

ROGUE LAWMAN
BULLETS
OVER BEDLAM

Peter Brandvold



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

Table of Contents

[Epigraph](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1. - SOGGY STALKING TRAIL](#)

[Chapter 2. - HULLABALOO](#)

[Chapter 3. - TWO HALVES OF A DEAD RAT](#)

[Chapter 4. - NIGHT VISITOR](#)

[Chapter 5. - INTERROGATION](#)

[Chapter 6. - JUST IN TIME FOR DINNER](#)

[Chapter 7. - JULIANA VELASQUEZ](#)

[Chapter 8. - AMBUSCADE IN CHARLEY'S WASH](#)

[Chapter 9. - SECRET PLACE](#)

[Chapter 10. - END OF THE TRAIL](#)

[Chapter 11. - "WHAT'S YOUR NAME, MY PRETTY?"](#)

[Chapter 12. - PALOMAR ROJAS](#)

[Chapter 13. - HOUSE OF CARDS](#)

[Chapter 14. - GUNSMOKE AND STARLIGHT](#)

[Chapter 15. - THE HUNTED](#)

[Chapter 16. - TROPHY](#)

[Chapter 17. - PRETTY GIRL TRAVELING ALONE](#)

[Chapter 18. - CAGED](#)

[Chapter 19. - FLIGHT](#)

[Chapter 20. - SARADEE'S REVENGE](#)

[Chapter 21. - WITHOUT MERCY](#)

“Brandvold is a writer to watch.”

—*Jory Sherman*

Stranger in the Night

Hawk wasn't sure how much time had passed before he opened his eyes. He'd heard something. The lamp was lit and warm . . . sweet breath pushed against his face. He jerked his head back, snapped a hand toward his gun belt coiled over a bedpost, clawed the Russian from the holster, and clicked the hammer back.

A woman laughed and leapt back from the bed. “Easy, lover! It's me, Saradee Jones.”

When Hawk's eyes focused, he saw her heart-shaped face framed by billowing, copper-colored hair. Her heart-stopping, high-breasted, round-hipped body, clad in only a dusty trail hat and a flimsy chemise . . .

“You must've been riding hard, last few days. Didn't think I could sneak into your room, much less light a lamp while you snored like a drunken sailor.” She leaned down and kissed his cheek. “You're getting careless, Mr. Hawk.”

Hawk aimed the cocked Russian at her. “How in the hell did you get in here? I told you next time I saw you, I'd kill you.”

Chuckling, she leaned forward, her left hand nudging his pistol up into the deep crease between her breasts. She ran her fingertips along the gun's barrel, then down along his hand and wrist, tickling him with her nails. “Why don't you fire?”

Berkley titles by Peter Brandvold

The Sheriff Ben Stillman Series

HELL ON WHEELS
ONCE LATE WITH A .38
ONCE UPON A DEAD MAN
ONCE A RENEGADE
ONCE HELL FREEZES OVER
ONCE A LAWMAN
ONCE MORE WITH A .44
ONCE A MARSHAL

The Rogue Lawman Series

BULLETS OVER BEDLAM
COLD CORPSE, HOT TRAIL
DEADLY PREY
ROGUE LAWMAN

The .45-Caliber Series

.45-CALIBER DEATHTRAP
.45-CALIBER MANHUNT
.45-CALIBER FURY
.45-CALIBER REVENGE

The Bounty Hunter Lou Prophet Series

THE DEVIL'S LAIR
STARING DOWN THE DEVIL

THE DEVIL GETS HIS DUE
RIDING WITH THE DEVIL'S MISTRESS
DEALT THE DEVIL'S HAND
THE DEVIL AND LOU PROPHET

Other titles

BLOOD MOUNTAIN

ROGUE LAWMAN
BULLETS
OVER BEDLAM

Peter Brandvold



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

ROGUE LAWMAN: BULLETS OVER BEDLAM

A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with the author

PRINTING HISTORY

Berkley edition / April 2008

Copyright © 2008 by Peter Brandvold.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN : 978-1-1012-2032-0

BERKLEY®

Berkley Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

BERKLEY is a registered trademark of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
The "B" design is a trademark belonging to Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

<http://us.penguinroup.com>

*For the Hi-Line couple:
John Anderson and Pam Burke,
remembering the horseback rides,
airplane rides,
Sadie and Shep,
and Friday nights with pistols and beer*

1.

