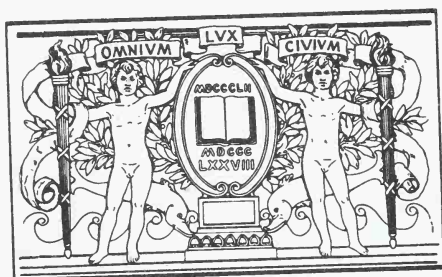


ATLANTIC WESTERN

INCIDENT AT HADDON CITY



Dan Roberts



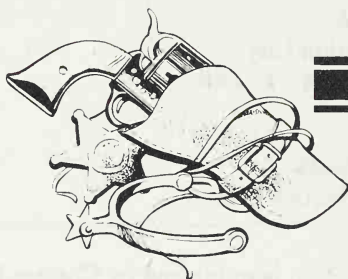
BOSTON
PUBLIC
LIBRARY



INCIDENT AT HADDON CITY

Of the three men riding north along the dusty Kansas road toward Haddon City, two were partners who worked together whenever they had a good thing going for them, and who were intent on investigating what the Panther Gang were doing at their destination. The third was a rowdy trouble-maker whose company they had not sought but who had invited himself to accompany them. Hardly had the trio arrived in town than the third man risked all their lives by imprudently appointing himself defender of a beleaguered girl. So the two friends had to save themselves by taking over and promising, to their own surprise, that they would help her search for her vanished brother.

INCIDENT AT HADDON CITY



Dan Roberts

ATLANTIC LARGE PRINT

Chivers Press, Bath, England.
Curley Publishing, Inc.,
South Yarmouth, Mass., USA.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roberts, Dan.

Incident at Haddon City / Dan Roberts.

p. cm.—(Atlantic large print)

ISBN 0-7927-0021-X (lg. print)

1. Large type books. I. Title.

[PS3568.O2378I5 1989]

813'.54—dc20

89-34908

CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Roberts, Dan, 1912—

Incident at Haddon City.

Rn: W. E. D. Ross I. Title

813'.54 [F]

ISBN 0-7451-9608-X

ISBN 0-7451-9620-9 pbk

This Large Print edition is published by Chivers Press, England, and Curley Publishing, Inc, U.S.A. 1989

Published by arrangement with Donald MacCampbell, Inc

U.K. Hardback ISBN 0 7451 9608 X

U.K. Softback ISBN 0 7451 9620 9

U.S.A. Softback ISBN 0 7927 0021 X

Copyright © Arcadia House 1968

To Mr and Mrs DENNIS JAMES, Senior
and Mr and Mrs DENNIS JAMES, Junior
—my good neighbours!

INCIDENT AT HADDON CITY

CHAPTER ONE

The first thing I noticed when I stepped out of the train at Haddon City was the heat. It was a hot, sticky day, and the sun was beating down on the town. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, but I didn't realize how hot it would be. The first thing I did was to go to the hotel and get a room. I had heard that the hotel was good, and I was right. The room was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right.

The next thing I did was to go to the bank. I had heard that the bank was good, and I was right. The bank was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right. The next thing I did was to go to the school. I had heard that the school was good, and I was right. The school was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right.

The next thing I did was to go to the store. I had heard that the store was good, and I was right. The store was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right. The next thing I did was to go to the church. I had heard that the church was good, and I was right. The church was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right.

The next thing I did was to go to the hospital. I had heard that the hospital was good, and I was right. The hospital was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right. The next thing I did was to go to the court. I had heard that the court was good, and I was right. The court was comfortable, and the service was excellent. I was in luck. I had heard that Haddon City was a good place to live, and I was right.

CHAPTER ONE

The three were riding northward along the dusty road to Haddon City. Cal Haines, out front on a big pinto horse, came to the ranch road leading off to the right and reined his mount to read the crude lettering on the weather-beaten sign erected at the forks.

‘No Squatters!’ was the terse message.

He studied it with a smile on his bronzed, determined face. He was tall and slim and sat easily in the saddle. His eyes were blue and most of the time held an amused, speculative twinkle, but they could go rock hard. A livid scar along his left cheek and deep lines at his mouth and eyes marked him as a veteran of the range. He looked more than his twenty-seven years.

His saddle partner, Rusty Miller, came riding up in a cloud of dust to halt abreast of him. Big, overweight, red-haired Rusty leaned forward with a smile and, indicating the sign, drawled, ‘Kansas gits more friendly every day!’

Cal glanced at his pal on the blue roan. ‘We’ve passed a heap of them signs today,’ he agreed in a dry voice.

Rusty said, ‘Wish to heaven we could lose Jim Gordon!’ He looked over his shoulder at a third rider approaching on a white gelding.

It was an itinerant gunman, Jim Gordon, who had tagged onto them in a bar back in Jericho and had invited himself to journey to Haddon City with them.

Cal grinned at his friend. He knew that he resented the intrusion of the third man. He had no use for Jim Gordon himself. He figured they would get rid of him when they reached town. Gordon was a rowdy, a drunkard and a troublemaker generally. And right now he and Rusty weren't looking for trouble.

Cal said, 'Better be polite to him. He's a quick draw!'

Red-headed Rusty, who was one of the fastest men with a Colt in the West, spat disgustedly. 'Now you're really bein' funny,' he said.

Gordon reined the white gelding, which stood out in contrast to his somber black outfit and Stetson. He was as mean-looking as his reputation. He had black eyes set too close in a lean face, his cheek-bones were high and protruding, and his skin was a dark olive. There were rumors that he had Apache blood in him. Now his thin mouth showed a taut smile.

'We'll soon be in Haddon City,' he said in his harsh voice.

'Yeah,' Cal drawled, his blue eyes appraising the rider in black. 'You got urgent business there?'

Jim Gordon continued that cold smile. 'Maybe and maybe not. Why are you two going there?'

Rusty gave him a defiant look. 'That's strictly personal,' he said. 'Me and Cal are having ourselves a little free time.'

'And we've been told Haddon City would be a good place to spend it,' Cal added.

Jim Gordon held the reins tight on his restless mount and nodded toward the sign. 'We've seen a lot of them along the way.' He studied the winding ranch road. 'That is the Triple B spread,' he said. 'Owned by Bruce Bentley, an old-timer. I worked for him once. Judging by the signs, he's been having squatter trouble lately. Maybe he'd be in the mood to hire a few special hands again.'

Cal regarded him calmly. 'Like we said, we're just riding through.'

The rider in black laughed curtly at this. 'Sure. But I know you boys have a reputation. Don't tell me you just stumbled into this territory by accident.'

Rusty glowered at him. 'You think different?'

Jim Gordon shrugged. 'Ever hear of the Panther Gang?' he asked.

Cal's blue eyes went from sleepy to wary. 'Sure, we've heard of them. Why?'

'Story goes their headquarters is near Haddon City,' Gordon said. 'It struck me you boys might be thinking of joining up with

them.'

'Is that why you're going there?' Cal asked.

The rider in black chuckled. 'You think I'd say so if it was so?'

'Then take it easy before you link us with any gang of rustlers and bank robbers,' Rusty warned him belligerently. 'We ain't hankering for any kind of company, not even yours!'

Cal was quick to note Rusty was at the boiling point, and he didn't want any battle to start. So he said, 'We'd better be moving if we expect to get to town soon after sundown.' He loosed the rein on the pinto and went on ahead.

Rusty and the troublemaker Jim Gordon followed him. He kept moving at a good pace until he came to a place where, a short distance from the road, the burned and blackened skeleton of a wagon, along with the bleached bones of horses, gave a grim warning the sign prohibiting squatters was deadly serious.

Cal's face was grim as he halted for a moment. And as Rusty joined him on the roan, he said, 'Reckon they finished the horses and then burned up the wagon. Bruce Bentley and the Triple B must be making a few bad friends!'

Before Jim Gordon caught up to them on the gelding, Cal urged his mount on. He wasn't hankering for any more cosy talk with

the dark man. All he wanted was to get to Haddon City before it was too late, find a livery stable for the pinto, a hotel room for himself and a friendly saloon where he could wet his parched throat.

He and Rusty had been on the trail for days before they'd landed in Jericho. They'd spent a week in the little town that was having a new boom on Turkey Red wheat.

Cal and Rusty had finished working for an outfit in the South. They followed a trade which prospered best in silence. Cal had figured it might be wise to trade territories for a while. They were getting too much of a reputation in the South. So he and Rusty cut cards in the bunkhouse one night and came up with Haddon City. If things worked out as usual, they wouldn't be there long before they had something going for them.

Meeting the gunman, Jim Gordon, had been plain bad luck. He'd recognized them at once. And he knew plenty about them, just as they were familiar with his reputation. Cal had guessed he was going to be a nuisance the moment he had sidled up to them in one of the Jericho bars and introduced himself with a nod.

'You gents gave heard of me,' he said. 'And I know about you.'

'And where does that leave us?' Cal had asked.

Jim Gordon shrugged. 'I hear you're

heading for Haddon City. I figured I might string along, since I'm planning to go there.'

'We ain't in the habit of formin' caravans,' Rusty had growled.

'I know that,' Jim Gordon agreed with one of his sinister smiles. 'But good company on the trail is always welcome. I'd say we three have a lot to talk about.'

'Me and my partner are not talkers,' Cal had informed him coolly before he downed the rest of his double whiskey.

But in spite of rebuffs Jim Gordon had followed them.

Darkness had settled in before they reached the outskirts of Haddon City. The three now rode almost abreast of one another. They were parched, saddle weary and ready for the excitements of the cow town. They passed the lighted windows of the frame houses in the residential section and came to wide Main Street.

With a jaded eye Cal noted that Haddon City was identical with a half-hundred frontier towns he'd known. He pulled the pinto to a walk as they went by saloons, general stores, the bank and a two story wooden hotel which bore the optimistic sign: TRAVELER'S REST. Next to it there was a restaurant and a photograph gallery, while across the street were a barbershop and a livery stable. The roadway was dusty, and a plank sidewalk ran on each side of it.

He headed the pinto toward the alley leading to the livery stable, and the others followed. Just by the alley there was a cluster of cowpokes gathered. Cal didn't look closely enough to see what was going on. Probably a dice game, or maybe they were heckling some drunk.

Then he heard Jim Gordon shout, 'Just a minute!' Reining the pinto, he looked back to see the man in black quickly dismount from his horse and approach the noisy circle gathered on the sidewalk. Rusty was also getting down off the roan. Cal decided to observe for himself what was going on and wheeled the pinto around and went back. It took him only a minute to see that the peering cowpokes were surrounding a girl in a gray flowered bonnet and matching suit. She was crouching against the building in fear as they continued to tease her.

As Cal swung down to the ground, he saw Jim Gordon push his way through the drunken, jeering circle to reach the girl's side. This at once caused an uproar. Somebody either lurched forward or deliberately pushed up against Jim Gordon, sending him sprawling against the girl he had gone to rescue. This caused the drunken circle of males to shout their glee. Jim's dark face took on a venomous look of rage as he recovered and reached for his gun.

Cal didn't hesitate. With a roar of 'Take it

easy!' he hurled his way through the startled circle to wind up beside Jim Gordon and the girl.

'You don't need to bother about this,' Jim Gordon said, his narrow dark face showing anger.

'It seems you're not doing a very good job,' Cal told him. 'Slide that gun back into your holster. These gents were just funning a mite. Ain't that so, boys?'

'Sure!' a spokesman for the circle of cowpokes said drunkenly. 'We was just offerin' the little lady some advice.' This drew loud approving murmurs.

'Well, advice time is over,' Cal said firmly, taking them all in with a steely gaze as he stood in front of the girl. 'I happen to be a friend of this lady.'

Jim Gordon gave him a surprised glance. 'You know her?'

'That's what I said,' Cal told him tersely. And to the cowpokes, he added, 'Better go back to the saloon, gents, before the sheriff shows up and starts running some of you in for disturbing the peace.'

The circle murmured drunkenly and with some reluctance dispersed and straggled across the wide, dusty road to the saloon. By this time Rusty had appeared on the scene.

Cal turned to the frightened girl. 'You all right, miss?'

She nodded, 'Yes, thanks to you.'

'Thanks to him!' Jim Gordon said harshly. 'I was the one who came over here first.'

'And nearly got yourself and her filled full of lead,' Cal reminded him.

Rusty edged in. 'That sure was some stupid play of yours, Gordon!'

The dark man glared at them belligerently. 'What are you two trying to prove?'

'We'll take care of her, Gordon,' Cal said, facing him.

Jim Gordon's cheek developed a sudden tic. 'I saw her first!'

'The lady is my friend,' Cal told him firmly. 'Better get moving.'

Rusty was standing shoulder to shoulder with him. He told Gordon, 'You heard what the man said!'

The thin dark man swallowed hard. 'Okay,' he said in a nasty quiet tone. 'Don't you two think I'll forget this in a hurry.' And with a final scowl for them, he went back to his horse.

Rusty shouted after him, 'Look us up any time you have a complaint, Mister Gordon.'

'Take it easy, Rusty,' Cal warned him, and gave his attention to the girl. 'Where were you heading, miss?'

'Up the street', she said, indicating with a nod the quieter residential end of the main street. 'I'm staying with Dr Marsland and his wife.'

Cal nodded. 'Okay,' he said. 'I'll take you

there.' And to Rusty, 'Put the horses in the stable and see they're bedded down. I'll meet you at the hotel in a few minutes.'

Rusty's good-natured face took on an understanding grin. 'Sure wish I could pick up the kind of work you do, Cal.' And to the girl, 'Don't pay any attention to what he says, miss. He's not a regular gent^e like me, he's a masher!' And with a chuckle at his own joke, the big man ambled away to take the horses to the livery stable. Jim Gordon had already ridden off down the street.

Cal turned to the girl with a wry grin. 'Don't pay any heed to what he says, miss.'

'I won't,' she said, a faint smile on what he now saw was a very pretty face. She was a small blonde with pert, even features and carried herself with style.

Cal assisted her down from the plank sidewalk, and they crossed the alley. When they were on the wooden sidewalk again, they strolled slowly in the direction she'd indicated.

'What gave you the idea you could wander around the dark streets of this cow town safely?' he asked her.

She sighed. 'I realize now I was foolish. I'm new to the West.'

'If I may say so, that's apparent, miss,' Cal said dryly. 'I'd have expected these folks you're staying with would have seen to it you didn't put yourself in danger.'

'Dr Marsland tried to warn me,' she admitted. 'But then everyone had been so busy doing that, ever since before I left Philadelphia, that I don't think I listen any longer.'

'You could get yourself in a heap of trouble that way,' he warned her.

'I realize that after what happened just now,' she said in a worried voice. 'I don't know what they would have done to me if you and your friends hadn't come to aid me.'

Cal gave her a cynical glance. 'I'll leave that to your imagination,' he said.

'I don't know how to thank you. I'm sorry the dark man became so angry. But you were right in what you said. He wasn't handling it very well.'

'Jim Gordon?'

'I think that is what you called him,' she agreed.

'Jim is a mite too anxious with his trigger finger,' Cal said. 'He wouldn't have been much better for you than them drunken saddle tramps. And for the record, he isn't my friend. He just happened to be riding with Rusty and me.'

