how all them Rayburns are when they get likkered-up, Mr. Dawson. They're meaner'n treed cougars. Pretty soon now they—they'll be worked up enough to come after me." His voice broke. Young Mitch Maclane began trembling. A vein stood out in his throat. "They'll want

me first, I tell you. And I—I don't want to die! I don't want to—"

Ben Dawson stopped him with a loose-fingered stinging slap across the cheek. "Stop it, Mitch," he said, quietly. "Get hold of yourself, kid. This ain't goin' to help anything. Not anything at all. So far there's no cause for you to get so spooked. They're behavin' themselves."

Mitch Maclane sucked in his breath. The trembling stopped. The fat blue vein in his throat disappeared. He sobbed: "Behavin'? Just because they ain't in here, swillin' rotgut, don't mean anything. Just because you don't let anybody in town wearin' guns drink in a public place. They got their likker, just the same. And what they're using, that mountain tiger sweat, is even worse. That'd put even a sane man in a killin' mood. A man drinkin' that stuff doesn't fear anything, either beast or human—not even a lawman with your rep. And don't think just because they're your in-laws, because your wife was a Rayburn, they'll let you talk 'em out of anything, either. You—you've—listen, Mr. Dawson, you've got to save me from 'em, get me out of here!"

"No," Ben Dawson told him. "That's where you're wrong, Mitch. You leave town and it'll be out of my jurisdiction. I can't do anything to stop 'em, then. At least, here in town, I can stick with you, do everything possible to see the law carried out my way."

Even as he said that, though, Dawson wondered. The things Mitch Maclane had said ran through his mind. They were true. The Rayburns were ordinarily good, hard-working ranchmen. But the oldest member of their clan had been backshot on his own land. Circumstantial evidence pointed to Mitch Maclane as the killer. Fueled to a furious vengeance pitch by

mountain whiskey, the Rayburns would be hard to reason with. Once they killed Mitch Maclane, then the Maclane family would start shooting, too. The old feud would be on once more. It would spread. The whole town would probably take sides. That would be the end of the sane reign of law and order that Marshal Ben Dawson had brought to the town a few years back.

His reasons, at that time, for taking the job of marshal, of cleaning up the town, hadn't been altogether altruistic. He had seen that once the lawless element was subdued, Piney Flats had the makings of a decent town. For a long time, even though it was the nearest trading place to his own spread, the Diamond D, Dawson hadn't thought too much about the town. He spent little time in it. The fact that it was a rattlesnake nest of tinhorn joints, a stopping off place for all the lawless heading through Rainbow Valley, a place where no woman dared walk the streets after dark, was of little concern to Ben Dawson.

When his wife, Ruth, died, when little Laurie was born, Dawson cared even less what happened in Piney Flats. He didn't step out of the Diamond D boundaries, hardly, for the next five years. But then as blonde young Laurie began to grow up and was scared half out of her wits by a street shoot-out the first time Dawson took her into The Flats to outfit her with new clothes, the widower began to see things differently.

He began to realize that as Laurie grew up, the town would become important to her. You couldn't pin a girl child down to a ranch all the time. She would need a school to go to. Piney Flats had no school. There was no amount of money could entice

a teacher to stay in the town overnight, let alone live there. Laurie would need the companionship of other children. But the Flats wasn't catering much to family life in those days. Realizing all this, Ben Dawson came out of his shell of sorrow after his wife's death and decided to do something about it.

He talked to some of the town merchants and finally convinced most of them that the town could grow and prosper if it was properly cleaned up. They finally agreed that they'd do their share in bucking the lawless if they had a man with guts and gun-savvy enough to lead them. Dawson told them he'd like a try at the job. If they'd elect him marshal, give him a few days to get ready, he'd see what he could do.

For those next few days Dawson hung around the town's tinhorn joints where the most trouble occurred and sized-up just who the troublemakers were, who were the ringleaders. Then he made out the necessary papers in the event of his death, to turn over his spread and the care of young Laurie to Rick Butterfield, who rodded the Diamond D for him, and Rick's wife. He moved into Piney Flats and informed the town citizens he was ready to do the job for them.

There hadn't been a marshal in Piney Flats for a number of years. The last three had remained in office only a couple of days before they were caught in the middle of gun-trouble and carted off to Boot-hill. It had seemed rather useless to make another appointment after that. So when Dawson started sporting a badge, there was considerable surprise and some restlessness and uneasiness. Especially when a set of town laws were printed and posted in prominent places around the town. The surprise increased when Dawson and a group of deputies began to en-

force those laws. The uneasiness broke out into frequent and flaring gunplay at the same time.

It was not an easy job and often the dust of Main Street was splattered with crimson, but Dawson and his men finally cleaned out the town. After awhile, the word spread that the lawless were given short shift in the town and they soon learned to give it a wide berth.

Piney Flats flourished and prospered and the need for Dawson to clear leather grew less and less. He had more time to tend to ranch business. Families with children began to move into town and a school house was built and Dawson took little Laurie there every day and was proud as Punch over the way she took to book learning. Now, Laurie was almost ten years old and although she was still addicted to tomboy ways and imitating the Diamond D hands she so loved and admired, still she was beginning to show promise of budding into a poised and lovely young lady. She had many friends in the Flats. She loved to come there with Dawson for Saturday shopping.

All of that flashed through Dawson's mind now, as he stood at the bar of the Golden Glow and felt the unnatural quiet and tension in the town hanging heavy as a pall. Out there on the street, today, it was as though time had turned backward to the days before he'd taken over. Women folks were all indoors, had been there all day, since they'd heard of the Rayburn-Maclane trouble, nervously waiting to see what would happen. He looked at young Mitch Mac-lane, the youth who'd been accused of starting the trouble. For a moment, Dawson felt tired and dispirited and wondered if he was facing a hopeless task in trying to buck this thing. It would be a fairly sim-

ple move for him to check out of town for a few hours on some excuse and let the two clans settle their differences in their own way.

But at that instant there was the sound of a chair scraping the floor from the shadowed gloom at the rear of the Golden Glow. Boot heels moved across the floor toward the bar. Dawson whirled, both hands dropping to the silver mounted sixes thonged low on his thighs. Half a second behind him, Mitch Maclane made the same move. But then a man moved out of the shadows and Dawson reached out and stayed Maclane's gun-hand. It wasn't one of the Rayburns who'd slipped in through the rear of the saloon to get in a sneak shot at Mitch Maclane.

"Easy, Mitch," Dawson said. "It's only Mayor Guthridge. Afternoon, Mark. You startled us, some. Didn't know you were sitting in the back. I'm getting as jumpy as everyone else in town today."

Mark Guthridge was a towering, bulky-shouldered man a few years older than Dawson, who somehow could effect brightly-colored pleated silk shirts with flowing sleeves without looking dandified. His hands were large but graceful looking, heavily jeweled and well kept. He flicked one of them to his high, boney forehead in a saluting gesture.

"How're you, Ben?" Guthridge said in a low-timbered, slightly whiskey-rough voice. "Don't know as I blame folks for bein' jittery. This Rayburn-Maclane ruckus could bust out into big trouble." He smiled and a gold-capped incisor shone dully. "But then I reckon you can handle it all right, even if it does. The Flats is a lucky town to have a lawman like you in charge, Marshal."

"Thanks," Dawson said. He always felt a little uncomfortable in the presence of this big, loudly dressed

man but he was grateful to see that the mayor seemed to back up the way he was handling things. The two men had never somehow seemed to develop a warm friendship between them but a strong mutual respect had grown after Guthridge moved into the Flats, bought up the town hotel, Harmony House, and later became active in town politics and was elected mayor. They had worked well together in keeping Piney Flats clean and progressive.

"It could be mostly drunken talk, Mark," Dawson said. "If nothing breaks by sundown, I have a notion—"

He never finished the sentence. Boots pounded the saloon's veranda. The batwings slashed open and the dust motes in the sunbeams whirled and danced crazily. A man lunged into the place. A topheavy looking man with so much shoulder and chest and belly straining at his dirty, sweat-ringed workshirt that it seemed impossible for his long and spindly legs to carry him. He should have been a comical looking specimen, with his almost porcine features. He had a snubby, broad-nostrilled nose, a pursed mouth and tiny, too closely set together eyes, in a round, blubbery-cheeked face. But there was nothing funny about the kill-crazy glitter in those swinish little eyes, at this moment, nor about the way in which he breathed, noisily, feverishly, through his half-opened mouth. Nor the way his fat and dirty hand hung poised over the loosened .44 on his right hip.

"Porky! Porky Rayburn!" The name burst from the lips of Mitch Maclane in a high screech of sound. Mitch cringed back toward Dawson.

The big man stopped just inside the saloon, blinking against the dimness after the glaring sunlight. Finally, he said: "Take it easy, Ben. I don't want any

trouble with you. I ain't goin' to start nothin' in here. I got a proposition to make." His speech wasn't thick but there was a slight slurring to the words that indicated he'd had his share, and then some, of the mountain whiskey that had been brought into town because Dawson didn't allow anyone wearing guns to be served at the saloon.

"Man's always got a right to speak his piece, Porky," Dawson told him. "What's on your mind?"

"I want that snivelin', bushwhackin' Mitch Mac-lane out on the street with me. Either he comes out under his own power or I'm draggin' him out. He'll get a fair show. Which is more'n he gave my old man. Mitch won't get back-shot. He'll get a fair-square chance to draw iron and defend himself. He and me'll have it out between us, man to man. My folks has agreed to do it this way, get it over with. We swear we'll be satisfied no matter how it turns out. All we want is a chance to even the score."

"I—I ain't got no quarrel with you, Porky, nor any of your folks," Mitch Maclane whined.

The youth had backed so close to Ben Dawson now that the marshal could smell the fear breaking out in him, could feel his all-over trembling. Dawson eased away from him. He didn't say anything for a moment. He tried to figure how best to handle this. He could feel the tense silence building, tightening. Porky Mac-lane began to fidget, his topheavy, beefy torso leaning forward from the waist, the sound of his breathing harsh. Sweat ran crookedly through the dust coating his fat face. Finally, Dawson said: "All right. If it's agreeable to Mitch. And if you both ride out of town. The law can't back you up, Porky. If you swear to me the thing'll end there and there'll be no more trouble, maybe it would be best all around to settle it

that way. But I can't let it happen inside the town limits." He turned to Mitch Maclane.

The blond youth was backed up to the bar, his elbows hooked over it, as though he was trying to push right back through it. He was sheet-white and his bulging eyes looked as though they'd squirt right out of his face. His lips moved for several seconds and his Adam's apple worked up and down in his throat before any words came out. Then he blurted:

"No! I—I ain't no gun fighter. Why—why should I take a chance on gettin' kilt? I didn't do nothin'. I—I'm innocent, Porky. I didn't kill old Cal Rayburn. I swear I didn't."

Porky Rayburn drew in a long slow breath and held it. He sleeved dirt and sweat from his meaty face. His little pig-like eyes stayed on Mitch Maclane, glittering, unblinking. "You mean you're still tryin' to skunk out of it? And I take it you ain't goin' to move out from under the marshal's shirt tails under your own power, eh, you gopher-livered, slobberin' little bushwhackin' polecat!"

Mitch Maclane just shook his head violently like a man trying to get water out of his ear. He could no longer speak. His breathing began to sound like sobbing.

"All right," Porky Rayburn told him. "Then I'm takin' you out. This has got to be done outside where the whole town can see how lily-livered you Maclanes are when a man is facin' one of you. I want everybody to see what happens to anyone who back-shoots a Rayburn."

"Easy, Porky," Guthridge put in. "The marshal and I aren't going to let you—"

Porky ignored him, started toward Maclane in his awkward, falling-forward gait, his beefy, powerful

shoulders hunched, his fat hands balled into fists. But Ben Dawson suddenly stepped between him and Mitch Maclane. Dawson's thumbs hooked into his gunbelt. His mouth was tight.

"Easy, Porky," he said. "I agreed to your proposition only if Maclane was willing, if he went along with you voluntarily. Looks like he don't aim to do that, so the whole thing's off. Far as I'm concerned, Mitch is innocent until he's proven guilty. Right now, he's still a law-abidin' citizen and it's my duty to protect him. Porky, we've always gotten along all right. Let's ease down some and talk this thing out sensibly. You want to press charges against Mitch?"

Porky Rayburn stood there, swaying, teetering on his high-heeled worn boots. His doubled chin was lowered onto his huge washtub of a chest. His eyes stared up glassily at Dawson, muddy, mean-looking. Dawson could smell his whiskey-sour breath. Porky said, "It's a good thing, mebbe, your wife's dead, Ben. She wouldn't be specially proud o' you, right this moment, standin' up against her blood kin, favorin' a gutless killer. Press charges? Do this thing legal-like? Don't be silly, Ben. We ain't takin' any chances on some slick-tongued lawhawk fixing it for Mitch to squirm free. Mitch killed my old man, now he's goin' to pay for it. That's all there is to it."

"I'm not so sure," Dawson said. "Did any of you—did *anybody* see Mitch shoot Cal?"

"Hell no! Ever hear tell of a bushwhacker operatin' with witnesses around? Get out of the way, Ben. I'm takin' him outside with me if I have to drag him out by the—"

"No, you're not," Dawson stopped him. "Even if I was convinced solid Mitch was the killer, I couldn't let you do that. And I ain't by a long hoot. Just be-

cause you found one of Mitch's boot heels near Cal's body doesn't tell me Mitch did it. Especially since the kid has an explanation for that. He says he was lyin' up in a room of Harmony House, drunk, when Cal was shot. He said somebody must've broke into his room, taken that boot heel and planted it by the corpse just to make it look as though he was the killer. Isn't that so, Mark?"

Guthridge nodded, his deeply set, shrewd eyes watching the scene calmly.

"That's a load o' mule mess!" Porky Rayburn shouted. He raised his chin from his chest. His tiny mouth was pinched whitely around the corners. "Naturally he's got to try and lie out of it. Ben, I didn't come here for a lot of silly legal palaver. Ain't nobody else but a stinkin' Maclane would want to kill the old man, anyhow. Get out of the way. There's a time for your kind of law and there's a time for ours. You're out of order right now, Ben. This is the last time I'm going to *ask* you to step aside."

"You brought up a good point, Porky," Dawson said. "*Why* would Mitch shoot—"

"A thousand reasons," Porky cut in. "They got into an argument about somethin', mebbe. The ol' man told him off. Mitch got sore and backshot him. What difference does it make, why? He did it, that's all."

All of a sudden Porky Rayburn exploded into action. His hand rammed out, struck Dawson's chest, shoved him staggering backward against the bar. Mitch Maclane squealed like a chew-eared cat as Porky lunged toward him. Cornered against the bar, Mitch flailed out with his fists. But Porky Rayburn was too big for him. He closed and wrapped his beefy arms around the smaller man in a bear hug, started wrestling him toward the exit.

At the same time Ben Dawson bounced away from the bar. He came at Porky Rayburn from the left, reached and hooked his palm under Porky's thick chins, yanked backward. Porky's grip on Mitch Mac-lane was broken. He spun around, with surprising agility for such a big and awkward-looking man, twisted free from Ben's grip. His hand slammed down to the butt of his .44, whipped it clean of its leather. Just as he squeezed the trigger, Guthridge stepped in, slammed Porky's gun arm to one side. The .44 larruped a blast of sound echoing back and forth from the walls of the saloon but the slug slammed harmlessly into the oak ceiling. Porky gave a gasp of pain as Dawson kicked the gun out of his hand.

"Simmer down, you big galoot," Dawson told him. "You're loco drunk. Sober you'd know better than to draw on me. You—" Dawson broke off as the big man wrenched free, clumsily tossed a wild haymaker that glanced off the side of Dawson's head as he ducked just in time. Still the force of the blow made his ears ring.

"Sorry, Porky," Dawson said. "Reckon there's only one kind of talk you understand at a time like this."

He stepped inside another wild punch and hooked his right fist in a short jolting blow, right into the soft spot between Porky's chest and his belly. Porky let out a great whoosh of breath and doubled over. Dawson straightened him up with a left uppercut. The big man stood teetering, his eyes glazed. Somehow, though, his long, spindly legs still held him up. Like an automaton, he started to throw another punch at Dawson. The marshal had no choice. He hit Porky flush to the hinge of the jaw. Porky took two staggering steps and his long, beanpole legs bent. He went forward on his face into the sawdust of the floor.

Dawson stooped and got a firm grip on the back of Porky's collar, dragged him toward the batwings. With his other hand he eased one of his silver-mounted sixes from its holster. He skidded Porky Rayburn out onto the veranda of the saloon and then bounced him off into the dust of the street, right at the feet of three of the other Rayburn boys who'd come running, with a couple of their friends, at the sound of the shot.

"Seems Porky had a mite too much of that hogswill you men been guzzlin'," Dawson told them. "He doesn't feel too well. Take him home."

A murmur arose from the group of anger-flushed, mean-faced men facing Dawson. For a second it looked as though they were going to break and rush the lawman. But then, lined and lanky Linc Rayburn, the oldest brother, bent and started to pick up the unconscious Porky. He said sullenly to his companions: "One o' you rannies give me a hand, here."

Then as they lifted Porky's limp figure between two of them, Linc Rayburn once more turned his blood-shot, angry eyes toward Dawson. He spat. He said so quietly Dawson could hardly hear him: "Porky was your wife's first cousin, Ben. Yours, by marriage. You whipped him just because he tried to do what any decent man would. You took up for a mangy backshootin' little coyote what never was worth a dam' and turned against your own kinfolk by marriage. Well, you've called it now, Marshal. You've showed your hand, showed who you're sidin'. We won't forget that. When this is settled, you'll get yours along with the Maclanes and anyone else who sides em. Is that clear?" He spat again, this time onto the veranda at Dawson's feet.

Dawson started to explain to them that he hadn't

taken sides, that he'd just done his duty. But another look at all the hate-filled, unreasoning faces turned toward him showed that he'd be wasting his breath. He didn't answer. He watched them move off. He heard Linc Rayburn call back:

"And this thing is bigger than any lone star-toter, Dawson. You want to stay whole-skinned, keep clear of it."

Sighing, shaking his head, Ben Dawson turned back toward the Golden Glow. He felt a little sick, a little helpless. He tried to hooraw himself that this thing wouldn't amount to much, that it would peter out, if he held to a firm stand. But he didn't make much headway with that train of thought.

Chapter Three

BACK INSIDE the Golden Glow, Dawson was just telling Mayor Guthridge that perhaps he'd better lock the still white and trembling Mitch Maclane in the town pokey for the night to be on the safe side, when the first shot sounded from out on the street. The sound was flat, a sharp whipcrack of noise that sounded almost unreal, especially against the dead silence that followed it.

Early Hines said: "Gawd-a-mighty, here it comes, now!"

As though punctuating his words, a whole fusillade

of shots sounded, one on top of the other, some of them blending into one solid blast of sound. Ben Dawson dug his toes into the floor, sprinted toward the batwings. He hurtled through them, hearing Mark Guthridge pounding behind him. He threw himself flat on the rough planking of the veranda, at the same time clearing his twin sixes. He squinted through a pall of dust that hung over the street in the direction from which had come the sound of shooting.

He saw a half block away, a freighter's wagon shoved over onto its side, one wheel still spinning. Crouched behind this makeshift barricade, was a group of men. They were shooting toward another group of men huddled in doorways along the street, about thirty yards away. Even as Dawson watched, he saw one of the men in a doorway tumble out, sprawl, straddle-legged in the dirt of the street. He saw, too, that one of the men behind the wagon was lying on his back in the crazy, twisted position that only the dead can fall into.

Dawson and Guthridge rolled toward the building, eased up to their feet, backs flat against the pine board front of the saloon. They sidled along, reached the end of the veranda, jumped off and ran, hunched over, toward the protection of the next building. As they did this, one of the men, whom Dawson recognized as red-headed Marsh Rayburn, crouched behind the overturned wagon, whipped around and saw them. Marsh shouted:

"Watch it, boys! It's Dawson and the Mayor slip-pin' up on our backs. Dawson's even taken on the ways of the Maclanes. Don't show him any respect, boys! Slam lead at the traitorous son!"

Two of the others whipped around. Gunflame lanced yellow-orange tongues into the sun glare. Daw-

son and Guthridge pressed against the boards of the building next to the saloon. Dawson said, forcing himself to control a rising tide of temper: "Don't shoot back if we can avoid it. I'm going to try and talk 'em out of it after this volley."

"They don't much seem to be in a talkin' mood," Guthridge answered, grimly.

A slug picked splinters from the wood a few feet from Guthridge's head. Another one clanged against a metal hitching post ring, ricocheted off in a shrieking whine. Guthridge hardly winced. He showed no sign of panic and Dawson's admiration for the man increased not only because he had volunteered to side him in this tight, but also because of the calm, cool way in which he was doing it.

As the Rayburn's fire ceased for a moment, Dawson bawled: "Hold on! We're not joinin' this hot lead clambake. We only aim to make a little palaver with both sides, You hear?"

The answer was another slam of gun-sound from the group huddled behind the overturned wagon. A voice called: "We don't savvy any talk from turn-tails!"

Dawson swore as the Rayburns opened fire again. Despair filled him. He let go with two answering shots at the same time that Guthridge triggered toward the opposing group. Dawson didn't shoot to kill. He slung one slug into the dirt a few feet behind the wagon-protected group, let the other one fly over their heads. But just as Guthridge's Colt barked from beside him, Dawson saw one of the Rayburns fall.

"You shouldn't have done that, Mark!" Dawson said. "Now we'll never talk 'em out of this."

"I doubt you could, anyhow," Guthridge answered. "And, hell, that one I plugged was drawing a dead

bead on you! If they'd gunned you down the town would really have been in a mess."

Now the Maclane group of gunmen, taking advantage of the distraction, ran several doorways nearer the Rayburns, at the same time letting fire a volley of shots from their guns.

Dawson said, quickly: "Look, Mark, you go round-up a few deputies. We've *got* to stop this. Meanwhile I've got an idea that might work." Leaving Guthridge, Dawson skittered around the corner of the building to an alley. There was a drainpipe leading to the roof of the building. Shelling his guns, he used the metal clamps that held the pipe to the side of the building as footholds and shinnied up to the roof. He ran across the roof to the far edge and leaped several feet across another narrow alley to the roof of the next building. Racing to the far end of that one and peering out around the edge of the false front, he saw that he was practically midway between the two groups engaged in the shoot-out on the street below. He saw that the wagon gave the Rayburns no protection from anyone shooting from up here. At the same time, most of the Maclane clan were huddled in doorways at the opposite side of the street. They had no protection from Dawson's vantage point either.

At the next lull in the gunfire on the street, Dawson shouted down: "This time I *mean* hold your fire. All of you! Rayburns *and* Maclanes! First man thinks I'm hoorawin' you and cuts loose, will be pickin' lead out of his own brisket."

