

ROGUE LAWMAN
BORDER
SNAKES

Peter Brandvold



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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The Aftermath

He leaned forward, set his elbows on his hips, and continued to scrub brusquely at his scalp as if to ease the hard tension knots in his skull and the back of his bull neck.

As if to obliterate the echoes of the dead men's screams in his ears and to erase the images of bloody murder that danced around behind his eyes like snippets from a thousand waking nightmares.

Always it was like this after a "job," as he called his un-sanctioned hunts. A day or two, maybe even a week or two of self-recrimination, isolation, depression. A free fall into an abyss darker than the remotest regions of outer space. Into a world without sound, without color, without taste save the coppery taste of blood, without smell except the sweet, cloying odor of burned gunpowder and death.

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*For my sis, Stacey,
who inspired Saradee*

EXECUTIONER'S SONG

THE man known as the Rogue Lawman thumbed open the loading gate of his big Russian horse pistol and shoved a bullet into the chamber that he normally kept empty beneath the hammer. He closed the loading gate and spun the cylinder, the clicks sounding like a low, distant scream beneath the howling wind.

Sliding the Russian into the cross-draw holster sitting high on his left hip, and angled so that the gun's grips nudged his belly, he stared ahead over the twitching ears of his grulla. The town he'd been heading for these past three days lay ahead—unpainted frame buildings and adobe-brick hovel situated among dun boulders between two rocky ridges slumped like long-dead, mineralized dinosaurs.

Blowing dust and tumbleweeds sheathed the town in a tawny gauze. No one appeared on the broad street between the twin rows of shabby buildings and stock corrals. Not even a horse was out—at least none that Gideon Hawk could see from this distance of fifty yards. There was the caterwauling shingle chains and the lower, more distant and intermittent clapping of an unlatched door against its frame.

A man's howl of unbound revelry reached Hawk's ears. It rose for just a moment above the howling of the wind, the screech of the rusty chains, and the clatter of the door. And then it died, leaving only the wind again, mewling over the spinelike northern ridge like the devil's demon dogs loosed from hell on a mission of bloody mischief.

Hawk tipped the brim of his black, flat-brimmed hat down low over his eyes, turned up the collar of his sheepskin coat against the chill, autumn gale, and toed the grulla forward. His head swiveled on his shoulders, eyes working back and forth across the trail, as sheds and small stables began moving up around him. He passed a sign along the trail—nothing more than two small planks nailed to a short post with the name MESILLA burned into the wood with a running iron.

Beyond the signpost the trail widened into the town's main thoroughfare.

The grulla's steady clomps were drowned by the wind and the screeching chains. Dust, seeds, straw and small bits of manure pelted Hawk like small-gauge buckshot. He winced against it, making out the business buildings around him, a few with high false fronts, several without. Many of the dwellings were simple frame affairs constructed of whipsawed planks that either had never been painted or had been stripped of their paint long ago by the searing, high-altitude sun of southwestern Colorado.

Among them, one building stuck out like a red dress in a funeral procession.

It was from this building that more whoops and cries of revelry came, along with the faint tinkling of a rapidly played piano. And it was toward this building—large and red and with a broad front porch sitting up high on stilts—that Hawk had started to angle when he saw a man with a rifle step out of an alley mouth on the right side of the street.

The man turned toward Hawk, froze as Hawk rode toward him, then stepped straight backward, turned, and disappeared down the alley between two shabby buildings.

Hawk angled the grulla toward the alley mouth and caught a glimpse of the rifleman just as the man slipped around the rear corner of the drugstore on Hawk's right. Hawk's jade-green eyes stared out from leathery sockets set deep in a ruggedly carved, high-cheekboned face.

It was the face of an Indian; in fact, Hawk's father had been a Ute war chief. His mother, though, was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants. The cold eyes blinked once, and then Hawk gave a wry snort, swung his right boot over the saddle horn, and dropped smoothly out of the saddle, landing flat-footed—an oddly graceful move for a man of Hawk's large size and breadth of shoulder.