'I see,' she said politely in her Eastern accent. 'By the way, my name is Julie Grant. I should have told you before.'

'Mine is Cal Haines, and my buddy is Rusty Miller,' he told her. 'What are you doing in Kansas? Visiting relatives?'

She shook her head. 'No. I'm out here looking for a relative. My half-brother, Steve.'

'I see,' he said.

'Steve came out here before our father died,' she went on. 'He doesn't know about Father's death, since I wasn't able to reach him. There's a legacy for him and other matters to be settled. I'd like to coax him to go back East again.'

'You think he's somewhere in this territory?'

She nodded and her tone was sad as she said, 'The trail ends here in Haddon City. He stayed here for a few months, and then he seems to have vanished. Apparently no one knows where. I've been talking to a lot of people in the hope of finding a clue to where he has gone. But no one has been able to help me.'

'A lot of men vanish in the West,' Cal told her. 'Most of them have reasons.'

She gave him a frightened side glance. 'If Steve thought he had any, they don't exist any more. That is one of the things I want to tell him.'

'If all these people knew your brother, it seems likely he'd have told some of them about his plans before he left.'

She nodded. 'I just can't understand it.'

Cal studied her for a moment as they walked on slowly. He was reluctant to put his

next thought into words, but he felt he should. He asked, 'Are you certain something didn't happen to your brother? Somebody might have put a slug in him or knifed him in a dark alley. The body could be stowed away somewhere. Did he get in any trouble here?'

'He gambled a lot,' she said, a tremor of fear in her voice. 'But Steve is such a nice boy I don't think he could have made any real enemies.'

'Boy?' he said questioningly.

'I shouldn't have called him that,' Julie said with quick embarrassment. 'He's actually a young man. He's twenty-four, three years older than I am.'

'And you say your brother gambled a lot?'

'Yes.'

'You talk to all the game operators in the different saloons?'

She nodded. 'They'd all met him. He lost a lot of money to them. But none of them have been able to tell me where he's gone.'

'What made you set out tonight?'

'Dr Marsland told me Steve had been friendly with the old man who operates the photography studio. He's never open in the daytime. I guess he drinks a lot. I thought I'd go and ask him a few questions tonight. Of course I didn't get there.'

'You should make it a rule never to go out by yourself at night,' he said.

'I know,' she agreed. 'Here we are.' And

she stopped at the gate of a white picket fence. To the side of the gate there was a square board sign affixed to the fence with the lettering: 'Dr Henry Marsland, Physician.'

Cal glanced toward the lighted windows of the neat white cottage some distance from the fence. He said, 'Looks like everyone is home.'

'The doctor and his wife were both there when I left,' she said. And she looked up at him gratefully. 'You don't know how thankful I am to you.'

He thought he had never seen a face so suit a bonnet. 'Glad we happened along,' he said with quiet embarrassment. He was beginning to remember how weary and thirsty he was.

'Won't you come in a moment?' she said. 'I'd like to have you meet the doctor. And it will help me explain what happened.'

'I promised to see Rusty at the hotel,' he reminded her. 'I expect he's there waiting for me this minute.'

'But he'll know you're coming.'

'I expect so.'

'Then surely you can spare a few moments to meet the Marslands,' she pleaded. 'I'd like them to know you. You are planning to remain in town awhile?'

'We may,' Cal told her warily, surprised at her question.

She at once gave her reason for asking it. 'I'd like to see you again, and it will be much

easier for you to call on me once you've met the Marslands.'

In the face of the invitation, Cal found himself forgetting his weariness, hunger and thirst. He smiled. 'I guess it won't be any real harm to keep Rusty waiting a little longer.'

'Thank you,' she said. And she opened the gate and led him to the door of the cottage. She knocked, and almost at once the door was opened by a distinguished-looking man with silver hair and Van Dyke beard.

The man said, 'I'm glad you're back, Miss Grant. Mary and I were worried about you. I'd about made up my mind to follow you.' He gave Cal a questioning look but made no attempt to greet him.

Julie quickly made the introductions. And then she added, 'I did get myself in some trouble. And Mr. Haines rescued me.'

The doctor shook his hand. 'Glad to know you, Haines. I suppose you believe I wasn't thinking very clearly to let her go out on her own that way.'

'I was the one who insisted,' Julie explained. 'I was afraid the photographer wouldn't talk if the doctor was with me.'

'And that was silly,' Dr Marsland told her. 'I'm sure Joe would have told you anything he could, provided he was sober enough.'

'I won't make the same mistake again,' she said.

'My wife is upstairs in bed,' Dr Marsland

explained. 'She had a touch of lumbago and retires early as a rule.'

'I must go up and say good night to her,' Julie said.

The doctor was studying Cal now with sharp eyes under his bushy white brows. He said, 'Cal Haines! The name has a familiar ring. You ever been in this part of Kansas before?'

'Just passing through,' Cal said cautiously.

'You plan to be here for a while this time?' the doctor asked.

'I don't know yet,' Cal said.

'What's your line, Cal?' the doctor inquired.

Cal hesitated. 'Me and my buddy travel a lot. We work for different outfits.'

'You're a cowpoke?' the doctor sounded surprised. 'I wouldn't have taken you for one.'

'I was foreman of an outfit far south,' Cal said with some embarrassment.

'Sorry; I didn't mean to sound disparaging,' Dr Marsland said at once. 'Ranch work is a good honorable way to make a living. Some of my best friends have been ranch hands.'

'I think it must offer wonderful freedom,' Julie said, smiling warmly at him. 'And living in the outdoors is so healthy.'

'Unless you happen to run afoul of a rustler's bullet, eh, Haines?' the old doctor

asked, chuckling at his own joke.

'I will see you again,' Julie said to him.

'Sure. I'll come by,' Cal agreed.

'And if you should hear anything about my half-brother, please let me know,' she said. 'You'll be moving around the town, and who can tell what you'll overhear?'

'I'll keep it in mind,' he promised. 'The name was Steve Grant, wasn't it?'

'Yes.' She smiled. 'Now I really must go upstairs. Good night, Doctor! Cal!' And with that said she left them.

Dr Marsland waited for a moment after she'd gone. Then he asked, 'Care for a shot of whiskey, Haines?'

'Thanks, no,' he said awkwardly, uneasy under the older man's keen stare. 'I'm overdue meeting my pal at the hotel now.' He started to the door.

The doctor followed him. 'Some other time then.'

'Sure,' Cal said as he stepped out into the cool night again.

Dr Marsland surprised him by following him outdoors. With a cautious glance inside, he turned to him and said, 'About that business of trying to help Miss Grant locate her brother—'

'Yes?' Cal looked at the silver-haired man expectantly.

'I wouldn't work too hard at it if I were you,' the doctor said. 'It might be better for

her if she didn't find him.'

CHAPTER TWO

Cal stared at the sober face of the old man with the white Van Dyke beard. He was surprised by his guarded words. 'I don't know if I rightly follow you, sir,' he said at last.

Dr Marsland said, 'I met young Grant before he disappeared. He was a wild young man. I suspect there was some good reason for him leaving Philadelphia fast and coming out here.'

'That's a pretty familiar story.'

'I know.' The old man sighed. 'The West could do with more stable stock than the East's discards. But we take what we get. The point I'm making is that Steve Grant impressed me as a young man in trouble.'

'Still, his sister claims there is no reason he shouldn't go back home with her now,' Cal said. 'So the trouble must have straightened itself out.'

'I don't question that,' Dr Marsland went on in the same grave manner. His eyes met Cal's. 'I only know the kind of people Grant fraternized with when he was here. A pretty rough crowd.'

'And no one has any idea where he went?'

‘Let’s say no one wants to tell Miss Grant where they think he’s gone. A lot of people must have the same idea I’ve got. But they won’t tell her.’

Cal frowned at the idea of this conspiracy of silence Haddon City was forming against the pretty young girl from Philadelphia. ‘That needs some explaining,’ he told the old doctor.

The man with the neat white beard was silent a moment. ‘You must have heard about the Panther Gang?’

There were only the night sounds in the background to break the quiet between them for a moment. Very carefully Cal said, ‘Yes. I reckon I have.’

‘Most of the people who knew Steve Grant think he’s thrown in his lot with the Panther outfit. But it’s not a thing to talk about openly in Haddon City. You don’t discuss the Panther Gang if you want to stay healthy.’

‘They’ve got that much hold on the town?’

Dr Marsland nodded grimly. ‘Make no mistake about that. You’re an outsider. You’ve got plenty to learn. Don’t think you won’t be watched.’

Cal’s lean face showed a cool assurance. ‘The Panther Gang is supposed to have its headquarters somewhere near here, as I’ve heard it.’

‘That’s right,’ the old man agreed. ‘They’re holed up out back. Most of the time there are

a few of them in the town. They make use of the information they pick up around the drinking places. That's where Steve Grant must have run into them.'

'Why would they enlist the services of an Easterner?'

'Steve Grant could ride as well as anyone,' the doctor said. 'And he was a crack shot. He'd trained as an engineer and could do all kinds of tricks with dynamite.'

'With dynamite?'

The old man sighed. 'I guess maybe that is why they would be so anxious to get him on their side. He set up some mining blasts while he was here that had the old-timers talking. And when the Wells-Fargo safe got out of order and had to be blasted open, he calculated the charge and fixed it so that not a thing inside it was disturbed.'

Cal raised his eyebrows. 'Sounds as if he might be a natural for a gang of outlaws like the Panther crowd.'

'That's why most of us think he's with them. But we don't want to tell her about it.'

'If she stays here long enough, she's bound to find out,' Cal warned him.

'I hope to persuade her to go back East and forget him,' Dr Marsland said.

Cal gave the old man a significant glance. 'She's too smart to be fooled easily.'

'I know that,' the doctor admitted. 'But it's a fairly hopeless situation. If I can convince

her the chances of locating him are scant, she may decide to return home. Likely she won't ever be bothered by him again. The life expectancy of the Panther outfit is pretty low. He'll be stopping a bullet before the year is out.'

'That figures,' Cal said. 'So Haddon City isn't exactly the sleepy cow town it seems.'

'I guess you must have heard that before you decided to come here, Mr Haines,' the doctor observed with a hint of sarcasm.

Cal gave him a sharp look. 'We like to travel around,' he said. And then he put a question to the old man directly. 'You've been here since before the Panther Gang took over the town. Any idea who the leader is?'

Dr Marsland's bearded face grew bitter. 'If I knew that, I'd have sent the information directly to the Federal Government long ago.'

'Why not tell the sheriff?'

'Sheriff Munro is an old man now,' the doctor said. 'He isn't as good a lawman as he used to be.'

'Bad time for him to be responsible for law and order in the town, isn't it?' Cal suggested.

'It's a bad time for all of us here in Haddon City, Mr Haines,' the old doctor said in a solemn tone.

'I'll say good night,' Cal told him. 'My partner is waiting.'

The doctor nodded his silver head. 'Come

visit us whenever you like. I'm certain Miss Grant would be happy to see you. But I still say the less mentioned about her brother, the better.'

'I've got the idea,' Cal said. And touching a forefinger to his Stetson, he turned and headed along the stone path to the sidewalk.

Finally he reached the hotel. Opening the front door, he was greeted by a pungent aroma composed of stale tobacco smoke, sour whiskey fumes and day-old cooked cabbage. The lobby had a rough plank floor and a scattering of wooden chairs with arms and battered cuspidors for each and every chair. There was a single large melancholy green plant in an earthen pot close to one of the windows. At the far end of the room was the counter by which Rusty stood.

Rusty greeted him with a resigned look as he leaned against the counter. 'I figured you had headed for Missouri with that little filly!' he said in disgust.

'Might have been a good idea,' Cal agreed.

His big redheaded pal regarded him curiously. 'It took you quite a spell to say good night.'

Cal smiled. 'Don't begrudge me my fatal fascination for the female.'

The big man grunted with loud annoyance. 'I ain't worried about a thing at this minute except to get some food and drink.' He nodded to a wizened little man with a black

patch over his right eye who stood behind the counter. 'This here is Mr Eben Cookson, who owns this place.'

The diminutive Mr Cookson bowed to Cal. 'Pleasure to have you and your friend as my guests,' he said. 'Only sorry the dining room is closed. But the Crazy Bear Saloon serves the best free lunch in Kansas.'

Rusty's broad freckled face was wreathed in a smile. 'Sounds perfect. Plenty of free food and whiskey within reaching distance!'

Cal studied Mr Cookson. He had just the trace of a low-class British accent; undoubtedly a Cockney type. His single eye had a wily gleam, and the gray hair streaked across his flattish head was thin. His face resembled that of a fox, and he seemed to be perpetually smiling. Eben Cookson was plainly not the type to be trusted.

Cal said, 'Has my friend signed for a room?'

'Indeed he has,' Eben Cookson said happily, his single eye agleam with greed, 'and paid for it a week in advance. You'll find plenty of action in Haddon City, gents. I hope you'll be with us a long time.'

Cal nodded. He was unimpressed. Turning to Rusty, he asked, 'Got our stuff in the room?'

Rusty stood impatiently, his hands notched in his gun belt. 'Sure. I took care of that first thing, while I was waitin' for you.'

‘What’s the room like?’ Cal wanted to know.

The big red-headed man’s face clearly indicated he hadn’t noticed. ‘Like any other hotel room, I reckon.’

‘You have the first floor front, and it’s my best,’ the little Britisher assured Cal from behind the counter.

‘I hope the best is good enough,’ Cal said significantly. ‘This the only hotel in town?’

‘Indeed it is.’ Eben Cookson drew himself up proudly. ‘And as a former employee of The Strand in London, I can promise you we have standards.’

‘I reckon,’ Cal said dryly. He gave the little man a sharp look. ‘So you must handle all the transients who pass through this town.’

‘I do,’ Cookson said. ‘There are a couple of widows who take boarders in their homes, but I get all the stage trade.’

Cal studied the one glittering eye of the little man. ‘Then you must have had Steve Grant staying here?’

This brought an immediate reaction from the diminutive Britisher. ‘You boys know Steve?’

Cal nodded. ‘We know of him. Did he stay here?’

‘Yes.’ The proprietor of the Traveler’s Rest had recovered his poise now. He was going to be careful. ‘Steve Grant was my guest for some weeks.’

'You got to know him well?' Cal inquired. The little man shrugged. 'Well enough.'

'Where has he gone?' Cal watched the wily Eben Cookson closely as he waited for an answer.

The little man fairly squirmed. 'I wish I knew,' he said. 'He left without paying his last week's bill. Of course he'd run up some big gambling debts by then. I figured he went back East.'

Cal was not impressed. He was sure the oily little man behind the counter knew a lot more about the disappearance of Julie Grant's half-brother than he was ready to reveal.

He told the hotel proprietor, 'I'd like to talk to you about Steve Grant sometime.'

'Sure,' Eben Cookson said. 'Sure. But there isn't much I can tell you.'

Rusty had been listening to their talk with a look of annoyance on his broad freckled face. 'Ain't we headin' for the Crazy Bear?' he demanded.

Cal smiled. 'Right this minute,' he said, and led the way.

Outside, Rusty gave him a bewildered glance. 'What was all that talk about Steve Grant?'

'The girl's half-brother. That's why she's here. She's looking for him.'

'That ain't no business of ours!'