There was no sound from the street for a few moments. Then Linc Rayburn's rasping voice said: "There he is, boys. Peekin' out up there from behind the false front over the leathersmith's shop. Pick him off. We start takin' orders from Dawson at this stage,

we're a bunch o' lily-livered gowampuses who *deserve* to have Maclanes walkin' all over 'em."

With that, Linc Rayburn rested his gun arm on the edge of the wagon and cut a shot toward the roof of the building. Dawson saw the spit of flame and felt slivers of wood fly into his face as he ducked back, too late. His heart started ramming like a fist against the cage of his ribs. Sweat ran down the insides of his arms at the closeness of the shot.

"They're beyond all reason," he whispered. "I ain't goin' to get anywhere jawin' at them."

He leaned out around the edge of the false front again and thumbed the hammer of one of the six-guns. He felt the butt buck against his fist and heard a roar of rage and pain as Linc Rayburn flung his arm up and sent his own weapon flying, then grabbed at the wounded arm with the other hand.

"You know I can shoot a little!" Dawson shouted down. "The next one'll give you an extra eye right between the regular two, Linc. That's the last warning. From up here I can pick any or all of you off, one at a time. You haven't got the chance of a skeeter in Iceland of wingin' me up here behind this front. You ready to listen to sense?"

Hardly before Dawson had finished speaking, one of the Maclane bunch took advantage of the fact that the Rayburns were all watching the marshal, to step out and take a clean shot toward the wagon. While the echo of that shot was still dying, Dawson whipped his gun in that direction, hammered again. The gun fell from grizzled old Dud Maclane's hand. He looked up in surprise, then flung himself back into his doorway shelter.

"My order goes for you Maclanes, too," Dawson shouted down. "Now, listen. Either this fool feud ends

right here and now and we all get together and talk the thing over like civilized men, or I cut in a full hand and start blasting at both sides. I'll give both groups until the count of ten to toss your hardware out in a pile in the center of the street."

He started counting, slowly. He reached ten and there was nothing but deadly quiet from the street below. Not a gun had been tossed out as he'd ordered. What was the matter with the fools, Dawson wondered. He didn't want to kill any of them. He took a deep breath and cut loose with the last two shots in the weapon he'd been using. He placed them carefully, one on each side of the doorway in which old Dud Maclane huddled.

"Dud," he hollered. "Tell your bunch to start it off. The Rayburns think I'm sidin' y'all. Mebbe if your boys start the disarmament, they'll follow suit."

"You heard him," Dud Maclane told his sons. "Toss out your hawglaigs, young'uns!"

Two Colts glinted briefly in the bright sunlight, then fell onto the center of the street, spurting up dust. Others followed. Dawson counted them as they were flung out and compared that count with the number of men in both groups. "All right," he said. "Now each group back off up to your own end of the street, far apart. Then I'll come down and we'll settle this shindig man-style."

He watched both groups back off toward their respective ends of the street. When he was certain neither side was going to make a break for the weapon pile, Dawson climbed around the edge of the false front, shinnied down it onto the roof of the building's front veranda. From there he dropped to the street. He turned in the direction the Rayburns had gone and saw that not one of them was in sight. He pushed

his fingers into the thick soft waves of his white hair and squinched his face into a puzzled frown. Then a bay horse came cakewalking out from between two buildings, wheeled and broke into a gallop along the street toward the north end of town. Four other riders next emerged from the alley where they'd tethered their mounts and headed after the first. The Rayburns had gathered up their dead and were gone. They weren't having any peace talk.

Dawson stood there, watching the horsemen disappear in rolling clouds of dust at the edge of town where Main Street widened to the trail north into Rainbow Valley. He turned slowly, his heart heavy, and started back toward the Maclane group, huddled together a block away, looking back toward him. He waved his arm in a beckoning motion, then started up the street to meet them, half way.

There were four Maclane brothers, including young Mitch who'd slipped out the back way from the Golden Glow to join his own group once the shooting started. There was old Dud Maclane, head of the clan and several close friends of the family. Dawson saw that Leroy, the oldest son, a handsome, tow-headed man in his middle thirties, was pressing a bloodied wad of rag against a wound in his right shoulder. His boyishly good looking features were drawn with pain, his mouth white-ringed. One of the others had a dried trickle of blood on his cheek where a bullet had grazed him. Dawson turned a small prayer over in his mind that the toll hadn't been heavier in this first outbreak of hostilities. But it was not too much consolation. Two of the Rayburns had been carried off dead or at least badly wounded. That would make them doubly determined to wreak bloody revenge on their enemies.

Dud Maclane, a stooped, angular old mossyback, with fiery blue eyes glowing out of a face that was a delta of leathery wrinkles, shook his short-cropped grizzled gray head and grinned crookedly at Dawson. "Marshal, I got to hand it to you," he said. "You sure made it look good when you fanned down on me, bracketted me in that doorway. Almost too damned good. I'll be pickin' wood splinters out of my hide for a week. Anyhow, it worked. Thanks for bustin' up that shindig when you saw we were outnumbered and out-maneuvered, with the Rayburns nestled in behind that wagon barricade. What I can't figger, though, is why you're sidin' us, when by all rights, what with the Rayburns bein' your kinfolk by marriage—"

"Whoa!" Dawson interrupted. "You're hittin' the wrong trail there, Dud. Let's get this straight, pronto. I'm not allied with either side. I'm a law officer and the law has to stick plumb in the middle in a ruckus like this, regardless of sentiment or family ties. You might even say I'm *against both* sides—until this feud is settled, or as long as either side insists on settlin' it with powder and lead instead of smart thinking."

"Haw!" Saul Barlo, one of the M-Bar-M's top hands snorted. "Not meanin' any disrespect, Marshal, but you ought to know your own wife's folks better'n that. Them mule-headed Rayburns don't know anything but Colt-talk in a hassle like this. You're wasting your time. Either join one side or the other to try and help get it over with, pronto. Or else stay out, altogether. From what happened this afternoon, I'd say your best bet would be to tie in with us. The Rayburns already figure you've done that, anyway."

"Thanks for the advice," Dawson told him. "But I'm stayin' neutral. You gents clear out o' town. Keep

to your own spread. I reckon the Rayburns'll probably do the same thing for a day or two, sort of waitin' for you-all to make the first move."

With that the Marshal turned and walked away. He saw Mayor Guthridge, with a few of the town's citizens, coming toward him. He signalled with a wave of one arm that the trouble was temporarily over and moved to meet the group. He told them what had happened, how his rooftop trick had stopped the gunplay. After a little more talk, the group split up and went their separate ways.

The Harmony House had been newly repainted. This Saturday night its facade glittered in the light of an early moon in almost startling contrast to the dull scabrous fronts of the other buildings, as Ben Dawson turned into the entrance. The reddish glow from the pine knot torches on each side of the doorway cast the lines of Dawson's face into bold relief for a moment.

Inside the small, lamp-lit lobby, a toothless oldster with cadaverous cheeks and long hanks of greasy, stringy gray hair framing them, looked up from behind the desk set between two potted imitation palms. His rheumy old eyes blinked at Dawson.

"Evening, Munsinger. Where's the boss?"

The old clerk ducked his head toward the rear of the building. "Mr. Guthridge is back in his office, Marshal."

Dawson walked toward the rear doorway, started down a short hall, at the end of which a light glowed from a side room which he knew to be the hotel owner's office. Halfway toward it, Dawson heard the sound of angry voices. A few feet from the lighted office doorway, he heard a drunkenly blurred voice say, quavering with temper:

"—an' I say the job was dam' well done an' worth a sight more than the measly hunnerd you forked out for it, Guthridge. Now you gonna loosen up with another hunnerd for a bonus, or—"

"And I say you're a drunken fooll Now get out, Cato, before I throw you out. The deal is closed!"

"But that money's gone, I tol' you, Guthridgel!" The drunken voice raised higher in anger. "An' don't go talkin' tough to me, neither, mister, nor so dam' high an' mighty. I've gunned down men bigger, richer and tougher'n you, in my time. Tha's no lie and you know it. Now, you goin' to open your safe and get me that other hunnerd or do I—"

There was the sound of a chair scraping the floor as though pushed back as someone arose suddenly in anger. "You're gettin' out, Cato. You might have been a dangerous gunny one time, with a lot of notches on your butt but that was years ago. Now you're nothin' but the town drunk. Who do you think you're threatening?"

"Why, you duded-up, oily-mouthed bustard, nobody calls Al Cato names and cheats him out of what's his rightful duel!" Cato's voice thinned hysterically.

Dawson sensed that the ex-gunslick had reached the breaking point in the argument. He lunged into the office, burst in just as Cato was fumbling a .45 from its holster. Immediately Dawson saw that Cato's drunken reflexes were much too slow. Mark Guthridge already had his Colt drawn and aimed at the other man. Dawson didn't waste time with words. He rammed his shoulder into Cato's, knocked him to the floor and sprawled on top of him, just as the Colt thundered and slammed lead into the doorway Dawson had just entered.

Scrabbling to his feet, Dawson said: "What's this

all about, Mark?" Behind the fancily carved mahogany desk, with the china-shaded oil lamp upon it, Mark Guthridge shook his handsome head and tossed the still smoking Colt into a desk drawer.

Guthridge said, softly. "You managed to get here just in the nick of time, Ben. This drunken fool was going to kill me. I fired only in self-defense."

Guthridge raised his silky brows. "Cato came in here drunk and tried to force more money from me for some work he'd already been paid for. When I refused him, he got ornery about it. Of course, I won't press charges against him. Drunk as he was, he probably didn't realize what he was doing. Isn't that the fact of it, Cato?"

Al Cato dragged himself up from the floor and stood there, swaying. He was tall and gaunt as a timber wolf. His sharply hooked nose and lips drawn back over yellowed teeth and a shock of shaggy gray hair tangled in a thick mass at the nape of his neck added to his wolf-like appearance. Long, arthritic-looking fingers caressed the notched and worn-shiney wooden butt of his .45. He licked his lips. He shivered. The stink of his soiled and ragged clothes filled the room. For a moment Cato looked as though he still might draw on Guthridge as the two men stood, eyes locked fiercely. Dawson said:

"Easy, Cato, this ain't Dodge or Fulson City or Hellwater. We don't put up with no killin's here. You know that. Get your hand off that lead-tosser! Fast!"

Slowly the other man's hand eased away from the gun butt. He wiped it up and down his thighs, the long, bent and grimy fingers clawed, still.

For a long instant the drunken one-time badman

held his breath. Then he let it out and his eyes broke before Guthridge's steady gaze. He tried to draw himself erect, made a pitifully ludicrous attempt to look dignified as he swung around on his heels and staggered out of the office. Guthridge sat back down in the big swivel chair behind his desk.

"Now that's over, what's on your mind, Marshal?" Guthridge reached into a cabinet next to the desk, drew out a fancy glass decanter. "How about a little something imported from the East, not like that liquid lightning Early Hines serves? We'll drink a toast to you for saving me from the gun of that rough, tough and nasty killer, Al Cato." Guthridge grinned mockingly.

"Thanks," Dawson told him. "Some other time. I had something I wanted to discuss with you, but it had better wait until later. Reckon I'd best go after Cato and make sure he doesn't start any more trouble or try and hang around the hotel."

Dawson left the office, then. As he moved along the hall toward the lobby he suddenly heard the sound of wild whooping and hollering from the street outside, accompanied by scattered shots blasting the silence of the night. He tried to tell himself that it was just some drunken cowpokes raising a little Saturday night hell, that it had nothing to do with the feud. But in his heart, Dawson knew different. And he was scared, sick-scared.

In the lobby, Dawson found old man Munsinger, the hotel clerk, peering out from the doorway onto the street. "What's goin' on out there?" Dawson demanded.

"Hen-heh-heh!" the oldster chuckled. "Some of the hands from the Maclane spread and some o' the Ray-

burn rannies havin' themselves a little disagreement, I reckon." Pushing past the old man, Dawson moved out onto the street.

Chapter Four

THEY WERE ALL on horseback. Two groups of them, about a dozen on each side with half a block of flame-licked blackness separating them. The nearest bunch were retreating this way. They were milling in front of the hotel on bucking, rearing mounts, highlighted weirdly in the reddish glow of the flares in front of the hotel. Dawson glimpsed the M-Bar-M brand on a big bay, recognized one of the Maclane hands forking the animal.

They were a wild and fierce looking bunch, there in the hell-red glow of the torches. The flickering light distorted their gape-mouthed, howling faces. Nearly all of them were war-whooping in savage exultation as they slammed wild and reckless volleys of shots back toward the other gang, down the street. As Dawson watched, one of the Maclane pokes had his JB shot right off of his head. He was revealed bald as a billiard ball, his naked pate gleaming in the fire glow. Several of the others had bloodied shirt-sleeves where they'd been winged by flying lead. A couple of them had blood-smearred cheeks and forehead.

"There must be some truth in the sayin' that the

Good Lord protects idiots and drunks!" Dawson thought, awed. "That other bunch must be drunker'n this one, not to do anymore damage than that with all this wild shootin'. But it still ain't too late for somebody to get killed if it doesn't soon stop."

He saw one of the horsemen in front of the hotel, a big, bull-necked waddie with a pushed-in face like an English bulldog, pause in his shooting and with his left hand raise a whiskey jug. Dawson recognized him as Artie Dressler, the M-Bar-M wrangler. He watched Dressler with his thumb through the tiny handle of the jug, raise the earthenware container, balanced on the crook of his elbow and put the lip to his mouth. He gurgled down liquor as calmly and unconcernedly as though he wasn't astride a skittering mare, with hot lead sizzling past him on all sides. Dawson figured that Dressler was probably the leader of this bunch, the man to work on.

The marshal held his sixes hip high. He fired one of them and the sound of the shot was lost in the general barrage of gunfire shattering the night quiet. But he saw the effects of it. He saw the whiskey jug in Artie Dressler's hand disintegrate, leaving the bewildered man holding only the small handle still hooked over his thumb. The contents of the bottle was splashed over his face and shirt-front. Then Dawson blasted with the other weapon and knocked the gun out of Dressler's other hand.

The big, bulldog-faced wrangler wheeled his horse around in the direction of this new-angled gunfire, his mouth gaping in surprise, his eyes wide with fear and astonishment. Dawson raised his right gun from his hip, took deliberate aim at Dressler's big bulk jutting up from the mare's saddle. But he held fire. It didn't take long for Dressler, now unarmed and

shocked somewhat sober, to figure the situation. He swooped low and sideways onto the opposite side of his mount from Dawson. He bellowed: "Break it up, you raw-blood-drinkin' rannyhans! The law's got us hemmed in. Hit hell-for-leather out o' town!" With that, he swung the mare around, spurred her into a gallop, toward the opposite end of Main Street, wildly waving to the others to follow him.

Dawson watched the rest of the Maclane bunch mill around in confusion for a few moments and then one by one, with a few parting shots at the opposition, wheel and lope off after their leader.

The other group up the street, quieted, suddenly. Their gunfire tapered off as they were caught by surprise with the sudden retreat of the M-Bar-M bunch. Then their massed hoofbeats drummed through the dust to the hard packed earth of the street as they took off in pursuit. Knowing that the gunfight would continue outside the town limits, with eventual heavy death tolls, Dawson acted with swift desperation. He strode right out in front of the whipping, spurring, fast-riding bunch of horsemen.

He stood there, while bunched as tightly together as race horses rounding a turn, bumping, saddle trap-pings scraping and creaking together, they rode down on him. Dawson felt his shirt suddenly stuck to his back with pouring sweat. He felt his scalp tighten and crawl. In that moment he was sicker with fear than any other time in his life. He stood there cursing himself for a stubborn, meddling fool, risking his neck in a foolhardy attempt to preserve a law and order that was obviously no longer wanted, had never really been wanted, by these liquor-muddled range riders. In that moment the whole situation seemed

symbolized—himself standing suicidally alone against overwhelming massed brute force.

Yet even as he decided to abandon this foolish gesture, to break and run for the safety of the boardwalk, he saw the bunch of horsemen suddenly fan out. He knew then that they'd be upon him before he could scramble to safety. There was only one thing left. He had to stop them. He dropped into a gunfighting crouch. His silver sixes sprayed flame and whistling lead in a fanning arc just over the heads of the mounted bunch bearing down on him. He called the shots close, saw a Stetson fly off. Another rider ducked nervously. Then the miracle happened. As though at some unseen signal, the riders started to rein in, just in time to draw their mounts to rearing, wheeling halts, on both sides of him. One of them unforked from the saddle and walked toward Dawson.

Wally Drake, the Lightning R cook, had worked so long for the Rayburns he was almost considered one of the family. He was a little banty rooster of a man with legs bowed as croquet wickets. He had a long, pointed nose and an underthrust jaw you could hang a lantern on. He came veering drunkenly toward Dawson, whipping off his Stetson and banging it against his short legs angrily.

"Gardamm me for a whangdoodled biscuit burner, Marshal, if you ain't either the world's biggest fool or the bravest man livin'. Why do you want to give those M-Bar-M gophers a chance to get away from us? We were fixin' to salivate every livin' son of 'em for stayin' signed on with a cowardly back-shootin' outfit like the Maclanes. Marshal, didn't you know we could have rid you down, squashed you flatter'n a chuck-hole bug and nobody could've put us to blame?"

"Sure," Dawson said. He was trembling a little with

reaction from his close call. He managed a sheepish grin. "Why didn't you?"

Drake knuckled his sprouty blond head and peered along his pointy nose at Dawson. His bloodshot eyes were quizzical. "Dammed if I know, exactly," he mused. "Should have. It—it was, now that I think on it, a loco thing. All of us seemed to decide to haul back and try to stop in time, all at once. Weren't that blast of shots you tried to shave our skulls with, altogether, either. Reckon it was just that we got so used to takin' orders from you when trouble starts, the past couple years, we just sort of acted without thinkin', or somethin'. Only way I know to figger it."

"That's as good a reason as any. What was all the shootin' about? Who started it?"

"Aw, you know what it was about, Marshal," Joel Humbert, another Lightning R rider put in.

Dawson let his eyes play over the group. He saw three faces in the gang of ten men, who had all dismounted, that weren't Rayburn hands. To any but the very close observer, they looked pretty much like the others. Yet even if he hadn't known who they were, Dawson would have spotted them right off. He knew the breed. There was a certain hostile shiftiness about the eyes, a bitter cynical twist to the mouths that put the stamp of the owlhoot upon them.

Dawson said to Drake: "Not very fussy about who you pick up to side you on a shootin' party, are you, Wally? What are Devlin, Ives and MacQueen doin' with your boys? They been hired on at the Lightning R? Thought they're Frenchy LaFarges' gunslicks?"

Drake answered: "But they're friends of ours, sympathizers. They don't like the Maclane bunch any better'n we do. And we're goin' to need all the gun-

help we can get. Ain't goin' to be healthy to stay neutral in this man's town the next week or so, Marshal. You know that."

The big man named MacQueen stepped forward. He was rawboned and rangy-shouldered but with the narrow hips and lean middle of a young boy. His hair and the thick beard stubble on his wedge-shaped face was Indian black. In startling contrast his eyes were a very pale, blurry blue, under thick and tangled black lashes and heavy lids that gave him the appearance of a sleepy but dangerous snake. He cocked a pair of big-knuckled fists on his hips.

"What's the call for that insultin' tone you used in referrin' to me and my sidekicks, Marshal? A badge o' law don't give you no right to belittle innocent people."

"You and the rest of LaFarge's bunch are about as innocent as Gila monsters," Dawson said.

MacQueen asked surlily: "You just pure prejudiced against Frenchy and the rest of us because we don't kowtow to you and tip our hats every time we pass you on the street? Or you got some law-breakin' charge against us, Marshal?"

Ives and Devlin, smaller but just as vicious looking men, sidled up beside MacQueen, taking courage from his outspoken defiance of Dawson. "Yeah," Ives added. "We done anything wrong, Marshal? If so, why not toss us in the pokey?"

"No," Dawson admitted. "You've all been playin' it real snug since you've been in town." His eyes moved from one to the other of the group, levelly. They finally came to rest on MacQueen. He stabbed out a forefinger to punctuate his remarks. "But get this straight and tell LaFarge the same thing goes for him, too. Our hoosegow is for local residents. Any

outside gunnies who stir up trouble usually leave town with hot lead buzzin' 'round their tails. Or else settle down here as permanent residents—in the local Boothill."

He turned to Wally Drake. "When you get back to your spread, tell Linc Rayburn that any sympathies I might have had in this family war was with your bunch, even though I might not have acted on 'em. But if Linc accepts the help of LaFarge and his gang y'all not only lose my natural sympathies but my respect as well."

One of the other Lightning R waddies, a moon-faced man called Joey Easter, stepped forward. He said: "Mebbe the Marshal's right, Wally. We don't know too much about this LaFarge bunch. We don't hardly need their help. Let's swivel around and head home for the Lightnin' R. Feud or no feud, we all got a day o' work to be done tomorrow."

Wally Drake thought about that for a moment. He fingered a mole on his lantern jaw. Finally he said: "Yuh, let's go, boys." He wheeled and forked onto his roan colt, called back to MacQueen: "Much obliged for chimin' in with us, help put those M-Bar-M bozos on the run, anyhow, Mac. See you around."

MacQueen hitched up his levis, spat disdainfully and jerked his head at his two cronies. "That does it. Ives, Devlin, let's git before we're expected to grovel in the dust in front of that law badge, just like the rest of 'em." The three of them swung into their saddles, heeled their mounts around and headed back up-street toward the Golden Glow.

Wally Drake poked out his lower lip. His eyes were blazing. He started to turn after the departing riders. "Why those hired-gun galoots! Was he insinuating that we're yaller, or—"

Dawson reached out and grabbed the Lightning R cook's arm. "Hold it, Wally. You ain't goin' to gain nothin' by startin' up trouble with those hombres." Dawson let his gaze move quickly over the rest of the Rayburn men. He saw that they'd all been drinking, but none of them seemed in too bad a condition. He wondered, now, why their shooting at the Maclane bunch hadn't been more accurate, why there hadn't been any casualties.

"Tell me, Wally," he said, partly to detract the other man's attention from MacQueen's parting insult. "How come you boys didn't show much in the way of real serious gun-slamming in that set-to with the Maclane gang? Only one of 'em was wounded as I could see and a couple nicked a little."

Drake widened his eyes in surprise. "Must've been MacQueen and the other two did that. We weren't *tryin'* to kill 'em, Marshal, and that's the honest truth. Not this time. All *we* wanted was to scare 'em a little, chouse 'em out o' town."

"Sure 'nough," Joey Easter affirmed. "Loco and likered-up as they were, we knew they couldn't hardly hit the side of a mountain, let alone anyone jouncin' around on a movin' critter. We just tore into 'em to have a little fun, stir up some excitement. Wally was only hoorawin' you, earlier when he said we was set on gunnin' the Maclane bunch down."

"That's right," Drake said. "We wouldn't have even started any trouble at all, except MacQueen and his friends sort o' goaded us into it."