SOGGY STALKING TRAIL

FROM a night sky black as a tar pit, lightning slashed through the rain and knifed into a sprawling cottonwood. Showering sparks sizzled as the storm loosed its wrath upon the world.

Thunder rumbled like cannon fire, shaking the earth.

The gods were angry. That's how it seemed to Gideon Hawk, riding his grulla mustang through a narrow draw, water up to the horse's hocks and sluicing off Hawk's broad-brimmed hat. The sky was dark as a blacksmith's apron, the air silver with the nickel-sized raindrops that had been pummeling him for the past two hours.

Thunder rumbled over the mountains enclosing him on three sides. Like fireworks, lightning lit up the stark, rocky, saguaro-studded terrain nearby.

It had been a long trail—three days' worth of hard tracking six killers and bank robbers from Cartridge Springs. When they'd hit the Stockman's Bank and the Wells Fargo office, the gang led by Shadow Nielsen and Skylar Parks had left town whooping like jackals and triggering lead, taking the banker's daughter hostage and leaving a young woman and her little boy sprawled across the boardwalk before the millinery shop, dead.

Hawk hadn't been in town that day. But news had spread over the telegraph wires.

When he'd heard that the sheriff's posse who'd followed the gang to the Territorial border had lost the trail in the badlands, Hawk rode to Cartridge Springs and quietly, anonymously took up the hunt.

Bona fide lawmen couldn't bring jackals like these to justice. It took a lawman unshackled by civilization's laws and society's rules—who enforced the law of the primitive—to give uncivilized lobos as these, who'd kill an innocent young woman and a child as casually as shooting trash-heap rats, their reckoning.

Earlier in the day, Hawk had lost the trail in the rain. It wasn't hard to figure where the jackals were heading, though. There weren't many trails in this neck of the rocky desert—at least, not many trails a white man dared follow and not end up slow-roasted over an Apache fire.

He put the grulla up a saddleback ridge and peered out through the separate streams funneling off his hat brim.

He wouldn't have to ride much farther.

Below, in a barren valley, on a low shelf under a high, anvil-shaped ridge, sat a small, two-story roadhouse, its two front windows and one side window lit against the stormy night. The frequent lightning flashes showed a pine-log hitching post out front, a sign over the brush arbor that Hawk couldn't read from this distance, and a small barn and corral on the right side of the trail.

Hawk reached back and shucked his Henry rifle from the saddle boot. The gun

wolves had stopped here for the night. It was too wet to continue. Besides, they were wealthy men. Well-heeled hombres didn't sleep on the ground when they didn't have to. Especially when they had a pretty girl with them, and it was raining bear cubs and wolverines.

Hawk broke open the rifle's chamber, made sure he had a fresh shell seated, then raised the lever against the stock. He rested the Henry over his saddle bows, lifted the collar of his yellow slicker, clucked to the horse, and headed slowly down the hill through the dripping saguaros that flashed like crucified martyrs on Cavalry Hill.

The wind and rain surged harder, turning the trail into a river, as he splashed down the ridge and halted the grulla between the corral and the barn. No horses milled behind the rails. They'd be in the barn for the night. In the roadhouse beyond, which the sign identified as Leo's Place, figures showed beyond the sashed, rain-streaked windows.

Hawk slid out of the saddle, opened the barn doors, and led the grulla inside. The trapped air was musty and warm with the smell of horses, hay, and manure. He closed the doors, found a lamp hanging with collars and harnesses on a four-by-four post, lit it, and held it aloft.

Copper eyes glistened in the lamplight, staring back at him from the rear shadows. Upon closer inspection, Hawk saw six stalled horses, all still damp. The tack piled on the stall partitions was also wet, the wool blankets hanging heavy on the pine planks.

Hawk tended the grulla, then checked the loads in his two pistols—a big Russian .44 positioned for the cross-draw on his left hip, and a stag-butted Colt on his right. He spun the Colt's cylinder, dropped the revolver in its holster, lowered his slicker over it, and grabbed his Henry, off-cocking the hammer.

He moved to the front of the barn, blew out the lamp, and opened the doors. He stood, letting his eyes range over the two-story cabin and stoop. The tang of burning mesquite cut through the slashing rain.

Thunder crashed like boulders. Lightning flashed ghostly blue.