Cal gave his buddy a mild look. 'Anything going on around us is part of our business,' he

corrected him. 'It pays to know what is happening. And the big thing happening in Haddon City seems to be the Panther Gang. They've got a stranglehold on the town.'

'So we knew something about that before we landed here,' Rusty reminded him. 'And where does this Steve Grant fit in?'

'The talk seems to be he's joined the Panther outfit. The girl doesn't know about it yet. But everyone else seems to. The smart thing here is not ever to admit there is such a thing as the Panther Gang.'

'Then why should we go messin' in their affairs,' Rusty wanted to know.

'We haven't yet,' Cal said quietly.

'Maybe not yet, but I know that gleam in your eyes,' Rusty complained. 'I was watchin' you when you were talkin' to that little limey behind the counter. You're aiming to make a hero of yourself for that girl; planning to try and locate her brother when everyone with any sense is keeping hands off!'

'You'll feel better after you get some food and drink in your stomach,' Cal told him as he pushed open the swinging doors leading into the Crazy Bear Saloon.

As the two made their way to the bar that ran the length of the room on the right, Cal saw that it was pretty well filled. The free lunch was set out midway along the bar, and that was where they went first. He and Rusty helped themselves to beef and bread, making

huge sandwiches which they munched ravenously. They both stayed for a second helping and began to take note of the saloon.

It had tables and chairs all down the center and along the other side. There was a balcony at the back, reached by a short flight of stairs. To the left of the stairs there was a big table filled with card players that Cal took to be the gambling table serving the big room. On the right of the stairs there was a small raised stage with a piano on it. A thin, slightly round-shouldered man with sharp features, hollow cheeks and slick black hair was bent over the piano, coaxing some ragtime out of it.

There were prints of race horses, burlesque queens and a couple of prize fighters stuck up on the walls. The air was thick with smoke, and the noise of talk and laughter was so loud it almost drowned out the piano music.

They had just finished their second sandwiches when a big man in a flashy brown suit with black stripes came across to them. Cal had noticed he'd been looking their way for quite a while.

The big man removed a cigar from his mouth long enough to assert arrogantly, 'That lunch is meant for regulars, and you two haven't wet your whistles with a drink yet.'

Cal faced the bulldog countenance and commanding figure of the overweight middle-aged man. He saw the heavy gold

watch chain that was looped across the fawn vest and the diamond stickpin gleaming in the wide red tie.

He drawled, 'I reckon you must be Mr Crazy Bear himself.'

The big man's face became an ugly crimson. 'I'm Tim Bates, the owner!'

'Well, Mr Bates,' Cal said coolly, as he glanced around, 'you seem to be doing a pretty fair business here. But if it will ease your mind any, my pal and I plan to do some drinking as soon as you give us the chance.'

'Yeah?' Tim Bates asked belligerently, poking the big cigar back in the corner of his mouth.

'Yeah,' Rusty put in, thrusting forward. 'We wouldn't want you to go out of business from lack of customers and giving away free food.'

'Better take it easy, cowpoke,' Tim Bates growled. 'I may decide not to sell you anything. I pick my customers here.'

'It would be against our principles to eat here and buy drinks, somewhere else,' Cal said easily.

'I'll be keeping an eye on you two,' the big man in the flashy clothes warned them. But he moved over to the other side of the room.

Rusty gave Cal a disgusted glance. 'So far, the only thing I like about Haddon City is that there's a road straight through it. And maybe we should take it tomorrow.'

'After paying a week's rent at the hotel?'

'I'll get my money back from the owner of that flea bag quick enough,' Rusty promised.

Cal laughed and slapped him on the back. 'Trouble with you, chum, is you get sensitive when you're dry.' He led him by the arm to an empty spot at the bar. 'A few whiskeys will make you see this town a lot different.'

'I'm willing to take part in the experiment,' the big man said. 'But I ain't countin' on any results.'

Cal signalled a bald bartender. After a minute the stout man in shirt sleeves polished the gleaming mahogany bar in front of them to a glasslike perfection and asked, 'What's your pleasure, gents?'

Cal ordered a bottle of whiskey and glasses, and they began to make up for the long dry trail. As he had predicted, the disgusted Rusty began to see things in a better light after the whiskey had warmed him.

The big man poured himself his fourth drink of the fiery amber liquid and gulped two thirds of it down. Then he smacked his lips and studied the glass with serene eyes. 'At least we got rid of Jim Gordon, I had about enough of him bugging us.'

Cal was on his third drink. He paused to give his pal a knowing glance. 'Don't count on it being permanent. We know Gordon must be somewhere around town.'

Rusty downed the rest of his drink, and as

he reached for another he chuckled lightly. 'He sure was mad when you took that gal from him. He rode away with a real ugly look.'

'Which makes it all the more certain he'll turn up again,' was Cal's comment. 'Jim Gordon always likes to have the last word.'

'Why do you suppose he wanted to come here with us?' Rusty asked.

Cal shrugged. 'Maybe for the same reason we had.'

'Yeah, maybe,' the big man agreed. He glanced around moodily. 'I hope Bates sees what we're doin' to this bottle. I wouldn't want him worried about his profits.'

'Take it easy, Rusty,' Cal warned. 'It's too early to start looking for fights.'

'Most of the time they come straight to me,' Rusty told him, refilling his glass. He gave Cal a questioning glance. 'When are we riding out to the Triple B to talk with Bruce Bentley?'

'Plenty of time for that,' Cal said.

'Not the way I see it. The sooner we get down to business the better.'

'No great rush,' Cal assured him. 'First I want to sort of size up the town.'

Rusty eyed him suspiciously. 'Like maybe tryin' to get a lead on what happened to that girl's half-brother?'

'Among other things.'

'If I were you, I'd dodge that Steve Grant

business. There's nothing in it for us.'

Cal smiled at him over his drink. 'I sort of promised the little lady.'

A strange voice interrupted from the other side of him; a soft, cultured voice that asked, 'Did I hear you mention Steve Grant?'

Cal turned in surprise to see that the thin, dark haired man with the cadaverous face who had been entertaining at the piano had now taken his place at the bar beside him. He was nursing a pale drink and giving Cal an interested appraisal.

Cal tried to hide his surprise. 'Yes, I was talking about Grant. Did you know him?'

The cadaverous one had sad eyes. 'Yes, I did.'

'Then perhaps you know where he went to?'

The piano player smiled wisely. 'There are some things it's better not to know.'

'Meaning what?' Cal asked.

'Meaning Steve packed up and left one day, and where he went and why is his business. Don't you agree?'

Cal was trying to make up his mind about the soft-spoken piano player. He had a feeling the gaunt body and cadaverous face might cloak a complex person. He said, 'You sound as if you might have been a really good friend of his.'

'I think I was as close to him as anyone,' the pianist said. 'He had a taste for good

music. He liked to hear me play.'

Cal nodded. 'I heard you when I came in. You're all right.'

'That stuff!' the gaunt one said scornfully. 'Steve wasn't interested in honky-tonk. He made me play Chopin, Beethoven and Liszt!'

'Then you are a concert pianist?' Cal asked.

The gaunt man smiled bitterly. 'I was once before I started spitting out my lungs and had to come out here.' He paused to down quickly the pale drink he'd been nursing. 'You two are strangers in town. Did you come here looking for Steve?'

'No,' Cal said. 'But his sister has asked me to help find him.'

'You take my advice and forget about it,' the pianist told Cal. 'You could find yourself in a lot of trouble for nothing. Number one, I don't think Steve wants to be found. Number two, you wouldn't have a chance of reaching him anyway.'

Cal gave him a direct glance. 'You figure the Panther Gang could make trouble if I interfered?'

The pianist's sad eyes suddenly took on a glaze of fear. He looked around in a worried manner, then told Cal solemnly, 'If you're smart, you'll not mention that outfit around here.'

'They got you buffaloed too?' Cal asked with wry amusement. 'My name is Cal Haines, and this is my partner, Rusty Miller.'

What's your tag?

The gaunt man was about to reply when he was overtaken by a coughing fit that racked his emaciated body. He leaned heavily against the bar as his shoulders quivered with each spasm. Quickly he reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a white linen handkerchief which he pressed over his mouth. He held it there a long moment before the coughing ended and he could wipe his lips and straighten up.

'Sorry,' he apologized, hastily putting the handkerchief away. 'These come on me when I least expect them. My name is Fred Dixon. If I can be of any help to you while you're in town, call on me.'

'I may do that,' Cal told him.

The piano player nodded. 'Time I got back to the honky-tonk,' he said with a wry smile. 'Come in during the day or after we close, and I'll give you some of the good stuff.' With another nod, he headed toward the platform.

Rusty's broad freckled face wore a look of perplexity. 'What do you make of him?'

'Probably harmless enough,' Cal said. 'He enjoyed Steve Grant's friendship because Steve was someone who could appreciate his music. And he probably thinks it would be better to let him run with the Panther Gang if he wants to.'

'I agree,' Rusty said. 'After all, he made his own choice.'

‘I wonder,’ Cal said. ‘And I wonder if he had the proper judgement to make that choice in the frame of mind he was in. Probably worrying about a crime hanging over his head back East: a crime that doesn’t count any longer, if his sister told me the truth. I’d like at least to talk to Steve Grant and let him know that.’

CHAPTER THREE

They finished the bottle and part of another before Cal decreed they should leave. They weren’t drunk, but they were feeling good. On the way out they had to pass the big bulldog-faced Tim Bates. The proprietor eyed them with a scowl on his ugly face.

Rusty paused to grin at him. ‘This is a nice little saloon except for you,’ he said.

Tim Bates went purple. ‘Don’t bother hurrying back!’ he growled.

‘But we like it here,’ Cal assured him.

‘I got some of the toughest bouncers in town,’ Tim Bates warned them. ‘Maybe you won’t like it so well after you meet them.’

‘We like to rough it up,’ Rusty told him as he and Cal went out through the swinging doors.

It was cooler in the open now. A few drunks stood around the entrance, arguing.

There were still a good many horses lined up at the hitch post. They turned and started down the wooded sidewalk in the direction of the hotel.

As they walked, Cal told his buddy, 'You shouldn't have tried to rile Bates. We want to go in there a lot. It's the liveliest spot in town and the place where you can meet the most people and get information.'

'I'll get on the trail again tomorrow if you say the word,' Rusty said. 'I got a funny feeling about this town: that it ain't goin' to be lucky for us. Why not forget about Bentley and the Triple B and let us go on our way?'

'I don't think we should do that,' Cal said.

'Then let us go straight out to the Triple B tomorrow,' Rusty insisted.

'Maybe,' Cal said. It was becoming a favourite word with him.

A figure suddenly moved out of the darkness as if from nowhere and stood blocking their way. It was Jim Gordon, and he'd been drinking heavily, as was evident by his slight weaving and the brightness of his eyes.

The man in black spoke softly to Cal. 'I've been waiting for you!'

Cal halted, facing the outlaw. 'I'd say you've been wasting your time, Gordon. I don't want to have anything to do with you now or ever.'

'We got something to settle,' Gordon said

aggressively.

'Better get on your way,' Cal said contemptuously. 'You're drunk!'

'That's right, Gordon,' Rusty chimed in, his hand on his gun holster, 'Play it smart.'

'This has nothing to do with you,' the outlaw told Rusty. 'It's strictly between me and Haines.'

Cal could tell the drunken Gordon was itching for a showdown, and he was just as anxious to avoid it. Brawling in the street would attract too much attention; it was the last thing he wanted.

Speaking reasonably, he said, 'We have no quarrel, Gordon.'

'That's what you say!' The outlaw spoke angrily, wheeling on him. 'You made me look like dirt before that girl. Now we'll see who is the best man!'

Cal had heard enough. Impatiently he tried to shove the outlaw back. Gordon swayed a trifle and then came lunging at Cal with a powerful left. Though not expecting the attack, Cal dodged the blow and aimed a hard right at Gordon's jaw.

Rusty roared delighted encouragement from the sidelines. 'That's the idea! Give him what's comin' to him, Cal!'

Cal was too busy to listen. He and his opponent had left the wooden sidewalk and were now squaring off in the street. They moved warily in the darkness, and then

Gordon came close and delivered a smashing fist to Cal's cheek which sent him staggering back. Gordon tried to follow up with other blows to the head and face.

But Cal gave ground until his head cleared and then moved in and aimed a fast left to Gordon's chin. The outlaw staggered to one side with a bitter oath. He shook his head like a wounded animal and shot his hand toward the holster. Before he could draw, Cal had his Colt out and slammed its heavy barrel down on Gordon's head. But Gordon moved just enough to miss the full fury of the blow and, with a strangled curse, reached for Cal's gun and tried to wrest it from his hand. Cal worked hard to keep it. But Gordon was strong and wiry and gave him a nasty battle. It had begun as a slugging match, and now they were wrestling for control of the Colt. They toppled over onto the ground and rolled back and forth in the dust as they struggled. Once Cal thought the outlaw had won, that he'd lost the gun, but somehow he managed to keep it clenched in his hand.

Rusty was crying out advice and warnings from the sidelines. And then Gordon made a savage movement to get the Colt and it loosened in Cal's hand. The next thing he knew, it went off. The explosion of it was so close to him that he was left stunned and limp. He was even blind to the fact that the fight had abruptly drained from his opponent.

Gordon was stretched out in the road with a startled expression on his upturned face, his eyes staring. Then, as Cal struggled to his feet, he saw the spreading stain on the outlaw's shirt front.

A stunned Rusty was at his side. 'He's dead! That bullet finished him! He shot himself!'

'I hope we can get people to believe that,' Cal said grimly.

'He weren't nothing but trouble from the start!' Rusty lamented.

Now men were running out of the saloon and coming to join them. The shot had caught their attention. No one wanted to miss out on a gun battle. Cal stood there, still dazed. The gun was on the ground beside the dead Gordon.

The first man to reach them glanced at the outstretched body and then at Cal 'This is a job for the sheriff,' he said.

Rusty moved in to defend the upset Cal. 'It was self-defence. Get the sheriff. We want him here more than anyone else.'

Now a towering figure stepped forward in the darkness to dominate the situation. A harsh voice was directed at Cal and Rusty. 'I knew you two were bent on making trouble,' the newcomer accused them. As he moved in close, Cal saw that it was Tim Bates, the proprietor of the Crazy Bear.

Cal said, 'He came at me out of the

darkness.'

'And you shot him down!' The saloon owner's tone was sneering.

'I'll save my story for the sheriff and let him draw his own conclusions,' Cal said quietly.

'Leave that gun on the ground where it is,' Tim Bates said sharply. 'And don't touch the body until the sheriff gets here.'

'We didn't intend to.' Rusty told the big man angrily. 'You keep your nose out of this.'

'It's all right, Rusty,' Cal tried to calm down his pal. He knew that his quick temper created a hazard for them.

They settled down to wait, while the crowd grew larger by the moment. Cal was surprised that there were so many people around so late. But then most of the saloons had emptied with the word of the killing on Main Street.

Somebody called out, 'Here comes Ed Munro!'

Cal stared into the night and saw a man on a white horse riding up. He rode in near as the onlookers drew back to make way for him. Then he dismounted and came striding over to Cal with his six-gun in hand.