He took long strides through the alley strewn with windblown trash.

As he rounded the drugstore's rear corner, he drew the big Russian from its cross-draw holster and ratcheted back the hammer. The wind was howling too loudly back here for the man ahead of him—the man facing in the opposite direction, crouched over his rifle as he stole along the rear of the drugstore to the opposite side—to hear the ominous click.

Hawk's voice froze him. "Willie Dumas?"

The man, who was small and wiry, dressed in a shabby canvas duster and checked wool trousers, their cuffs stuffed into high-topped boots, turned around slowly. His young, whiskered cheeks lost their color, and his colorless eyes glinted fearfully when they'd taken the measure of the big, black-hatted man before him, whose face personified thunder.

"Who the hell are you?"

Hawk set his lips as he raised the Russian, dropping his chin slightly and canting his head as he aimed down the barrel. "Your executioner."

The Russian roared.

The .44-caliber round plunked through Willie Dumas's forehead, and drove the young killer straight back off his heels.

For a moment he teetered like a windmill in a high mountain gale, eyes crossing, arms thrown out to his sides. He released his rifle. A second after it hit the ground, Willie Dumas hit the ground, a well, one leg curled beneath the other.

His boots twitched and his eyes danced and his hands opened and closed as though clutching at the last remnants of his life.

Without so much as a second glance at the brigand, Hawk stepped over the near-lifeless body, turned the drugstore's far corner, and walked up the gap between the drugstore and a shabby two-story brick building to the main street. At the mouth of the gap, he stared at the big, red building on the other side of the street and up a ways, sitting alone on a weed-choked lot behind two broad front galleries—one on the first story, another on the second.

The piano could no longer be heard from inside. Just as Hawk noted this, a pistol popped behind the building's walls. A girl shrieked. A few seconds later, a man laughed and another woman yelled, her voice pitched in admonishment.

Hawk glanced to his left.

The grulla stood where he'd left it, ground-tied. The well-trained mount had moved only far enough to face downwind, and its tail blew up between its legs in the steady, sand-swirling gale.

Staring at the red building, part adobe brick and part wood, and which large letters painted across the front identified as A THOUSAND DELIGHTS SALOON AND SPORTING PARLOR, Hawk whistled. The grulla trotted over to him.

Hawk took his eyes off the sporting parlor only long enough to shuck his sixteen-shot Henry repeating rifle from his saddle scabbard. He levered a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber, of course, cocked the hammer, and set the rifle atop his right shoulder, his black-gloved hand wrapped around

the neck of the rifle's stock.

Taking his customary long, confident strides, black hat tipped low, Hawk angled across the street to the sporting parlor. He mounted the front steps, crossed the broad front porch, and pushed through one of the two stout wooden doors adorned with brass knockers in the shapes of naked women.

As he stepped inside, a pretty brunette in a long, red dress was admonishing a man sitting on a brocade sofa with a little, scantily clad blonde for discharging firearms on the premises. The man—bearded, wearing a checked shirt, and with a battered Stetson tipped back off his forehead—was telling the woman she ought not to have rats on her premises if she didn't "want men discharging guns at 'em." The pistol in his hand was still smoking.

The argument died unresolved as all eyes in the room, including those of the arguers, turned toward the newcomer just now shutting the door on the cold wind.

Hawk let his eyes rake the room quickly, taking in the ornate furnishings, which included varnished tables, richly upholstered chairs and fainting couches with here and there a flimsy privacy screen and heavy, elegant drapes hung across shadowy alcoves. There were potted palms and ferns hanging from ceiling beams.

A fire popped in a large hearth in the room's right wall, smoke billowing when the wind gusted down the chimney. A long, mahogany bar with a mirrored back bar ran across the room's rear, beneath a second-story balcony and flanked by a carpeted staircase. In the bright light of lanterns, candles, and leaping flames, the glasses pyramided on the bar and stacked on the shelves behind it gleamed like jewels.

A man stood behind the bar, filling three shot glasses while a girl with a serving tray waited. The girl had turned to glance over a bare shoulder at Hawk. The bartender regarded him from beneath bushy black brows.