"I see," Dawson said. He reached out and squeezed Wally Drake's upper arm in a friendly fashion. "I'm glad to hear you boys haven't really got yourselves all heated up over this feud, yet."

"We aim to stay clear of it as long as we can,

Marshal," Drake said. "Course if the M-Bar-M starts any trouble on our own range, we'll rightly have to pitch in and help the Rayburns."

"I'm hopin' I can get the thing in control before that happens," Dawson told him. "Now, hit on home, boys. Try and stay out o' town for the next day or two. That'll be the safest bet." He watched the Rayburn bunch all spring into their saddles, wheel and ride off toward the other end of Main Street and the trail home.

Ambling on toward the Golden Glow, Dawson wondered if it would do any good to look up LaFarge and try to talk him, or scare him, into keeping himself and his hirelings clear of the feud. He didn't much think so. Dawson had made inquiries about the big, black-bearded man when he and his gang had first rode into town, put up at the Harmony House. There had been some rumors about the strangers but that was all. Dawson had heard that LaFarge was part Mexican, part Piute and part French. He was supposed to have a bad rep four or five hundred miles north, was suspected of pulling a couple of stage robberies and doing some killing for hire. But how much of that was talk, how much truth, Dawson hadn't been able to ascertain.

LaFarge's appearance, the look in his eyes, the way he wore his Colts and the cut of his holsters, indicated to Dawson though that there might be considerable truth behind all that talk. However, in the week they'd been in town, LaFarge, himself, had kept pretty much to the hotel. His men had been a little wild and quarrelsome but had managed to keep out of any real trouble. There hadn't been much that Dawson could do about them. Their reason for being in town at all, though, puzzled him. It frightened

him, too. If they hired out to either side in this feud. . . .

Reaching the Golden Glow, Dawson swung up onto the veranda. The loud talk, drunken laughter and the clanking of a tinny-sounding piano washed over him in waves of raucous sound. He pushed through the batwings into the coal-oil lighted interior. With the Maclane and Rayburn groups cleared out, the place wasn't as crowded as it might have been. About a dozen men ranged along the bar. Dawson stood just inside, his eyes flicking swiftly along the hips of the drinkers. He saw that MacQueen, Ives and Devlin were up at the far end of the bar. He saw, too, that they were the only ones breaking the law, the only ones in the place toting guns. The rest had obeyed the rules and had checked their hardware with old Cootie James, the swamper, at his table to the right of the entrance.

Early Hines looked up and saw Dawson standing there. He jerked his head nervously and spun down toward the far end of the bar. He picked up the bottle and three glasses standing in front of the La-Farge trio.

Against the blast of noise in the place, Dawson couldn't hear what was being said. But he saw MacQueen and the others lean over the bar, angrily and drop their hands to the guns at their hips. Dawson strode toward them. Up close behind them, he said: "You heard what Hines said. He's only observin' the law. A little late but better than never, I suppose." He threw a crooked grin at the frightened looking saloon owner. "Nobody gets served in here while they're luggin' hardware. Shuck it and leave it over there with Cootie and you can stand here 'til you drop, get blind as cave bats."

For a moment after they whirled around, MacQueen, Ives and Devlin looked as though they were going to argue the matter. They stood tensed and holding their breaths. Veins strained in their temples. Ives, a small, amber-eyed man with a mouth like a sewed wound, looked as though he'd explode into action any minute. A tic began jumping at the end of a short but heavily welted scar at the corner of one eye. Then his lips popped wetly open. He blurted, his voice breaking: "I'm tellin' you, Mac, I can't take any more o' this tin star town hero—"

MacQueen stopped him by jerking his elbow hard and sharp into the pit of Ives' gut. Ives bent way over, his face turning green. MacQueen hooked his arm through Ives'. "Devlin," he said. "Let's mosey on out. The wind changed and blew a bad stink into the place."

When Devlin opened his mouth to protest, MacQueen said, quickly: "Shut up, you fool and let's get Ives out o' here before he tries to start trouble. It ain't time for that, yet."

Flashing venomous glances at Dawson, MacQueen and Devlin lugged Ives, still bent over and sick to his stomach, toward the batwings. Dawson bellied in to the bar. He moved his head in a beckoning motion to Early Hines, who'd retreated to the other end, was busily engrossed in dusting off bottles on the backbar shelf. When Hines hurried down, Dawson asked him:

"Where's their nursemaid? He in here, earlier?"

"I—that is—who?" Early Hines muttered. His eyes avoided Dawson's.

"Don't go coy on me, Early," Dawson told him. "You know who I mean. Frenchy LaFarge. I want to know if he was in here earlier when the trouble started between the Maclane and Rayburn hands."

"Oh," Hines said, gulping. "No. Ain't seen him all evenin', Marshal. Why? Might find him down to the hotel. He don't come in here much."

Dawson turned away from the bar and started toward the exit.

From the saloon, Dawson went back to Harmony House to tell Mayor Guthridge what had happened, about the LaFarge gunnies showing signs of being interested in the feud and to ask his help about that. He needed that help badly. This thing was getting too big for him. He suddenly felt very small and alone.

The big man, resplendent in an Indian red silk shirt, toyed with a letter opener on his desk. His intelligent eyes flickered with interest and concern as Dawson told him about MacQueen, Devlin and Ives. Dawson finished, saying: "Since they've been in the hotel, has there been any clue as to why they've been hanging around Piney Flats, Mark? They're up to something. We've got to figure it. We've *got* to stop this feud. I don't see what they can possibly expect to gain out of this feud, though, unless they hope to be hired as professional gunmen by one side or the other."

Guthridge took a cigar from a humidor on the desk. He clipped off the end with his sharp, strong teeth. He stuck the cigar in his mouth, poked the end into the chimney of the lamp until it was lit. He exhaled the rich smelling blue smoke, studied the glowing coal on the end of the cigar.

"I dunno, Ben," he said, thoughtfully. "Like you say, them chimin' into the feud like that *is* bad. I hope you understand that I don't *like* havin' tnat breed of guests in my hotel, but I don't have much choice. Their money's as good as anyone else's. And

they paid a week in advance. You've got to understand that I'm a business man, Ben, as well as the mayor. Of course, if it comes down to a choice of making money at the expense of the town's good, that's a different thing."

"I'm not blaming you for having the gang in your hotel," Dawson told him, tiredly. "It's just that—"

"Tell you what I'll do," Guthridge cut in. "Their takin' part in the feud even though only on the mild scale you mentioned, puts a different color on things. As soon as their week's up, I'll put 'em out. I'll refuse to let 'em have rooms again. How'll that be?"

Dawson stuck out his hand. "Thanks, Mark," he said. "That'll help. Now all we got to pray for is that neither the Rayburns or Maclanes hire 'em before that. Once you block 'em out of the hotel, I'll find some excuse to run 'em out of town."

He left Harmony House, then and went back to his office. He felt a little better. With a man like Mark Guthridge on his side, Dawson felt stronger, more confident. And he had the notion that Guthridge, himself, still wasn't too fully aware of the threat to the town that this feud, once busted wide open, could be. He thought that once Guthridge realized that, he'd get even more solidly behind the Marshal. After all, Guthridge as much, if not more than anybody else, had everything at stake in preserving law and order in the Flats. If this feud opened up the town to gun-rule again, it was honest business men like Guthridge who would suffer most.

At his office, Dawson busied himself cleaning out some old files. Outside, everything seemed normal, now. There was the usual Saturday night boisterousness on the street, now and then, but no gun-play. Dawson said a little prayer that things would stay

this way. If he could get through tonight without any further trouble, the feud had a good chance of cooling off. Tomorrow was Sunday. The town would be quiet. The odds against any trouble starting on that day were heavy. Ranch folks were a rough, tough and salty lot but they had their respect for the Sabbath.

After awhile, Dawson sat down at his desk. Several times he thought about going home. He didn't like to be away from his ranch overnight, if he could help it. He liked to be there to enjoy a last few moments of horse play with Laurie before she went to bed, to sit with her while she said her prayers. He knew that she probably missed him tonight, had most likely pouted a little when it got late and he still wasn't back. She knew that sometimes he had to stay overnight in town. Especially if any trouble was brewing. But she never liked the idea. And this was the first time, now, in months, that it had happened. He hoped that she wasn't too worried about him.

Slowly, the after-effects of this exhausting day began to take their toll. Dawson's head began to droop and his eyes got heavy. Several times he rested his head down on his arms upon the desk and half dozed. Then he would jerk awake and tell himself that he'd wait until the Golden Glow closed, at three A.M. and then he'd ride home.

But he never did that. He fell, finally, into a deep but troubled sleep, full of strange, nightmarish dreams. Several times he stirred restlessly but did not awake. When he opened his eyes again, it was breaking dawn. It was Sunday. He moved sluggishly, sleepily, out to the pump behind the jailhouse and sluiced cold water over his face. Then he saddled up Nero, the big gray gelding, stabled behind the building and started for home.

Chapter Five

ALL OF THAT, all the events that had led up to the soul-searing shock of coming home to find his ranch burned-out and his daughter, Laurie, gone, flashed through Ben Dawson's mind, now. He examined each incident, trying to be objective, looking for some word spoken, some threat that would indicate for sure who had pulled off this brutal massacre. He tried to remember if there had been any tipoff in the violence in town yesterday, that he'd been too thick to notice, that might have warned him of something like this, happening. But there was none. All that had seemed like something apart from his own personal life. As though it had been another world.

The more he thought about it now, though, the more certain he became that it was the Rayburns who had made the cowardly, deadly raid. It had to be them. There didn't seem to be any other answer. He became more and more sure that he wasn't just flying off the handle, leaping to conclusions.

As he rode away from the smoldering ruins of his ranch, Ben Dawson tried to calm himself some. He tried to think clearly, plan his line of attack, now that he'd been forcibly drawn right into the middle of the deadly feud.

Halfway to the Rayburn place, he turned off to-

ward a couple of acres cultivated with corn and other farm crops, in the center of which nested a small hut, half soddy, half dugout. As he reined in before the dwelling of the homsteader he'd let squat on a section he didn't need for grazing, Dawson dismounted and turned toward the thin bent figure of a man pouring slop into a trough in a hog pen.

"Prago," he called. "Come here a minute."

Maurice Prago walked toward Dawson at the same time that his wife, a thick-bodied, tired-faced woman with stringy white hair, stooped-out from the half-underground entrance to their hut. She joined her husband. Both of the old people ducked their heads and their seamed old faces wrinkled in smiles.

"Mornin', Mr. Dawson," they said in almost the same voice. "Come in and join us in some breakfast. We don't set a fancy table, but—"

"Sorry," Dawson cut them off. "This isn't a social call." He started to blurt out what had happened at the Diamond D but even thinking about it choked him up and the words wouldn't come. He fought for control and finally murmured: "Something happened. Something bad. I—I need help."

He searched both their faces intently when he said that. But there was no indication that they knew what he was talking about. They merely erased their welcoming smiles and stared at him in serious, puzzled concern.

"Certain, Mr. Dawson," Prago said. "You know we're mighty beholdin' to you for a lot o' things. Anything we can do in time of trouble, we'll be glad to. What is it, sir?"

Somehow he got it out, told them what he had found upon returning to the ranch from town this morning, without breaking down. When he finished,

he said: "I want you to do me two favors. First, take your buckboard and go over to my place and—and tote the bodies into town. Take 'em to Claire Ambrose, the druggist's, place. He takes care of undertakin' in the Flats. Tell him to arrange a quiet funeral and do the best he can. Tell him to seal the boxes right up, to tell folks it's goin' to be a private funeral. I don't want a lot of morbid curiosity-seekers gawkin' at those poor souls. You understand that, Prago? Tell Claire that I'll be payin' for everything. I—I'd take care of this chore, myself, Prago. But I—well—I've got other things to tend to, right now."

His head bowed, the old nester said: "Of course, Mr. Dawson. Sarah and me'll be glad to—well not glad—but we'll handle that for you. Who—you got any idea who'd do a low-down sidewinder trick like that?"

Dawson ignored the question. "The second favor, Prago. Did either you or your wife hear any riders pass this way, last night? Mebbe drivin' some stock before 'em?"

Maurice Prago glanced quickly at his wife and then lowered his head again. He didn't answer for a moment. Dawson saw fright flash across the old woman's rheumy eyes before she turned her gaze away. He said: "I asked you a question, Prago. I've been your friend for a long time. If you hold back any information on me, now . . ." He let the words trail off.

The old man looked up. His eyes met Dawson's squarely. He swallowed a couple of times, his Adam's apple jumping in the folds of empty flesh at his throat. "It—it ain't a question of holding back on you, Mr. Dawson. It's—just—well—Sarah and me don't want to get involved in anythin' that ain't none o'

our business. But I reckon a bunch o' thievin' killers raidin' the Diamond D is our business."

He swallowed fast some more and went on: "We was woke up last night by a bunch o' riders. Rather early this mornin', just afore dawn, it was. An' come to think on it, reckon it did sound as though they might o' been drivin' some cattle. They—don't know how many o' 'em there were, sir. Sarah and me figgered it best not to get nosey when cattle men are out ridin' that time o' night. But this we can tell. They were headin' in the direction o' the Lightning R spread."

Dawson let a long breath out through his teeth. "That's what I thought," he said. "I just wanted to make sure. I—I thank you. For the information and—and for takin' care of my friends. You—tell Claire Ambrose that I'll try and be in town tonight again to pay my last respects. And—if anything should happen to me in the meantime, tell 'm he can take his fee out of the sale of my land."

Without another word, Dawson wheeled, remounted and rode off toward the Lightning R. Now, after the information obtained from the Pragos, the anger in Dawson began to build and burn again. But this time it didn't rage and roar and entirely consume him with its wild intensity. This time it was steady and controlled. It seared like a ball of white-hot blue flame where his heart should have been and worked all through him, slowly, gradually and with the terrible force and power that comes only from anger with definite purpose.

The Lightning R's western line was marked by a series of drift fences, newly repaired and painted. Dawson slowed Nero down to a jog, once on Rayburn ground. He tilted his Stetson low over his eyes,

against the glare of the late morning sun, and swept his gaze back and forth over the outlying acres of Rayburn grazing ground. There was a lot of stock in sight. Several steers raised their heads lazily and studied Dawson with mournful eyes. He rode close enough to some of them to make out the brand but it was the rightful one, an R with a jagged lightning streak through it.

From the moment he had entered Rayburn land, Dawson rode with his right hand resting on the butt of one of his Sixes. Suddenly from the corner of his eye, he saw another rider approaching from his left. Dawson eased Nero to a halt and slipped both weapons from their holsters. He turned toward the approaching horseman. He thumbed back his gun hammers and waited.

As the other rider drew close, Dawson saw that it was Zane Rayburn, the next oldest of the Rayburn boys. Like his father and his older brother, Linc, Zane, too, was tall and rangy shouldered. He was a hawk-faced man with jutting ears that showed the sun shining pinkly through them. His gaunt, big-boned face was beard-stubbed and his eyes were heavily bagged underneath. They were red-rimmed and bloodshot from heavy drinking the night before. He looked mean and ornery as a nettled timber wolf, sitting there, slouched in the saddle of a big bay, with a Winchester aimed squarely at Dawson as he rode up. His finger was white on the trigger. Recognition showed in his face but no friendliness.

"Ridin' onto private range at a time like this could get a man a skull full o' hot lead, with no time for questioning, Marshal," Zane Rayburn said. "Lucky thing I thought I recognized that gray gelding o' yours. State your business and turn tail and git. We

got little use for town law out here this Sunday mornin'."

"'Bout as much use as I got for night-raiders and kidnappers," Dawson said. He watched Zane's face. He saw a flicker of surprise cloud it for a moment and then it returned to its former taciturn expression. It was no act. That puzzled Dawson.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Zane said. "An' don't much care. All I'm interested in is seein' you switch around and skedaddle back toward the Diamond D where you belong. Linc rides out and finds me settin' here, jawin' with you after what happened in town, yestiddy, he's likely to take some o' the poison in him this mornin', out on me. Now, vamoose. This is the last time I'll tell you—with words." Zane inched the rifle up and his trigger finger knuckle showed whitely through its tan.

"I wouldn't cut down with that rifle," Dawson told him. "Wouldn't accomplish much. My dyin' reflexes would let these hammers loose. I reckon ol' Linc would like that even less than a little jabber with me. Be one Rayburn less at a time when you're all needed. An' me bein' dead wouldn't be much consolation . . . Put that thing up, Zane and shake some o' them whiskey cobwebs from your skull. Use a little common sense. Do I ever come botherin' folks 'less I got a dam' good reason?"

Zane's mouth twisted in a sneer, exposing some of the rough cut wadded in under his lower lip. He spat a stream of brown juice onto the grass. "You ain't smooth talkin' me out o' chousin' you off our land, but I got a better idea. Mebbe Linc might like to keep you in cold storage for awhile, so's you won't cause no more trouble in town. I'll give you exactly three seconds to hip those Sixes and start moseyin' toward

our buildin's, with your hands reachin' for sky. And don't give me any bluff, 'bout tryin' to shoot your way out. We got you sewed up, now." His eyes flicked past Dawson. At the same time Dawson heard hoofs drumming up from the opposite side. He went tight as a coiled steel spring, resisting the impulse to wheel around and take a look at the rider approaching from the other side.

Zane Rayburn grinned, crookedly, called: "Cut those Sixes out o' the lawman's paws, Marsh. He's tryin' to talk big with 'em."

That was too much for Dawson. He jerked back and half whipped around, trying to cover both men at once. It didn't work. He saw red-haired Marsh Rayburn reining in a few yards to his right, a rifle aimed at him. At the same instant he became aware of Zane spurring his mount toward him. He turned back that way and saw Zane hurl himself from the big bay. Zane swung the barrel of the Winchester down toward Dawson's gun wrists. The long steel smashed across Dawson's right wrist in a glancing blow. The sixgun fell from that hand, exploding, spitting its slug into the grass by Nero's hoofs. The other weapon slammed a harmless shot into the air as Zane Rayburn's long, sinewy figure landed on Dawson and bore him backward from the saddle.

Dawson landed on the ground, with Zane on top of him. He twisted and squirmed and got his knees up and into Zane's gut. He shoved him off and scrambled to his feet. It didn't do him any good. Marsh Rayburn's rifle barrel whistled through the air. Dawson hunched his head and neck as deep as possible into his shoulders. The gun barrel slashed across the top of his head, knocking his flat crowned Stetson flying. The sun seemed to explode in Daw-

son's face in a blinding glare. He felt himself staggering and falling. He felt the coolness of grass against his face and tasted dirt in his mouth. He didn't lose consciousness, though. He could hear the shouts and cries of the Rayburns all that time. But his limbs seemed paralyzed. He couldn't seem to move. Then the numbness left him; the dizziness disappeared. He pushed down at the grass with the flat of his hands and got to his knees and then rocked clumsily to his feet, shaking his head.

Zane and Marsh Rayburn were standing over the Sixes he'd dropped, gunning down on him with their Winchesters. At the same moment Dawson saw four other riders, all carrying rifles in addition to holstered revolvers. He recognized them as some of the Lightning R riders he'd encountered in Piney Flats the night before. Dawson raised a hand to the lump on the top of his head, thankful for the thick mat of wavy white hair which had, in addition to the protection of his Stetson, saved him from worse damage.

"That star-toter sure is hard-headed," Marsh Rayburn commented, with grudging admiration. "That blow should have felled a steer."

"Yuh," Zane said. "Hard-headed in more ways'n one. Let's herd him back to the place, boys. Mebbe Linc can convince him to keep his law-abidin' nose out o' other people's troubles."

Dawson looked around at the six Lightning R men now present. A wry grin forced itself onto his face. "This place has turned into a regular armed camp. Looks like you were expectin' plenty trouble of one kind or another."

Zane Rayburn spat and rubbed some of the tobacco dribble from his stubbly chin. "There's been enough gab," he said, gruffly. "Pick up your hat, fork saddle

and ride toward the main building. Kerch, grab up the Marshal's fancy irons and tote 'em for him. Don't reckon he's goin' to give us any more trouble."

Bending to pick up his Stetson, Dawson almost fell on his face with a sudden attack of dizziness from the head blow a few minutes before. But the feeling washed right away. He dusted off his hat and ambled toward Nero. He eased up into the saddle. Surrounded by the Lightning R riders, he jogged in the direction of the big ranch's main building.

It had been several years now since Dawson had visited the Rayburn place. The last time had been an altogether different, a happy occasion. He had brought young Laurie here on her birthday, to visit with her aunts and uncles. Remembering that started a whole chain of thoughts for Dawson. He remembered the days, long ago when he'd come to this ranch, courting Ruth Rayburn, old Cal's niece. He remembered the wedding and how drunk some of the Rayburns had gotten. But they'd been good natured, a million laughs, that night.

Now the Butterfields and the boys of the Diamond D were dead. Laurie was missing. She'd been snatched in the early hours of the morning, practically from her bed, amidst a wild orgy of murderous shooting. Perhaps she had even been forced to watch while her protectors, her father's friends and employees, had been shot down in cold blood by a gun-crazy mob that had caught them by surprise and probably outnumbered them at least two to one.

The vision of Laurie's terror in that hellish moment and the thought of what she must have gone through, might even now be suffering, brought the anger brimming up in Dawson again so that everything in his vision faded to a red glare. For one wild crazy

moment, he thought that he was going to turn on this Rayburn bunch, defiant of their guns and tear into them all, hand, tooth and nail and *make* them bring him to Laurie and release her.

But that violent impulse faded as he rode into the yard of the main ranch building of the Diamond D. At the sound of their hoofbeats, old Linc Rayburn came out of the main house. From some of the smaller houses, others of the clan came forth. Some of the Rayburn kids peeked shyly from around the edge of doorways, their eyes big with excitement.

Dawson sat grimly silent, while the others dismounted and listened to Zane Rayburn give Linc his version of the encounter out at the western boundary of the property. He watched Linc's cold eyes upon him. For the first time it began to seriously strike Dawson that none of these men had acted or were acting the way they would, if they were the ones who'd pulled the night raid on his own spread. There was no gloating about that, no reference to it.

For the first time doubts began to creep into his mind about the Rayburns being the culprits.

Flecks of angry light flashed in Linc Rayburn's narrow, bloodshot eyes. The parenthetical lines from his long nose to the corners of his mouth deepened. He said, his voice edgy with irritation: "Last night and yestiddy you deal yourself into our private affairs and turn against your own in-laws. This mornin' you ride over to start more trouble and spout riddles about night raiders. My patience is runnin' short, Ben. You got somethin' on your mind, get it out. Pronto."

Linc's eyes stayed steadily on Dawson's as he spoke. There was no fear in them, no guilt nor apprehension, that Dawson could detect. He felt a sudden

terrible confusion. He had been so sure it had been the Rayburn bunch who'd raided his ranch. Now doubts began to beseige him.