'You the one that did it?' Sheriff Ed Munro demanded. He was a tall, spare man with white hair showing under his Stetson. His face was strong and good, but he was no longer a young man. The erosion of age had

begun to chisel away at the stern features.

'I was fighting with him to keep him from getting the gun when it happened, but I didn't shoot him,' Cal said. And he quickly began to explain to the veteran sheriff exactly what had happened.

Sheriff Ed Munro heard him out with a frown on his thin, lined face. Then he examined the body, noting the position of the wound and where the gun lay. A couple of lanterns had appeared in the hands of bystanders to give the scene a weird carnival touch. The sheriff asked Cal a few sharp questions.

Tim Bates lumbered over to stand by the sheriff. 'I wouldn't put too much stock in anything these two have to say,' Tim told him.

Sheriff Ed Munro glanced at him. 'Why do you say that, Bates?'

The saloon owner shifted on his feet. 'They were in the Crazy Bear earlier, looking for trouble.'

'Did they cause any?' Sheriff Munro demanded.

Tim Bates hesitated. 'No. But they sassed me.'

'I might do that myself,' was the sheriff's caustic reply. 'Everything I find here seems to bear out this man's story.'

Cal spoke quietly. 'Thanks, Sheriff.'

The old lawman gave him a look. 'That

don't mean I won't want to talk with you and ask some more questions. Also, I'll plan on questioning your friend.'

'That's okay, Sheriff,' Cal said.

'Were you planning to stay in town?' the sheriff asked.

'Yes, we have a room at the hotel.'

'I'll expect you to report to me first thing in the morning, then,' the sheriff said. 'You and your friend are not to leave town without permission from me.'

'Very good, Sheriff,' Cal said.

Tim Bates spoke up in astonishment. 'You're not going to lock them up?'

'No.' The sheriff's tone was angry.

'You ain't handling this right, Munro,' Tim Bates stormed. 'I'll make it my business to complain to the Mayor in the morning.'

'You do that, Bates,' Sheriff Ed Munro snapped. 'I'll enjoy letting him know you tried to interfere.'

'You're senile, Ed Munro! That's what's wrong with you,' Tim Bates raged. 'And the whole town knows it!' With that the saloon owner turned, pushed his way through the crowd and vanished.

The sheriff turned to Cal with a grim expression 'All right, you two. You can go now.'

Cal asked, 'What about my Colt?'

'Evidence right now,' the sheriff said. 'We can arrange about it when I see you

tomorrow.'

'Okay, Sheriff,' Cal said. 'I mentioned it because that gun has a special meaning for me.'

The old lawman nodded and turned to a couple of those standing by. 'All right, men; the show is over. Now we can all go home. A couple of you can help me with the body. It will go to the undertaker's.'

Cal touched Rusty's arm, and they started toward the hotel again.

They got a good night's sleep and the sun was bright when they got up. Cal doused himself in the cold water of the basin first, and while Rusty was washing, he began to dress.

He swung his gun belt around his waist. 'First thing after breakfast, we're due at the sheriff's,' he told Rusty.

The big redheaded man was slipping into his plaid shirt. 'That what he told you?'

'Yes,' Cal said gloomily. 'I suppose by this time everyone in Haddon City knows what happened.'

His prediction proved close to the truth. They had breakfast in the dining room of the hotel. It was empty except for them. A bedraggled young girl served as waitress, and the ham and eggs she brought them were floating in grease.

Rusty scowled at his plate. 'I could do better than this any day of the week!'

Cal smiled at him. 'You picked this place.'

They managed the breakfast and then were ready to leave for the sheriff's office. The dingy lobby looked even more forlorn with the sunlight pouring in. From behind the counter the diminutive Eben Cookson greeted them.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' he said with his forced smile. 'I understand you encountered violence last night.'

Cal paused to give him a thoughtful look. 'Who told you?'

The hotel proprietor's single eye gleamed tauntingly. 'As a matter of fact, I heard it from several parties. Killings are not so common in Haddon City they don't get talked about.'

'This was an accident,' Cal said in a dry tone.

'Of course. I understand,' the little man was quick to say. 'I believe Gordon rode in with you when you arrived here last night. But you must have parted before your friend booked you two in here.'

Rusty spat disgustedly and expertly in one of the battered cuspidors. 'Gordon was more fussy about where he stayed,' he told the nosy little man. Then Cal and he walked out, leaving Eben Cookson with a startled expression.

Cal told Rusty, 'We can walk to the sheriff's office.'

It wasn't far from the hotel. Located at an intersection, it was a long, low rock-and-adobe building, with barred windows at the side and rear. A sign projected over the front door, 'Office Of The Sheriff.' They mounted a couple of steps that led to a small porch and went in through the open door.

Sheriff Ed Munro was already seated behind his desk in the far left corner of the room. He looked up when they entered with a satisfied expression on his worn, strong face.

'Well, I see you're here and right on time,' he observed.

Cal nodded. 'We don't aim to complicate your job. You gave us a fair deal last night.'

The white-haired lawman studied him with deepset brown eyes. 'Only because I thought you deserved it,' he said.

At that moment there were footsteps from a corridor leading to the rear of the sprawling building, and an attractive girl appeared, carrying a tray. She was blonde, fragile-looking and had the same excellent face structure as the sheriff.

'Thank you, Sarah,' the sheriff said as she silently placed the tray on the desk before him. 'This is my daughter, boys. And these are the two involved in that shooting fracas last night.'

Sarah, who was unmistakably shy, gave them a quick glance and then, in a low,

pleasant voice, asked her father, 'Is that all you want?'

'Only toast and coffee,' he said, checking the tray. Then he looked up at Cal. 'You boys want some coffee?'

'Not right now,' Cal told him. 'We just finished breakfast.'

The sheriff nodded and told his daughter, 'That's all then, Sarah.' She turned and hurried back down the corridor without a word.

The sheriff took a drink of coffee and waved them to chairs. 'Sit down,' he suggested.

Cal accepted the invitation, but Rusty stood uneasily beside him, staring at the old man. Cal asked, 'Just where do we stand with the law now, Sheriff?'

Ed Munro considered this. 'Now that's a mighty interesting question,' he said with a thin smile.

'We aim to move around the territory a little, and I reckon we can't do that until you give us a clean bill of health,' Cal said, leaning forward in his chair as he watched for the sheriff's reaction.

The white-haired man sipped his coffee. 'I guess you know that was an outlaw by the name of Jim Gordon you drilled last night?' The question was put with calculated casualness.

Cal knew there was no sense in lying. This

old man behind the desk might have passed his peak, but he was still mighty smart. He said, 'Yes we knew it was Gordon. We ran into him in Jericho, and he tagged along after us.'

'There was no bad blood between you until you had the ruckus about the Grant girl?' the sheriff wanted to know.

Rusty spoke up. 'We didn't want him around, but we couldn't get rid of him.'

'He'd always been a troublemaker,' Cal filled in. 'We weren't looking for trouble.'

The white-haired man's eyes narrowed speculatively. 'But he brought it to you anyway.'

'Yes, sir,' Cal said in a quiet voice.

'Cal didn't mean to plug him. It wouldn't have happened if Gordon hadn't tried to draw first and then get Cal's gun. I was there and saw it all,' Rusty said, taking a step toward the old man's desk.

The sheriff waved him to silence with a weary gesture of his purple-veined hand. 'I've figured all that out.'

'Then we can leave Haddon City whenever we like?' Rusty asked eagerly.

'Let's not rush things,' Ed Munro said in his dignified fashion. He turned his attention to Cal again. 'It also happens I know something about the reputation of you two boys.'

'I guessed that last night,' Cal confessed.

The sheriff smiled thinly again. 'Even in this wild country, a certain amount of information gets passed along from one law office to another. And when men have their guns for hire, we soon get a line on them.'

Cal shrugged. 'We've got nothing to hide.'

'Maybe yes and maybe no,' Ed Munro said in his casual way. He rummaged among some papers on his desk, pushing the tray to one side. Then he looked straight at Cal. 'You've got a record as a gunman in half a dozen states. You hire yourself to the highest bidder. You're the kind a sheriff watches as soon as you arrive in a town.'

Cal sat back in his chair. 'I sell protection,' he said in a cold voice. 'I work within the law.'

'Just barely,' the sheriff reminded him. 'Whenever the price is high enough, you're available. You've served as a trigger man for some of the biggest spreads in the West. And you've never been worried whether their motives were honest or not, just as long as they had the law on their side.'

'I'm just smart enough to know how to use a gun,' Cal told him. 'I don't aim to figure out why I'm using it just as long as I'm working for the right outfits.'

The sheriff's strong, once handsome face showed disgust. 'I only wish I'd been blessed with your kind of conscience,' he said. 'Life would have been a lot simpler for me. I could

have hired out to drive squatters off land where they weren't wanted, shot down the ignorant and innocent who were forced by poverty to break the law, and all for a good regular wage.'

'I don't make the rules out here,' Cal said; 'I just try to live in spite of them.'

'You strike me as a decent man, Cal Haines,' the sheriff said quietly. 'But I wonder how long you can stay one and sell your gun as you've been doing.'

'We didn't come here for no lectures, Sheriff,' Rusty blustered.

'Especially not you, Miller,' the sheriff said calmly. 'You're bound to be touchy, with your record.'

'What do you mean?' The redheaded man went close to the desk, his fists doubled at his sides menacingly.

Ed Munro seemed not in the least perturbed. 'Any two-hundred-and-fifty-pound redhead is easy to tag,' he told Rusty. 'I've got your whole history on file. You were mixed up in a lot of nasty business before you hooked up with Cal here. In fact, when you two met, you'd just finished a prison term for rustling.'

'Don't try to force that down my throat!' Rusty raged.

Cal jumped up to restrain the big man, afraid he might decide to attack the sheriff in his anger. He said, 'Take it easy, Rusty! The

sheriff is only laying it on the line. You know all he's said is true.'

Rusty wheeled on him in hurt surprise. 'You're going to let him get away with this?'

'It's nothing to worry about,' Cal assured him.

The big redheaded man shook his head. 'I swear you left your good sense in your saddlebags when you hit this town. First that Grant filly, then that fight with Gordon, and now you're lettin' him call us a couple of renegades!'

Sheriff Ed Munro smiled coldly. 'A lot of people might term you that.'

Cal met the old man's gaze. 'Just what are you getting at, Sheriff?'

'I'm interested in knowing what brought you here,' the old man said. 'It's possible it could have a bearing on this row you had with Gordon and his killing. So I consider it a legitimate question.'

'I don't mind telling you,' Cal said. 'We've had an offer from the Triple B. Bruce Bentley let word get out he'd like to talk to us.'

The sheriff's eyebrows raised. 'Bentley,' he said softly. 'Yes, that figures. You know what's been going on at his spread?'

'I guess he's been having trouble,' Cal ventured.

'Bentley has been having a minor war with a group of former tenant farmers,' the sheriff said. 'He let some of them have parcels of

land on his ranch and employed most of them part time as ranch hands. It worked out pretty well for both sides. Then he found the farmers were doing so well with Turkey Red wheat they weren't interested in ranching part time any more. So he ordered them off the places he'd given them. They've fought back to keep their farms, but they don't have any legal rights.'

'So Bentley has had to police his spread,' Cal suggested.

The old man behind the desk smiled bitterly. 'You'd understand all about that, Haines. It's your kind of deal. Sure Bentley sent for you. He's in bad need of guns without a conscience. He can't hire men around here to do his dirty work. But then that's only one of the problems we have in this territory.'

Cal gave the old man a resigned look. 'You've said your piece, Sheriff. Can we head out to the Triple B now?'

The sheriff hesitated. 'After I've said a few more things, you can go if you like. But first I've got a proposition for you.'

CHAPTER FOUR

Rusty's broad freckled face was dark with indignation as he wheeled on Cal. 'How long

you goin' to stay here and listen to the old man shoot his mouth off? He's got nothin' on us; let's get movin'!

Cal gave his buddy a patient look. 'I want to hear all Sheriff Munro has to say,' he told him quietly.

Rusty's reaction was a disgusted grunt. The big man moved across the office and leaned on the edge of a table, watching with disapproval. The sheriff rose from behind his desk and came around it to face Cal. He looked incredibly old and frail.

The old man's eyes slitted. 'What do you know about the Panther Gang?'

Cal was noncommittal. 'I've heard about them.'

The sheriff frowned. 'Everybody has heard about them, especially in this last year when their raids have spread all over the state and into Missouri. But do you know any of them?'

'Why should I?' Cal asked.

The sheriff's lean face was grim. 'You're so close to being an outlaw yourself I thought you might have some pals in the gang.'

Cal took no offence at the statement.

'Sorry to disappoint you,' he said. 'I just know they're a band of outlaws led by someone called the Panther.'

'They're making their headquarters close to Haddon City,' the sheriff said. 'I guess you knew that.'

‘What if we did?’ Rusty asked in a surly voice.

The sheriff gave him a disparaging smile. ‘I said that for the record. As sheriff, I haven’t been able to do anything about them. We’ve never been able to find their hide-out. And we have had no luck discovering who the Panther is, though I suspect he’s someone living right here in Haddon City.’

It was Cal’s turn to frown. ‘Why do you think that?’

‘Simple enough,’ Ed Munro said. ‘That’s the reason the gang is holed up so handy. It’s convenient for whoever the leader is. He can have a respectable life here as a front and yet be within a short distance of his outfit.’

Cal asked, ‘Then you suspect someone?’

‘I suspect a lot of people,’ the old sheriff said grimly, ‘but I can’t prove anything. Known members of the gang come into town and buy supplies and spend money with the different businessmen. So they’re really encouraging those outlaws and setting up a conspiracy of silence against the law. There’s a lot that could be told me, but they don’t want to do it. They’ve practically suggested I turn my back on the gang’s doings.’

Cal smiled thinly. ‘You’re not much more honourable than we are, Sheriff.’

The old man sighed. ‘I like to think I am. I’ve honestly tried to fight the Panther outfit. But I’m not getting far. Mayor Drew, who

owns the biggest hardware store in town and makes the most money from them, is against me. He'd have me run out of town if it weren't that the ordinary people in town wouldn't stand for it. I've been here long enough to hold their loyalty and respect.'

'This is all interesting, Sheriff,' Cal said. 'But I don't see why you waste your time and ours telling it to us. We've got business at the Triple B, and you should be trying to locate the missing Steve Grant.'

The sheriff smiled grimly. 'It was Grant's sister got you into trouble.'

'Are you going to help the girl?' Cal wanted to know.

The lawman shrugged. 'I've tried to. No one who knows the whole story will talk. But I guess it's pretty certain he decided to throw in with the Panther and his crowd. I had a couple of run-ins with him when he was here. He's a pretty wild young man. His sister doesn't seem to realize that.'

'He came here on the run from some trouble back East,' Cal said, 'trouble that has been settled. He might not be so reckless if he knew that. And she hopes he'll go back with her.'

Sheriff Munro looked dubious. 'He's hooked up with a bad crowd. I don't think they'll let him leave alive. Their whole strength depends on keeping anyone from talking. Young Grant would know too much

by now.'

'Still you should try,' Cal argued. 'It's your responsibility.'

