

## C H A P T E R O N E

Hot, humid air hung heavy over Wolf Hole.

“One hundred and six degrees!” old Mrs. Clipper eased her rocker on the boarding house porch. “Ain’t been this hot in fifteen years. Not in fifteen years!” With a knowing nod she shucked a stream of hard, green peas over her left shoe and into the can at Turkey’s feet. *Clang!* They hit bouncing.

“Hey!” Turkey jumped back. “Watch them peas, old woman!”

Mrs. Clipper laughed at the Texan. His face was a cross between comely and just plain ugly, with thin lips, square jaw, and eyes blue as the prairie sky.

“Gosh, it’s hot,” he wiped sweat. “Too hot for a shindig like this.”

Heat or no, the “shindig” was in full swing. A band turned the corner and the brassy licks of an out-of-tune trumpet caught their ears. Turkey made a face.

“Mordecai shoulda stayed home.”

“I say, what?” Mrs. Clipper leaned forward. Yet the steady *thump, thump, thump* drowned her out.

“Take a look over there!” wrangler Spence Atlas swung around a post. He pointed at the street as the crowd gave a jeer.

“Where?” Turkey squinted.

“There!”

The band was followed by three men on horseback. Only one drew name-calling and boos.

“Did you ever see such a sight?” Spence marveled. Banna Carlson sat stiff in silk-lined frock, top hat and ruffled collar. His tie was pulled so tight, he looked to pop a stitch or two just to breathe. The crowd laughed.

“Just a proud old man.” Turkey was right. And so the people had come to watch, to laugh, and to remind Banna that three years as mayor had been too many, too long.

Mrs. Clipper shucked another round of peas into the bucket. “Any more and I’ll be sick.”

“I’m sick already,” Turkey said. “C’mon, Spence, what say we get those supplies for Samson and head on back?”

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"I wouldn't stick around if you paid me." Snakeskin boots scuffed dirt. Spence was pleasing to the eye, even-tempered and agreeable. "Buy you a drink," he punched his friend in the arm.

"You got any money left?"

"Maybe not, but even bets says I can win it back."

Deputy Kane Sparks pushed through the double doors of the Stardust and squinted into the sun. He barely nodded at Turkey and Spence. It was still. *Too still.*

"I don't like it," he muttered as the horsemen dismounted in front of a square, wooden platform erected in the middle of Main Street. A huge banner read, "*Banna Carlson For Mayor,*" in flamboyant red, white and blue.

Sheriff Kent signaled from the platform as Banna climbed the steps. The band was quiet, the crowd just beginning to murmur when a slight movement upon the balcony of the Carlson Hotel caught Kane's eye. A figure ducked below banners and streamers as a flash of light - the unmistakable glint of sun upon metal - produced a knee-jerk reaction. He instinctively reached for the 41 tied at his hip.

"Look out!" Kane hit the dust firing.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Horses whinnied while women screamed, seizing children with one hand and bonnets with the other. Banna flew against the sheriff, blood oozing from his left shoulder. Turkey and Spence burst from the saloon, their guns drawn and ready. Yet two minutes and three shots later, the ugly scene had played itself out to a deadly finish.

A man, several bullet holes to the chest, plunged over the balcony and crash-landed face down in the street. His limbs twisted in the dirt, a white streamer caught in the rowel of one spur sailing like a kite behind him.

"Jake!" Turkey moved in for a look. "What the devil was he doing up there?"

Kane squinted. "That's what I'd like to know."

"Isn't it obvious?" From the shadows of the platform emerged a figure clothed in black. His gun was cocked, the barrel smoking, as with the tip of a boot he flipped the body over.

"Flute Jackson!" Kane gave a start.

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“That’s right, deputy.”

The day’s festivities were a thing of the past. Nothing but death hung in the air now.

“Flute! Flute!” Banna was there, a bloodied kerchief pressed to his shoulder. “Flute, I...” he stopped. “Why, Jake Perton! What was he doing in town? I thought you sent him to Jordan’s Crossing to...”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Flute re-holstered. “Obviously he had it in for you.”

“Stillman! Stillman put him up to this!”

“Impossible,” Kane spoke up.

“Why’s that?”