The piano had stopped when Hawk had walked in.

Now he strode toward the bar, following a path between the tables, his rifle on a shoulder and his boots clomping loudly upon the scarred puncheons. The piano player—a lean old gent in a top hat—began playing again, with less vigor than before. Most of the heads in the room swiveled to follow Hawk to the bar.

There were seven men visible, he half-consciously counted. Four were playing cards at a table while the other three were scattered about the room. All were with women. They all bore the faces of human wolves. Several Hawk recognized from wanted dodgers.

As the serving girl removed her tray from the bar top and shambled off to the table at which the cardplayers sat in sudden, moody silence, Hawk laid his rifle on the bar and said, "Bourbon."

The barman likely doubled as a bouncer. He was nearly as tall and broad-shouldered as Hawk. His left brow and his nose were badly scarred. As he reached under the bar for a bottle, Hawk said, "I'll take the good stuff—not what you've been serving these border snakes. Been a long trail."

The bartender arched a brow at the pretty brunette who'd been reading the riot act to the man who discharged his pistol. In the back bar mirror, Hawk saw the woman dip her dimpled chin. The barman lifted a labeled bottle from beneath the bar, swept a glass off the pyramid to his left, and filled it.

Hawk tossed a half eagle on the bar. "Leave the bottle."

The piano spoke a little louder, and voices sounded behind Hawk as a couple of conversations resumed. He could see in the mirror that the four cardplayers had continued their game, albeit haltingly and continuing to cast skeptical glances toward the rangy, rifle-packing newcomer at the bar.

Hawk threw back half his drink. A girl who had been sitting alone and looking bored near the fireplace got up and strolled over to him, resting one elbow atop the bar. She was a willowy honeysuckle.

blonde with pale blue eyes and a sharp nose, wearing a dress of pink taffeta. What there was of it. Her white shoulders were bare, as was most of her cleavage. A black choker encircled her thin neck.

“Need someone to talk to, stranger?” She had a nice voice, vaguely accented.

“Get away from him, Clara!” a man grumbled behind Hawk.

Boots thudded on the brothel’s wood floor.

Hawk had already watched in the back bar mirror the hard case who’d discharged his weapon rise from the fainting couch where he’d been sitting between a black girl and a redhead. Now the man, his thumbs hooked behind his cartridge belt, sauntered up to the bar, gimlet eyes on Hawk.

“Why should I?” Clara said. “You already got you a girl, Laramie. Two of ’em!”

“I said, git!” Laramie snarled, grabbing the girl’s arm and swinging her back away from the bar. Clara glared at the hard case but retreated to her chair near the fire.

The pretty brunette, whom Hawk assumed ran the place, watched Hawk and Laramie from the shadows near a ceiling joist, frowning cautiously.

Laramie, standing in the same position as that of the girl a moment ago, one elbow resting on the bar, looked at Hawk. The Rogue Lawman lifted his shot glass and tossed back the rest of his drink.

“Who are you, mister?” Laramie asked slowly.

He was lean and saturnine, with a black hat and a short, coyote-hide jacket. He wore two pistols on his lean hips, and the handle of another in a shoulder rig peeked out from behind a flap of his open jacket. He had a small, hand-rolled quirley wedged between the first two fingers of his left hand, and the smoke from the cigarette curled up between him and Hawk.

Hawk refilled his shot glass. “You ask too many questions, friend.”

“That’s the only one I’ve asked.”

“That’s one too many.”

Laramie’s eyes flickered faintly. A corner of his mouth quirked up as he glanced at the men behind him.

At the same time, the piano player stopped playing, lifting his old, clawlike hands from the keys and turning around to face the bar, sensing the menace as he scowled dreadfully behind his steel-framed spectacles.

BEWARE THE PREACHER'S PIG

“COME on, friend,” Laramie prodded Hawk, feigning a grin. “There’s no secrets in A Thousand Delights. We’ll tell you who we are, if you tell us who you are. Now, that’s fair, ain’t it?”