The old man ran a gnarled hand over his shining white hair. Then he gave Cal a sour smile. 'I guess you heard what Tim Bates said to me last night. He called me senile and an old fool in front of all that crowd. That's the way he and his friends think of me.'

'I don't agree with them,' Cal said.

'Thanks. But there are times when I begin to wonder myself.' The old man's jaw firmed. 'I'm alone here. I haven't had help for a long time. And I need a deputy or two bad. But no one wants the job, with the Panther Gang keeping camp just beyond the town limits, Bentley carrying on his private war and most of the important town heads lined up against my office.'

'Maybe you should resign and let a younger man take over,' Cal suggested.

The sheriff smiled wryly. 'Mayor Drew has a couple of his stooges he'd like to put in here. He's just waiting for me to get disgusted enough to quit and make way for them. But I'm not of a mind to be that agreeable.'

'What is your idea on the subject?'

The sheriff met his glance levelly. 'I'm hoping that maybe I can hire you and your friend to work with me as deputies,' he said.

Cal was too startled by this to make a reply. Rusty bounced up from the table where he'd

been leaning and marched across to the old man.

'Don't get any ideas like that, Old-timer,' he said angrily. 'Me and my pal have had enough headaches in this town already!'

The old sheriff accepted the big man's approach unblinkingly. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'You short on nerve?'

This angered Rusty still more. 'Nobody ever called me yellow!' he shouted.

'Okay, Rusty, simmer down,' Cal told him quietly. Moving between the big man and the sheriff, he said, 'Thanks for the offer, Sheriff. But I don't think we're the type.'

Ed Munro regarded him sadly. 'And you could be. That's the unhappy part of it.'

Cal gave him a bitter smile. 'I reckon there might be a lot of folks in Haddon City wouldn't agree with you.'

'I'd be willing to back my hunch,' the old man said. 'Think it over. The jobs are bound to stay open.'

'Just forget about us, Sheriff,' Cal said. 'We've got our own way of operating.'

'I know that,' the sheriff told him. 'And I don't know how you can stomach hiring your gun for jobs like the one Bentley is ready to offer you.'

'His money is as good as anyone's,' Cal said.

'It's dirty money, Haines—blood money!' The sheriff was caustic. 'I don't see too much

difference between his kind of operation and the Panther Gang, even though he has the law on his side.'

Rusty spoke up again, 'You heard what Cal said. You can deal us both out of any big ideas for expanding your staff.' And to Cal, 'Come on. It's time we went.'

Cal nodded and told the sheriff, 'Good luck. I reckon you're finished with us.'

'For now,' the old man agreed. 'But don't step out of line an inch, or I'll see that you pay for it.'

Cal smiled. 'I'll remember that.' And he and Rusty walked out of the office, leaving the old sheriff standing watching after them.

The sleepy-looking attendant at the livery stable grew alert when Cal told him who they were and asked for their horses. He rushed off to take care of saddling them while Cal and Rusty stood in the stable entrance. At a forge inside the shadowy stable, a huge smithy worked shaping a horseshoe. As he finished pounding the white-hot metal, he glared their way. He was more than six feet tall and very heavily built. He had a stubble of black beard on his slab-like face and sharp, evil eyes.

Now he came over to them, rubbing hairy hands on his stained apron. He asked Cal, 'You and your friend the two who finished off Jim Gordon last night?'

'What about it?' Cal asked, sensing trouble.

The deep-set eyes of the blacksmith were fixed on him malevolently. 'I happen to have been a friend of Gordon,' he said. 'He had a lot of friends in Haddon City. I don't like what you did.'

'It was Gordon who asked for it!' Rusty said angrily.

'Just the same I don't like it,' the big man told them. 'I own this place. And I pick my customers. You don't need to bring your horses back here. We won't have any room for them.'

'Thanks,' Cal said lightly. 'We weren't planning on stabling them here any longer, anyway.'

'More than that,' the blacksmith said, 'you two would be wise to get out of town. You ain't goin' to be very popular around here.'

Cal would have answered, except that the blacksmith abruptly turned and went back to his forge and anvil. The ringing sound of his heavy hammer was already filling the air as the stableman returned, leading a horse in each hand. Cal paid him. Then he and Rusty carefully examined their saddles and adjusted them before starting out on their journey to see Bentley at the Triple B Ranch.

The sun was high in the sky as they rode out of town. It was getting warm. As they went by the neat cottage with Dr Marsland's sign out front, Cal looked to see if he could spot the Grant girl. But she was nowhere in

sight. Within a short time they had left the town behind them and come to the intersection with the sign warning squatters. They took the winding narrow road to the Triple B. Cal led the way on his pinto, while Rusty followed on the roan.

The road finally angled down a hill to a valley about a mile wide. The pinto lifted its ears sharply as they approached the impressive Triple B ranch house and the outbuildings.

Interested eyes peered from the bunkhouse as they neared it. Cal swung out of the saddle before the bunkhouse, and Rusty did the same. They approached the door and noted three or four men lounging on their bunks. A tall, battered-looking veteran, sitting cross-legged on a bunk mending a spur strap, gave them a curious glance.

‘What do you boys want?’ he drawled.

‘I’m looking for Bentley,’ Cal said.

‘Well, I reckon you don’t expect to find him here.’ The cowpoke grinned. ‘He’s up at the house.’

‘Thanks,’ Cal said. And he and Rusty turned and walked towards the imposing ranch house.

They were met outside the door by a hostile youth standing with his right hand ready on his gun holster. He had a mean look as he asked, ‘What’s your business here?’

‘We aim to have a talk with Bentley,’ Cal

said. 'My name is Haines, and this is my partner, Rusty Miller.'

The youth's expression changed. He looked impressed. 'You Cal Haines?'

Cal nodded. 'Bentley knows about us.'

'Sure,' the young man said. 'So do a lot of people. Wait here and I'll see if he's free.' And he went inside.

Rusty gave Cal a wise look. 'Seems like Mr Bentley don't want any unexpected callers.'

'That figures,' Cal said in a quiet voice. 'He isn't exactly the most popular man in the country right now.'

Rusty gazed about him at the excellent buildings, the big corral with its stock and the rolling green hills surrounding the ranch house. 'Looks like there is plenty of cash around this spread,' he said with relish. 'I'd count on Bentley being able to pay well.'

'You'd expect him to,' Cal agreed.

The door of the ranch house opened, and the young man with the mean face reappeared. He stood to one side as a sallow, thin-faced man followed him out. The gray-haired man had a slender moustache and walked with the aid of a cane, dragging his right leg stiffly behind him. He paused to study Cal and Rusty with a bleak smile.

'So you two finally showed up,' he said in a harsh, grating voice. 'I'd decided you didn't get my message.'

'We had some business to finish,' Cal said.

He'd expected to see a large, powerful man rather than this wasted invalid.

'Well, we've plenty for you to do here,' Bentley said, and indicated the younger man with an emaciated hand. 'This is my son, Dave. He takes care of the active operation of the ranch since I've had my stroke.'

'We can sure use you boys,' Dave Bentley said with an eager look in his weasel face. 'We haven't got more than a half-dozen men we can count on.'

'And those darn farmers are giving us more trouble all the time,' his father said angrily, leaning on his cane for support, his sallow face distorted with rage. 'We want men who can shoot straight and put the fear in them!'

'My pal and I can do that,' Cal told him.

'I've heard about you both,' Bentley agreed. 'Otherwise I wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of bringing you here.'

Cal said. 'You have some men to work with us?'

Bentley nodded. 'As my son said, we have five or six who will do anything we ask.'

'That will be enough,' Cal told him.

'When can you begin?' the younger Bentley wanted to know.

'We have our things at the hotel,' Cal said. 'We can start as soon as we pick them up—' he hesitated significantly—'provided the price is right.'

The senior Bentley at once said what he

was willing to pay. It was more than either Cal or Rusty had figured on. Cal became even more convinced this was going to be a rough assignment.

As they talked on for a few minutes, a rider on a black horse came up and dismounted. A heavily built cowpoke with a round vacant face crossed to the older Bentley. Touching a finger to his hat, he told him, 'We looked after the Brandons like you said.'

Bentley looked somewhat annoyed at the intrusion. 'Very well,' he said brusquely. 'You can give me more details later.'

'Okay, Boss,' the cowpoke said, and left to lead his horse off towards the corral.

The older Bentley gave his attention to Cal again. 'Well, you two get back here as soon as you can. I'll give you my instructions then.' He nodded towards his son. 'You'll be directly under Dave. Whatever he says will go.'

Cal saw the smile that appeared on Dave Bentley's weasel face and decided that working with the old man's son was going to be one of the most unpleasant aspects of the job. But he managed to conceal his disgust for the youth.

'We'll be back,' he promised. And then he asked, 'Is there any short cut to town?'

Dave Bentley nodded. 'Instead of going to the main road, take the first left you come to when you leave the ranch. It's narrow and

hilly, but it leads directly to Haddon City.'

Cal thanked him, and they left.

The took the winding trail suggested by Dave Bentley and made their way up a rather steep hill. When they reached the top, Cal suddenly saw smoke rising some distance ahead. He could also smell it clearly. The pinto whinnied and moved about uneasily as he held it back.

Rusty pointed to the column of black smoke. 'Something doing over there!'

'We'll know what in a few minutes!' Cal declared, letting the impatient pinto have his head.

Cal raced the horse over the uneven ground. Rusty came behind him on the roan at a gallop. Once the pinto nearly stumbled, but Cal guided it on. They left the wooded section behind and were in open country. Cal saw what the trouble was before he came close to it.

A small cabin was wreathed in flames. Several people gathered in a group away from it. When Cal rode up a woman who was standing with a small boy clinging to her full black skirts gave him a defiant look. She was young but had a work-worn face; her hair was pulled tightly back from her forehead. Seeing Cal, she placed a protective arm around the little boy.

'Haven't you done enough?' she cried as he reined the pinto near her.

He swung out of the saddle. 'What happened?'

The woman looked scornful. 'Don't pretend not to know. You were with them!'

Rusty had also dismounted and joined Cal. The man said, 'This is the first time we've been through this way, ma'am.'

'You set fire to our home!' the woman accused them bitterly. 'And look what you did to my man!' She moved slightly to reveal a man leaning on an elbow as he tried to lift himself from the grass where he lay. One look was enough. He had been beaten unmercifully about the head and face so that he was a mass of bloody pulp with eyes.

He somehow managed to form a curse with his broken mouth before he collapsed and fell back on the ground. The woman at once began to sob and kneel by him. The little boy eyed Cal and Rusty and then cringed beside his mother.

Cal went over to the battered hulk on the grass. 'Let me help,' he said.

'No!' the woman cried. 'You only want to finish him!' And she cradled the bloody head of her husband in her arms to protect him.

Cal gave her a solemn glance. 'Neither me nor my pal had anything to do with this,' he told her. 'We only want to help!'

The woman stared at him with dazed eyes. 'You're not one of them? Not one of Bentley's killers?'

The two men exchanged quick looks. Cal said, 'Not yet. What's your name, ma'am?'

'Nell Brandon, and this this is my husband Sam,' she said. 'We've been living here for two years with our little boy. And now Bentley's burned our house and told us to go!'

Cal needed no further information. He had a picture of the blank-faced man riding up and telling Bentley they had looked after the Brandons. So this was the way they were reclaiming the farms. No wonder Bentley was in such a hurry to hire them. He needed gunmen with some experience to take care of things without the kind of violence revealed here.

He said, 'If I had some water, I'd try to look after your husband's injuries.'

The woman still regarded him warily. She pointed. 'Back of the house there is a well.'

Cal told Rusty, 'Go get me some water.'

The almost hysterical Nell Brandon moaned over her battered mate, while the boy huddled close to her and regarded Cal with fear-stricken eyes. After a minute Rusty returned with a dipper of water. Cal used his neckerchief as a washrag. It was a nasty business. But after some patient and gentle effort, he began to clear the worst of the blood from the face of the farmer.

Sam Brandon opened his eyes to ask in a hoarse whisper, 'Who are you?'

‘A friend,’ Cal told him. ‘Don’t worry.’

The farmer looked fearfully at his wife and child and then begged Cal, ‘Take care of them.’

‘It will be all right,’ Cal promised him. The farmer lay back and closed his eyes again. Cal glanced at the woman. ‘We need to get him to a doctor. And you and the boy will want a roof over your heads. Do you have any friends nearby?’

‘Everyone in this section has gone,’ Nell Brandon said. ‘Sam was the last to hold out.’ She began to sob. ‘I told him what would happen. They’d come for us same as they did the others. But he wouldn’t listen.’

Cal spoke sharply to ward off her possible hysteria. ‘Do you have a wagon? Horses?’

She shook her head. ‘They burned the wagon and took our horses with them. And they shot the cow! Everything’s gone in the fire!’ She buried her face in her hands and sobbed again.

Cal stood up and consulted with Rusty. ‘I’ll take the man on the pinto with me,’ he said. ‘You can follow with his wife and the boy.’

Rusty looked concerned. ‘Bentley won’t like our messing in this!’

Cal’s face went hard. ‘Bentley can go to perdition!’

CHAPTER FIVE

Dr Marsland was working on the farmer's injuries. His wife had gone to visit a neighbour to arrange for Nell Brandon and her little boy to stay with them. Sam Brandon would occupy a spare bedroom in the doctor's house until he was well enough to get around. Rusty was happily entertaining the little boy with some rope tricks while his mother assisted the doctor. And Cal and Julie Grant had gone out into the small garden at the rear of the cottage to talk.

The blonde Julie was looking her usual attractive self in a print dress with a high lace collar and jabot. She looked up at Cal with a troubled expression. 'What a dreadful business,' she said.

'I feel mighty sorry for the Brandons,' he agreed.

'How lucky that you happened by in time to help them.'

Cal hoped he wouldn't have to explain how that had come about. He cleared his throat. 'I knew right away he had to have a doctor. And the woman and little boy couldn't be left out there.'

'Of course not,' she agreed. 'Dr Marsland and his wife will see they are taken care of.'

Cal glanced toward the house. 'He's a fine

man, the doctor. The town is lucky to have someone like him.'

Julie looked down. 'Even though it's not lucky in much else.' Then she gave him a questioning glance. 'Have you heard anything about my half-brother?'

He felt he had to maintain the silence the others in town were imposing on her. It wasn't yet time to let her know that Steve Grant might be a member of the notorious Panther Gang.

So he said, 'I haven't had a chance. We were mixed up in that trouble last night.'

She frowned. 'Dr Marsland told me. He said that Jim Gordon was killed. Your gun went off accidentally.'

'That's what happened.'

Her eyes met his. 'The doctor also told me there was a lot of talk about you and your friend coming to Haddon City. The rumour is you have reputations as gunmen. Is that true?'

Cal couldn't avoid her searching eyes. And for the first time in a long spell he felt ashamed to admit his calling. 'I guess so,' he said soberly. 'Rusty and me hire ourselves out to different outfits.'

'As gunmen?' She sounded incredulous.

He shrugged. He was finding it mighty unpleasant. 'You could call us protection officers. We act like private police for people who need protection or some special job

done. We've done a spell as extra guards for the Wells-Fargo Express when they were running heavy gold shipments.'

'I see,' she said quietly. 'So you do live by your skill with a gun?'

'Yes.' There was no denying it.