Hawk pushed the doors closed and slogged through the mud to the front porch. He climbed the steps, setting each boot down softly, and tripped the door latch. The Z-frame door squawked inward, and he moved through it casually, doffing his hat and swiping it against his thigh.

The others in the room—five men playing cards or checkers at two tables to his right, and the apron standing behind the bar reading an illustrated newspaper spread open on the pine planks to his left—shifted their eyes to him.

Hawk didn't slip into even a crowded room unnoticed. He was over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, and powerful through the arms and shoulders. His father was a Ute warrior, his mother, a Norwegian immigrant's daughter. He owned the thick, dark-brown hair and red-bronze skin of his father, while his green, slanted eyes and high, tapering cheekbones bespoke the Viking blood of his mother.

Under the slicker he wore a blue chambray shirt, red neckerchief, sheepskin vest, and tight-fitting black denims. His bench-made boots were plain brown and high-heeled, the spurs unadorned.

The eyes stayed with him as he casually scraped mud from his boots on the flour-sack rug inside the door, then moved to the bar, his boots thumping hollowly against the puncheons, spur chains ringing. He cast a quick glance over the two groups of men

sitting at two separate tables—three at one table halfway down the room, two at another a little farther back. The group of three was playing cards, while the other two sat hunched over a checkerboard.

None had apparently scraped their boots, and dried mud marked the floor around their chairs, telling Hawk they'd been here a couple of hours.

One of the men at the first table, staring so hard at Hawk as to bore holes through him, had long, stringy blond hair, a red weasel face, and a big, hide-wrapped bowie hanging down his chest from a leather lanyard.

The gang's segundo, Skylar Parks.

Upstairs, a man and a woman were talking. Must be the top coyote himself, Shadow Nielsen. The woman must be the banker's pretty daughter the gang had taken as a hostage.

The barman, leaning on the pine planks, looked at the five men at the tables, then shifted his brown eyes to Hawk. His long, greasy hair hung down both sides of his pitted, blue-jowled face.

Straightening, he shook his hair back from his eyes. His voice betrayed a slight Irish accent. "Wet night to be out."

"I was glad to see your lights."

Hawk set the Henry's barrel on his right shoulder and turned sideways to the bar, glancing again at the unshaven, well-armed coyotes still regarding him sullenly through their tobacco smoke. Aside from the rain pounding the roof, the room was so quiet that Hawk's resonant voice sounded sepulchral in the close quarters.

"Got any coffee?"

"Not made."

"Whiskey, then. A bottle of something besides what you brew in the barn."

Before he'd finished the sentence, a sharp slap sounded above his head, in the second story. A man chuckled. Two seconds later, a girl giggled. Bedsprings squawked loudly.

Casting a furtive glance at the other customers, the barman chuckled as he reached under the bar. He set a brown, unlabeled bottle and a shot glass on the scarred planks. "Dollar and a quarter."

Hawk canted his head toward the five-gallon bucket at the end of the bar. "I'll take a couple of those hog knuckles, too."

As the bedsprings upstairs began squawking again, the man forked a couple knuckles out of the brine and set them on the planks before Hawk. The pork and vinegar smell made Hawk's stomach growl. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, and then only cold jerky and water.

"Three bits," the barman said.

Hawk flipped several coins onto the planks. Taking the knuckles in one hand, the bottle and his rifle in the other, he turned toward the room.

The coyotes were still staring at him through puffs of cigarette and cigar smoke. The second-in-command, Parks, sat back in his chair, holding a quirley between his thin, pink lips. He squinted through the smoke. His other hand rested negligently atop an ivory-butted Remington in a cross-draw holster. A sawed-off shotgun leaned against his chair.

His pinched face showed no expression.

The poker and the checkers had stalled. No one said anything. They smoked and stared at Hawk.

Upstairs, the bed squawked faster now, and the lovers groaned and sighed.

When Hawk's eyes had ranged across the room, his own face like granite, he moseyed over to a table near the smoking woodstove, set the bottle, knuckles, and glass on the table, then kicked out a chair. He laid the Henry across the table, angling it so the barrel pointed toward the middle of the small crowd before him, and shrugged out of his slicker.

He shook water from the oilskin, hung it over the back of a chair to his left, tossed his hat over the rifle's brass receiver, and sank down in the seat. It creaked loudly in the quiet room. A log in the woodstove fell.