Hawk sipped his second whiskey shot. He nodded thoughtfully, set the shot glass back down on the bar, then turned to Laramie.

“Well, since you asked so damn nice, and since I know who you are, Blaxton, and since I know who all your men are—most of ’em, anyway—I reckon it’s only fair that I tell you that I tracked you over from Trinidad, after your third bank robbery in as many days, and that I’m here to kill every last one of you yellow-livered privy rats. Just as dead as I killed your picket, Willie Dumas, in an alley across the street.”

Laramie Blaxton’s grin faded. His face darkened, an eye narrowed, and an incredulous cast entered his gaze. “You . . . you think you’re gonna kill *all* of us?”

“That’s right,” Hawk said matter-of-factly.

A hush fell over the room. It was like a held breath. Laramie Blaxton leaned against the bar and stared up at Hawk, who was a good four inches taller than the outlaw leader. Suddenly, recognition slackened the muscles in the outlaw’s raptor-like face.

“Well, Gideon Henry-goddamned-Hawk,” he said in bemused awe and genuine surprise. “Fellas like you he said to the room while keeping his eyes on Hawk, “look who we been so honored to have shadowing our trail. The Rogue Lawman his ownself!”

The wolflike faces stared at Hawk, expressionless.

The four poker players were holding their cards tensely. One chomped down hard on the fat stogie wedged in a corner of his mouth. The pretty brunette who ran the place stood stiffly where she’d been standing before, her wide brown eyes wary, skeptical. She didn’t realize it, but she saved Hawk’s life when she lifted her gaze toward the balcony over the bar.

Hawk grabbed the Henry off the bar top and, thumbing back the hammer, took two quick strides past Blaxton. He’d only taken one, however, before a rifle barked above the bar.

The bullet cut the air just off Hawk’s left shoulder and made a wet cracking sound as it tore through the crown of Blaxton’s hat. The outlaw leader didn’t make a sound as his head bobbed suddenly and violently, and he staggered forward, arms hanging slack at his sides.

A girl in the room screamed. An outlaw shouted.

Hawk looked up, pressing the stock of his Henry against his right shoulder and raising the barrel. The man who’d just killed Blaxton stood in balbriggans and socks atop the balcony, a battered sombrero on his head, looking down with a shocked expression at the result of his errant shot. His rifle barrel dangled over the rail, smoke dribbling from its octagonal maw.

Hawk planted a bead on the outlaw’s wrinkled, sunburned forehead, and just as the man jerked his eyes toward the Henry’s barrel, Hawk squeezed the trigger. A ragged, quarter-sized hole appeared just above and a little left of the man’s exasperated eyes.

The man screamed as his head jerked back. His knees buckled. As he fell, he began pulling his rifle back behind the rail. The stock got caught, and he released it.

The rifle tumbled straight down and smashed against the bar top. The man himself slumped back against the balcony's spooled rail as though he figured he'd just sit there and collect his thoughts for a while.

"*Good God almighty!*" the bartender bellowed, backing against the shelves of the back bar and holding his hands up around his head as if to shield himself from bullets.

As the echo of Hawk's blast chased itself around the building's adobe-brick walls, Hawk levered a fresh cartridge into the Henry's firing chamber and pivoted toward the room behind him.

Less than five seconds had elapsed since Hawk had seen the pretty brunette's eyes lift toward the balcony, but all seven of the hard cases in the saloon hall were on the move. The poker table looked as though a stick of dynamite had been detonated beneath it; as the four players leapt to their feet, the table shot straight up in the air, and the four whores that had been hovering close to the gamblers flew back from around the men in a blur of swirling hair and dancing dresses, their screams rising shrilly.

Bottles and glasses crashed to the floor.

"*Git that son of a bitch!*" one of the gamblers shouted, lifting a baby LeMat in one hand and a brass-chased Colt Navy in the other.

Calmly, without expression, as though he were merely pinkieing cans off fence posts, Hawk drew a bead on him and shattered his breastbone.