'Why did you come here?'

It was the moment he'd been dreading. From the first time he'd met Julie Grant he'd liked her and looked forward to having her friendship and respect. He had no wish to lie about himself, but he couldn't help wondering if the truth would rob him of her regard.

'I expected to take on a job.'

'Oh?' She stared at him as she waited to hear him explain.

Cal touched his tongue to his lower lip. Then he said, 'That's how I came to be on Bentley land. Rusty and I were coming from a hiring talk with Bentley and his son.'

'Oh, no!' She sounded shocked.

'And we found the Brandons' house burning.'

Julie's pretty face showed revulsion. 'You'd mix up in dirty business like that, sell your gun to any tyrant? Is that how you've been making your living?'

Cal nodded toward the house. 'We've never done anything like that.'

'But you must have worked with people of Bentley's type before or you wouldn't have

considered coming here to join him! Don't you care what you do? Don't you see that giving any kind of help to people like Bentley is perpetuating these injustices?'

'I don't hold with the kind of violence that happened to the Brandons,' he said quietly in the face of her anger. 'Otherwise I wouldn't have bothered to try and help them.'

Julie's face was a study in shocked unhappiness. 'And are you really still seriously thinking of hiring out to Bentley?'

'I haven't given it much thought. I was too busy getting Brandon in here.'

'And now?' she challenged him.

He wasn't going to be stampeded into a quick decision, no matter how pretty the filly. An obstinate look crossed his pleasant face. The scar on his cheek stood out as he crimsoned.

'I'll make up my mind later,' he informed her.

Julie regarded him defiantly. 'I know I should be thankful to you for what you did for me. And I think it's wonderful you rescued the Brandons. But I'll still hate you, Cal Haines, if you go to work for that awful Bentley.'

He nodded. 'That will have a heap of influence on what I decide,' he promised her. 'But I haven't decided yet.'

'I see,' she said. And with a sigh: 'Well, I hope we'll be able to remain friends. You

know it depends on you.' And she left him and went into the house.

Rusty came out a few minutes later with a perplexed look on his broad face. 'Did you and that Julie dame have a fight? She came into the house just now with a mad look on her face, snatched the kid right away from me and went off with him. And me just gettin' around to teachin' him how to tie a few knots!'

Cal smiled grimly: 'Julie doesn't approve of the way we make our living.'

The big man showed disgust. 'She needn't be upset. The way I see it, we're going to be unemployed. Bentley will be hopping mad when he finds out we brought Brandon in here for treatment and found his family a place to stay.'

'Are you sorry we did it?'

Rusty sighed. 'I guess not. That's a pretty sweet kid those two have. I'd hate to see anything happen to him.'

'Enough has happened for one day,' Cal reminded him.

'You're right,' Rusty agreed. 'That Bentley and his son are a couple of varmints. Let them find a couple of other gunfighters to do their dirty work. We don't want to inherit no mess like what happened to the Brandons. I say, let's get on our way.'

Cal looked thoughtful. 'I think we ought to take a couple of days to think it over.'

'So some of Jim Gordon's friends or the crew from Bentley's ranch can come in here gunnin' for us! I think this town is too hot, and I say we should keep moving.'

Dr Marsland came out to join them, still in his vest with his shirt sleeves rolled up. He told Cal, 'Brandon is going to come through it all right, mostly thanks to you boys getting him here so soon.'

'That's good news, Doc,' Cal said. 'And you've got a place for his wife and boy?'

'Next door,' Dr Marsland said. 'My wife has it arranged.'

'I'll be responsible for the bills,' Cal told him. 'You can give them to me.'

'We're all sorry for Brandon and the other farmers in the same plight,' the veteran doctor said. 'There won't be any bills.' He paused. 'Are you boys still considering working for Bentley, now that you've found out what he'd expect you to do?'

'We ain't made up our minds yet, Doc,' Rusty said with his usual surliness.

The white-bearded medico gave him a sharp look. He turned to Cal. 'Julie Grant kind of put you on a pedestal after last night. Finding out what you are has sort of let her down.'

'That's too bad,' Cal said with an attempt at mild sarcasm.

Dr Marsland didn't take it that way. Instead, he said, 'Frankly, I agree. I hope

you'll prove to her that you do have some heroic qualities.' And with a curt nod, he turned and went back into the house.

Rusty glared after him. 'Everyone wants to tell us what to do.'

'He means well,' Cal said. 'And I think it's time we mosey back to the hotel.'

The big redheaded man snorted. 'We sure enough aren't popular here.'

They said nothing as they rode down Main Street.

Rusty looked around him in disgust as they dismounted and tied the horses to the hitch post in front of the hotel. 'This dad-blamed town is unlucky for us,' he warned Cal.

Cal smiled. 'Maybe it's the other way around, he said, leading the way into the hotel.

The little Britisher who ran the place was behind the counter as usual. He greeted them by name. 'There have been several people in here asking for you gentlemen,' he informed them.

'Seems like we're picking up some local fame,' Cal observed in a dry tone.

The single eye of the proprietor glittered with evil malice. 'That you have,' he said. 'Will you be taking dinner in?'

Rusty looked apprehensive as if remembering the awful breakfast. 'I'm going to the bar to wet my whistle,' he said. 'I'll get lunch there.'

'I'll be taking a little ride,' Cal told the little man. 'Better figure on us both eating out.'

'Roast beef tonight,' the still hopeful Eben Cookson tried to tempt them. But they were now heading for outside, and neither of them listened to him.

As Cal parted company with Rusty, he warned him, 'Be careful what you do and say in the Crazy Bear.'

'You know me!' Rusty said. 'Ain't I always careful?'

'Hardly ever.' Cal told him. 'But now we've got to play it soft. Don't forget Tim Bates is aching for a battle with us.'

'I know how to handle him,' Rusty said. 'Why don't you come along with me if you're so worried? Where you planning to go?'

Cal took on a secretive expression. 'There are some things I'd like to find out,' he said. 'I'm just going to take a slow ride around.'

'Where will we meet?'

'I'll come back here,' Cal promised. He waited until Rusty was on his way to the saloon before he untied the pinto. Then he swung up into the saddle and headed along Main Street in the opposite direction.

Whether by accident or intention, he found himself in front of the sheriff's office. After a moment's consideration he got down from the pinto and tied it to the hitch post. Then he mounted the several steps and went inside. The office was shaded and empty in the late

afternoon. He stood there indecisively, wondering why he had gone in. Then there were footsteps in the corridor from the back, and he glanced up to see the sheriff's daughter coming toward him.

Sarah Munro offered him a pleased smile as she joined him in her father's office. 'Dad said you would be back,' she told him.

Cal eyed the fair-haired girl with grim reserve. 'Then he must know more about me than I do. For I sure didn't plan to be here.'

'My father is a shrewd judge of people.'

'Where is he now?'

'He had to see the Mayor and make a few calls,' she said. 'He should be back any minute. Won't you sit down and wait?'

He hesitated. 'I don't know,' he told her frankly. 'I'm not even sure I want to see him.'

'Oh!' She sounded disappointed.

Cal wanted to swing the talk to something else. He said, 'It seems to me Bentley and the Triple B crowd have been playing pretty rough with the farmers they're shoving off their land. Have you received any complaints from the farm people?'

Her face shadowed. 'Yes. Several of them have been here to see Dad. But Bentley is within his rights dispossessing them. And we've not been able to prove that it is his men who have been harassing and attacking the farm owners. Bentley always insists it must have been outlaws or even the Panther Gang.'

'But your Dad doesn't swallow that story?'
She shook her head. 'No.'

'Yet he hasn't done anything about it, Cal pointed out.

Sarah Munro raised her chin with a pretty defiance that made him realize what an attractive young woman she was. On top of that she had courage and a sound head on her shoulders.

She said, 'No. And frankly, I hope he doesn't.'

'Why?'

'He's an old man, Mr Haines. And he's served the people of this town too long. With all the problems he faces in Haddon City today, it's not fair to expect him to deal with the Bentleys as well. He's running this office completely on his own except for the help I can give him.'

'I know all that,' Cal said. 'Still, it's too bad.'

Sarah Munro looked at him squarely. 'If you feel that way, why don't you do something about it, Mr Haines?'

Cal knew his face had reddened. He said, 'The name is Cal. And I've had no experience in the sheriff line.'

'You couldn't find a better teacher than Dad,' she said.

'What's this about Dad?' It was Sheriff Ed Munro himself who entered the office to ask this question. He looked from his daughter to

Cal.

'It's not important,' Sarah said hastily. And with a flustered glance at Cal. 'He wants to see you, Dad.' And she hurried down the hallway.

The veteran sheriff went over to his desk and stood behind it. He took off his Stetson and set it down. Then he mopped his brow with a handkerchief from his tan shirt pocket and gave Cal a further interested look.

'So you've come back to see me,' he said.

'Your daughter told me you expected me,' Cal said grimly.

The old man chuckled. 'Well, she wasn't quoting me exactly,' he told Cal. 'But I did say I hoped you'd be back.'

Cal resented the way the sheriff treated him. The old man was acting as if he were some raw kid. His jaw tightened and his hand rested on the gun in his holster. He said, 'I've just come from Bentley. He made me and Rusty a good offer.'

'Congratulations,' the sheriff said with sarcasm.

'He wants us to start working for him right away.'

The veteran lawman nodded, a look of disgust on his strong old face. 'I don't blame you for taking the job, Haines, if money means all that much to you. And of course there's your reputation as an ice-cold gunfighter to consider. You want to hang

onto that.'

'That's what I've been for some time,' Cal reminded him.

Sheriff Ed Munro took a deep breath. 'Of course I'm countin' on you and Rusty having strong stomachs. You'll have to, or you'll break under what Bentley will expect from you.' He paused meaningfully. 'But then I don't have to tell you that. I've just come from talking to Dr Marsland. And he told me all about the Brandons and the part you played in getting them to him.'

Cal was surprised. 'News travels fast here.'

'It's a small town,' the sheriff said. 'And knowing what I do, I was sure when I came in and saw you here that you'd come for a special reason.'

'That was supposing quite a lot!'

The old man nodded. 'I don't think so. Not considering you've always been a reasonably decent young man. And Rusty, too, apart from that prison sentence he served once. You two aren't the type to burn people out and half kill parents in front of their children.'

'Rusty wants me to leave town pronto,' Cal said.

'What about you?'

Cal was silent for a moment. Then he said, 'I figure I'll stay a few days.'

'I hope you do,' the old man said. 'Why don't you fellows throw your weight in with

me, Haines? Then maybe we could really clean up this town.'

Once again Cal found himself doing the thing he'd least expected. It was as if a second Cal Haines were making decisions for him. He startled himself by saying in a quiet tone, 'Okay, Sheriff. If the deputy job is still open. I'll take my badge now.'

Ed Munro broke into a delighted smile. 'You mean that, son?'

'I reckon that is why I came here in the first place.'

'So I wasn't wrong,' the old man said happily. 'I never make that big an error in judging a man. What about Rusty?'

'I'll answer for him too,' Cal said. 'If I take the star, he'll come along with me.'

The sheriff had turned serious. 'This is a big moment for me, Haines. I've been waiting for someone like you to show up.'

'Suppose Mayor Drew and some of the others don't favour your hiring gunmen like Rusty and me for the job?' Cal asked.

'I can handle that,' the old man promised. 'Mayor Drew can't back me any more than he has. And while I'm running this office, I'll do it my way.' He rummaged in a top desk drawer and finally produced two badges. Moving over to Cal, he pinned one on his left chest. 'There,' he said with satisfaction. 'That looks mighty fine. I'll swear you two boys in together.'

Sarah Munro had returned to the office without Cal noticing, and now she stood near the desk smiling at him. 'Well,' she said, 'this is a surprise.'

'The boys are going to work with me,' her father told her proudly.

'So I see,' Sarah said. 'I'm glad to know you're a man of action, Cal.' It was the first time she'd ever used his first name.

The sheriff told him, 'You and Rusty can move into the deputy's quarters here at once. We have a good-sized room with two beds in it. And Sarah will do the cooking for all of us. I can't pay you anything like Bentley could, but I'll promise you'll sleep better nights here and have food the Triple B cookhouse couldn't match.'

Cal smiled. 'It sounds good.'

The sheriff became serious. 'I can promise you plenty of action here, Cal. Things have gone pretty far, what with the Panther Gang and all. Now that I've got me some help, I aim to clamp down on the lawlessness in this town.'

'I'm not used to operating behind a badge,' Cal reminded him. 'I'll need some instruction from you.'

'Don't worry about that,' the old lawman said. 'You just go round up Rusty and bring him back here. I'm anxious to start laying our plans.'

Sarah Munro gave Cal a look that told him

he was forgiven for his earlier hesitation. 'It's going to be good having you and your friend here,' she said.

'I'm going to have to do some tall talking to Rusty to persuade him to stay in town,' Cal told her. 'But I think I can manage it.'

When Cal went into the hotel lobby, he saw no sign of Rusty. In fact, the place seemed empty except for the little Britisher with the one eye behind the counter.

Eben Cookson glanced up at him and said, 'You got someone to see you, Mister Haines.'

At almost the same instant Cal heard a hollow cough behind him and turned to see the piano player from the Crazy Bear Saloon. Fred Dixon was huddled in one of the big leather chairs. and so he hadn't noticed him before. Now the thin, gaunt-faced man suppressed his fit of coughing and rose with an effort from the chair.

Extending a bony hand, he said, 'I've been waiting for you, Haines.'

Cal shook hands with him, almost wincing at the touch of the cold, sweaty skin against his own. He said, 'Have you seen anything of Rusty?'

Fred Dixon's cadaverous face showed a faint smile. 'Yes. He was loading up at the Crazy Bear bar when I left.'

'I'll have to look him up,' Cal said, worried that his friend might get too drunk to reason with.

'I wanted a word with you alone,' the piano player said. 'So I thought I'd try to find you here.'

Cal asked, 'Have you had some word about Steve Grant?'

The thin man gave a cautious look in the direction of Eben Cookson who seemed to be intent on the registration book before him on the counter. Then he took Cal by the arm and led him across the lobby until they were standing by a front window and out of earshot of the hotel owner.

Dixon spoke in a low voice. 'You can't be too careful in this town.'

'I understand,' Cal said.

The piano player went on in the same subdued tone, 'After you left last night, a friend of mine came into the saloon; a friend who has a lot of contacts. I told him about Julie Grant wanting to find her brother.'

'And?'

'He thought he might be able to get a message to Steve.'

Cal frowned. 'Couldn't he let Grant know his sister is here at Dr Marsland's and have him come visit her?'

'I'm not sure Grant thinks it is safe for him to come into town,' the pianist said. 'But this friend of mine will try to talk to him. Have you any special message to send his way?'

Cal was skeptical of the whole business. Yet he knew the piano player probably had

plenty of friends outside the town. And probably some of them were mixed up with the Panther Gang. He said, 'Can I talk to your friend?'

Fred Dixon's gaunt features took on a veiled look. 'I'm afraid not.'

Cal was in a quandary. He didn't know just how to handle this to the best advantage. He said, 'I'll have to talk to Julie.'

'You mustn't bring me into it,' Fred Dixon warned.