"I don't know," he said, tiredly. "It is hard to believe y'all would pull a trick like that. Still . . . Well, anyhow, this is it. Just before dawn the Diamond D was raided. All my hands were massacred. They didn't draw the line on wimmin folks, either. Poor ol' Miz Butterfield was killed. They left my buildings in ashes. And I found the corpse of Mitch Maclane there, too. Naturally, I figgered you Rayburns had been after him and he'd gone to my place for refuge. With that kind of evidence that you were the ones—"

"Mitch dead!" Linc Rayburn gasped. He looked truly surprised and incredulous. He looked around at the others of his clan. He spat. "Well, we ain't none of us goin' into any mournin' for that back-shootin' little weasel. Except for the fact we didn't have the privilege of doin' the job. About the rest of it, Ben, we—I don't rightly know what to say. Except I'm truly sorry to hear about it. Reckon that speaks for all of us. Believe me, if it'd been us after Mitch, we'd have respected your property. We'd have waited out his leaving. He couldn't have stayed there forever. Ben, you don't possibly believe that we could have pulled an ornery stunt like that?"

Dawson pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and rubbed the inner corners of his eyes. "I'm not sure, Linc. I—I can't hardly seem to think straight anymore. But—why would anyone else do a thing like that? Maybe your boys didn't actually pull the raid but I wouldn't put it past any one of you to have hired some of that LaFarge bunch to go after Mitch Maclane for you. They'd have no

scruples about burnin' down a man's property, killin' a woman and kidnappin' a child."

The thought, now, of Laurie being in the hands of a bunch like the LaFarge gunnies made Dawson sick. Anger began to flame uncontrollably in him again. He said: "That must be the answer. If you men didn't actually make the raid, that leaves only the LaFarge gang. We know dam' well the Maclanes didn't have anything to do with it. They wouldn't have killed Mitch. And the LaFarge boys wouldn't pull a raid like that just for their own amusement. So they must've been *hired* to do it."

"Wait a minute, Ben," Linc said, his eyes narrowing. "You're way off on the wrong trail with that. We Rayburns don't have to hire *anyone* to do our fighting for us. I heard that some of our riders picked-up with a few of LaFarge's men in a street fight last night. I gave 'em hell for that and told 'em to steer clear of that bunch. I got no more use for owlhoots than you have."

Again Dawson felt confusion stir in him. There was such a strong ring of truth in what Linc Rayburn said, the way he'd said it. None of this was making any sense, now, if Linc *was* telling the truth. There would be no reason for the LaFarge gang to kidnap Laurie. He wasn't a rich man, couldn't afford any big ransom money. He'd figured that maybe the gang had brought Laurie here. But now he was having trouble believing that. Each moment it seemed more certain that the Rayburns were completely innocent of the whole affair, were practically bowled over by the news of it.

Dawson glanced toward the ranch house and Linc told him: "Ben, if you think—if you've even got a shred of suspicion—that we're holdin' Laurie here,

search the place. Go ahead. Cover it with a fine tooth comb. You got my permission. Us Rayburns have done some sorry things in our time, like most folks. But we ain't never stooped to wimmin-killin' nor kid-nappin'. We never will."

"Don't reckon that'll be necessary," Dawson answered. "First place, even if you *were* holdin' Laurie, it likely wouldn't be here, knowin' this is the first place I'd come." He turned toward the man who was holding his Sixes. "If you'll return my irons, I'll ride on."

"You ain't goin' to start any trouble if we give you back these silver mounted hawglaigs?"

"Not if you've been tellin' the truth." He reached out and took the weapons handed to him. He slipped them back into their holsters, after reloading. He swung up into the saddle and eased Nero over to a watering trough. While the gelding quenched his thirst, Linc Rayburn walked over.

"Ben," the lanky man said, "if you find out who's holdin' Laurie and you need any help gettin' her back, call on us. Laurie's blood kin to us Rayburns, remember. We love her, too."

Dawson looked toward the Muchapi Mountains, the small but rugged range that reared up to rocky heights from the Eastern edge of the Rayburn property. Their peaks were painted golden by the afternoon sun. "Thanks, Linc," he said

"And, Ben. It still ain't too late for you to come over onto our side in the feud. We could use you. We'd be willin' to overlook the way you sided the Maclanes, yester—"

"The feud!" Dawson jerked around in the saddle, cutting off the other man's words. "Is that all you think about, that dam' fool feud. If it wasn't for that,

maybe none of this would have happened. In some way your rotten clan war is responsible for what happened at my spread, for Laurie's kidnapping. And you want me to take part in it? Mention the word feud to me once more, Linc Rayburn and I'll kill you. Right here and now."

Linc drew back. His face went pale. His mouth tightened and grew white at the corners. "We lost somebody we loved, too, Ben Dawson. You can get all worked-up and out for vengeance blood when somethin' happens to one o' yours, but you're against us doin' the same thing."

"No," Dawson said. "It ain't the same. You haven't seen me start shootin' have you, before I'm sure what I'm doin'? I could have. I had evidence, evidence just as good as what you've held against Mitch Maclane. But did I come over here, spewin' lead, without askin' any questions, first? Sure a man should dish out justice when he's been wronged. But he shouldn't go off at it half cocked. Don't you see, Linc? Even when I do find out who slaughtered my ranch people and stole Laurie, I still don't hanker to wipe out the whole family of every man involved. That's the difference in the way I feel and you folks. When a man's done wrong you don't hold his whole family responsible for it."

Linc Rayburn pursed his small mouth. "That's just the way you see it. We got another slant. We figger a diamondback strikes one of us down, we don't just kill that one. We clean out the whole nest. And that's the way it's goin' to be, even though Mitch Maclane is dead. We didn't kill him, so there's no satisfaction in that for us. But we'll make some of them other Maclanes pay. And don't say you didn't get a chance to join us, Ben. Sometimes I don't understand you.

Don't forget if it hadn't been for a Maclane starting this mess, none of it would have happened—including the wiping out of your own spread."

Dawson didn't answer. He turned Nero from the trough and headed out of the yard. As he moved south toward the Maclane spread, one of the Lightning R riders joined him to make sure he got off the ranch without further trouble.

Chapter Six

AT THE M-BAR-M, Dawson told the Maclanes all that had happened and that young Mitch's body was being taken to town along with the rest. The Maclanes were stunned by the news. Hoping to avoid further trouble, they'd sent Mitch away, just before daylight, Sunday morning, to visit with some relatives in a distant town. They'd thought that possibly, with him gone away, the feud might be avoided and that with time the Rayburns would cool down, or that maybe some evidence against the real killer of old man Rayburn might turn up.

Apparently young Mitch had been intercepted and attacked before he got to Piney Flats and had turned and headed for the Diamond D for refuge. But it hadn't done him any good.

Just as Dawson was about to leave the grief stricken family to head for town, thunderheads began to

roll up in the west and Dawson borrowed a poncho. The storm broke as he was halfway back to The Flats. The rain sluiced down in slanting sheets for about ten minutes, then settled into a steady drizzle. In spite of the protection of the poncho, Dawson was drenched and muddy when he finally sloshed onto Main Street. There was little sign of life or action in the town, it being a Sunday night. Early Hines' saloon was closed. Here and there squares of yellow light slanted out into the rainy darkness. The flares spluttered dully in front of the hotel. The street was a sea of mud.

The long, lonely ride, with nothing to occupy his mind but his own dark thoughts, had plunged Dawson into depths of gloom and despair. He did a lot of thinking, none of it on the bright side. He felt so helpless.

It would be almost impossible to find where Laurie had been spirited to. Undoubtedly, she'd been whisked away to some hideout in either the Hangtree Mountains or the Muchapis. There were a million possible hideouts in either mountain group, where she could be kept hidden for weeks or even months. Yet, somehow he had to get Laurie back, no matter what.

As Dawson passed the building that housed Claire Ambrose's Apothecary he saw that a light shone dully from a window at the back. Dawson knew that Ambrose must be preparing the mass funeral for the dead from the Diamond D. He stopped, hitched Nero to the rail in front of the building and headed down the alley. He listened to the rasping sound of sandpapering going on inside, then rapped on the door. The rasping stopped and footsteps shuffled toward

the door. The bolt was thrown and the door opened. A wash of lantern light flowed over Dawson.

The man who opened the door was dumpily built, flabby fat. The underwear top that covered his flacid torso was a dingy yellow. Tufts of white chest hair pushed out through the partially unbuttoned front. His lardy arms were also matted with thick white hair. His face was round and triple-chinned. It was apple-red and shiny and surprisingly, held few lines or signs of age. He was bald except for a padre-like ring of puffy white hair just above the ears. Little fat-buried blue eyes stared at Dawson, bulging some. Claire Ambrose, town druggist and undertaker, jerked nervously and half jumped back from the door.

Dawson laughed, suddenly realizing the rather frightening vision he made, standing there in a poorly fitting black poncho shining and running with rain water, with his Stetson sopping and pulled down low over his now whisker-stubbed face.

"Easy, Claire," he said. "It's just me, Ben Dawson, not the ghost of some poor soul discontented with the way you put him to his last resting place."

Ambrose gave a relieved chuckle and his flabby belly bounced briefly as he stood aside and beckoned Dawson inside. "Come in, dry off and warm up, Ben. Come in, sir."

It was a big room, here in back of the drug store. One side was lined with shelves of patent medicines, salves, wound dressings and the like, as well as a certain amount of dry goods. Against another wall stood a pile of pine boards and a couple of kegs of nails and a work bench. Dawson saw that four neat but simply fashioned pine caskets had already been nailed together and sanded smooth. Ambrose, still holding a big sandpaper-covered block and his apron thick

with sawdust, apparently had been smoothing down the fifth box when Dawson interrupted him.

"See you're making progress," Dawson said. He unfastened the front of the poncho and shrugged out of it. He shook the rain from it onto the dirt floor, hung the poncho up on a wall nail.

"Yes, sir," Ambrose said. "Hate this damned kind of work, though. Don't know why I do it."

Dawson looked at the other man. Ambrose was trying to look sad, solemn. But his face wasn't made for it. He merely succeeded in looking like a fat school boy full of the devil and having trouble holding back.

"Sure you do, Claire," Dawson said. "For the money. You'd do anything for money."

"Now, that's not fair, Ben. You know it's bound to get a man depressed, making dead-boxes like this. But somebody's got to do it. Anyhow, Ben, I'm sorry about what happened. Truly sorry. You find out who's responsible? You want to talk about it?"

"No, to both questions," Dawson said. "Just stopped in to dry off a bit and find out when you could be ready for the funeral and what it's going to cost me. Where are—where you keeping the boys and Miz Butterfield?"

Ambrose went back to sandpapering the edge of the fifth pine coffin. "Over at the front room of my house where I hold services. Don't worry, I'll do right by 'em, Ben. And you don't want to talk business, now. You're tired, upset. You ought to get yourself some shuteye before you collapse. I'll take it easy on the price of these buryin's, Ben. Man gets burned-out like you did, needs a break. There won't be any hurry about the money. Can have the funeral tomorrow afternoon or night, if you like."

"Let you know," Dawson said. He walked over to a table that held a big jug. "This drinkin' stuff?"

Ambrose looked up from his sandpapering. "Yup. Help yourself. Do you good."

Dawson tilted the small neck of the jug, took several long swallows. He set it down, exploding breath and gasping noises from deep in his chest. He coughed and thumped his chest. "What in hell's name is that?" he demanded, chokingly. "Embalming fluid?"

Ambrose grinned. "Just some mountain dew made by a wild hoss wrangler I know up in the Hangtree range. You get used to it, you won't like any other."

The fiery liquid soon spread its warm glow through Dawson and some of the tiredness left him. His sagging spirits lifted some. After a few minutes, he said: "Claire, you get any emergency calls for bandages or stuff to treat bullet wounds, this mornin'?"

The fat man looked up, surprised. "Yuh. How'd you know?"

"Didn't. Just guessin'. But I figgered some of my boys must've cut some lead into those murderin' jaspers who raided the Diamond D, before they got away. Who bought the stuff, Claire?"

"'Fraid that ain't goin' to help you much. It was old man Munsinger. You know, the clerk at Harmony House. Must've been for one of their guests."

"I'll *make* that help me," Dawson said, grimly. "Thanks, Claire." He walked over and took down his poncho and shrugged it on. He eased out the side door as Ambrose went back to his sandpapering.

Emerging from the alley, Dawson unhitched Nero and walked the gelding down the street. A small figure was hunched against the front of the jail building with his knees drawn up, arms on knees, head on

arms, asleep. Dawson had expected to find him there. Cootie James, the swamper and gun-checker at the Golden Glow, got put out of his rooming house every Sunday night. Every Sunday he took a busman's holiday and drank himself into a stupor. But when he'd awake after several hours, he'd go into a mild case of delirium and cut up such a noisy rumpus, his landlady would put him out. She'd refuse to admit him back into the house until Monday. Cootie would then walk around until partially sobered and quieted down, and go over to the jail house where Dawson would let him sleep in a cell.

Dawson woke the shriveled little oldster. Cootie jerked erect and rubbed bleared eyes with the back of his hands. "Where you been, Marshal?" He hugged himself with skinny arms. He was soaking wet and shivering. "I like to drown and froze to death, waitin' for you to get back."

"You're goin' to work for your lodging, tonight, Cootie," Dawson told him. "Take Nero back to the stable, feed him and dry him down. Then saddle up that buckskin in there and have him ready to ride, just in case I need him later." He tossed the jail keys to Cootie. "Leave 'em on my desk after you've opened up a cell to sleep in."

He watched Cootie shuffle down the alley toward the small stable in back, leading Nero. Then Dawson headed toward the hotel. The plank walk was slippery wet and Dawson's bootheels almost slid out from under him a couple of times, but that was better than wallowing through the mud of the street. It had stopped drizzling, and a pale and gibbous moon hung over the Muchapis, bathing the town buildings in a hazy, eerie light, causing the false fronts to throw

long crooked shadows across the shimmering mud and puddles of the street.

Whether it was the long jolt of Ambrose's mountain whiskey he'd taken, or the inspiration to ask the druggist about anyone purchasing dressings and salves for gunwounds, Dawson wasn't sure, but now, as he strode along Main Street in the rain-wet quiet of this Sunday night, he began to take courage again. If Munsinger could tell him that it was some of the LaFarge gang that had ordered stuff for treatment of gunshot wounds, it would be pretty strong evidence that they were the ranch raiders. He could move against them.

But before he got to the hotel, as he passed a wide areaway between the Mercantile and the Express Office, a low, moaning sound attracted his attention. Dawson froze, then quickly ducked into the shadows close to the front of the building. He pressed flat against the rough boarding. He held his breath and waited. There was dead silence for a full minute and then the moan sounded again, this time accompanied by harsh, agonized breathing.

Finally deciding that it wasn't any kind of a trap, Dawson entered the pitch blackness of the areaway, sloshing cautiously through a puddle and reaching out into the inky darkness in front of him, with both hands. Then his boot toe dug into something soft. He stooped and reached down with his hand, encountered rough clothing. His hand moved over the clothing until his fingers ran onto beard stubble, then jerked away as his fingertips touched something warm and sticky. Positive now that this wasn't some kind of a trap, but actually somebody hurt and in need of help, Dawson tangled his fingers into the loose fitting clothing. He dragged its owner through the mud and

out of the blackness of the alley, onto the plank walk.

A bar of moonglow slanted down on the inert figure Dawson had dragged from the darkness. The wan light revealed the lanky, bag-of-bones figure and emaciated face of old man Munsinger, the hotel desk clerk. The old man's eyes were shiny and puffed shut. One cheek had been laid open to the bone by a ringed fist. Munsinger's long stringy hair clung to the wound. The other side of the clerk's sunken old face was also bruised and swollen. His lips were thick from being smashed against his gums. Blood still oozed from one corner of his broken mouth. There was an ugly walnut sized lump at the old man's temple. His breath was coming in harsh wheezes.

"Good God!" Dawson murmured.

Dawson put his hand over the oldster's heart. The beat was irregular and very faint. A pulse in the scrawny old throat fluttered weakly, spasmodically. The marshal bent his mouth close to Munsinger's ear. "Can you hear me?" he said. "Can you talk?"

One eye forced open its puffy upper lid. The eyeball shone through the slit glassily at Dawson. The smashed lips moved but no words came out. Dawson said: "Munsinger, who did this to you? Try and tell me. Summon your strength. I'll see that they're punished for it, old hombre. Talk!"

The broken mouth opened and blood welled out. In a weakly hoarse voice, Munsinger mumbled thickly: "LaFarge—bunch—caught me listening—outside their room. . . . They—big poker game—high stakes. . . . Thought I—heard—something about . . ." The thin voice grew weaker, finally trailed off into an unintelligible murmur.

"About what, old man?" Dawson demanded. He gently shook Munsinger. The thin-haired head wob-

bled loosely. The puffed eyelids flickered. Munsinger's whole loosely-jointed body stiffened and then went limp as a long, whistling breath issued from his suddenly loose-hanging lips.

Dawson swore. "Died before he could really tell me anything. But it must've been something mighty important they thought he overheard to fist-whip him that bad. Must've given the poor old coot internal injuries of some kind." Rising, Dawson looked up at the sky which was now full of stars. Certain that there'd be no more rain, this night, he slipped out of the poncho. He spread it over the still body on the boardwalk. Then, hitching his belt and sliding his Sixes loose in their holsters, he moved once more toward the hotel. He crossed the street and kept to the shadows until he was opposite Harmony House. But there were no lighted windows at the front. He moved down an alley to the rear of the hotel.

One lighted room showed in the rear of the structure. It was on the second floor. Dawson saw, too, that the window of that room was opened. Thin wisps of cigarette and cigar smoke drifted out. He could hear a rumble of voices from the room.

There was a narrow ledge running along the second floor of the building, just under the windows. Trying to figure how he might get up onto that ledge, Dawson finally spotted several barrels in a row, at the far end of the building. He walked toward them, careful not to trip over any of the rubbish and litter of cans and bottles strewn the yard behind the hotel.

By piling the three barrels one on top of the other, he formed a rickety structure, upon which he could climb to within reach of the ledge on the second floor. While the barrels teetered perilously under him, Dawson chinned himself up, flung one leg onto the

ledge and crawled up onto it. It was wider than it looked from below, about eighteen inches across. Plenty wide enough to move along comfortably, with a little caution. Slowly, Dawson inched along toward the spot where light flooded out from the opened window. As he got close enough to distinguish voices and identify two of the men in the room as MacQueen and Devlin, his heart began to pound.

He thought that deeply engrossed in a high stakes poker game, with their tongues loosened by liquor, the LaFarge bunch might let go with some kind of talk that would convict them definitely as the ones who burned out the Diamond D and kidnapped Laurie. He hardly dared hope that he might even learn where they were holding her prisoner. Every nerve in him became strung tight as fiddle strings. If anything happened to give away his position out here on the ledge, he'd be trapped at a terrible disadvantage for a gunfight. He'd be a sitting duck.

Just as he reached the edge of the window, Dawson recognized the great, rumbling, booming laughter that meant Frenchy LaFarge, leader of the gang, was himself in that room.

The first few moments of his eaves-dropping, Dawson heard only the usual coarse small talk of a men's poker game. Curious, then, he poked his head around the edge of the window frame and peered into the room. In the harsh light of three high-burning oil lamps, he saw eight men sitting around a huge table. There were several whiskey jugs on the table. A good sized stack of greenbacks and silver dollars formed a large pot in the center. As Dawson peered in, he saw the man called Ives, reach out and rake the pot toward him. He was grinning and appeared to be the

big winner of the game. The others swore as they tossed in their hands.

In addition to Ives, MacQueen and Devlin, the three Dawson had had a run in with the night before, there were four other men and LaFarge, himself. There was Ike Qualters, a skinny, sad-faced little owlhoot with a great, drooping mustache that looked several sizes too large for him. There was Crimp Duval, a stocky, pockmarked man, partially bald; Simon Rawls, slat-built and ferret-faced and Oley Olson, a red-faced man with the loose-lipped expression and the vacuous eyes of a moron. They were as ornery a bunch of human hyenas as Dawson had ever seen grouped together. He shivered at the idea of young Laurie being in the hands of a bunch like this. The most fearsome of the lot was Frenchy LaFarge, himself.

Dawson had seen actually very little of this man since he'd first ridden into the Flats with his bunch. Now he studied him carefully. LaFarge, first of all, was big, but his tremendous shoulders, barrel-like chest and long, powerful arms were so in proportion that the full effect of his real size was not apparent at first glance. But here, where there were other more normally constructed men for comparison, Dawson for the first time realized that the owlhoot leader was a veritable giant.

The chair he sat upon seemed like a toy chair beneath his great bulk. His huge hams overflowed it. His back and shoulders dwarfed it. Dawson marveled that the chair held together under LaFarge's close to three hundred pounds, as the big man tilted back on it, watching Crimp Duval shuffle the greasy deck of cards. But the most impressive thing about LaFarge was his head. Its fine shape was moulded by long,

thick, shingly greased straight black hair, brushed back smoothly from his broad forehead and curled into a ridge at the nape of his neck. The thick bar of his eyebrows, which would have been straggly, except that they too, were greased, almost met over the bridge of a fine, straight nose. Beneath those brows, sunken cavernously deep, were black eyes as glitteringly opaque and motionless as a serpent's. The upper lip of a long, full, pink looking and sensuous mouth was cleanly shaven. But beneath it, LaFarge wore a small, pointed goatee, as black and shiny as his hair. On any other man it might have looked insipid and dandified, but with Frenchy LaFarge, this dainty chin decoration somehow accentuated the savage, virile fierceness of all his other features.

Dawson looked at LaFarge's hands. They had the typical pale and soft look of the owlhoot, who doesn't believe in manual labor. But as the long, thick fingers drummed the table, reached for the cards dealt to LaFarge, Dawson saw that they were full of the nervous agility and flexibility of the experienced gunfighter. Seeing all this, Dawson felt a little sick. He wondered vaguely what chance he had against an owlhoot leader of this man's caliber.

Dawson watched and saw Crimp Duval angrily slap the cards he'd been dealt down onto the table. He reared back on his chair, his square-jawed, pock-pitted face white with anger. "I ain't had one gardam good hand since this stinkin' game started," he said. "Ain't no sense in playin' against a hombre like Ives, nohow. He's got the devil's own luck tonight. Look at that simpy grin on his face. Bet he's holdin' a full house, at least, right now. I don't mind losing a little in a friendly game, but I don't take to bein' cleaned-out every blasted hand."

Ives grinned at him. "You mean I busted you already?"

"Busted me all you're goin' to, tonight."

"Hell, Duval," MacQueen said. "You just ain't got enough guts to stick it out. Whatever goes up, must come down. Ives' luck can't last forever. An' don't try to hooraw me, you lost so damn much, already. Why, I'll bet you ain't lost a third o' your share for that Dawson job, last—"

Frenchy LaFarge leaned across the table and his big, soft looking white hand smashed against MacQueen's mouth, cutting off his flow of words, snapping his head back. The tall, rangy outlaw went white and pressed his hand to his mouth. He wiped away a thin trickle of blood from one corner.