Hawk sighed deeply and tipped the bottle over his shot glass, filling the glass to the brim. He set the bottle on the table and cast his gaze around the room, the coyotes still regarding him like a rabbit at a rattlesnake convention. The thought made the corners of his broad mouth twist up slightly.

He lifted the glass to the room, tossed it back.

The whiskey burned, instantly warming his chest and belly. Not bad coffin varnish for these parts.

Still keeping one eye on the glowering faces before him, Hawk lifted a hog knuckle, sniffed it, and took a bite. Vinegary and tough. It had sat in the brine too long and the hog had been old. Still, it tasted good to a hungry man just in from the rain.

He sat back in the chair, sipping his second shot and chewing the hog knuckle, staring blandly at the men glowering at him. The barman stood with his hands on the bar, a wing of hair hanging over one eye. The other eye was sharp with anxiety. He breathed heavily through his open mouth.

Hawk paid little attention to him. Hawk had never visited this corner of the Territory, but the place smelled and looked like an outlaw haunt. The barman, probably an old owlhoot himself, was no doubt in the habit of offering beds and whiskey to jaspers on the run.

Nevertheless, the barman was not Hawk's primary concern. Trouble, when it came, would come from the weasel-faced Skylar Parks, wanted in three territories and in Old Mexico for armed robbery and murder.

Upstairs, the mattress was getting a good workout, the headboard hammering the wall. It sounded like angry pistol shots. The man grunted and the woman sighed. Above Hawk's head, the ceiling creaked and groaned.

Hawk ripped another hunk of meat from the knuckle, washed it down with whiskey. Let Parks make the first move. Hawk could use the rest and the nourishment. Besides, he had all the time in the world.

Hawk finished the knuckle and dug in his shirt pocket for his makings sack. He'd begun rolling a smoke when Parks snorted and slid his chair back, the legs barking against the puncheons. Parks glanced at the other men, hitched up his gun belt, picked up his shotgun, and, holding the shotgun in one hand, sauntered toward Hawk.

Parks stopped as the headboard slammed one last, furious time against the wall, and the girl upstairs gave a shrill, deathlike exultation. The man groaned as though he'd run a mile to find the stage had already left the station.

Silence.

Parks continued toward Hawk, stopping five feet from Hawk's table. His sandy brows mantled his small, cobalt-blue eyes, and the mole to the left of his nose turned brick red. Hawk could smell the sweat-stink on him, the whiskey.

One hand on his pistol, the other holding the shotgun down near his thigh, finger on one of the two triggers, Parks spoke slowly. "Why the hell are you starin' at us?"

Hawk finished rolling his cigarette. When he licked it closed, he struck a match on the table, touched flame to the quirley. He took a deep drag.

Blowing smoke, he dipped his thumb and index finger into his shirt's left breast pocket, tossed a heavy copper star onto the table. It clanked and rolled, fell pin-down so that the words "Deputy U.S. Marshal" stared straight up at Parks.

"I've been sitting here trying to come up with a reason why I should take you boys in alive," Hawk said slowly, cigarette smoldering in his left hand. "And you know what?"

Parks's pupils expanded and contracted. "What?"

"I couldn't do it."

2.

HULLABALOO

PARKS blinked.

The air seemed to be sucked straight back behind him, as if the other coyotes were holding their collective breath.

Parks's upper lip curled as he took one step back. Raising the shotgun, he reached across his waist with his right hand, clawed the Remy from its holster, and, thumbing the hammer back, began swinging the barrel toward Hawk.

A revolver barked.

Parks winced and his right leg appeared to be jerked back as if by an unseen puppet string. The outlaw's face bleached as he screamed and, half-turning to his right, fired the shotgun and Remy into Hawk's table. The shotgun blast blew Hawk's whiskey bottle to smithereens, while the .44 slug plowed through a corner of the table and into the puncheons.

Having dived to his left after he'd fired his big Russian from under the table, Hawk lay on the floor on his left hip. He peered beneath the table at Parks's legs on the far side. Parks's right knee was smoking as blood filled the .44 hole Hawk had drilled through the joint.

As Parks stumbled back, shrieking and cursing, Hawk loosed another shot from the silver-plated Russian, which sounded like a howitzer in the close quarters. A ragged .44 hole appeared in the inside of Parks's right thigh, sending his shrieks higher as he danced and pirouetted before the bar.