'I understand,' Cal said. 'Right now the most helpful message to give Grant would be to let him know his father is dead and the trouble he was mixed up in back home is settled.'

The pianist nodded. 'I'll see to that. And my friend will be able to tell you how he feels about this in a few days. I'll let you know as soon as I've heard from him.'

'Meanwhile I'll have another talk with Julie,' Cal promised.

Fred Dixon gave him a wary look. 'Incidentally, my friend told me he knew of a good deal for a couple of all round men like you and your partner. Would you be interested?'

Cal was surprised at this. 'Tell him we've already got a deal,' he said.

'Too bad,' the pianist said mildly. Yet it struck Cal this might be the real reason Dixon had come to talk to him. Dixon coughed

lightly and touched a handkerchief to his thin lips. 'I must be moving on,' he said.

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as the piano player left, Cal went down to the counter and told the hotel proprietor, 'When my partner gets back, we're moving out.'

Eben Cookson's single eye fixed on him with dismay. 'But you've only been here a day. Is something wrong?'

'We've taken on new jobs. You needn't worry about the deposit for the week's rent. You can hold onto it.'

The little Britisher brightened. 'I'll put it down to your credit, Mr Haines. You can come back to use it up any time.'

Cal nodded. He gave the hotel man a shrewd look. 'Before I go, you got anything you'd like to tell me about Steve Grant?'

Eben Cookson rubbed his hand nervously against a sallow cheek. 'There isn't much to tell. He stayed here, but he spent most of his time at the saloon. He and Tim Bates were friendly. And he liked to listen to old Joe Hawkins spin yarns.'

'Joe Hawkins?'

'The photographer. You must have seen his sign down the street,' Eben Cookson said.

‘Joe can talk a blue streak when he’s had a few drinks.’

‘And Steve Grant visited his shop a lot?’

‘He did. He came back here to sleep, and that was about it.’ The little man looked uneasy. ‘He didn’t seem to take to me, so I didn’t try to force myself on him, as you might say.’

‘You’d suggest I ought to talk to the photographer, then?’

‘If you can find him sober enough,’ the hotel man said. ‘He’s there mostly at night.’ The beady eye settled on Cal again. ‘You boys moving out to the Bentley ranch?’

Cal gave him a bleak look. ‘No.’

‘But you are staying in town?’ Eben Cookson asked, not seeming to understand.

‘We’ll be around,’ Cal assured him. And that was all the satisfaction he had any intention of giving him. He went on up to the room.

Cal was cheered at the prospect of leaving the dingy room, even if he was still a little worried about the decision he’d made for himself and Rusty. He began to check his own things before going. A frown crossed his bronzed face as he recalled the unexpected call made by the piano player. He was still of the impression Dixon had more on his mind than he’d revealed.

He heard Rusty’s familiar step coming down the hall. Then the door opened and the

big redheaded man came lumbering in.

Rusty at once saw the open saddlebags on the bed and gave him a surprised look. 'What's going on?'

'We're moving,' Cal said.

'Now you're showing some sense!' Rusty said with a broad smile. 'I didn't think you'd ever listen to me. The sooner we get this trouble spot behind us, the better I'll be pleased. When do we hit the trail?'

'We're not leaving town,' Cal said at once.

Reactions came swiftly from the big red-haired man. 'Then what's going on?'

Cal explained as plainly and quickly as he could, hoping Rusty's whiskey-fogged brain would grasp it all. Rusty at first looked dazed, and then his expression gradually became one of alarm. He grasped the iron bed frame angrily in one hand as if to steady himself as he glared at him.

'You didn't do a thing like that!' he protested. 'You couldn't be so dumb! Not tie us up with that old lawman in a town dynamite-loaded with trouble!'

Cal nodded calmly. 'That's exactly what I did,' he said.

'You must be plumb loco!'

'We couldn't work for Bentley after what we saw.'

'We could have high-tailed it away from here! And that's what I'm still figurin' on doing. You had no call to speak for me. I'm

not going to make myself a target for every punk and outlaw in the town so you can be a hero to that Julie Grant.'

'I had a better reason than that for saying we'd act as deputies,' Cal said evenly. 'We've been playing close to the wrong side for a long while, closing our eyes to plenty as long as the pay was right. It's time we did something to balance things.'

Rusty scowled. 'I didn't think you'd play a skunky trick like that on me, Cal. And I ain't goin' to be bound by it.'

Cal lifted up his saddlebags and slung them over a shoulder. 'That's okay, Rusty,' he said. 'You move on out of town if you want to. I'll be stayin' here. We'll meet up again some day.'

Cal walked past him and went downstairs. He slung the saddlebags over the pinto and rode off in the direction of the sheriff's office. He was feeling badly about the break between himself and Rusty, but he felt it had to be that way.

When Cal reached the sheriff's headquarters again, the old lawman showed him where to stable the pinto and then took him to the big room reserved for him and Rusty. He looked at the other bed, and a feeling of sadness surged through him.

He told Ed Munro, 'Rusty isn't coming. I talked it over with him, and he's leaving town.'

The sheriff showed disappointment. 'Sorry to hear that,' he said. 'He would have been a valuable man. And he was used to working with you'.

'I took too much on myself when I spoke for him.'

The old man nodded that he understood. 'I'm sorry I was the one who broke you boys up.'

Cal shrugged. 'I reckon it had to happen one day. This is as good a time as any.'

'Get yourself settled in here and then come have some food with Sarah and me,' the sheriff said. 'After that I'll swear you in, and we'll talk over our plans.'

Cal was in a blue mood when he sat down at the circular table with its crimson plaid cloth to join the old man and his daughter in the evening meal. The sheriff had not been exaggerating his daughter's cooking ability. The food was excellent, and all during the meal Sarah behaved in a shy, sympathetic way that let Cal know she understood he was bothered by the split with Rusty.

Afterwards she stood by as her father swore Cal in as deputy and pinned the shiny badge on him. Up until then Cal had been carrying it in his pocket, having removed it before he returned to the hotel.

So the fair-haired Sarah was the first to step forward and congratulate him on his appointment. 'I'll not worry so about Father,'

she said, 'knowing that you'll be at his side.'

Cal held her proffered hand for a long moment and met her serious gray eyes. 'I'll try to justify your confidence,' he told her, 'though this is all new to me.'

The sheriff patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't you worry about that, Cal. I wouldn't have gotten you into this if I wasn't sure you had the makings of a lawman.'

Sarah smiled. 'I'll wash up the dishes and let you two talk.'

Cal and the sheriff waited until she left the office. The old lawman's strong, kindly face wore a satisfied look as he settled down in his swivel chair to puff contentedly on his straight-stemmed pipe.

He told Cal, who had taken a plain chair across from him, 'For a long time Haddon City has been in a state of siege, ever since this Panther Gang made its camp outside the town.'

'But you say a lot of the townspeople are co-operating with the gang,' Cal reminded him.

The old lawman nodded. 'That's true. It's only a small group, mind you, but a powerful one. It takes in a lot of our most prosperous citizens who aren't too fussy where their prosperity comes from. The fact Mayor Drew happens to be one of them doesn't make it any easier for this office.'

'I haven't met the Mayor.'

‘You will,’ the sheriff promised dryly with a puff on his pipe. ‘I don’t expect he’ll exactly cotton to the idea of my bolstering this office. But we won’t worry about that.’ He paused slightly and gave Cal a keen look. ‘I think the most important single task facing us is to find out where this Panther Gang is holed up and who the leader of it is, and then run them out of this territory. Once we’ve got some solid facts, I’ll have no trouble organizing a posse to battle them.’

‘Do you know of any contacts the gang has in Haddon City?’ Cal asked. He was thinking of his conversation with the pianist from the saloon, Fred Dixon.

‘I know of three for sure,’ the old man behind the desk told him. ‘The main one is Joe Hawkins.’

‘The photographer? I hear he’s one of the town drunks.’

‘He doesn’t make his living taking photos,’ Ed Munro said grimly. ‘But he always has plenty of cash for booze. Near as I can size it up, he’s a listening post for the Panther’s outfit and takes and delivers messages for them. A lot of the time his shop is locked up.’

‘I’ve been intending to see him. The Grant girl claims he was one of her brother’s friends.’

Sheriff Munro sighed. ‘Which makes it pretty certain Steve Grant went with the Panthers. As soon as they found out how he

could handle dynamite, they set out to get him. He was in deep, gambling and drinking. It couldn't have taken too much persuasion to get him to make up his mind.'

'And who are the others in town you know about?'

'Tim Bates, who owns the Crazy Bear Saloon,' the old man said. 'I know he's mixed up in a lot of bad deals. And Eben Cookson.'

Cal's eyebrows lifted. He was startled to hear the name of the little hotel owner in that connection. He said, 'I didn't suspect him.'

'He's no big wheel,' the sheriff said. 'But he does work for the gang.'

'I see,' Cal said. 'Then all three of them should be carefully watched.'

'I suspect Joe Hawkins could be broken down,' the sheriff said. 'It's a matter of gaining his confidence and catching him at the right time. I have an idea he's frightened and would like to break away from the Panther outfit, but so far he hasn't dared.'

'What about the piano player at the Crazy Bear?' Cal asked. And then he told the sheriff what Fred Dixon had said to him.

The old lawman took it all in. 'My idea' he said at last, 'is that Tim Bates was behind that. Dixon was his errand boy. He's a lunger and in bad shape. A lot of the time he isn't able to play. He's dependent on Bates for his living.'

'Sounds logical,' Cal agreed. 'Dixon's

proudest claim is that he's a good classical pianist. He doesn't sound like the type to be actually mixed up with an outlaw gang.'

'I'd say Tim Bates is our man,' Ed Munro said. 'You can begin right away by showing yourself in town and letting folks know you're a law officer. We'll see what happens after that.'

Cal smiled thinly. 'Maybe Rusty was the smart one. I'm going to face a lot of opposition, especially since Jim Gordon had friends here, and they want to think I killed him on purpose. The owner of the livery stable across from the hotel, for instance; the one who does his own blacksmithing.'

'Nevada Noonan,' the sheriff said. 'He's a bad actor. I wouldn't be surprised if he's in the know as far as the Panther Gang is concerned. He doesn't really own the livery stable. Tim Bates put up the money.'

'That explains a lot,' Cal said. 'One last thing: are you going to let Bentley get away with what he's doing to those farmers?'

'Not if I can tag his men with the violence that has been going on,' the sheriff said. 'So far we've had no one to swear that Bentley's men are responsible for the burnings and physical attacks. Get me proof, and I'll put Bentley in his place.'

'Which would be behind bars.' Cal's tone was grim. 'Who else has anything to gain by harassing the farmers?'

'No one,' Ed Munro agreed. 'But Bentley claims it's the Panther Gang which is responsible, even though most of the farmers are too poor to attract the outlaw's interest. So I say round up the Panther Gang, and then Bentley will have no one to blame these happenings on.'

Cal got up, his hands on his gun belt. 'Maybe the single most important thing is to find out who the leader is,' he suggested.

'I couldn't agree more,' the old man told him. 'Find out who the Panther is, and we'll soon smash the whole gang.'

So that was where they left it. After Cal had received a few more instructions from the sheriff, he went out to the stable and saddled the pinto. It was almost dark as he rode slowly through the town. The familiar night revelry in the saloons and bars had begun. The wooden sidewalks were filled with cowpokes who had come in from the surrounding country for a night of celebration. Haddon City had the relaxed after-dark air of a spot where there wasn't any real law.

Cal smiled grimly to himself. He planned to visit a few well-chosen spots within the next couple of hours and let a part of the town know that Sheriff Ed Munro wasn't working alone any longer. He had decided to stop by Joe Hawkins' photo studio first, but it was in darkness. And when he tried the door it

wouldn't open. He pounded on it and waited, but there wasn't any answer. After a few minutes he got on the pinto and rode straight through town to Dr Marsland's cottage.

The doctor and his wife were both out. But Julie Grant was there, looking after the house and keeping an eye on the badly beaten farmer. She let Cal into the living room, and as soon as she saw the badge on his shirt front her face took on a happy glow.

'Cal! Are you really a lawman?' she asked eagerly.

He gave her a wry smile. 'Don't ask me why,' he said. 'I'm the new deputy.'

'I know why,' she told him. 'Because you're decent, and you couldn't let things such as happened to Brandon in there go on without doing something.'

'That's part of it.'

'I'm so proud of you,' she exclaimed, looking up into his face with admiring eyes. 'Maybe now you'll really be able to do something about finding my half-brother.'

'I'm certainly going to work at it,' he promised.

Her pretty face became gentle. 'You've made me so happy, Cal,' she said softly. And she came close to him.

He took her in his arms, and the next moment he was kissing her. She returned the kiss with a warmth that surprised him pleasantly. When he let her go he studied her

solemnly and said, 'It could be rough before it's over, Julie. This is a wild frontier country. And I'm not positive your half-brother will ever want to talk to you.'

'He will,' she insisted, 'when he learns that his father is dead and things are settled in the East. I'm convinced of that.'

'I'll do my best,' Cal told her. 'How is Brandon?'

'The doctor says he'll get better. He's still in bad shape, though.'

Cal's bronzed face was stern. 'Later I'll want to ask him some questions. What about his wife and boy? Are they feeling any better? They had a rough time.'

'Yes. They seem to be over the worst of the shock now.'

'Good,' he said. 'I must be on my way.' He turned and went to the door.

'Cal!' she called, following after him. When she reached his side, she gazed up at him with troubled eyes. 'Do be careful!'

He nodded. 'I can look after myself.'

'I'll feel responsible for you,' she told him. And she raised her head to kiss him again.

Though he knew it probably meant asking for trouble, he decided the Crazy Bear Saloon would have to be his next stop.

Judging by the horses and carriages lined up before the saloon's hitch post, it was having a big night. Sounds of revelry and the tinkling notes of Fred Dixon's ragtime piano

issued through the swinging doors. The gas lamps over the outside sign were flaring brightly, and a couple of groups of cowpokes were standing on the wooden sidewalk before the doors, engaged in a lively argument about something. They were so taken up with their own talk they never turned an eye on Cal. He was grateful for this and had a hunch he could walk straight through the doors and over to the bar without too much notice being taken of his new deputy's badge.

And it worked out that way. He edged up against the bar and waited for a fat bartender to give him some attention. He called for a beer. The bartender waddled down and placed the glass of foaming amber liquid in front of him. 'You been in here before, haven't you?' he asked.

Cal nodded. 'That's right.'

Now the fat man noticed the badge and gave a low whistle. 'You part of the local law?'

Cal smiled thinly. 'I'm not any deputy from Missouri.'

'You're going to find it lively around here, Mister Deputy,' was the fat one's comment as he left to serve another customer.

Cal blew the foam off his beer and took a mouthful of the refreshing liquid. The smoke-filled room was busier than on the other night. He glanced toward the platform where Fred Dixon was still playing. The thin

man was almost slumped over the keyboard. Cal wondered if the dry climate would really do him any good. He still had a bad cough, and the sheriff had mentioned he was often too sick to work.

'So you're back again, Haines!' a harsh, familiar voice said from behind him.

Cal wheeled around quickly to see Tim Bates, the saloon owner, standing scowling at him. The bulldog face showed hatred. Instinctively Cal let his hand move to his holster. He was ready to draw the Colt if the big man got nasty. But now Bates spotted the badge, and his jaw dropped.