"What the hell was that for?" he whined.

"To make that big mouth o' yours a couple of sizes smaller," LaFarge told him. The big man's voice was low and rumbling. Each word was bitten off shortly, sharply.

"Hell, who's goin' to hear anything?" MacQueen said, a touch of anger in his voice. "An' don't give me that old saw about walls havin' ears. We—"

MacQueen's words chopped off again as he saw LaFarge's big hand start toward him once more. Instantly MacQueen threw his left hand up in front of his face to protect it. LaFarge seized MacQueen's wrist, yanked it away. At the same time, his other hand lashed out. This time he caught MacQueen across one lean cheek. The fingerprints were visible even through the dark beard stubble there.

"You've got pretty teeth," LaFarge told him. "You think you'd look better without 'em, keep shootin' off your mouth. You got something else to say?"

The two men held their glances locked for a few

seconds, then MacQueen finally jerked his head down, to look at his cards. "Sorry, Frenchy," he muttered, grudgingly. "Lets play cards."

Out on the ledge excitement needled through Ben Dawson. He had final proof that this was the gang which had wiped out his spread and kidnapped Laurie. As that realization penetrated, rage welled up in him again. He had to fight down the wild and senseless urge to leap through that window, with guns blazing, wipe out every man of the murderous bunch, right where they sat. But he knew that wouldn't get Laurie back. In fact it might mean her death. Even if he succeeded in cleaning out the LaFarge bunch before one of them could get him. And that was hardly likely. It wouldn't help Laurie much to have him dead.

At the same time, Dawson realized that even though these were the men who had actually raided the Diamond D, he still didn't know why. He knew that he should wait before striking, to find that out. He continued to stand there on the ledge, holding his breath, fearful of missing a word. Even though LaFarge's treatment of MacQueen practically insured that none of the others would discuss their nefarious business, while the leader was present, at least. But there was always a chance LaFarge might quit the game, leave the room, thus allowing the gang's mouths to loosen again.

But it was not LaFarge who got up from the table a few moments later. It was Crimp Duval. He pushed his chair back and rose and stretched. He waved his hand through the cloud of smoke in the room, said: "Phew! Smoke in this hole is thick enough to cut. I got to get some air before I suffocate." He started toward the window.

Dawson pulled his head back and pressed tightly against the wall. He slipped back along the ledge a few feet from the window before Duval's head thrust out. He stood there, every nerve in his body tingling. His feet seemed to go numb. Sweat ran down his ribs and soaked the small of his back. But Duval didn't turn his head in Dawson's direction. He rested his elbows on the window ledge and looked straight out into the darkness, breathing deeply of the fresh night air.

A bat suddenly whirred toward the light pouring from the window. It sensed Duval leaning out and swerved toward Dawson. It fluttered past him, its wings brushing his face. Dawson squeezed his eyes shut and stood trembling, hoping the bat wouldn't light on his head. A second later when Dawson again opened his eyes, the bat was gone. But now, Crimp Duval was turned in his direction, staring through the darkness, after the flight of the bat. Dawson couldn't tell whether the man's eyes had become adjusted enough to the outside darkness yet to see him, or not. As he waited, though, Duval continued to stare toward him, abnormally long. Dawson saw Duval's brows crawl together in a puzzled frown, saw his eyes, squinting, straining to penetrate the blackness where Dawson was standing.

"Hey!" Duval said, suddenly. "Don't know whether my eyes are playin' tricks on me or—"

"Crimp!" LaFarge's rumbling voice called out. It cut off Duval's soft-spoken musing. "You're wastin' time, hangin' out that window. You through with the game, ride out to where we've got the girl and relieve Vic Demarest. We're an hour late for his relief, as is."

Duval's head jerked back in through the window.

He roared: "It ain't my turn to pull guard on that dam' kid. It's Ives' trick. Send him. I ain't ridin' to hell and out into the Muchapis in the middle o' the night like this."

"You heard what I said," LaFarge told him. "Ives is too big a winner in this game to pull out. We got to even him down a little. You was the first one to quit, so you're elected. No more lip about it. And while you're out there, don't try to make any time with Rosita. First sidewinder she tells me's been plaguin' her, I'll chew him alive and spit the pieces to the four winds. That little ol' Mex gal's my private property. Now, get goin', Crimp."

There was silence for a moment. Then Duval said: "Hold it a minute, Frenchy. Before when I was lookin' out the window, I swear, for a moment I thought I saw someone—or somethin'—perched on that ledge out there. Give me one o' them lamps to take a better look."

Frenchy LaFarge let out a roar of surprise and a string of oaths. There was the sound of chairs hurriedly scraping back from the table inside the room. Dawson didn't wait to hear any more. With jubilation over the information he'd overheard, mixed with fear, he started edging fast back toward the corner of the building where he'd piled the barrels. He was *only* halfway there when he glanced back over his shoulders and saw both Duval and LaFarge's heads poke out the window, simultaneously. Duval held a lamp out into the darkness. Its wash of yellow light edged dimly over Dawson, not revealing him clearly. But it sent his shadow down into the yard.

"Someone out there, all right," LaFarge hollered. "Some sneakin' bastard spyin' and listenin' on us, just like we caught ol' Munsinger doin', earlier tonight.

I *told* you blabbermouths not to mention anything about our business. No tellin' what that eavesdropper overheard. We got to get 'im!"

LaFarge's big hand, holding a .45, snaked out next to the lantern. At the same second, Dawson reached down and yanked one of his own Sixes and hammered out a shot. The glass of the lantern shattered and the light went out. Crimp Duval screamed with pain as flying glass shattered into his face. Then LaFarge cut loose with the .45. He hammered out four shots as fast as he could trigger. But he was temporarily blinded by the sudden dousing of the lamp. The slugs went screaming past Dawson and into the wall, several feet from where he stood. He slammed out another shot of his own but he was in an awkward position, flattened against the wall. He missed both men. He saw them suddenly jerk back inside, though and knew that he'd at least come close.

A babble of shouting and confusion came from the poker room, now. As Dawson edged on again toward the corner of the building, he looked back and saw a hand sticking out around the window frame, holding a Colt. It started blasting at once, streaking its wicked spurts of orange fire into the blackness. It was aimed close along the building and fanned up and down at the same time, trying to pin down its target. One of the shots plucked Dawson's shirt front. Another slapped through the brim of his Stetson, sending it skittering from his head and fluttering to the ground below. Dawson's heart leaped and thundered against his chest as leaden death lanced through the blackness on all sides of him.

Taking careful aim, he cut loose toward the window, himself. As the weapon bucked in his fist he heard a scream of rage and pain over the sound of

the shots. He heard the gun being held out the window go clattering down the side of the building to the ground. It didn't help much. Almost instantly, another hand holding a gun, pushed out. More lead flew toward Dawson. When that gun emptied, still without touching him with its spewing lead, Dawson abandoned the idea of fighting back. He turned and edged as fast as he could, with safety, the remaining few feet toward the corner of the building and the stacked barrels which would get him to the ground. But as he reached out for the barrels, to climb down them, they all toppled and fell.

The marshal didn't hesitate. He acted instinctively. There was no time to try and figure things out. He pushed himself away from the building and jumped from the ledge.

As he plummeted downward, the men in the window opened fire again. It seemed in that fraction of a second that the night was alive with one solid and deafening thunder of gunfire. Angry lead buzzed around his falling figure like a swarm of blood-maddened mosquitoes. Something ripped burning hot across Dawson's forehead. Another streak of fire seared across his left hand. And then he crashed to the ground.

He rolled and flung himself to one side just as a fresh burst of shots flew down. The slugs slammed into the ground a few feet away. Weaving, to make him a more difficult target, Dawson ran, crouched low, toward the alley next to the hotel. As he staggered along through the darkness, he realized that his zigzag course was entirely involuntary. Flashes of dizziness swept over him, accompanied by nausea. He felt blood trickling down into his brows and the wound on his forehead began to throb and send

flashes of pain all through his skull. He banged against the wall of the building, then finally half spun out onto the street, almost fell.

Somehow, though, he managed to keep the black waves of unconsciousness from smothering him completely. He continued his stumbling, weaving run back toward the jail building. He reached it, flung himself weakly inside and managed to lock the door, clutching at it. The darkness swam around him, pinpointed with a million tiny firefly lights. Then he seemed to go floating, turning, twisting lazily off into that same darkness. It became tunnel-like, endless and he began to spin into it, along it, faster and faster. . . .

Chapter Seven

HE CAME OUT of it with someone slapping his face. A whiskey hoarse voice was saying: "Marshall Ben! What happened? You—you're hurt! Your face is a mess o' blood!"

It was still dark as Dawson forced his eyes open, blinking. He heard Cootie James say: "I'd better strike a light."

At the same moment, out on the street Dawson heard a rataplan of hoofbeats. They slowed right outside. There was an argument in guarded voices.

Dawson reached out and grabbed Cootie by the

pants leg. "No!" He whispered hoarsely. "No light. Not now. Stay still, damn you. Don't let 'em hear us in here."

A moment later the hooves of the horsemen outside slapped dirt again. They splashed through a puddle, rode off, the sound fading toward the north end of town. Dawson waited another few moments, then reached out to the wall and clawed his way to his feet. "Okay, Cootie," he said, weakly. "You can get a lamp lit, now."

A stove match scratched on the wall. A lamp flickered slowly into a strong flame. Dawson looked toward it, saw Cootie James' frightened face turned toward him, the little swamper's bloodshot eyes big with awe.

"Good Gawd-a-mighty, Marshal," he gasped. "You must have as many lives as a cat. You got least a pint o' blood smeared across your face. And look at your hand!"

Dawson glanced down at his left hand. The back of it was smeared with crimson which was slowly leaking from a ridge of torn flesh. He lifted his hand, examined the wound, flexed his fingers. The hand felt a little numb still and was throbbing but Dawson said: "Don't seem to be any bones broken or muscles torn. Just grazed the flesh. Mebbe the head wound isn't too bad, either. I'll go out to the pump and wash the blood off and see. Meanwhile, don't just stand there, Cootie. I got a job o' work to do tonight. A big one. I'll likely need help. You go get it for me."

"What you want me to do? What happened? What was all the shooting about?"

Quickly as possible, his bloody face tightened into grim lines of determination, Dawson recounted the events at the hotel, the information he had gained.

When he finished, he said: "I have an idea that was the LaFarge bunch mounted that we heard outside, before. If so, they've cleared out o' town. We'll probably find them holed up where they're holdin' Laurie. I think I know where that is, now. Or can find out. But I'm not fool enough to ride right into an armed owlhoot camp like that, alone. I'm going to form a posse. Go round up these men and tell 'em what's happened and what I want 'em for. Tell 'em not to waste a minute." He then rattled off a list of names of men in the town who owed him favors, men he thought he could count on in a tight like this.

As Cootie James rushed out, Dawson went out back of the jailhouse to the pump, put his head under the spout and sluiced his whole head with the cold well water. The wounds on his forehead and hand stung like fury at first, but then the throbbing in them eased up. He went back inside and took out a small steel mirror that he used for shaving, from his desk. He saw that there was an ugly two-inch welted ridge of torn flesh across his forehead where a bullet had creased him. It was still bloody and raw looking, but Dawson was pleasantly surprised to see that it wasn't any worse than that.

Outside of a slamming headache, he felt no ill effects from the wounds, although his left hand was beginning to stiffen some. He was thankful, though, that it wasn't his right. A painful, crooked grin formed upon his face, as he examined his reflection. With his cheeks and chin stubbled with a two day growth of white whiskers, his eyes tired and blood-shot and ringed with sooty shadows beneath, tired-lines deepened from nose to mouth, he looked like one of the Devil's own henchmen.

He finger-combed his thick, tousled white hair as

best he could, then checked and cleaned his guns, while he waited for the men Cootie had gone after. They rode up in front of the jailhouse a few minutes later and Dawson went out to meet them. Most of them were yawning and still sleepy-eyed, but they were a tough, dependable looking bunch. They checked, briefly with Dawson, what Cootie James had told them and he filled in on some details, Cootie went around to the stable and led out the buckskin, saddled-up and ready to ride.

"First," Dawson said, mounting, "we want to make sure we aren't starting out on any wild goose chase. Let's check at the hotel."

They rode down to Harmony House. Dawson and two of the other men dismounted, went inside and up to the room the LaFarge gang had occupied. They were gone.

They left the hotel, remounted and headed north out of town. A little later, as they turned east, approached the borderline between the Maclane and Rayburn spreads, Dawson looked ahead at the moon-drenched ridges and peaks of the Muchapis. He thought about Laurie being held up there somewhere in that wildly wooded mountain terrain. She was probably still awake, wondering why this thing had happened to her, why her father didn't come to help her. Dawson wished that they could press their horses even harder. But they didn't dare. The animals would need reserve strength, later, in the heavy, rocky, uphill going in the mountains. In fact, they were already riding too swift a pace, hoping, perhaps, to catch up with the LaFarge bunch, if the latter were taking it easy, not too afraid of pursuit.

After awhile Dawson's gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the man riding next to him, portly Sam

Kelsey, who ran the Piney Flats Mercantile. Over the monotonous pounding of the horses hoofs, Kelsey shouted: "After we get into the pass, which way do we head, Ben? You said you had some idea where their hideout was."

"I overheard LaFarge say something about a woman named Rosita, as though maybe she was there. I have an idea they might have hired her to help take care of Laurie. Reckon Laurie might have given them a hard time and they figured a woman could help quiet her down. Anyhow, that's a clue. There's an old prospector, a Mexican, named Juan something or other, who lives in a shack in a little draw off the pass, several miles in. He has a daughter and I think her name is Rosita. If I'm right, her father will probably know where the LaFarge bunch took her. I suppose that's a long shot, but it's the only hope I've got."

Kelsey didn't answer and they rode on again in silence. But now they were riding down a straight-away alley of land, about thirty yards wide, between two rows of fences. The actual borderline between the Maclane and Rayburn spreads ran down the center of this alley. But for two reasons, both ranches had set their fences back some distance from the actual border. One, because even though their feuding had been inactive in recent years, there never was any real love lost between the two families. Both sides had figured that a sort of no-man's-land between the two properties would prevent any too close association that might lead to trouble. The second reason was to open a path for all valley ranchers to drive their cattle straight to the long pass that cut through the Muchapis to the level land on the other side, and the shortest, easiest route to Linkton, the nearest rail-head and shipping point. In this way, the other valley

ranchers could drive their stock to the pass, without any feeling of trespassing.

Now, riding along this alley of land between two rows of fences, with the dark gap of the pass cutting through the mountains, directly ahead, Kelsey suddenly said: "Ben, I reckon you might not be interested in discussin' something like this right now, but I heard a thing the other day, a bit o' rumor, that's been bothering me. Ridin' along here, now, reminded me of it."

"What's that, Sam?" Dawson answered absently.

"I've heard talk that Jay Constantine, you know, the little kewpie-doll faced character who occasionally dabbles in real estate deals as well as runnin' the barber shop, has bought up several ranches adjoining these Rayburn and Maclane spreads and that he's also made offers to both the Rayburns and the Macclanes, but only to buy if they both would sell." Kelsey paused a moment and then went on:

"The rumor is that Constantine, himself, is only fronting for somebody else on the deal, of course."

"So?" Dawson said. He was only half listening to what the other man was saying. He was too busy worrying about Laurie to pay close attention.

"Well, since I heard that, Ben, I been thinking a lot about it. I got a crazy notion. What would happen to Rainbow Valley ranchers if this trail through the Maclane-Rayburn properties was ever blocked? Suppose the two outfits got together, closed in and forbid anyone to drive their stock through here to the pass?"

The import of what the other man was saying now drove through to Dawson. He turned, said: "It would ruin all us Valley ranchers. Ain't any other way to get to the pass. Would be too long and too tough a drive through the Muchapis. But the Rayburns and Mac-

lanes wouldn't do that. Both outfits are pretty decent folks. They aren't that kind of mean, anyhow."

"But suppose somebody not quite so scrupulous got hold of these two spreads," Kelsey went on. "He'd have the whole valley by the short hairs, wouldn't he? He could charge a stiff price to allow herds to run through here to the pass. The ranchers would have to pay it or quit. Over a period of years, a hombre like that could make a fortune, with no risk, no effort, no investment. Just sheer, cold blooded orneriness. And he'd have a combination of two of the finest spreads in the country, to boot."

"Yeah," Dawson answered. "But there isn't much chance of that. Not of gettin' both the Rayburns and Maclanes to sell at the same time. Besides, those are two high priced properties. Who could afford to pay—" Dawson broke off, abruptly.

"Wait a minute, Sam," he said, after awhile. "I think maybe you've got something. If most of both the Maclane and the Rayburn tribes were wiped out in a bitter feud, their widows wouldn't have much choice *but* to sell, would they?"

"I—I hadn't thought about that," Kelsey said. "You mean—"

"I mean that maybe you've helped stir up the answer to a lot of things. If that happened, the Maclane and Rayburn widows would likely *have* to sell the land at a sacrifice. Both spreads could be bought cheap. Right there is a damn good reason for somebody not only starting that feud by murdering old man Rayburn and framing Mitch Maclane for it, but to also keep it going. Even if it meant hiring an outside bunch of gunnies like the LaFarge outfit, to see that the feud ended in a complete wipe-out of both tribes."

Before Sam Kelsey could answer that, all hell seemed to break loose in the quiet of the night. From the Rayburn side, gunfire blasted. At least a dozen rifles cracked almost simultaneously, spitting their orange death-flashes one after the other. The slugs passed close over the heads of Dawson and the others, whining and whistling shrilly. Then, as soon as the echoing sound of the shots faded, a voice boomed:

"Rein in and stand quiet! If any o' you make a move or shoot back, we'll cut you down in a bunch!"

Dawson thought he recognized the voice of Linc Rayburn. He shouted back: "Hold that fire, Linc. It's me, Dawson. We ain't up to any harm. We're just headin' for the pass. Didn't a bunch of other riders head this way a little while ago? We're after them. We're in a hurry, Linc!"

"We know who you are, all right, Dawson," Linc Rayburn's voice answered. "But you ain't in a big hurry to reach hell, are you? If so, keep ridin' the way you were. We'll help you hit Hades in a hurry. If you want your skins whole, wheel around and head back for town."

There was silence for a moment. Kelsey whispered to Dawson: "What the hell's the idea of this? Have the Rayburns gone loco or something?"

"I don't know," Dawson said softly. "But I don't like the looks o' this. Let's try and find out what it's about." He turned toward the Rayburns, shouted: "We got to get through here to the pass, Linc. That LaFarge bunch are the ones burned out my spread and kidnapped Laurie. They're holdin' her in their hideout in the Muchapis. That's where they've gone. Don't hold us up, or they might have time to move Laurie to some new place, before we can get to 'em."

"That's a good story, Ben," Linc called back. For the first time, now, Dawson noticed that the other man's voice was thick with liquor, was tight and strained with almost hysterical anger. "LaFarge told us what you're really up to. Now turn tail and git before we cut down on you."

"He sounds drunk," Kelsey whispered. "If those Rayburns are likkered-up, there's no arguin' with 'em. Mebbe we'd best do what they say, Ben. LaFarge got 'em riled up agin you for sure, somehow."

"Yeah," Dawson said. "Linc," he shouted. "You goin' to believe a bunch o' murderin' kidnappers like that LaFarge gang? What fool nonsense did they stuff into your heads?"

"Ben, you kin skip all the fancy talk," the answer came back. "Frenchy gave it to us straight. Said you'd finally become convinced that we were the ones burned out your place and took your daughter. Said you were tellin' that all over town, tonight, workin' folks up against us and that you'd finally convinced enough citizens to form a posse and come out here to arrest the whole pack o' us Rayburns. Well, it won't work, Ben. You ain't goin' to do that! We'll defend ourselves on our own land to the last man. Turn your posse around and get! The next volley we fire'll be for keeps!"

Dawson groaned. "They were lyin', Linc!" he cried. "Ask the boys with me. Tell 'em Kelsey!"

"We ain't interested in no palaver from your men," Linc answered, quickly. "When I've counted to three, we're openin' fire. Wheel around while you've still got a chance. You cain't fight us. We're well barricaded behind this fence."

While Dawson pleaded with the Rayburns, Kelsey and a couple of the others chiming in with him, Linc

Rayburn counted, slowly, loudly. When he reached the count of three, a single rifle blast cut loose. The slug sang wickedly and Kelsey's hat skittered off.

"That's the last warnin'."

"We've got to get through!" Dawson whispered. "I'm goin' to shoot back and run for it. We might make it. We've got to."

He didn't wait for an answer. He spurred the buckskin, viciously. He leaned low in the saddle and whipped out one of his silver Sixes and blasted toward the Rayburns. The horse lurched beneath him. Fire-red flashes spat from the Rayburn ground. Kelsey and the others instinctively spurred their mounts and broke into a gallop alongside of Dawson. Several of them cleared leather and fired back at the Rayburns. The night silence of the valley was now shattered by an echoing, barking fusillade of shots. The rifle fire slapped out sharper, louder than the slamming of the six-guns. Slugs buzzed and shrieked angrily over and through the Dawson group as they rode hell-for-leather, down the alley of land between the two properties, toward the pass.

Two of Dawson's men were hit in the next few seconds, flung sideways from their saddles. One of the horses went down. At the same time, Dawson saw that some of the Rayburns had anticipated such a move and had already mounted. They now rode parallel with the Dawson men, on their own side of the fence, slamming shots toward them in blistering fire, as they rode.

His face against the buckskin's mane, Dawson saw the silhouettes of three riders, the other side of the fence. He took the best aim possible, with the buckskin loping in a frightened, half-crazed gallop and

walloped out a shot. He saw one of the silhouettes of the opposing horsemen disappear.

At the same time, two more of his own men went down but Dawson kept on riding. He saw that he had only two men left now. Ugly yellow streaks of gun-flame kept lancing at them from the other side of the fence. Dawson felt a slug rip through the back of his shirt where the wind billowed it out. He cut loose with two more shots toward the fence and saw another rider disappear over there. The next time he looked up, the third one was gone. Dawson didn't know whether he'd just quit, or if he'd been hit. He didn't much care. The important thing, now, was that he and two of his men had succeeded in running the gauntlet. They were in the clear.

He didn't ease up on the buckskin until they were right into the pass, with its sheer cliffs rising up dark and forbidding on either side of him. Then he gentled his mount to a halt, dismounted and walked him for awhile, letting him blow. The others followed suit. He stopped once and listened but there was no sound of pursuit. He figured that those of his posse who had been only wounded had now managed to convince the Rayburns of the truth. Dawson twisted his mouth in a bitter smile. Now, when it was too late. Now, when the damage was done. Now when he had hardly enough men to invade the LaFarge stronghold.