Screaming as the bullet exited his body under his left arm and shattered a bracket lamp on the post beside him, the man fired both pistols into the still-jouncing table. As the man stumbled backward, leaking blood badly, Hawk smoothly ejected the spent cartridge from his Henry's chamber, seated a fresh, and lined his sights up on another cardplayer just as his target triggered a black-barreled Colt; the slug of which curled the air off Hawk's left cheek and crashed into the mirror behind him.

K-chow!

Hawk's finely tuned and regularly cleaned and oiled Henry leapt in the Rogue Lawman's hands. In his haste, however, he hadn't gotten a clear picture of his jerking target, and the slug hammered off the man's Colt, ripped through the face of the man standing three feet to the hard case's right, and tore into the ceiling with an angry bark.

Both men screamed.

The one with the damaged gun dropped the weapon like molten iron while the one with gaping holes in both cheeks staggered back two herky-jerky steps, eyes wide as saucers, and swung his Sheriff's model Colt toward Hawk, who shot him a second time—this time on purpose and this time for keeps.

But not before the man's own slug sliced a burning line across one of Hawk's right-side ribs. It was a sting like that of an angry wasp.

Hawk's narrowly focused mind only vaguely registered the nip. He was too busy levering and firing, levering and firing, seeing smoke puffs from the pistols aimed at him, hearing the barks and the screeches of the bullets careening around him and thumping into the bar or the back bar mirror annihilating the pyramid of neatly stacked shot glasses to his right.

Like a man possessed, he dispatched one outlaw after another as he stood before the bar, sidewise to the room, boots spread a little more than shoulder-width apart. Only his pivoting hips and his hands moved, sliding the rifle this way and that in his arms.

In the roughly twelve seconds it took him to cut each of the gun wolves down and to set the howling like banshees over a fresh kill—those that did not die instantly, that was—Hawk never blinked. If anyone were watching his face—and no one was, as everyone in the room was either

shooting or dying or lying facedown on the floor with her arms over her head, wailing—he or she might have seen the right side of Hawk's long mouth quirk with a faintly amused, bemused, exhilarated grin.

Hawk levered a fresh round but froze his trigger finger as he aimed the Henry's long, octagonal barrel through the wafting powder smoke. He looked for movement but saw nothing but the smoke itself.

A funereal silence fell over the room. A silence so heavy that only the snapping of the fire in the hearth penetrated with an eerie, stubborn indifference.

After a few stretched seconds, the silence was compromised by a man's grunt.

Then a groan.

Hawk spied movement through the shifting smoke cloud, somewhere behind an overturned chair and a small table, near a still-standing palm. A head took shape in the weirdly lighted smoke. It shifted this way and that as a man tried to gain his feet.

Hawk drew a bead on the head—just a pale oval beneath a line of black hair. He fired, the Henry speaking again loudly. The bullet plunked into one of the front doors with a sharp, wooden thud.

The head still moved. Hawk fired again.

"*Ohh!*" the man said, stumbling backward and hitting the floor with a hollow boom.

Hawk didn't bother ejecting the spent cartridge. He lowered the Henry and, having unconsciously counted his shots and knowing he'd capped all sixteen as well as the one he'd had in the breech at the start of the dance, set the long gun on the bar.

He pulled his silver-plated Russian from the cross-draw holster on his left hip. He slipped his long-barreled, horn-gripped Colt Army from his second holster thonged on his right thigh. Thumbing both hammers back, he strode slowly forward, swinging the guns around, looking for movement out of any of the quarry he'd dispatched.

The whores lay groaning or wailing. All but the pretty brunette, that was. She sat with her back to the ceiling joist she'd been standing in front of earlier.

She had her knees up, her hands on them. Her fine-boned cheeks were pale and her sherry-brown eyes were dark as she studied Hawk in pensive silence. Anger and exasperation were in those eyes, both emotions tempered by hushed amazement.

Six of the outlaws were down and unmoving and, judging by the amount of blood they were spilling, were pounding on hell's gates. The seventh, however, staggered to a half crouch just as Hawk reached the front of the room.