A pistol and a rifle barked at the same time as the other outlaws, gaining their feet, began flinging lead toward Hawk. Both slugs plowed into a chair on the far side of Hawk's ruined table. As another shot curled the air over his right ear and plunked into the wall behind him, Hawk threw the table over and ducked behind it.

Three shots popped through the flimsy pine, one tearing the nap from Hawk's right sleeve, one creasing the soft skin between the index and middle-finger knuckles of his right hand.

Hawk snaked his Russian and his Colt over the top edge of the table, peered into the shadows where the outlaws milled, sidestepping and aiming their revolvers and rifles, squinting through the smoke. As several more shots pealed around him, Hawk cut loose with both revolvers, pulling the triggers, cocking the hammers, pulling the triggers again. He sent two men dancing back and falling over tables, while another dropped his Colt Navy and clutched his arm.

"Son of a *bitch!*"

As the man lowered his head toward his chest, another slug plunked through the top of his hat. He jerked and collapsed.

Hawk lowered his head but continued firing the Russian and the Colt until both

hammers clicked empty. Then he dropped both guns, bolted to his feet, and leapt the overturned table. As he scooped his Henry off the floor, he cast a glance into the smoky shadows, where the surviving outlaws milled, out of sight behind chairs and their own overturned tables.

One man fired from behind the woodstove, but the slug plowed through the room's center post a good five feet ahead and to the right of Hawk. Hawk dropped to a knee, thumbed the Henry's hammer back, and fired. The broad forehead of the man peeking around the stove turned pink as he gave a startled grunt and fell back against the wall, flapping his arms as if trying to fly.

A big bear of a man with two salt-and-pepper braids and an eye patch heaved to his feet from behind a table, and fired a Starr .44 in each hand. Hawk threw himself right and rolled off his right shoulder as both slugs plunked into the pail of hog knuckles atop the bar.

Hawk rose to a crouch, levering a fresh shell into the Henry's breech, snapping the butt to his shoulder, and firing two quick rounds.

The man screamed, eyes snapping wide as, both smoking pistols held straight out before him, he glanced down at the two holes in his chest—perfectly parallel and spaced three inches apart, directly over his heart.

In the corner of Hawk's left eye, someone moved. A fierce, defiant shriek rose as a pistol flashed through the smoke and murky lantern light.

Hawk swiveled right and ran, taking three strides and then lofting himself over the bar. Three bullets, fast as wind-driven hail, popped into the cracked mirror behind the bar above his head. Hawk smashed into the back wall and hit the floor on his right shoulder and hip.

Ahead, the barman crouched, knees drawn to his chest. He lifted his head from his arms, hair hanging like strings around his face, eyes bright with fear. "What a goddamn hullabaloo—look what you done to my place!"

Hawk raked another shell into the Henry. "Not finished yet."

The scream came again, followed by a string of Spanish epithets. Peering out from under the bar, Hawk saw a swarthy man in a steeple-crowned, straw sombrero stagger toward him, kicking fallen chairs and tables out of his way. To Hawk's right, half under a table, Parks grunted and groaned, a pool of blood growing beneath his ruined legs.

The Mexican emerged from the smoke and shadows, a bracket lamp revealing a round, mustachioed face with bright, black eyes set beneath sloping brows. The man held a hand to his bloody belly. Blood dribbled down from the left corner of his mouth and between the three or four teeth in his lower jaw.

"*Sangre de Cristo, usted me mato!*" Blood of Christ, you killed me.

He raised the pistol, cracked off another shot. The slug barked into the floor a foot in front of Hawk. The shooter triggered the gun again but the hammer clicked, empty.

As the Mexican tossed away the spent Schofield and grabbed a second gun from behind his horsehide sash, Hawk scurried over to the beer keg to his right, which held up one end of the three cottonwood planks composing the bar. The second Schofield popped twice, one shot chunking into the floor in front of the keg, the other into the keg itself, which jerked against Hawk's left shoulder.

The Mexican's boots thumped toward the bar, spurs chinging. The Mexican was

sobbing and cursing in Spanish.

“Shit,” the barman said, throwing himself flat on the floor. “Ah, shit, shit, shit . . .”

Hawk glanced at him. “You’re awfully grim.” He threw himself right, out from behind the keg, and onto his elbows, raising the Henry in both hands. The Mexican stood five feet from the bar, lifting his enraged eyes to peer over the top.