He swore softly at the cunning and ingenuity of LaFarge. Nobody else would have thought of a stunt like that, to rig the Rayburns against him, stop him from going after the gang. If anybody had asked Dawson if the Rayburns would have believed such a far-fetched yarn, he'd have said no. But apparently LaFarge knew the clan, knew how keyed up they were by the feud, better than he did.

After awhile Dawson, Kelsey and the third man, Harris, rode on to the draw, at the end of which lived the old prospector, Juan Mendoza. The draw was about a mile long and a shallow stream trickled along an all but dried-out creek bed. At the end of it, where it rose up in gentle, thickly wooded slopes to the mountains proper, Dawson saw a dim light burning, in a large two-room shack.

Halfway along the draw, the three men reined in when they spotted a large area, crudely fenced in with unpeeled poles. It held several hundred head of cattle milling around restlessly, nibbling at stray tufts of grass. At the sound of the riders, some of the cattle began to bawl mournfully.

"What's cattle doin' here in this draw, Ben?" Sam Kelsey asked.

Dawson rode over to the huge pen. In the bright moonlight he got a look at the brand on some of the animals. He rode back to join the others. "That's the answer to what happened to my stock," he said. "It's also further evidence that the LaFarge bunch were the raiders. I reckon they drove the critters up here, figurin' that when their work was done around Piney Flats, they could run the beef on through the pass to Linkton and sell it there. That way they'd pick themselves up a few thousand dollars bonus."

The three rode on then to within twenty yards of the shack. Suddenly the horses stumbled and there was an unearthly clanking racket as though a million bottles and cans had been jarred off a shelf. The din was enough to wake the dead. Dawson quickly dismounted and saw that a rope, loaded with tincans, broken buckets and other pieces of junk had been strung clear across the draw at this point, about two feet off the ground.

"Quite an alarm against trespassers somebody's rigged up," Dawson said.

Just how effective it was they all saw now as the door of the shack slammed open and a figure, dimly illuminated by the lantern he carried, stepped outside.

Chapter Eight

IN THE FLICKERING glow of the lantern, Dawson saw that the man facing them was short and squat and powerfully built. His humped shoulders added to the impression of great physical power. His face, in the lantern glow, looked yellowish and was clean shaven but deeply deltaed with lines and ridges, through which his high cheekbones poked out like rocks in a leather pouch. He had an extremely low forehead and straight, short-cut black hair hung over it in bangs. In his right hand, he held an ancient .45.

"Juan?" Dawson asked. "I come as a friend. I need help. Information."

"Perhaps," the other man answered in a richly vibrant baritone. "But perhaps you three hombres come to steal Juan Mendoza's gold, eh, Senor? Until I find out the truth, you will all kindly raise your hands, eh?"

"That's not necessary," Dawson told him. "I'm the Marshal from Piney Flats and I'm out here—"

An explosion that echoed back and forth between the walls of the draw chopped off Dawson's explanation. Dust spurted several inches from his right boot. The slug hit a piece of stone, ricocheted off with a rising whine. As the echo of the shot faded, Dawson and the others thrust hands in the air.

"That cannon may be kind of old, but it sure works proper, Juan," Dawson said. "No need to cut loose with it again. Just want to ask you a few questions."

"We shall see," the old man said. "You will all turn around. With the backs toward me. Quickly."

He shuffled forward in his bare feet that looked much too large for the rest of his body, with their great, dirty, splayed toes. Dawson started to protest again but heard the hammer of the old .45 click back. He saw the granite like lines of the old man's face, the glittering wild light reflected in his eyes. "Better do like he says, boys." The three wheeled around. Dawson felt the old prospector lift his Sixes from their holsters.

"Go ahead, if it'll make you feel any better," Dawson told him. "You'll give 'em back when you learn why I'm here. Where is your daughter, Rosita, Juan? She has a job?"

"That is Juan and Rosita's business, Senor." When Dawson started to turn, he felt the muzzle of the .45 ram stiffly against his spine. "Keep your backs to me. It happens that Juan knows why you are here. I've been waiting for you. I was told also that if you make trouble for the senors for whom Rosita works, you will also make trouble for her, too. And to make sure that does not happen, I am to receive the—what you call it—the bonus for restraining you. So . . . you

will march ahead of me up to the house, Senors, where I shall make you prisoners."

This was too much for Dawson. Here, now, when he was so close to his daughter, Laurie, to be stymied by this old Mexican, drove all sense of caution from his mind. As the gun barrel left his back momentarily, he spun around and dropped, reaching for Juan's ankles. He grabbed them and spilled the old man to the ground. To the others, he shouted: "Get his gun!"

The old Mexican was incredibly strong. They thrashed about on the ground for several moments after Kelsey had grabbed up the gun that had been jolted from Juan's hand. Dawson told the others: "I'm all right. Let me take care of this monkey!"

After awhile he got his hands around Juan's leathery throat. Squeezing the larynx between his thumbs, Dawson pressed down, began banging Juan's head up and down on the rock littered floor of the draw.

"All right, talk, damn you!" Dawson ordered, desperately. "Where is your daughter and the LaFarge bunch? You're going to tell me if I have to choke every stinkin' breath out of you and bang your head to a bloody pulp. Come on. Where are they?"

Juan Mendoza struggled feebly for a moment but then his tongue began to force through his lips and his face to turn bluish in the light from the lantern that Kelsey had caught before it had fallen. Finally, as Dawson let up for a moment, he gasped: "Si, Senor! I tell! I talk!"

Dawson stopped banging the other man's head against the ground and eased the pressure on his throat, slightly. He said: "I don't want any tricks. I don't want any lies. This is important to me, Juan. That little girl the LaFarge bunch are holding is my

daughter, Laurie. Damn you, you have a daughter of your own and even if you are lowdown and ornery enough to let her go off with an owlhoot gang like that, you must still have some idea about how a father feels. I tell you this, Juan: If you send me on any false trails, we'll come back here and—"

He broke off as Juan gasped: "No, Senor! I—I swear. I tell truth. I swear by the Mother of God!"

Dawson eased the pressure of his fingers on the other man's throat almost entirely. Juan choked and spluttered and hawked a few times, then said: "I—I did not know there was any harm in what they do, Senor. They, the big man with the little beard, he tell me that it is the joke on a friend of his and—"

"Skip that," Dawson stopped him. "Where are they?"

"I am—am tryin' to tell you, Senor. You go up the slope there to the west, until you come to the old stage trail. You will have to look close. It is pretty well grown over. You turn north on the trail until you come to an abandoned Stage Station, Senor. That is where you will find them. But, I beg of you, Senor, do not hurt my Rosita. She is a good girl. She will not have hurt the little Senorita who belongs to you. She will only have taken good care of her."

"All right," Dawson said. "We'll see." He got up and got his own gun back. "Move on up to your shack and get a length of rope. Do as I say and you won't be hurt. Try to go for any weapon you might have hidden in there, or to break away and we'll load you with lead. At this stage we're through foolin', Juan. We'll shoot to kill. You want to see your daughter alive and go on pannin' dust from that creek, watch yourself."

They followed the prospector inside the cabin and found a length of rawhide, instead of rope. With this

they securely bound Juan to an old iron posted bed in one of the rooms. When they left, they turned toward the wooded slope to the west of the prospector's camp. The going was rough and rocky and the higher they climbed the thicker the underbrush grew. Long streamers of thornwood ripped Dawson's shirt practically to ribbons. They gouged deep, put burning scratches in his flesh before the group finally broke out into a slight clearing. Here Dawson dismounted and in the moonlight saw signs that told him this was the old stage road Juan had mentioned. So far the prospector apparently had given them a straight steer.

Dawson and the others turned north along the weed-choked shrubbery-overgrown trail. They didn't have too much trouble staying on it, because of the swath it cut through the tall timber on each side. But as an hour went by and they saw no sign of the Stage Station Juan had mentioned, Dawson began to wonder. He didn't know how much farther to keep on. If the old prospector had been lying, they could keep on until dawn. Perhaps in the meanwhile, Juan could work free, or some of the LaFarge bunch might visit him and untie him.

Just as Dawson was about of a mind to quit and suggest that they turn around and go back, convinced that Juan had lied, they rounded a sharp bend and saw a dull glow of light flicker between wavering shrubbery, far ahead on the left. They spurred the horses on. Dawson's heart started to pound crazily inside his chest. His teeth clamped so tightly they ached. His fists clenched until the short nails dug into his palms. He was just riding between two clusters of cottonwood trees, whose thick branches blotted out the moon at this point and plunged the trail into

pitch blackness, when another horse and rider eased out onto the trail in front of him.

"Stand!" a rough voice ordered. "Your outlines make good targets against the moonlight at the other end of this tunnel of trees. Make a wrong move and this Colt I'm holding 'll make chicken wire out o' your carcasses."

His heart bumping against the back of his teeth, Dawson said, imitating Juan Mendoza's rich baritone: "No, do not shoot, Senor! It is only me, Juan, with some friends. I have a message for my daughter."

The guard grunted. "What kind o' message? Not that it makes any difference. Boss gave orders he's not to be disturbed tonight by anybody. You'll have to come back in the mornin'. Not only that but he'll be plenty riled at you for leavin' that spot in the draw. Suppose Dawson tries to come out here?"

"No fear o' that, Senor," Dawson said. "That is another reason I have come. This Dawson did try to get through my camp. He is no more. He is dead."

The other man gasped. "Dawson dead? You killed him?"

"Si, Senor," Dawson said. "Me and my friends. If, when you take that message to Senor LaFarge, you will also take this note to my daughter, I will greatly appreciate it."

"All right," the guard said. "Bring it here."

Dawson and the others rode slowly up to him. As Dawson drew alongside, he leaped from his saddle toward the dark bulk of the other mounted figure. His left hand sought his opponent's face, moved down to cover the mouth before an outcry could be made. Hardly before the outlaw could recover from his surprise, Dawson sliced his right hand through the

air, toward the other's neck. It struck with the side of the palm. It had every ounce of strength in Dawson's compact body behind it. The guard clomped sideways stiffly from the saddle. He hit the ground and didn't move. Dawson was pretty sure that he never would again. Kelsey and Harris murmured their awed approval.

Dawson slapped the outlaw's horse sharply on the flank, sent him galloping along the trail back the way they had come. The three men then decided to lead their mounts into a thicket, out of sight, and tether them there. Then they walked on foot, through the darkness and on up the trail toward the show of light. Up close, they saw that it came from the ground floor window of a two-story log building. Light also glowed from between chinks in the logs. There was a long shed attached to the main building and one of the horses hitched there nickered as Dawson and the others moved past.

Not knowing whether or not another guard might be posted right here close to the hideout, Dawson told the others to wait. He then got down on his belly and slithered slowly and as quietly as possible through the high weeds and snake grass that had overgrown the front yard of the old Stage Station, until he reached the wall. Here he straightened up and with his back flat against the logs, eased along until he reached the window.

The sound of rising and falling voices had been audible to Dawson before, but, now, close to the window, he became aware that one of the voices was a woman's. It was shrill with mingled fear and anger as it said: "Leave me alone, you big, hulking bully! My father will kill you for this. You promised no harm would come to me!"

Frenchy LaFarge's low, rumbling voice answered: "True! And I'm keepin' that promise, honey. I ain't goin' to hurt you, I swear. What harm is there in a little kiss or two? Now, stop actin' like a clawin' little hellcat and come here to me, damn you!"

There was the sound of scuffling and a muffled scream. Dawson took a chance and poked his head around the lighted edge of the window frame and peered inside. It was a big room, half filled with dusty, broken, heavy furniture. On one side was a desk where the stage station business had once been conducted. A lighted oil lamp stood upon this. At one end of the room was what was left of an old lunch counter, littered now, with trash. A girl, about twenty, leaned back against this counter, her elbows hooked over it. She wore a skirt and blouse made out of old flour-sacking, but the loose fitting material failed to hide the obvious ripeness of her young figure. Thick, slightly wavy black hair cascaded around her shoulders to frame the pretty oval of her face. She had a short, snubby nose, a deep-lipped, petulant looking mouth and enormous dark eyes. She was barefoot and her legs, below the hem of the flour-sack skirt, were brown and shapely.

"If you touch me again, you—you ugly, bearded monster," Rosita Mendoza told Frenchy LaFarge, "I'll claw your eyes out!" But the fear was sharp in her voice.

LaFarge laughed, boomingly. He smeared his great, white, soft looking hand across his mouth, took a step closer to the girl. "Hell, you really are a little spitfire, ain't you? But I've always liked a gal with lots of spirit."

The girl lithely twisted to one side as LaFarge lunged toward her. He caught her by the wrist and

yanked her close to him. She began to whimper, then. "Please, Senor LaFarge," she pleaded. "Up until tonight you have been a gentleman. You've kept your men from bothering me. Why have you changed all of a sudden? What has made you like this?"

"That's more like it, sweetheart," LaFarge told her. "I didn't think it'd take long to tame you. As for your question, I ain't changed. I've had my eye on you from the beginning. Why I hired you in the first place, when I spotted you outside o' Juan's shack when we went through the draw. We didn't really need anyone to take care o' Dawson's brat, but when I saw you I decided maybe it would be more convenient to have a woman to look after her. At the same time you'd be here, be around when I wanted you. Well, that time has come. And I won't need you here any more after tonight. We fixed it so Dawson'd get killed by those crazy, feudin' ranchers. Tomorrow we can get rid of his kid."

As LaFarge tried to pin the girl in an embrace, she suddenly reached up and raked his cheek with her fingernails. At the same time, she kicked him smartly in the shin. With a cry of pain and rage, LaFarge let her go and she slipped away from him. But he cut her off before she could get to the door.

Breathing heavily, dabbing with his fingertips at the bloody scratches on his cheek, a long lock of his black and grease-shiny hair tumbled down over one eye, LaFarge started toward the girl again. He said: "Take it easy, you pretty little Mexican. That wasn't nice at all. That hurt. You're goin' to pay for that. Pay plenty!"

This time when he lunged at her again, Rosita Mendoza ducked under the giant's long reaching arms. She darted toward the door.

At the same time, Dawson left his post at the window, moved down toward the door, as Kelsey and Harris joined him. He drew one of his Sixes, gripped it tightly. He saw the door of the building burst open and Rosita rush out. He heard LaFarge's bellow of frustrated rage and then he, too, came hurtling out through the doorway. He stopped just outside, his head swiveling, his eyes squinting into the darkness, trying to find out which way the girl had run. That was when Dawson struck. He swung the heavy barrel of his sixgun up and then down in a viciously powerful arc. It was a blow hard enough to kill an ordinary man. He didn't know whether it had finished LaFarge or not. He didn't much care. He had to make sure that the big man would be out of the way for some time. LaFarge pitched forward stiff and heavy as a felled oak. He didn't move.

Dawson wheeled around and saw the girl, cringing by a thicket, a few feet away. He put his finger over his lips in a signal for silence, hurried toward her, whispering: "Easy, Rosita. We're friends. We won't hurt you. I'm Ben Dawson the little girl's father. We've got to help each other."

Her eyes big with fear, her breathing so ragged she could hardly speak, she gasped: "Thank you, Senor. I—I'll do anything I can to help. When I—I took the job I did not know the little girl was kidnapped, I swear."

"Never mind that. Is she all right? She hasn't been hurt? She isn't sick or anything?" Dawson's hands gripped the girl's upper arms.

She shook her head. "No, Senor. She is fine. I—I have taken good care of her. No harm has been done her. She is sleeping, now."

"Where? Where have they got her?"

She pointed past him, toward the building. "In there. Upstairs. In the back room."

Dawson thought for a moment. "Where are the others? The rest of the gang?"

"They are on the second floor, too, Senor, in two other rooms, sleeping."

"Is there a window in the room where Laurie is? If so, is there any way of climbing up to it?"

"Yes. It will be easy. There is a wood shed right under the window."

"Good," he said. "Let's all go back there. Maybe we can slip her out before any of them awake. Let's try it."

The words were no sooner out of Dawson's mouth than a figure blocked the light pouring from the opened front doorway of the house. He was tall, broad-shouldered and he was wearing only a shirt. The long tails flapped about his muscular bare legs. Dawson saw that it was MacQueen. He was carrying a gun. The girl, Rosita, saw MacQueen at the same time and a small scream escaped her throat before she could bottle it up.

MacQueen said: "Who's that? What the hell's goin' on out there?" Then he glanced down and saw the fallen figure of LaFarge. He swore.

"Drop that gun, MacQueen!" Dawson told him in a hoarse whisper. "And be quiet."

"Dawson!" MacQueen gasped. His gun hand jerked. He fired from the hip. But a fraction of a second before flame and smoke spewed from the weapon, Dawson whipped up his own sixgun and squeezed the trigger. The two shots were so close together they sounded almost like one. MacQueen's slug riddled through Dawson's thick white hair. Then he heard MacQueen's gun clatter to the door step. The lanky

man stood there for a moment, clutching his stomach with both hands. He was an almost ludicrous figure, clad only in a shirt, standing there barelegged, flat-footed. Then he folded, slowly and rolled over onto one side, half blocking the doorway.

Dawson grabbed Rosita's arm, slung her toward the corner of the house. "That shot'll wake 'em all!" he told her. "The whole pack'll come plunging down those stairs, now. Get around back, climb up to the window of Laurie's room and get her out. You'll find horses tethered off the side of the trail, about a hundred yards south of here. Take Laurie into Piney Flats. I'll pay you plenty if you get her out of here, safely! Hurry! We'll keep the gang occupied down here, while you do that!"

He saw Rosita disappear into the darkness toward a corner of the building and turned to the others. He said, quietly: "Even with three of them out of the way, we're still outnumbered. And they've got the advantage of the house for protection. This is going to be rugged. Kelsey, you and Harris are both family men. If you wanted to back out, it's still not too late and I wouldn't blame you."

Kelsey said: "We've come this far with you, Ben. What makes you think we'd hightail out and leave you in a tight, now?"

"Me, I've got a kid of my own about Laurie's age," Harris told him. "I know what this means to you. Let's stop jawin'. Here they come!"

Through the doorway of the building, they saw bare legs appear halfway down the stairs, inside. Dawson said: "Let a couple of them reach the bottom steps before we start blasting."

They did that. They saw that they were Ives and Devlin. Both were clutching .44's. Dawson, Kelsey

and Harris cut loose just as the sleepy-eyed Ives and Devlin raised their guns. The three shots rang out almost simultaneously. A black hole appeared suddenly in Devlin's forehead. His eyes walled and he slapped the back of his hand against the wound, as though at a bothersome mosquito. He twisted half around and collapsed on the bottom step.

Ives looked down dazedly at the wound in his chest. His right hand dropped the .44. His left hand clawed at the wound and ribbons of crimson pushed out between his fingers and he fell against the wall and slid down it.

Behind those two, another man was plunging down the stairs so fast he couldn't stop. He tripped over Ives' body and went sprawling. His gun skittered from his hand. Sam Kelsey shot him through the top of the head as he lay there.

The next instant there was the sound of windows being slammed open over the heads of the Dawson group. Dawson shouted: "We're standing right in the light from the doorway. Get out of it!" He half shoved Kelsey and Harris in front of him, out of the flood of light falling from the doorway.

At the same time, all three wheeled and fired at the windows over the door. A man came tumbling down from one of the windows, thudded to the ground. But two shots immediately flashed from another window. Dawson felt Kelsey stumble against him and go down, just as they reached the safety of darkness. He heard Harris swear and a sick moaning sound break from his throat and Harris, too, plunged to the ground, with a slug in his back.

Dawson flung himself down into a patch of weeds, wriggled toward a clump of bushes and an old log behind them. Sprawled behind the log, he pumped

two shots toward the upstairs windows of the building. He ducked as answering gunfire roared back. He heard the slugs slam into the log. He emptied his other sixgun at the windows, then reloaded. He prayed that even if he didn't get any of the men still upstairs, and the odds were against that, with him shooting at darkened windows, that at least he'd keep them occupied until Rosita got Laurie out of the back room window and away.

When Dawson reloaded and opened fire again, the men at the window blasted back. Powder smoke rolled thick and black through the slanting light from the doorway of the building. But most of the shooting was wasted lead and powder. Dawson hadn't received a scratch, so far. And he felt fairly certain that unless he'd been crazy lucky, he hadn't winged any of the three men left in the building either. It was a deadlock, with a lot of noise, a lot of excitement, but no real damage done.

Suddenly, though, all that changed. A single shot larruped from the upstairs window. Instantly, as he had been doing right along, Dawson fired one of his own guns back at that stab of gun blaze, using it as a target. The next two shots caught him completely by surprise. One came from his left, one from his right—and from ground level. He realized immediately what had happened. Three men were still alive in the house. Two of them had climbed out a window at each end of the building, dropped to the ground and were hemming him in.

There was little time for Dawson to ponder all angles of the situation. He had to act fast. He gave a little scream of pain, thrashed around in the thicket behind the log and then lay still. Four more shots thrashed through the nearby grass and branches. A

couple of them came hair-raisingly close; one of them ticking leather from Dawson's boot. But he forced himself to keep control, not to move. He held his breath and listened.

There was no sound for a moment. Then he recognized Oley Olson's voice as he shouted: "Be careful, you hombres. He might be just playin' possum."

From the upstairs window of the stage station, Crimp Duval called: "I don't think so. We really poured it to him, that time. But be careful anyhow, just to make sure. You two stay where you are until I get down there."

Dawson lay on his belly, both arms resting on their elbows, his eyes and guns aimed toward the long oblong of light that fell from the doorway of the building. Every once in awhile, he silently twisted his head around to watch the corner of the building now behind him. He didn't have to wait long. Something suddenly moved around the edge of the doorframe.

Dawson's nerves and muscles jumped and he had trouble controlling his trigger fingers. He almost fell for the trick but a moment later saw that the thing that had appeared in the doorway was a Stetson poked out on the end of a gun barrel. When it drew no fire, Crimp Duval's stocky figure slowly emerged. He hugged the doorframe tightly, tensed and ready to leap back inside at the first crack of gunfire. But it didn't come. Dawson forced himself to wait.

As the seconds ticked past, Duval grew bolder. He stepped right out into the swatch of light from the door. Dawson could see his ugly pock-marked features, as he peered toward him. At the same signal, Dawson heard the footsteps of the man at the corner of the building, behind him, pounding to join the

others. He forced himself to ignore that man, forget him for a moment.

With both guns, he took steady, careful aim on the men standing in the doorway light and then triggered. Duval and Olson both yelped in surprise. Olson's gun let out its blast but the slug pounded harmlessly into the log wall of the building as Olson's arm flung up in a reflex action. Dawson got one glimpse of Olson's plump, florid face, with a gaping, bloody hole where his nose should have been. His big, moronic eyes rolled wildly and then he pitched headlong. At the same time, Crimp Duval grabbed his gun-arm with his free hand. Wincing with pain, he half bent over.

Duval hollered: "Get him, Rawls! The sneaky law-bastard tricked us!" He hammered out two quick shots, one of them lancing under Dawson's left arm. It tore a streak of white hot pain along his ribs. Then Dawson triggered again and saw Duval spin like a dervish. His Colt flying, he fell to the ground.