"Murderin' *devil!*" the man roared as he lifted a snub-nosed revolver in his left fist, his long, brown hair hanging over his face like a tattered screen.

Hawk killed him easily with a round from his Colt. The man wailed again and triggered his empty pistol at the floor, the ping of the hammer ringing like a cracked bell, and flew backward through the window. When the scream of the breaking glass had died, it was replaced by the howling of the wind outside.

Beneath the wind, Hawk heard the scrape of a boot somewhere above the brothel's main saloon hallway. Holding both smoking revolvers barrel up, and keeping the brunt of his attention on the balcony obscured by gun smoke above the bullet-riddled bar, he made his way to the back of the room.

The barman inched his head above the bar top. He had glass in his hair. His eyes were dark.

"What in tarnation?" he said in hushed awe, sliding his incredulous gaze from Hawk to the smoke-filled room.

Hawk started up the narrow stairs, taking one slow step at a time, his own spurs ringing softly on the

the thick, red carpet. When he was halfway to the top, a face took shape in the shadows ahead. A rifle barrel glinted in the room's wan light. The rifleman bolted forward, to the edge of the stairs bellowing maniacally and angling the rifle down toward Hawk.

The Rogue Lawman extended both revolvers at the same time.

Both guns spoke simultaneously, punching twin holes into the rifleman's bare chest. Smoke and flames geysered from the rifle's maw, the bullet clipping the railing to Hawk's left.

The rifle dropped to the floor and slid down the stairs as the shooter, clad in only lye-yellowed underwear bottoms, fell to his knees. He gave Hawk a blank stare, then, lids slowly closing over his eyes, he sagged forward, turned a somersault, and continued turning until he'd piled up atop his rifle at the bottom of the stairs.

Hawk stared up at the balcony.

Spying no movement among the smoky shadows shunted this way and that by wan candlelight from somewhere down a dingy hall, he continued climbing the steps. Slowly, he continued across the balcony into a hall that smelled of sex, smoke, and spilled liquor. He set his boots down carefully, but still the floorboards creaked faintly beneath the musty carpet runner.

Rough-timbered doors stood closed on either side of the hall, the walls of which were constructed of low-grade pine planks. When he was halfway between the stairs and the hall's end, a door opened suddenly at the end of the hall on the left.

Hawk crouched, extending both pistols.

A figure bolted out the open door and across the hall so quickly, disappearing in a blur down an intersecting hall, that Hawk had no time to get a shot off. Hearing boots clomping away from him, Hawk bolted forward, then slowed when he reached the open door from which the man had fled.

Sour air emanated from the dim, cluttered room. Just beyond the open door, a slender Indian girl sat at the edge of a rumpled bed, long hair hanging straight down the sides of her dark-eyed face. She was naked but did nothing to cover herself. Her breasts were small and pear-shaped, with dark brown nipples. As Hawk peered into the room, looking for other gunmen, the girl shook her hair from her eyes and lifted a long, black cheroot to her lips.

The cheroot's coal glowed as she took a long drag and leaned back on one outstretched arm regarding Hawk without expression.

Hawk swung away from her, quickly trod the ten feet to a dark, rickety back stairs, and ran down three steps at a time. At the bottom of the steps, an unlatched outside door banged against the building's outside wall in the moaning wind. Hawk bolted through it and slid both cocked pistols around in front of him.

Straight out from the brothel's back door, a man ran toward the brown, rocky ridge rising in the south. He wore baggy denims and a battered Stetson, and his cartridge belt was draped over his left shoulder. The flaps of his unbuttoned shirt blew behind him in the wind.

Beneath the wind, Hawk could hear the soft trills of his hammering spurs.

Hawk fired two quick shots. Dust puffed around the man's scissoring boots. He leapt with a start but Hawk didn't think he'd hit him.

He lunged forward, running, his own spurs lifting a raucous clatter.

Ahead of the running man lay a rickety-looking brick shack, with a wooden stable off the left side. The stable was enclosed by a dilapidated board fence around which sage and scrub willows grew thick. A sign was nailed to the front of the fence, but Hawk couldn't read it from this distance.