Hawk fired. The Mexican jerked toward him, and the slug merely sliced the lobe from the Mexican’s left ear.

The Mexican fired the Schofield. The bullet sliced through the top of Hawk’s left arm. Gritting his teeth, Hawk rose to his knees.

As the Mexican raised his Schofield’s barrel and thumbed the hammer back, ignoring the blood pouring from his ear, Hawk rammed another shell into the Henry’s breech, the spent casing smoking across his right shoulder and hitting the floor with a ping.

Teetering like a windmill in a prairie twister, the Mexican canted the Schofield toward Hawk and fired a half second before Hawk levered two rounds through each of the man’s sun-seared cheeks, and one through his heart. The Mexican’s own slug plowed into the base of the wall behind Hawk.

The Mexican—punched straight back and lifted off his feet—was dead before he hit the floor.

Hawk levered another round and peered through the wafting smoke. The smell of cordite was tempered by the smell of brine still dribbling to the floor in two streams from the bucket of hog knuckles. Around the demolished room, nothing moved. The five men were down, twisted amidst the rubble.

Silence except for the twin streams of brine dribbling onto the floor, and the sharp, anguished breaths of Skylar Parks, lying under a broken table ten feet away from Hawk and staring at the ceiling. Rain still lashed the walls and windows, and wan lightning flashed, but the storm’s fury had passed.

Behind Hawk, wood creaked. He threw himself right as a pistol popped twice.

He hit the floor on his butt and raised the Henry toward the stairs at the back of the room. A mustachioed face peered out through the rails near the top of the staircase. A silver-plated gun barrel angled toward Hawk, who fired two rounds. The slugs hammered through a rail support on both sides of the mustachioed gent’s face.

Shadow Nielsen cursed, withdrew the gun, and bolted the three steps to the top of the stairs.

Hawk turned toward the bar. The barman was still down on all fours, hands laced across the back of his head, his forehead pressed to the floor.

“There a back way out of this place?” Hawk asked.

The barman lifted his head, looked around warily, then slid his gaze to Hawk. He shook his head.

Hawk stood and set his rifle atop the bar. He probably had two or three rounds left in the long gun. He walked back to his broken table, picked up the Russian and the Colt, and loaded both at the bar, thumbing cartridges from the leather loops on his shell belt.

The ceiling creaked. Hushed, agitated voices rose in the second story.

Hawk spun the Russian’s cylinder, then picked up the Colt. Holding each gun down low at his sides, he started toward the stairs. He paused over Skylar Parks.

The outlaw's rheumy blue eyes, glazed with shock from blood loss and fear, met Hawk's. "I'm gonna . . . I'm gonna need a doctor real bad," he croaked.

Hawk stared down at him, shook his head. "Undertaker, you mean."

Hawk aimed the Colt at Parks's forehead. Parks stared up at the revolver's barrel, eyes crossing. He'd started shaping his mouth for an exclamation, his eyes snapping wide, when the Colt barked.

The slug drilled through the middle of Parks's forehead, where the veins above his nose forked. His mouth opened and closed several times, his boots shaking. Then his open eyes turned to marbles, and he lay still.

"Christ!" exclaimed the bartender, standing at the far end of the bar, shaking his head.

"Dirty job," Hawk said, moving toward the stairs. "Somebody's gotta do it."

Hawk stopped at the bottom of the narrow stairs, peering up to the second-story landing. Nothing up there but a framed print of a plump, naked blonde spread out like a female smorgasbord on pink satin sheets in a jungle. A lantern guttered on the wall above the railing.

Hawk climbed the stairs slowly, his boots making the steps squawk, the spurs chiming softly.

Two steps from the top, he stopped, thumbed the hammers of both revolvers back, and edged a peek around the corner. The dim hall was empty.

Hawk turned into it. A musty runner ran the length of the hall. It cushioned Hawk's heels as he strode slowly between the walls of bald, vertical cottonwood planks. Two bracket lamps shunted circular shadows across the walls. Their wicks had not been trimmed, and the black smoke hung like fog beneath the ceiling. The air smelled like coal oil and sex.

The door of the last room on the left was open. Soft, red light angled from it.

A man stepped out of the room, blocking the light. Holding a woman before him, he stood facing Hawk at the end of the hall, before a low, sashed window through which distant lightning flashed.

Hawk stopped, aiming both pistols straight out from his shoulders.