Dawson was on his feet now. He wheeled around to face Simon Rawls, advancing on him from behind, shooting wildly. Dawson couldn't see Rawls. All he could see was the fiery muzzle-flash from his belching irons. The hammer of one of his own sixes clicked on an empty chamber and he dropped the weapon immediately. He went into a crouch and fanning the hammer of the remaining weapon, slashed the six shots from the newly loaded gun toward Rawls' powder-flashes. He moved the gun in an upward and then a sideways movement as he shot, forming a cross of fire, not knowing the exact location of Simon Rawls behind the bullet-flame.

When the six shots faded into silence, there was no more shooting. There was utter quiet. A silence so

thick after the constant din of gunblasts that it hurt Dawson's ears, strung his nerves so tight he wanted to scream. Then he saw Rawls' lanky, scarecrow figure run staggering into the light flowing from the doorway. Rawls' ferret-like face was a twisted gargoyle mask of pain. He shrieked something unintelligible. He ran like a man blinded and pursued by Satan, himself. Even when he came to the pile of bodies sprawled in front of the stage station doorway, he tried to keep running. He tripped over them and fell heavily. His rising shriek of agony was cut off in his teeth as he jarred to the ground. The silence after that was complete.

On shaking legs, his breathing ragged and hurting deep in his chest, Dawson walked toward the door of the building. He stepped gingerly over the pile of bodies in the doorway light. His stomach turned at the smell of death already issuing from them as he saw a june bug crawling over MacQueen's dead and staring eyeball. He went inside and tiredly climbed the stairs to the second floor.

He moved straight to the doorway of a room at the back, flung it open and looked inside. Moonlight poured in the window. Dawson became aware of woman scent in the room. He saw two piles of torn and grimy looking blankets laid out on the floor in pallets, and knew that this was the room where Laurie had been held prisoner, where she'd slept with Rosita Mendoza. At the same time, he glanced toward the window. He saw that it was open and breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently Rosita had gotten Laurie safely out of the building, was now on the way back to Piney Flats with her.

A wonderful feeling of relief rose and swelled inside of him, at this. The desire to see his daughter

and hold her in his arms once again now that this horrible nightmare of events was just about over, grew in him like an aching fever. He thought that if he hurried, he might easily catch up with Laurie and Rosita before they got back to town. He looked in the other rooms of the second floor but there was none of the gang left up here. These rooms were empty except for scattered packing crates which had been used as tables and chairs. On some of these, playing cards were scattered, fanned out. There were several empty whiskey bottles on the floor, along with more pallets, made up of patch quilts and old blankets.

But it was the whiskey bottles that caught Dawson's attention. Most of them were the plain looking bottles that had held the cheap brands of whiskey sold in the Golden Glow. But two bottles were different. They were ornately shaped decanters and fancily labeled, bottles that had held an expensive brand of liquor, especially imported from the East. Dawson had seen only one other bottle like those. He'd seen it in Mark Guthridge's office, when the mayor had offered him a drink.

Chapter Nine

FROM BELOW Dawson suddenly there came a crash and the tingle of broken glass. Then there was the sound of heavy footsteps down there. Dawson froze, his heart leaping. The pulses in his throat and wrists hammered crazily. He listened and the sound of someone moving around downstairs was unmistakable now.

At the same time, Dawson realized that if he had heard the person down below moving around, it was quite possible that his own movements up here had been audible. That deduction was verified a few seconds later when Frenchy LaFarge's voice boomed: "I know you're up there, Dawson! Come on down. This time you won't have the advantage of bein' able to skull me when I ain't lookin'!"

Dawson didn't answer. He stood, leaning against the wall of the second floor. While he tried to figure what to do, he reloaded his sixes. Then the smell of thick oily black smoke and flame began to drift up the stairwell. He knew now what the crash of broken glass had been. LaFarge had smashed the kerosene lamp against the wall and set the old log building aflame.

From the room behind Dawson smoke suddenly rose thickly through the loose flooring. The flick-

ering light of the flames in the room below flashed out toward the stairs and mounted upward in an eerie glow. Dawson knew that in a matter of a few minutes, the whole rotten old dried log building would be an inferno. He couldn't waste any time getting out of it. He ran, panic-stricken toward the stairs and started down. Halfway, he stopped, realizing that was probably what LaFarge was waiting for him to do. If he continued on down, the giant outlaw would pick him off just as Dawson and his friends had picked-off the others when they'd done the same thing. He jerked to a halt and backed up the stairs to the second floor again.

He raced into the back room with the open window, just as a great burst of fire flashed through the rotting wood of one of the other rooms. It threw a cloud of thick black smoke rolling out into the hallway. Dawson ran to the window, holstering his guns. He climbed out backward, hung by his hands for a moment and then dropped. Hitting the ground, his feet stung painfully through the boot soles; his legs buckled and he went down onto his hands and knees. He got up a little dazedly and started to look around. Just as he did that, something that felt like a sledgehammer slammed against the side of his head. Dawson went spinning for half a dozen paces and then sprawled onto his back in the dirt behind the stage station. His ears rang. The sky overhead and the lowhanging stars seemed to revolve in his dazed vision, along with the stage station building, now a mass of flames and pouring smoke on one whole side.

Over the crackling of the fire, Dawson heard LaFarge's deep voice shout: "I figured you'd try to slip out the back of the building. I was here waitin'

for you. Now you're goin' to pay for bustin' up my bunch and goin' hog-wild with those Sixes o' yours. I'm goin' to make you die an inch at a time. I'm goin' to start shootin' at your feet and work my way up. When I'm finished, you'll be so loaded with lead it'll take five men to carry you away."

Dawson's vision cleared and he saw LaFarge standing about ten feet away, a pair of Colts filling his huge white hands. In the flickering, ghostly glow from the flaming building, Frenchy LaFarge looked like some monstrous figure out of a nightmare. His long, greasy black hair was a blood-crusting tangle all over his head. Hanks of it fell down on each side of his eyes. He was ghastly pale from the blow on the head Dawson had given him earlier, the blow that would have finished any ordinary man. His full, sensuous mouth was drawn back at the corners in a horrible grimace. His teeth were skull white and long and pointed as a cannibal's. Deep in their sockets, his black eyes blazed madly, catching and throwing off glints of fireglow. Setting this picture off in gruesome incongruity, was the little dab of pointed black beard below his snarling mouth.

Just as he finished talking, LaFarge cut loose with both Colts. Sucking in his breath, Dawson rolled at the same time. One of the slugs knocked off a boot-heel. The impact numbed his whole boot. In that second Dawson knew what it was to die. At such close range, in the light of the now roaring fire from the building, he knew that LaFarge couldn't miss him. Now that he was trying to escape, the big man would no longer toy with him. He'd put the next two slugs into vital parts of his body. Dawson felt all the soul-sickness and the desperate almost insane urge to live a little longer that strikes all in the last few

seconds of life. Through his mind flashed things he had always wanted to do, would now never be able to. There was a vision of what Laurie would look like, grown up. There was aching sorrow that he would never live to see that.

He heard LaFarge's Colts roar, their crash of sound loud over the crackle of the fire. But miraculously no bullet thudded into his squirming, rolling body. He twisted his head and saw what had at the last minute saved him from the gunman's thundering irons. A cloud of black smoke, borne on the night breeze, rolled around the building at that exact moment, engulfing LaFarge. He stood there, blinded, spluttering with rage and partial suffocation from the thick, rolling smoke.

In this moment of temporary safety, Dawson lurched to his feet and staggered backward, drawing his own guns. He thumbed back the hammers and triggered. The Sixes bucked against the heels of his hands. When their flash and flame cleared, he saw that LaFarge still stood. Now the smoke had blown away from around the giant. He smeared the back of his hand against his smarting eyes, roaring blue oaths. He dropped into a crouch.

For an eternally long second, the two men stood there in the orange flash and glare from the burning building, facing each other with drawn guns. That picture was forever etched into Dawson's mind. As though he was another person witnessing but not participating in this grim and deadly pageant, he could see himself and LaFarge, like two blood-mad animals at bay, waiting to kill or be killed. But the picture was only like a lightning flash through his brain. Then reality burst back over him as his own guns and LaFarge's thundered simultaneously. Four

shots racketed together into the fire-bright night. At the split second of firing, Dawson hurled himself to the right. One of LaFarge's slugs struck his left hand gun, knocking it flying from his hand. His hand and lower arm lost all feeling to the elbow.

At the same time, though, Dawson saw the giant Frenchman take two staggering steps toward him, saw his gunhands drop. He knew that LaFarge had been hit solidly. Right then, Dawson decided that if it was at all possible, he wanted to take LaFarge alive, at least see him hang for the dirty work he and his bunch had committed. Dawson cut his next two shots at the Colts dropping from LaFarge's big white hands. The Colts were flung far to each side. LaFarge raised his hands, both of them bleeding, and stared down at them stupidly for a second. Then he dropped them limply to his sides and stumbled on toward Dawson.

Dawson took a backward step, holding his remaining gun hip-high. He glanced down at the cylinder. He figured he had only two shots left. There wouldn't be time to reload before LaFarge reached him. He said, his voice breaking:

"Don't come any closer, Frenchy. Don't be a fool! You're finished. You're badly wounded." He watched blood blossom over the front of the other man's shirt, just above the waist, with two closely spaced black holes in the center of the stain. "I want to take you alive if you'll give me the chance. Stand still and throw your hands up. Don't be loco, Frenchy!"

LaFarge didn't seem to hear. He shook his huge tangle-haired head. He kept coming toward Dawson on deliberate, lumbering steps. He raised one hand, closed it into a fist and dug it into the wounds at his stomach. Closer, now, Dawson saw that LaFarge's

eyes were rolled almost back into his head. Nothing but the whites showed. LaFarge's lips broke open and he tried to say something, but no sound came out, only a bubbling froth of blood.

"I said, stay back!" Dawson shouted, his hair crawling. "I don't want to shoot down a wounded man, defenseless! But you're giving me no choice. Get back, you big dumb galoot!"

LaFarge kept coming. He reached out toward Dawson with both big hands, no longer white, but crimson-smeared, now. He was only about six steps away. Dawson could wait no longer. He raised the sixgun, took deliberate aim and slammed a slug straight toward LaFarge's chest at the heart. The big man stopped as though he'd run into a brick wall. Another scarlet flower bloomed over his left breast, red and shiny and ugly in the fire light. But LaFarge was only stopped temporarily. His huge bulk lumbered forward once again, leaning toward Dawson like a man walking against a high wind. He towered over Dawson, his hands reaching toward the marshal.

Dawson wanted to back up but his legs suddenly seemed frozen. He was shocked motionless by the spectacle of this man, carrying enough lead in his vital parts to have stopped three or four men, still lunging toward him. He had to do something. He knew that once those giant paws fastened on him in a death grip, he'd never get free.

He raised the gun again and watched in fascinated horror at the spurt of ugly flame from the muzzle, blending into the brightness from the burning building. He watched the little puff of smoke that followed. His eyes on LaFarge's face, he suddenly saw that now, where the owlhoot leader's right eye should

have been, there was nothing but a blackly bloody empty socket.

That final piece of greasy lead jolted squarely into his brain was too much for even LaFarge's mighty constitution. He toppled and his fingertips raked and clawed the front of Dawson's already tattered shirt as he fell. When his huge hulk hit the ground it seemed for a split second to Dawson as though the very earth shook. He stood over the fallen behemoth of a man, his breath rasping wildly in his throat. He watched LaFarge make one last convulsive attempt to rise and then stiffen and lie still.

"God!" Dawson gasped, in awed admiration. "What a shame! What a waste of all that power and strength and determination! On the right side of the law. . . ."

Dawson's words trailed off. He jumped as a wall of the burning stage station seared through, broke loose and crashed to the ground with a huge shower of flying sparks and clouds of billowing black smoke.

He turned slowly and walked around to the shed next to the building. He set free all the rearing, wild-eyed horses hitched there, except one. This one he quieted and was just leading away, when a scream sounded over the roaring of the burning building. Dawson wheeled around, saw one of the pile of bodies in front of the stage station doorway raise up on its hands, shout something incoherent at him and then collapse again.

"Hell, one of 'em's still alive back there. Can't let him be burned alive when that building finally collapses," Dawson said.

He led the big black he'd separated from the rest a good distance from the fire and hitched him to a tree stump and rushed back to the flaming stage station. Now, as the wounded man awkwardly raised

his head, Dawson saw that it was MacQueen who was still living. He grabbed him by the back of the shirt and dragged him through the weeds, some distance from the fire, squatted down beside him.

MacQueen was deathly pale and his eyes were dully glazed with pain as he stared up at Dawson. His lips moved and some blood spilled out as he said, hoarsely: "You hombres would never have whipped us if you hadn't come sneakin' around in the middle of the night, caught us all asleep! I—I allus knew all lawmen were cowards hidin' behind their badges, wouldn't know how to shoot it out fair and square."

For a moment anger rose in Dawson, then the grim humor of this struck him. He laughed. "That sounds good comin' from the likes o' you, MacQueen. It was different when you and your owlhoot pards raided my spread in the middle of the night, wasn't it? A bunch o' big brave gunnies you all were, killin' a woman and kidnappin' a child. Any more o' that kind o' talk, mister and I'll leave you here to die. I'll leave your ornery carcass for the buzzards to find in the mornin'."

MacQueen groaned and pressed his hand over the wound in his belly. He sagged back onto the ground and passed out again. Quickly, Dawson raised the other man's shirt and looked at the bloody, bluishly puckered hole in the tall outlaw's hairy stomach. Blood kept pulsing out of it. "Bleed to death, soon, if I don't stop it up," Dawson said.

He ripped off part of MacQueen's shirt tail, wadded it up thickly and placed it over the bleeding gunshot wound. Then he ripped more material from the shirt and tied it over the crude padding in the bandage. When he finished, MacQueen's eyes flickered open again.

"MacQueen," Dawson told him. "You're hurt pretty bad but not bad enough to die if you get a saw-bones' attention before morning. I'm goin' to give you a choice to make. You're goin' to give me straight answers to a few questions. If you don't, I'm goin' to leave you here to die."

"Go to hell, lawman," MacQueen muttered.

Dawson shook him. "Don't play tough," he said. "Listen to me. Where'd that fancy brand of Eastern liquor come from that I saw back there in the stage station? Who gave that liquor to LaFarge?"

MacQueen hesitated, then said: "I'll answer that. What difference does it make? Guthridge, the owner of the hotel, gave it to us, gave it to Frenchy, as a gift. Why?"

"That's what I want to know—why? Why would the mayor of the town be givin' expensive Eastern whiskey to the leader of a bunch of strange, out-of-town gunnies?"

MacQueen groaned. Through his teeth, he said, defiantly: "We were guests at his hotel, weren't we? Maybe he just appreciated our business."

Dawson shook the wounded man again until his eyes rolled in his white face. "Don't get flip," he said. "Give me straight answers. It was Guthridge who hired your outfit, wasn't it? He was the one who paid you to raid my ranch, hoping that would not only not stop me from interfering with the feud, but would cause me to make it even hotter. That was the idea, wasn't it?"

When MacQueen didn't answer, Dawson looked off into the darkness. At the moment of seeing that fancy whiskey bottle, back at the stage station, the full truth of what it meant had not dawned upon him. It was such a fantastic fact to have to accept.

But now he remembered what Sam Kelsey had said about the rumors of somebody buying up ranches adjoining the Rayburn-Maclane spreads and trying to buy out those two, also. He knew now that those rumors were true.

A lot of things began to fit into place, now, although they were still difficult to believe of a man like Mark Guthridge, a man who had won the respect and admiration of everybody in Piney Flats. Dawson remembered Guthridge's argument with Al Cato, over Cato wanting more money "for a job he'd done for Guthridge." Dawson had a pretty good idea now, what that job had been. It had been to murder old man Rayburn and frame the kill to look as though Mitch Maclane had done it.

Dawson marveled at how clever Guthridge had been about all this, how he'd pretended to side the marshal in trying to stop the feud. Doing that, he'd killed two birds with one stone. He'd fooled Dawson completely just in case he might ever get some slight suspicion that Guthridge was the one behind the feud. At the same time by killing one of the Rayburns, himself, and knowing that they wouldn't know if it had been his or Dawson's shot that had done it, Guthridge had helped to promote more violence, fast.

Then, when the feud showed signs of dying out, Guthridge had started it up again by paying the LaFarge bunch to raid Dawson's ranch. All of that was an awful lot to accept about Guthridge. For one crazy moment, he hoped that he was all wrong. He thought that maybe he was indulging in wild flights of fancy. He turned back to MacQueen, said softly: "Guthridge hired your bunch, didn't he, Mac-

Queen? You might as well tell the truth. I know it, anyhow."

"What kind o' hombre you think I am to give evidence against my friends?" MacQueen asked angrily.

Dawson, though, could tell by the look on MacQueen's face, that he'd stated the truth. He no longer doubted. "Oh, the code of the owlhoot, eh?" Dawson said, sarcastically. "The code of a gnat-brained idiot, I'd call it. What friends? Your whole bunch is salivated. You're the only one still breathin'. The only one you'd hurt would be Guthridge. He a pard o' yours, mister? He, personally, ever do anything for you? You choosin' to die out here for a slickster who sits back and cleans his fingernails while men like you do his dirty work for him? You seemed a heap smarter'n that, MacQueen. Listen, if you'll testify against him when we get back to town, I'll try my best to keep them from hangin' you, to get you off with a jail sentence."

MacQueen's thin, bearded face twisted with pain. He groaned out loud as spasms of torture struck at his innards. Finally he rasped: "All right, lawman. What you want to know? What you want me to tell you?"

"Did Guthridge hire you and LaFarge and the rest to raid the Diamond D, kidnap my daughter? Was it on his orders?"

"Of course."

"Just wanted to get it all straight, once and for all. Now, do you know for a fact if Guthridge was the one who started the feud, had old Cal Rayburn murdered, to do that?"

"Yuh," MacQueen grunted. "Frenchy was in his office when Guthridge hired that drunken old ex-gunnie, Al Cato. Frenchy told us about it."

"Good," Dawson said, exuberantly. "What was La-Farge gettin' out o' this deal? It was a little out o' his usual line, wasn't it?"

"Guthridge told Frenchy that after it was all over he'd hire him to ramrod the combined Maclane-Rayburn spreads and pay him big money to do that. That—that was just what Frenchy was lookin' for. He'd been gettin' a little tired of owlhootin' lately, jumpin' from one part o' the country to another. He had a hankerin' to settle down. Course, Guthridge was payin' us all some good sized cash for this work, too."

"That about does it, I guess," Dawson said. "Now, let's get ridin'."

"Ridin'?" MacQueen gasped. "In my shape? That'll do me in!"

"Mebbe you'd rather walk?" Dawson said coldly. "Stop feelin' sorry for yourself, badman, and git up. You're too ornery to die any way except by hangin'."

"Hey, you said there wouldn't be any rope party," MacQueen whined, all fight gone out of him. "If I'd—"

"That's right and I'll stick to my word. But you're still a young man, MacQueen. Some day you'll wind up stretchin' a rope, somewhere, somehow. A prison term never teaches your breed a lesson. When you get out you'll go right back to the crooked trail."

He helped the wounded man to his feet, tore off another strip of his shirt and used it to bind his wrists tightly behind him. Then he helped support MacQueen until they reached the big black. It took some doing to get the lanky law-breaker up onto the saddle but Dawson finally made it. He mounted behind him and dug in his spurs and started back along the old coach trail the way he'd come earlier.

They hadn't gone very far when in a leaf-dappled

moonlit spot up ahead of them, Dawson saw something crawling along the trail. As they drew closer, he said to MacQueen: "What's that up ahead? An injured animal?"

"Looks purty big for that," MacQueen answered. "Looks more like a person."

And then they were right on top of it and Dawson reined in. He swung down from the black and saw that crawling, dragging herself along the trail, was Rosita Mendoza. With a little cry of fear, Dawson kneeled beside her. He turned the girl over. Bright red stained the front of her flour-sack blouse. Her once shiny black hair was now a snarled, blood crusted mess. One of her eyes was blackened and her lips were puffed. Her face looked drawn and waxen in the moonlight.

"Rosita!" Dawson gasped. "What—what happened? Where—where's Laurie? I—I thought you got her—"

"I did," the girl said weakly. Her eyes looked up tiredly at Dawson. They looked blank, as though she wasn't really looking at him at all. "Senor Dawson, I tried my—my best. I took the child from the room, out through the window, as you said. We ran down the trail, looking for the hidden horses you spoke about. But we never got to them. One—one of *them* saw us leave. He came after us, caught us. He—what he did to me, Senor—well, you can see! He—"

"Laurie!" Dawson cut in. His voice was torn with anguish. "Where is she?"

"He took her, the outlaw, Senor," Rosita managed, weakly. "He rode off with her."

Dawson cried: "I—I don't understand. I thought they were all dead, except MacQueen. Who was he, MacQueen? Who was left?"

"How would I know," he answered gruffly. "I was

one of the first ones you conked out. You know the names o' the ones you shot?"

Dawson reeled them off. He said: "I thought all of you except one man left to guard Laurie, man named Demarest, were all at the hotel earlier, tonight, at the poker game."

"Uh-uh. Sanburn, who does the cookin' for us, stayed up here with Demarest. Little sandy-haired runt. He was nursin' a wounded arm from the gunfight at your spread and wasn't feelin' so good. He didn't head for town with the rest of 'em. Sounds like Sanburn must've spotted this Rosita and the kid goin' out the window, went after 'em."

His shoulders drooping with despair, Dawson moved back to the girl lying on the trail. He raised her head and spoke to her again but saw that she was unconscious now. He realized that his buckskin was probably still tethered where he had hidden him. He found the place and brought the horse back. He lifted Rosita across the saddle of the buckskin, then mounted himself. Leading the black, with MacQueen riding it, they started on again.

Dawn was streaking grayly through the draw when they reached old Juan Mendoza's cabin. The old prospector was asleep, tied to the bed the way Dawson had left him. Swiftly, Dawson told him all that had happened. He broke the news that his daughter was badly hurt and went out with the old man to help bring her in. As he lifted Rosita's unconscious figure down from the horse, Juan stood there, cradling her in his arms. He rocked her, crooned to her, as though she was still a baby. Tears bumped over his lined and leathery face.

He turned sadly to Dawson. "Aieeee! I should have known. There is no such thing as the easy

money, Senor. The only good gold is that which we work for. Thieves' gold is fools' gold. I should have known better!"

Dawson said: "We all make mistakes, Juan. Perhaps she is not too badly hurt. I believe you will be able to nurse her back to good health."

"*Si, Si!*" Juan then turned toward MacQueen who was hunched up on the saddle of the black. His face was gray, still tight with pain and his shirt front, the tatters that was left of it, were stiff and brown with dried blood. Juan started toward him. "Was he the one! I will kill! I will tear out his heart and his filthy bowels with my bare hands! I'll—"

Dawson put his hand on the Mexican's arm. "Easy, Juan. That wouldn't help Rosita any. That isn't the man who hurt her, anyhow."