The fleeing outlaw slowed his pace near the shack, then slithered through the fence, losing his hat in the process. As the hat bounced and tumbled away with the sand and tumbleweeds and flying trash of

the chill wind, the cutthroat drew his head back inside the fence, then stuck a pistol out between the slats.

Smoke puffed from the gun's barrel.

It was followed a quarter second later by a hollow crack that was quickly snuffed by the wind. The bullet chewed into the ground several feet from Hawk's pounding boots.

Hawk stopped and raised both his pistols. He was about to squeeze the triggers when a bizarre squeal rose from the behind the fence.

There was the almost inaudible drumming of fast-moving hooves, and then the shooter loosed a scream that tightened the skin between Hawk's shoulders. He held fire, staring over the barrels of his leveled guns and into the pen from which the screams of the man now rose with the shrill, savage mewls of an enraged pig.

Hawk could see little from this distance and angle. But between the slats of the fence he caught glimpses of frenzied movement and occasional splashes of dull color—the man's white shirt, blue denim trousers, and the pig's pink, mottled-black hide with a little curl of tail rising up from its broad ass.

Hawk strode forward.

The pig's frenzied squeals steadily grew louder while those of the man dwindled, became higher, thinner, more pleading and intermittent.

By the time Hawk got up to the fence, the man's cries had died entirely, and Hawk saw why. The pig had him down on his back, unmoving, the man's arms flung above his shoulders.

His torso was drenched in blood. The pig's head, also painted scarlet, thrashed violently from side to side as it dug into the man's belly with its broad, square snout and snapping teeth.

Hawk depressed his gun hammers as he lowered both weapons. He stepped back to read the sign hanging from the fence's top rail by a rusty nail—just a two-foot-by-one-foot scrap of hand-painted lumber: BEWARE THE PREACHER'S PIG.

Hawk holstered his weapons and peered once more into the pen. The pig was still busily slashing and tearing at the bloody corpse, jerking and dragging the body around violently.

Hawk turned, pulled his hat down tight, and started back to the brothel, squinting against the swirling, wind-churned grit. "Should've learned how to read, friend."

MRS. PARKER

HAWK strode around the front of the building to take a gander at the town in the wake of the dust in *A Thousand Delights*.

From the high front porch, he saw his horse standing where he'd left it, facing downwind. A couple of boys in wool coats and cloth caps were milling around the front of the brothel, eyeing with morbid fascination the dead man lying in a pile of blood-splashed broken glass near Hawk's boots. Hawk flipped them each a quarter to stable, feed, and curry his horse, as well as to fetch his saddlebags, and they ran delightedly down the street, shoving the quarters into the pockets of their patched, wash-worn trousers.

They were the only people he could see in the windblown dust, but as he turned to reenter the brothel, he glimpsed movement farther down the street and stopped for a closer look.

Three men were moving toward him out of the dust haze. They all carried rifles. They all wore long coats, hats pulled down low on their foreheads. As they came closer, glancing at the lone horse on the side of the street and which the two boys were approaching now, one reaching for the reins, the other the bridle, Hawk saw badges glinting dully on their coat lapels.

He smiled and went into the brothel.

The pretty brunette stood near the door, looking around. The only other person in the room now—living person, that was—was the bartender kneeling beside one of the bloody, staring corpses. He was grunting and bunching his lips as he wrenched a ring off a lifeless middle finger.

Hawk closed the door and started past the woman. Girl or woman—it was hard to tell. She seemed neither old nor young though obviously older than the sporting girls Hawk had seen earlier. Her figure was full, almost fleshy in the hips. Her eyes were dark with faint red lights in them, and her face was heart-shaped, the nose small and straight, the lips long and plump. Her skin bore no age wrinkles that Hawk could see, not even around her eyes. It was the bold directness of the eyes themselves that betrayed her maturity.

"You did a wonderful job here, mister," she said with an ever-so-slight Southern accent. "And what do you think's going to clean up this mess and pay for the damage?"