Shadow Nielsen had dressed hurriedly. His hair hung uncombed from beneath his big plainsman hat, and his shirttails hung over his cartridge belt and black denim trousers. Two sets of saddlebags, two pockets stuffed with clothes, were looped over his left shoulder.

The girl before him—a small, thin brunette—was clad in a see-through nightgown, her arms and legs bare. She stood stiffly before Nielsen, brown eyes riveted on Hawk, as Nielsen held his silver-plated .45 to her jaw.

"Drop it," Nielsen barked. "Or she dies."

Hawk blinked, kept the revolver leveled. "Kill her."

Nielsen squinted one eye. The girl frowned slightly.

"I'm warnin' you," Nielsen said. "I ain't just dancin' with this pretty little banker's daughter. I *will* kill her if you don't put those guns down and back away." He cocked the .45's hammer. "You wanna take her pretty little *carcass* back to her daddy?"

"Why not?" Hawk growled. "I don't reckon her daddy would have much use for a little tramp that ran off with the men who robbed his bank."

"Ran *off*?" the girl said, indignant. She shifted her bare feet on the runner, her

breasts jouncing behind the nightgown. “I didn’t have a choice. They took me out of my father’s office.”

“Maybe you were in your old man’s office because you knew Nielsen was comin’. Maybe you figured your old man would be more likely to turn over the combination to the safe if he thought his daughter’s life was imperiled.” Hawk paused and leveled his gaze at Nielsen. “Go ahead and kill her. Then face me like a man.”

Nielsen’s chest rose and fell sharply. The girl beetled her brows, and her cheeks turned crimson.

“I’m warnin’ you, lawman.” Nielsen pressed the .45’s barrel hard against her jaw. “I’m callin’ your bluff!”

The girl winced and slid her fearful eyes toward Nielsen as he gripped her tighter around the neck. “Shadow . . . don’t . . .”

Hawk smiled down the long barrel of his Russian .44.

“I’m gonna kill this little bitch!” Nielsen’s voice boomed around the hall. “I ain’t gonna warn you again. You don’t drop those hoglegs in three seconds, I’m gonna blow her fucking *head off!*”

The girl’s eyes snapped wide. She bunched her lips and squirmed, trying to wrench herself free of the big man’s grasp. “Shadow, let me *go!*” She bit his left hand.

“Ouch!” Nielsen’s thick arm jerked away from the girl, and she spun toward the wall, getting her feet entangled with Nielsen’s boots and falling, hands slapping the cottonwood planks. “Ivy, you fuckin’ bitch!”

The saddlebags tumbling from his shoulder, Nielsen lashed out at her, stopped, and turned to Hawk grinning down the Russian’s barrel at the outlaw leader. Nielsen’s eyes flashed fear as he jerked his Colt up.

Hawk’s Russian leapt in his hand. *Pop!*

The Colt spoke. *Ka-paw! Ka-paw!*

Then the Russian again: *Pop, pop, pop!*

The thick powder smoke wafted around Hawk’s head, making his eyes burn. He slitted his lids and peered at the end of the hall. Nielsen stood straight back against the wall, against the window, arms hanging slack at his sides. Blood fountained from the four holes in his chest, spraying the girl cowering on the floor to his right.

She screamed and hid her face in her arms and raised knees.

Nielsen’s Colt slipped out of his hand, hitting the floor with a thud. He sighed, eyes rolling back in his head. Then he sagged down to the floor and lowered his chin to his chest. After a few seconds, he rolled onto a shoulder, his blood pooling around him.

Hawk lowered his revolvers and strode down the hall. He glanced at the girl sobbing into her blood-splashed arms. He picked up Nielsen’s pistol from the blood pool, emptied it, letting the cartridges clink to the floor, then tossed the revolver into the darkened room, skidding it under the bed.

He fished around in Nielsen’s saddlebags. When he found the set with the money the gang had stolen from the bank and the Wells Fargo office—over ten thousand dollars of bundled greenbacks—he slung the bags over his shoulder and turned again to the girl.

“You best split ass for home.” Hawk adjusted the saddlebags on his shoulder. “Before I take you over my knee.”

She lifted her head, her cheeks tear-streaked. “I’ll never go back there. I hate that

town and those boring people!”

“Well, you best go somewhere. You’ve worn out your welcome in these parts.”

The girl cried in her arms as Hawk walked away down the hall and descended the stairs.