“Stillman’s been in Denver for weeks.”

“That proves it!”

“Really, Carlson...”

“You’ve heard the rumors, haven’t you?”

“Challenging you for mayor doesn’t make him guilty. You could blame any one here!”

Banna looked around the sea of faces.

“All right, people, clear the street! Clear the street!” Sheriff Dave Kent pushed through. “Fine shooting, Kane,” he slapped his deputy. “Help Doc take care of the body, will you? And tell him to come by the office. Carlson will need tending.”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.”

“Was there a beef between the two of you, Mr. Carlson?”

Banna scoffed. “I treat my ranch hands fair. Now, what kind of beef would I have? Jake Perton worked under me for ten years!”

“Perhaps, you should focus on the dead man,” Flute said. “It’s no secret that Banna would be speaking in town today.”

“You sound as if you know all about it.”

“Your deputy shot him.”

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“Oh, he had his man all right. So did you.”

“I was lucky enough to see him, Sheriff.”

“Or make certain he was dead.”

“Would you rather Carlson was lying there? Aren’t you wasting pity on a killer?”

“Not if I have more than one.”

“This is nonsense!” Banna protested. “You interrogate my foreman when he saved my life! What kind of lawman do you think you are? I’ll have your badge if...”

Flute grabbed Banna’s elbow. “Sheriff, why don’t we finish this inside.”

“Suit yourself.”

The Sheriff’s office stood a lonely sentinel on the edge of town. With bars for curtains, paper-strewn desks and dusty floors, it lacked a woman’s touch, the inevitable result of two bachelors under one roof.

“How’s the arm?” Dave pulled out a chair for Banna.

“It’s still connected, if that’s what you mean.”

“I’ll admit I’m baffled. Why should Jake Perton want you dead? Just what did he have to gain?”

“How should I know? Flute sent him to Jordan’s Crossing. He was supposed to be gone four, maybe five days.”

“Devil’s Rope bought some horses,” Flute explained from the door. “I ordered Jake to pick them up at the crossing. Spurr and I were to accompany Banna to the ceremonies.”

Dave Kent sat on the edge of his desk. He was a giant post of a man, straight, thin and refined. “You sounded so certain about Jake’s plans. Did he let on to you he had something against Banna? Had you any reason at all to think that he planned to kill him?”

“Well, yes, now that you mention it. Jake did seem upset a few nights ago, on account of some Shawnee half-breed he was courting. I didn’t think much of it then, but, well, we all know how Mr. Carlson feels about the Shawnee.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dave waved a hand. The Shawnee raids responsible for the death of Banna’s first wife had been common talk in Wolf Hole for years. Banna had avenged him-

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self violently on what he called the “red heathen,” driving them to seek refuge in other parts of the territory, more particularly along the panhandle border. It was an awful, bloody time in Texas history.

“Forget the Shawnee!” Banna exclaimed. “Jake could’ve had any number of reasons. Jealousy maybe. After all, I own one of the wealthiest ranches in this country and there are more than enough who resent me for that alone. Take Ben Samson, for instance...”

“You’re not going to drag Samson into this!”

“The point is that some folks resent me, even though I built this community, this town. Why, there’d still be Indian massacres if my men didn’t bring some semblance of decency to this God-forsaken place!”

“Point taken, Banna. In the meantime, what are you going to tell the citizens of Wolf Hole?”

“Another man, a ‘Judas’, one of Banna’s own...” Flute said. “We can explain this just fine, Sheriff. Trust me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Dave walked to the door. “I’ll see what’s holding up Doc Landry. The sooner we get that arm patched, the better.”

“Then we’re through here?” Banna asked.

“For now. I’m not saying for good. I still have questions.”

“That makes us even, Sheriff.”

As the door closed, Banna turned to Flute. “What about this Shawnee woman?”

“Like I said, Jake had been sneaking off to meet her.”

“Where?”

“A small shack about five miles from town. The girl lives there with her old man. He’s nothing but a drunk and the place hasn’t been worked for years.”

“What kind of assets do they have, Flute?”

“Not much in the way of cattle, if that’s what you mean.”

“How come I didn’t know about these vermin before?”

Flute straightened to his full six feet. “Well, it just didn’t seem important.”