Juan calmed a little, but he yanked away from Dawson's hand and kept walking toward MacQueen. He said: "He still is one of them. I—I hate them all for this!" He stepped close to MacQueen and spat full into his face. MacQueen swore softly and ducked his head to avoid any further attack.

Juan turned and stumbling a little, with the burden of the unconscious girl still in his arms, started toward his shack. Dawson watched him go, his own heart wrenching, thinking about Laurie. He had to find her. He thought there was some chance that the outlaw, Sanburn, might have taken her on in to Piney Flats. It was some small hope, at least. He remounted the buckskin, and leading the black, started at a faster pace, out of the draw toward the pass.

The sun was well up, when they emerged from the pass and moved into the narrow alley of land between the Maclane and Rayburn fences. When they

came to a break in the Rayburn fence, Dawson turned in there. He rode toward the Rayburn ranch buildings in the distance.

Chapter Ten

JUST BEFORE he reached the Rayburn main ranch buildings, Dawson saw Linc, Marsh and Zane Rayburn and a couple of their hands, carrying spades and pickaxes. They were coming from a small fence-surrounded cemetery, toward where their horses were ground-hitched. Their faces were long and solemn. Each of the Rayburns was dressed in starched clean levis and blue workshirts. The collars were buttoned tight around their necks. They stopped and watched Dawson riding toward them, leading the black with MacQueen mounted on it. They looked sheepish and curious as Dawson reined in beside them.

"I don't want any trouble," Dawson said curtly. He jerked his thumb at MacQueen. "This gent's got some important palaver to make to you and your clan, Linc. You ready to listen?"

Linc Rayburn looked as though he hadn't slept very much. His ordinarily gaunt face was now as haggard as a corpse's, long dead. He said: "We won't make any more trouble for you, Ben. Reckon we made a lot last night. We paid for it, though. Just got through tossin' dirt on three o' my top hands.

The others in your posse pretty much convinced us that we'd made a bad mistake. Where's the rest o' that scurvy LaFarge bunch? What happened to 'em? I'd like to have a few private words with that big ape who leads 'em, for settin' us onto y'all, last evenin'."

"That ain't hardly possible. This here character is the only one—no, one of the two that's left. I—don't know where the other one is. He's got Laurie."

Swiftly, then, Dawson recounted all that had happened. After that he had MacQueen tell them about Guthridge and how he'd hired Al Cato to kill Cal Rayburn to make it look as though Mitch Maclane had done it. He made him tell the Rayburns how Guthridge had also hired them to burn out the Diamond D, slaughter the Dawson hands and kidnap Laurie, all as part of the plot and why he had done all that.

While this was going on, the faces of the Rayburn men grew bleak and ugly with mingled shame and anger. When they'd heard the whole story, red-haired Marsh Rayburn exploded: "That money-grubbin' stinkcat! All this killin'—all this turnin' of neighbor against neighbor—just so he could stuff his pockets full o' crooked greenbacks! A man like that's not fittin' to live. Boys, Let's side Ben here, for a change and ride on into town and git that slimey son! I want the pleasure o' bein' the one to drape the hemp about his fat, powdered throat! I—"

"Ease off, Marsh. If there's a hangin', it's goin' to be done legal like." Dawson cut in. "Guthridge was the one responsible for bringin' lawlessness back to Piney Flats. We'll start with him, to bring things back to the right way again. You needn't worry about him slippin' free. He'll get a trial but it won't take

long, with the bale of evidence we got against him, with MacQueen's testimony. I got a hunch that quick verdict *will* be death by hangin'. But it's got to be done that way."

For a long time there was no answer. Then Linc muttered: "I reckon you know best, Ben. Any event, we'll do it your way. We owe you a little cooperation and then some."

"First, though," Dawson said. "There's somethin' else to be done. You Rayburns got to ride with me over to the Maclanes and settle this feud deal. Then, if you want, you can all ride into town with me. I got to check and see if that rat, Sanburn, went there with Laurie. If he didn't, then he's still in the Muchapis and it'll be hell's own job to hunt him down. I'll need help. The more of us there'll be searchin', the quicker we'll find him. How about it?"

The Rayburns all looked at each other and mumbled between them. It was obvious that they didn't like the idea of having to go eat crow before their old enemies, the Maclanes, but they were a changed group this morning. Finally, they all grudgingly consented to do that. First, they had to clean Dawson's and MacQueen's wounds, put on fresh bandages. They pulled levis over MacQueen's bare legs, after he passed out in the hot morning sun.

An hour later, they were on Maclane property and the two warring clans stood uneasily eying each other while Dawson explained all that had happened again. Then he prompted Linc Rayburn, who stepped forward and made a stilted speech of apology to the other family on behalf of his own. When that was done, Dawson said: "Why don't all parties let this be a lesson that nothin' is ever settled right by wholesale bloodshed? Why don't you, Linc, and old Dud, as

oldest members of each tribe, step forward and shake hands like true men, vow to try to work together and get along from now on?"

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Both groups looked searchingly into each others faces. Then old Dud Maclane stepped forward, grinning crookedly, his lined face tomato-red. He said, gruffly: "Reckon the time ain't long off, even out in this country when nothing is goin' to be settled by gun-play. Law an' order goin' to be as strong out here as it is in the East. Mebbe we'd be smart to start it off, Linc, you ol' hunk o' crowbait. Unless you ain't man enough, ain't got guts enough to make a change o' face like I am, an' shake paws on it!"

Linc Rayburn's head jerked up. His eyes flashed. "Why you ig'orant ol' wampus. Ain't nothin' a fly-bitten Maclane can do a Rayburn cain't."

With that, both men shot out their big, work-hardened hands and gripped them. Then they stepped back sheepishly with their own groups. Dawson broke the taut silence. He turned to the Maclanes: "How 'bout some of you saddlin' up and ridin' into the Flats with us while I settle with Guthridge and find out about Laurie?"

They agreed and soon the group of horsemen were heading across the Maclane property and onto the trail that led to town. It was a little after noon when they got there and the sun was high and bright overhead. They were all dusty and sweat-drenched and MacQueen was moaning and babbling feverishly by then.

They rode down a side street of the town and dropped MacQueen off at Doc Peterson's place to be patched up and ready to be tossed into jail. Then Dawson and the others rode on down to Harmony

House. They hitched their horses outside the hotel. Dawson said: "Gent's I want the pleasure of tellin' Guthridge the score, all by my lonesome. But just in case he should try to escape, split up and some of you keep watch on the front and the rest go around and cover any rear entrances. I reckon I can handle him all right. But just in case."

The others nodded grimly. Dawson strode into the hotel. There was a new clerk on the desk, a pink-faced, slick-haired young man that Dawson had seen about town. Dawson said: "Where's Guthridge?"

The young clerk flipped a hand toward the office at the rear and went back to the dog-eared copy of an Eastern magazine he was reading. Dawson went past the desk and down the hallway that led to Guthridge's office. The door was locked. Dawson didn't stand on formality. He didn't knock. He grasped the knob and swung the door inward and open.

Mark Guthridge was behind his desk, working on some ledger books with a quill pen. He was fresh-faced and clean shaven. He wore a pale blue silk shirt, pleated down the front. It had flowing sleeves and Guthridge's initials monogrammed over the breast pocket. The big man looked up and surprise widened his shrewd looking dark eyes. He flashed his teeth in a smile. Only for the barest fraction of a second did his face express anything but friendliness.

"Howdy, Ben," he said. "Come in. This is a surprise."

"I'm already in," Dawson told him. "And I'll bet it's a surprise. Well, that makes us even, Mark. You've surprised me plenty, too. But there's one thing I've got to know before there's a lot of talk. You're going

to tell it to me fast or I'm going to beat it out of you."

Guthridge's face flushed and then turned white. A ridge of muscle along his jawline started jumping. "Rein-in fast, mister!" He spat the words through his teeth. His voice was no longer smooth, friendly. It held an edge like an angry buzz-saw. "Who do you think you're throwin' that kind of bull-doizin' talk at, Dawson, one of these ignorant cow-herders or some small town simpleton? You've got something to say to me in my own office, say it proper. With respect."

The mayor's eyes flickered with cold, sardonic amusement for a moment. He said: "And I really am surprised. Surprised that there's still something you don't know, that you haven't already stumbled onto by dumb blind luck. You wouldn't make much of a poker player, Dawson. Your face gave away the fact that you've somehow figured everything out, the moment you came in here."

For a moment, the man's arrogant coolness, his readiness to admit everything, almost threw Dawson. He'd expected at least some token pretence of innocence. Before he could answer Guthridge, the other man went on:

"What happened to that big, goateed fool, LaFarge and his bunch? He told me he had it figured how to take care of you, Dawson."

"He thought he did. His plan didn't work, though," Dawson answered. He sliced the air impatiently with one hand. "I didn't come here to talk about that, Guthridge. The LaFarge gang is dead—wiped out. All except one man, a hombre named Sanburn. And he must have come here. Where is he, Guthridge?"

"Sanburn?" Guthridge's brows rose. He looked genuinely puzzled. He shook his head. "I don't

know. I haven't seen him." His eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Why, Dawson? Why is Sanburn so important to you? If you got the rest of the bunch, one man getting away shouldn't be so important."

For a moment a great lump of rage and fear and frustration choked up in Dawson's throat and he couldn't speak. Finally he forced it down and in a broken voice, said: "He has Laurie. He got away with Laurie." His bleak eyes found Guthridge's. He said, hoarsely: "I've got to get her back, Guthridge. No matter what. None of this other's any longer important to me, as against that. That's why I came here alone, Mark. If you know where Sanburn is, where he's taken Laurie, I'm willing to make some kind of deal. Providing she's still safe. Is she, Guthridge? Dammit, you've got to tell me. You've got to have some heart in you, in spite of all the rottenness. She's my daughter, Mark. Can't you understand that?"

The big man shrugged. The expression of cold disdain on his face didn't change. He said, quietly: "I don't *have* to do anything, Dawson. Not tell you anything, nor make any kind of deal. Certainly you're not stupid enough to think I'm going to meekly toss in the cards just because I'm now the lone hand playing against you. You still don't know me very well, Dawson."

He pushed back the desk chair, then, and stood up. His big, jewelled fist clenched the same Colt that he'd used to gun down on Al Cato. The great round black bore pointed squarely at Dawson's midriff.

"Ever since the trouble here last night," Guthridge said, "I've been afraid this whole deal might fold right up in my face. I suspected you'd found out too much then, at least enough so that any informa-

tion you stumbled on later, would tip you off. Especially if LaFarge wasn't able to take care of you."

Guthridge sighed. "I'm all ready and packed for a quick run, Dawson. You and I are leaving here together." With the gun muzzle he gestured toward a corner to Dawson's right where two carpet bags stood, bulging and locked. "Pick up those bags for me, Dawson. I'm going to be right next to you, with this colt hidden under my shirt, pointed at you. When we walk out of here, together, you tell any of your men you might have waiting outside, that you've made a big mistake about me, that I'm clean. You'll tell them that I'm riding out with you to find Sanburn, that I know where he might be, but that we have to go alone, to make sure Sanburn doesn't get panicky and hurt the kid. You understand?"

Dawson looked at the gun, at Guthridge's big thumb cocking back the hammer. He wasn't frightened. He was just sick with disgust at himself for being such a fool as to barge in here, blunder-headed in his anger and anxiety, without a sixgun in his fist; that he'd let Guthridge get the jump on him.

For one wild, raging moment, he thought about trying to jump Guthridge. But only for a moment. That was insanity. You don't jump a man with a cocked gun pointed at your guts. You'd be dead before you'd taken a single step. And that wouldn't help anybody. It wouldn't get Laurie back. It wouldn't accomplish anything. By sheer force of will, Dawson restrained himself. He watched a tiny smile of awareness flick at Guthridge's lips as the big man realized what was going on in Dawson's mind.

"Let's go," Guthridge said, softly. "You see, Dawson, I've got it all figured. I've got to run for it. I wouldn't stand a chance at a trial, clever at bluffing

and lying as I am. Al Cato would talk and Constantine, the real estate man. And probably you got information from LaFarge or some of his men before they died. I wish I did know what happened to Sanburn and the girl, Dawson. Not for your sake. For my own. Perhaps we *might* have been able to bargain something out." He shrugged. "But there's no time to jaw about what might have been. Pick up those bags, Dawson. We're checking out. And remember what I said you're to tell anybody who tries to stop us, outside."

Slowly, Dawson turned and stepped toward the corner. He bent and picked up the two heavy carpet bags. What happened after that he hadn't planned on, had hardly thought about. It was one of those spur of the moment impulses. It all happened so fast that he was hardly aware of it at the time. He yanked one of the bags up in front of him, shielding his stomach and chest with it. The other one he hurled with all his strength full against Mark Guthridge.

The bag banged against Guthridge's chest. The mayor swore. His thumb released the hammer of the Colt. The sound of it thundered deafeningly in the room, bounced back and forth off the walls. The slug slammed into the carpet bag Dawson held before him as a shield. He didn't know what was in that bag but whatever it was, it stopped the slug.

Before Guthridge could cock the Colt for another shot, Dawson was hurtling toward him. He dropped the carpet bag, and with one fist slammed the Colt from Guthridge's hand. He heard it clatter against the wall. He slammed his other fist toward Guthridge's face. But at the last second, Guthridge spun out of the way, with surprisingly agility for such a big man. He straight-armed Dawson in the face and

raced for the door, banged it open and was gone. Dawson recovered and ran out after Guthridge, along the short hallway. When Guthridge came into the lobby, Dawson saw him glance at several of the Rayburn men standing there and skid to a halt and then turn left toward a flight of stairs that led to the rooms above. Dawson ran after him.

He went up the steps three at a time, to the third and top floor of the hotel. Guthridge was nowhere in sight. But there was an iron ladder leading up through an opened skylight to the roof. He climbed it and eased out onto the tarpaper roof of the building. He saw Mark Guthridge holding a length of rope, dropping it over the edge. At the same time Guthridge heard Dawson and pivoted around.

"Now we can settle our score personally, Guthridge," Dawson said. He unstrapped his guns, tossed the rig aside. "And I won't need those."

"Dawson, listen," Guthridge said. His handsome head swiveled from side to side, looking for some means of escape. His sensual mouth worked meaninglessly. A tic jumped at the corner of one of his eyes. His well kept hands fluttered at his sides.

"There's nothing to listen to, Mark. You're a big man. You ought to be able to put up a pretty good fight. Even a weasel will fight when it's trapped. Stop talkin' and save your breath, Mark. You're going to need it!"

Guthridge suddenly charged straight at Dawson, his long, powerful arms windmilling. Dawson stepped to one side and started to throw a punch right into Guthridge's face. Just before he cut loose with it, his foot slipped on a tar bubble in the papered roof. His blow missed and Guthridge whirled on him. One of Guthridge's roundhouse blows caught Dawson on

the cheekbone, sent stars exploding inside his brain. The punch caught him off balance. He stumbled backward and fell. He shook his head, saw Guthridge hurtling toward him. Dawson got both feet up just in time. He planted them full into the pit of Guthridge's gut. The big man whooshed out breath and went staggering backward. Dawson scabbled to his feet and went after him.

He broke through Guthridge's guard, caught him a hard hooking blow to the point of the chin. Guthridge's head jarred back. He backed away. Dawson stayed right with him. He jolted a blow square onto Guthridge's nose and saw crimson spout. Guthridge spat blood and stumbled backward away from Dawson again. Then Dawson froze in horror as he saw Guthridge raise one hand to the back of his collar and suddenly whip a wickedly glinting knife from a scabbard that hung down inside the back of his shirt.

Guthridge crouched, holding the knife with the cutting side up, in the stance of the experienced knife fighter. The sun flashed from the razor-edged, needle pointed blade. Guthridge laughed shrilly, blood snorting from his nose. His eyes blazed crazily. He said: "Dawson, I won't be hung. One of us is going to die but it won't be me!"

He lunged at Dawson then. The marshal spun to one side and tried to grab Guthridge's knife wrist but his own sweating fingers slipped free as the other man twisted the arm and twirled around toward Dawson again. Guthridge was moving fast as greased lightning, now, cocky and confident, with a weapon in his hand. Dawson saw that he wasn't long going to be able to avoid that murderously slashing blade at arms length. Sucking in a deep breath, he lunged

in close to Guthridge. He felt the burning slash of the knife as it went through the flesh of his shoulder like hot butter. Instantly Guthridge twisted the blade, sending stabs of pain all down Dawson's arm, then yanked the knife free again. The next time he slammed it toward Dawson it caught the marshal in the side. It slid between ribs and grated sickeningly against one of them.

But this time, as Guthridge withdrew the blade for another thrust, Dawson got a grip on his wrist. He twisted, kept twisting until he finally heard the bone of Guthridge's forearm snap. He heard the hotel owner's animal-like scream of pain. The knife clinked to the roof and Dawson booted it out of reach. Then he dropped his right fist almost to his boot tops and brought it up in a whistling uppercut. It landed flush on Guthridge's chin, drove his lower teeth through his upper lip. Guthridge's eyes rolled. His boot heels left the floor briefly. When they came down again, Guthridge turned stiffly, like a parade ground cavalryman doing an about face. He walked slowly away from Dawson, swaying, his knees buckling. He only took two staggering steps, though, out on his feet. That's all there was room for. The fight had brought them to within a few yards of the roof edge. Guthridge staggered right up to it, his head tilted crookedly on his shoulders as he stared unconsciously into space. He took one more step and there was nothing beneath his boot. His foot went down and down and he jackknifed off the roof.

Ben Dawson stood there, half bent over, his fists hanging loosely at his sides. Blood ran down his torn arm and from his ripped ribs. He jerked convulsively at the dull, sickening sound of Guthridge's body striking the dirt of the alley three floors below. Then

Dawson shook himself like a wounded bear. He turned and staggered toward the skylight. He almost fell down the ladder. He never did know how he got the rest of the way downstairs. He didn't know anything else again until he came to, lying between starched white sheets, in a bed in Doc Peterson's house. . . .

He raised a hand and felt that his face was clean-shaven. Somebody had shaved him while he was unconscious. He started to turn over and shoots of pain ran all through him and he realized that he was practically swathed in bandages from the waist up. He turned his head slowly and then saw Laurie standing there.

At first he thought that he was still unconscious, that he was dreaming. Then he saw Laurie smile. Her blue eyes were full of laughter. One of them winked at him. She said: "Hi, Pops. You're not supposed to get excited, the doc says. How do you feel?"

Dawson tried to sit up but the effort sent streaks of pain shooting through his ribs. He fell back down again. "You see?" Laurie said. "I'm not worried about you, though. I told them all you were too tough to die, that you'd be all right once you saw me again. How about that, Pops?"

He looked at her, at the thin face showing the first early traces of beauty that was to come, despite the freckles and the sunburned nose, slightly peeling. He looked at the long, golden pigtails.

"Laurie," he said, weakly. "I—I don't understand. You—where'd you come from? What happened to you, after—after that gunnie, Sanburn, took you away from the stage station?"

Laurie's blue eyes danced wickedly. "He had a bad arm, Pops. A bad bullet wound. And it was botherin'

him heaps. Anyhow, after we rode awhile he got kind of feverish and sick. Right after we rode out of the pass, I saw him kind of droopin', like, in the saddle. I took a chance and tried to get his gun. I got it, too, Pops."

"Then what happened?"

She laughed. "I clouted him with it. Across the side of the head. When he fell off the horse, I high-tailed it. I was about exhausted, though, by the time I reached the Prago's place. You know, those homesteaders. So I stopped there. They made me go to bed, said they'd come on into town and send somebody out to the pass to help you."

Dawson tried to figure it out. He realized that somewhere, there'd been some mixup on the part of the Pragos. That didn't matter, though. All that mattered was that it was all over and Laurie was safe with him once again. He looked at her, marveling.

"You say you took Sanburn's gun away from him and hit him with it and rode off?" He started to laugh. "He'll never live that down, if they catch him. A button like you, putting one over on a tough gunny like—" Dawson broke off in a gale of laughter that hurt his ribs but that he couldn't control.

Laurie shrugged. "Of course, Pops," she said. "It was the natural thing to do. After all, I'm the marshal's daughter, aren't I?" And then her laughter joined with his.

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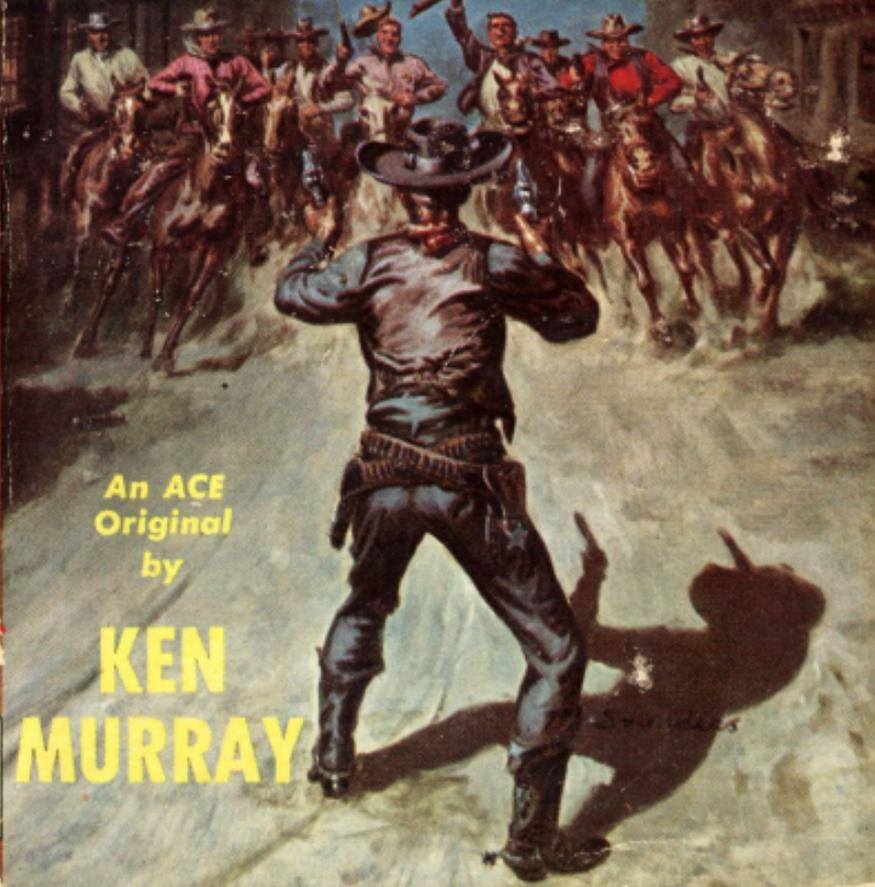
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