Hawk stopped in front of her but glanced at the bartender. "The apron has the right idea. The Stony Hills Bunch are wealthy men—if you can catch them early enough after a robbery. Let them pay for it." Hawk pulled a wallet from an inside pocket of his fleece-lined buckskin mackinaw and peeled out five hundred-dollar bills. "But just so there's no hard feelin's. . . ."

He stuffed the bills down into the deep, warm cleavage revealed by her bloodred whalebone corset. Her eyes sparkled, and color rose in her cheeks.

She parted her lips slightly as if to speak, but said nothing as Hawk turned away from her and strode down the long room, stepping around overturned chairs and tables and over a couple of bodies. Hawk scooped his empty rifle off the table he'd laid it on and set it on his shoulder.

Amazingly, his whiskey bottle was the only thing around the bar that hadn't been hit in the

firestorm. He grabbed the bottle and his glass, picked up a chair, set it before a table that had only two bullet holes in it, and sat down. ~~Sitting back in his chair, he tripped the Henry's loading tube free of the stock and filled it with shells from his cartridge belt.~~

When he had sixteen in the tube, he racked one into the chamber, off-cocked the hammer, then shoved one more cartridge into the tube before sliding the tube back up into the stock. Setting the rifle on the table before him, Hawk popped the cork from the whiskey bottle and splashed whiskey into his shot glass.

He looked up when the door squawked open and three men filed in—the three lawmen he'd seen heading toward the brothel. The brunette was picking up a chair, but now she turned to the door with a cool, ironic expression on her pretty, heart-shaped face.

"Why, Sheriff Wiley—what a surprise. The shooting's over, but you can help me clean up, if you like."

The man who'd first walked in the door and who now stood at the front of the room, roughly flanked by the other two men, looked across the carnage toward Hawk but spoke out the side of his mouth at the woman to his left: "Dewey Wainwright reported a disturbance. Shootin' disturbance. Me and the boys was waitin' out the storm in the jailhouse. Didn't hear a thing."

The sheriff was a tall, blond man with a brick-red, clean-shaven face and broad nose. He set the butt of his Winchester on one hip, his gloved fist on the other, spreading the flaps of his duster wide, and looked around the room, whistling. "I'll be damned." He canted his head at Hawk. "That the perpetrator of this hoedown?"

The brunette, inspecting a bullet hole in a brocade-upholstered chair, narrowed an eye at Sheriff Wiley. "Well, I didn't do it."

Wiley gave a caustic chuff as he started walking toward Hawk, keeping his rifle on his hip, the barrel aimed at the ceiling.

"For what it's worth," the brunette said to his back, "they started it."

Wiley slowed his step for a second before continuing toward Hawk's table. He glanced at the barman, who was dragging one of the dead men outside by his stockinged feet—he'd removed the man's boots and set them with the rest of his loot on a bloodied fainting couch—and glanced at his deputies, "Louis, Joe—give Ingram a hand."

He stared at Hawk, who held the stare, as he crossed the room. Stopping a few feet from Hawk's table, he glanced at Hawk's Henry and narrowed one eye.

"Why don't you slide that rifle a little farther across the table?" he growled. "And to the left. You left."

Hawk leaned forward and, with his left hand, slowly slid the rifle in the direction the sheriff had ordered. "How's that?"

"That'll do just fine . . . long as you keep both hands where I can see 'em."

"All right." Hawk lifted his shot glass and looked at the dead man slumped in front of the bar to his left. "That there is Laramie Blaxton. Lead rider of the Stony Hills Bunch out of Wyoming. Robbed two banks in the Texas Panhandle last week, another in New Mexico, just north of Taos, last Saturday. Four townsfolk killed. And, like the lady said"—Hawk glanced at the brunette, who was holding the door open while the two deputies carried another dead man outside—"they busted the first cap he pulled today."

The sheriff narrowed his eye again at Hawk. "Who are you?"

Hawk ignored the question. "If you look through your files, you'll likely find paper on 'em. sizeable reward for each. I'd like for the lady to have it."

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