'What's that mean?' he asked.

'I'm the new deputy in town,' Cal told him.

Tim Bates sneered. 'That's the last thing Haddon City needs.'

'You may think so, but there are a lot of others around who feel different.'

'You won't last long,' Bates said. 'And we don't want you hanging around here. You can tell the sheriff I said that!' He thrust his cigar back in the corner of his ugly mouth.

'I reckon I'll just decide for myself when I'm needed and when I'm not,' Cal told him quietly.

'You don't impress me,' the saloon owner said angrily. 'You're just a gunman who happened into town at a time the sheriff needed help. Having that badge doesn't make you more than a licensed killer. You finished

Jim Gordon off without giving him a fair chance, and I suppose you think you can go on the same way. Better not count on it.'

'Your information is all wrong, Bates,' Cal warned him. 'Gordon got what he asked for. And you'll get the same if you don't keep in line. The sheriff has his eye on you and on this place.'

The hulking Tim Bates went purple and silent. After a malevolent appraisal of Cal with his pig eyes, he turned and stalked away. Cal faced the bar again and gave his attention to his beer. Those standing by had heard the exchange and now regarded him with a mixture of apathy and hostility. He paid no attention to them. It seemed likely that Tim Bates would find some way of making trouble for him, but he hadn't figured out exactly how.

He was soon to learn. He'd finished his drink and noticed that Fred Dixon had finished playing and left the platform. He glanced around the crowded room to try to spot the gaunt figure of the pianist. But he seemed nowhere in sight. Instead, Cal saw someone else standing across the room with Tim Bates and gazing at him speculatively. It was Nevada Noonan, the blacksmith!

Cal could tell the big mountain of a man was in his usual mean mood. Now that he knew Noonan was Tim Bates' hireling, he figured he could expect anything. With some

jeering comment to the saloon owner, Nevada Noonan stepped forward and advanced slowly toward Cal.

When he came within a couple of feet or so from him, he sneered, 'I reckon you think that piece of tin is going to protect you.'

'I can look after my own protection,' Cal told him.

'You gave Jim Gordon the dirty,' the blacksmith said, flexing his powerful hairy hands. 'But you won't get away with it with me. I say to high-tail it out of here before I break you in two.'

'Don't be a fool, Noonan,' Cal warned him, his hand on the Colt.

The slab-faced, hulking Noonan saw the move. 'We don't need guns to settle this,' he said softly. 'Just bare fists!'

'Remember,' Cal warned him again, 'you're mixing with the law!'

'The devil with the law!' Noonan said derisively, and aimed a great fist at him. The blow landed on Cal's cheek and bent him back over the bar.

The crowd at once roared their approval and began forming a circle around the two. Cal cursed at the thought he'd been tricked into getting into a brawl with his over-sized opponent on this first night of his career as a lawman. This mere fact would help discredit him, and that was what Tim Bates was hoping for. Noonan was grinning. He backed

and circled.

Cal closed in. He gave the big man a swift right to the head and then followed with a whistling left which caught him above the heart and drove him staggering against the crowd. They shouted their enjoyment and pushed him back in the ring. Noonan shook his head savagely and drove in at Cal again. He managed to land a number of powerful body blows, some of them low, that gave the young deputy a bad time. It was his turn to back away and recover his breath.

By now the entire room was gathered around them. Cal knew if he meant to stay on as deputy, he had to get this situation under control.

'Go get him, Nevada!' the crowd roared encouragement.

Nevada rushed in, stepped on Cal's right foot and drove both fists into his face. Cal crashed to the floor, to be attacked by Nevada's stomping feet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cal somehow rolled out of danger and tried to rise again. He had only reached his knees when Nevada delivered a kick to his ribs and sent him sprawling once more. Again the onlookers howled their encouragement. The

hulking blacksmith towered over him, taunting him to get up. Cal couldn't manage it right away, and the big man laughed coarsely and made a play to the crowd by seizing him by the hair.

Cal had recovered somewhat and delivered a hard right to the big man's groin. It bent Nevada double with pain and gave Cal a chance to send a fist crashing into the big man's face at close range. Blood gushed from Nevada's mouth and nose. He staggered back. At the same instant Cal got to his feet. Nevada yelled with rage and pawed at his shirt. In the next moment there was the flash of cold steel in his right hand.

A familiar voice shouted, 'Look out, Cal!' He didn't have time to note where it came from, but he knew it was Rusty.

Rusty suddenly rushed in, grabbed Nevada's upraised right arm from behind and twisted it until the big man grimaced and let the knife fall. Then Rusty let him go and swiftly retrieved the weapon to the booing of the crowd.

Cal closed in on Nevada and got a short left to his jaw again. He followed this with a right and another left. Nevada was bleeding copiously and was dazed, most of the fight gone out of him. He made a wild right lunge for Cal and missed him. It gave Cal the opening he needed. He delivered a punishing blow to Nevada's chin, and the blacksmith

toppled to the floor of the saloon, unconscious. There was a loud outburst of disappointment from the onlookers, mingled with shouts of encouragement for the fallen bully to get up. But Nevada was not getting up.

Tim Bates came across to Cal furiously just as he was bending to get his fallen Stetson. The saloon owner said, 'Well, I hope you're satisfied now you've caused a brawl in my place.'

Cal eyed him stonily. 'You had more to do with starting it than anyone else.'

'What are you talking about?' the big man blustered.

'If this is your way of trying to get me in trouble, it doesn't make much sense,' Cal went on in a quiet tone as he took the dents out of his brown Stetson and donned it once again. 'Your man Noonan is going to gaol for attempted assault with a deadly weapon.'

'You won't get any witnesses in this bunch,' Tim Bates sneered.

'He's got one right here!' It was Rusty who stepped forward triumphantly with the knife he'd taken from the unconscious Nevada in his hand.

'You'll not get away with this, Haines,' Tim Bates threatened. 'Wait until I tell my side of things to the Mayor.'

'There'll be plenty of chance for that,' Cal said. 'Right now I'm interested in just one

thing: getting Noonan to the jail.'

He and Rusty carried the fallen man out. He was gradually coming round, and when he discovered the handcuffs on him he uttered a hoarse string of oaths and threatened to start more trouble. But his hands were securely locked behind his back, and Cal dragged him stumbling along the main street at the end of a rope. Rusty rode beside Cal and helped keep an eye on the angry Nevada.

It was only after they had the irate blacksmith safely lodged in a cell of the Haddon City jail that Cal and Rusty had the opportunity for a short talk.

Cal and his friend stood in the sheriff's office facing each other.

With a smile Cal said, 'I'll have to admit I probably would have wound up with a knife in my back if it hadn't been for you.'

The big red-haired man looked pleased. 'I figured you'd get in trouble, so I just naturally stayed around.'

'What now?'

Rusty shrugged. 'I've gone this far; I might as well go all the way,' he said. 'I guess I'll accept that deputy's badge after all.'

'Good boy!' Cal exclaimed, and patted him affectionately on the shoulder. 'The sheriff is going to be pleased.'

And he was. Veteran lawman Ed Munro was also glad Cal had brought in Nevada Noonan. He told him, 'We'll just let him cool

his heels in jail for a while. When he finds out his friends aren't going to be able to help him, he may decide to talk.'

'It could be,' Cal agreed. 'How long can you hold him without trial?'

'Until the circuit court judge arrives,' Sheriff Munro said. 'And that will be a week or ten days. It should give us plenty of time to soften the prisoner up.'

'He's a hard customer,' Cal warned. 'Don't expect too much.'

'It's the first time we've had one of Bates' main cronies under arrest,' the sheriff said. 'I'm satisfied with that for a start.'

Rusty stayed at the jail all night, and in the morning he had breakfast with Cal, the sheriff and Sarah. The sheriff swore him in first thing and then suggested he work with him for the day. There was a complaint about rustling on one of the smaller ranches, and he took the big red-haired man with him to investigate the situation. This left Cal to keep an eye on the jail and the town.

After the sheriff and Rusty had ridden away, Cal went out to the kitchen to ask Sarah if she minded being left alone with Nevada Noonan in the jail block. The prison section was joined at the back of the sheriff's office and the living quarters.

The pretty fair-haired girl paused in her duties at the stove to smile and shake her head. 'It won't bother me,' she told him. 'I'm

used to prisoners being out there. As long as they're locked up, what harm can they do me?'

Cal smiled. 'I suppose that's true. You're in more danger from the ones roaming around loose.'

'Dad always tells me that.'

'Only be careful if any strangers show up,' he warned her. 'You never know when some of his pals might take a notion to try and spring him from jail. Just refuse to let anyone visit him unless we're here.'

'I always keep the door between the office and the jail block locked,' she said, 'and the key hidden.'

'You've been pretty well trained for this kind of emergency.'

'I've grown up here,' the attractive Sarah said. She had fine features and a perfect profile except for a slightly snubbed nose which he thought added to her attractiveness. 'My mother died when I was twelve. I've acted as housekeeper for Dad ever since.'

Cal couldn't help feeling sympathetic toward the girl. 'Your father is getting to be an old man,' he said. 'This job is too risky for him.'

'I know it,' she said, her expression becoming troubled. 'And of course there are people in town who taunt him about it. They claim the Mayor only allows him to stay in the job because he thinks he is incompetent.'

‘Your Dad is far from that,’ Cal said. ‘But he should soon consider taking it easier.’

‘I know you and your friend will make it much better for him,’ she said. ‘You two sharing the work will give him a chance really to tackle the crime situation here.’

‘I hope so,’ he said.

She gave him an anxious appraisal. ‘It’s going to be dangerous for you as well,’ she reminded him. ‘Don’t forget that.’

‘I’ll try not to.’ He smiled. ‘I expect I’d better be taking a ride into town and see how things are going after last night. Once again he made the photographer’s studio his first port of call. And once again he decided that Joe Hawkins no longer lived in the weathered gray building. He was about to mount his horse again when someone called to him from across the street.

‘Hey you!’ the stranger said, and waved for him to come over.

Cal hesitated and stared across at the man who had hailed him. He was of medium size, dressed neatly in slate gray and wearing a bowler hat of a lighter shade to match. He had an autocratic face and bearing and had been talking to a younger man who had glanced furtively over his shoulder at Cal before quickly going on to the bank building, which was only a few yards away. Cal at once decided the man who had so officiously shouted to him must be the town banker,

Mayor Drew. With this in mind, he strolled casually over to him.

Mayor Drew was a middle-aged man with a surly face. He looked Cal up and down and said, 'So you're the new deputy?'

'One of them,' Cal coolly informed him.

The man in gray looked astonished. 'One of them? Are there more?'

'The sheriff swore in a second deputy this morning.'

'That old man must have gone plumb loco,' the man in gray complained. 'I take it you're Cal Haines? But I don't suppose you have any idea who I am, since you're new in town.'

'I'll make a guess,' Cal said. 'You're Mayor Drew.'

'That's right,' the other man said in his irate way. 'How did you know?'

'The sheriff mentioned you,' Cal said. 'And you were standing in front of the bank building.'

The Mayor gave him a further sullen scrutiny. 'That's good enough deduction,' he said in a grudging tone. 'Come on into the bank. I want to have a talk with you.'

He led Cal into the frame building and through the outer office, in which Cal saw the young man and two others of a more advanced age at desks behind the counter. Mayor Drew took Cal directly to his inner office and closed the door after him. Then he gave him a threatening glance before he sat

down. 'I've had somebody talking to me about you already this morning,' the Mayor told him. 'I've been informed you're a troublemaker.'

'Would that have been Tim Bates?' Cal asked.

The Mayor looked up at him from his chair behind the desk. And it was then that Cal noticed his right hand was covered by a black leather glove. Further, it seemed to be paralysed, since he had not opened it since Cal had joined him.

'It was Bates,' the Mayor agreed. 'And he claims you deliberately started a brawl in his place last night and arrested a friend of his.'

'I took Nevada Noonan into custody,' Cal said. 'He tried to knife me.'

'Bates claimed you tormented him into making the attack.'

Cal smiled thinly. 'I'm sure you'll be satisfied with the facts when they come out at his trial.'

Mayor Drew scowled. 'I'm not sure he should be held for trial.'

'I suggest you take that up with the sheriff.'

'I intend to,' the Mayor said, bringing his gloved hand down on the desk for emphasis. It made an odd heavy sound that Cal found startling. The Mayor noted the surprise that must have registered on his face and, lifting the gloved hand, told him, 'You needn't look

so astonished. I have an iron hand. I lost mine in the Union Army.'

'I'm sorry,' Cal said. 'No one mentioned it.'

'You're due to find out a lot of things, young man,' the Mayor said severely. 'I gave Ed Munro no authority to hire you, and your appointment may not be legal.'

'Again, that's something to discuss with him,' Cal said.

'But while you are wearing that badge, try to remember we don't want trouble here in Haddon City. I'm the Mayor of a law-abiding town, and I don't intend it should change. No senile sheriff is going to rile things up by hiring a couple of gunmen whose reputations are no better than they should be to poke their noses where they're not wanted.'

'I take my orders from the sheriff,' Cal said quietly.

'I'll be seeing Ed Munro before the day is over,' Mayor Drew said biting. 'And we'll see who you take orders from after that.' He brought his iron hand crashing down on the desk to underline this.

'Is that all, sir?' Cal asked in a quietly polite tone.

'All except that you should remember to avoid having any more trouble with Tim Bates. He's an important man in this town, and I want his interests protected!'

Cal said, 'Bates put Noonan up to causing

that fight last night.'

'I don't believe it!'

Cal shrugged. 'That's your privilege, but I know what happened.'

'Stay clear of Bates from now on. That's an order!' the Mayor told him. And he nodded to him in dismissal.

Cal was glad to get out of the office. Once he was on the street again, he took a deep breath of fresh air. His meeting with the Mayor had left him with a bad impression. The sheriff had told him the Mayor owned the town's leading hardware store and so was willing to deal with the Panther Gang for business' sake. The fact that he also owned the bank and probably a good many other things made him a power in the small community.

Cal mounted the pinto with these troublesome thoughts running through his head and rode slowly to the other end of town. He saw no one at Dr Marsland's place and kept on heading towards open country.

He nudged the pinto up a trail leading to a high divide. It was sharp and rocky, its top a mass of uneven pinnacles. From up there he could see a wide sweep of range. Far beyond were a succession of tiny canyons and rough coulees. Then, off to the left, he saw a rider. He watched as the slightly crouched figure on the horse crossed the open country far below him. From where he viewed the panoramic

scene, he had perfect vision for miles. Studying the rider, he was able positively to identify him as Eben Cookson, the little hotel owner.

Now his interest increased, especially as another rider came into sight on the right. At first he was only a tiny, swift-moving speck going up the slope of a faraway divide. The ant-like rider vanished in the crest and could not be seen for a while. But the riders moved still closer together, Eben Cookson gradually getting farther away as he rode on to meet the other man.

It was perhaps five minutes before the rider who had been lost to view reappeared. Now Cookson and the stranger were close enough together to see each other. They exchanged waves of greeting and rode forward to meet on a wide grassy plain.

Cal was filled with a number of conflicting impulses. He wanted to ride down, overtake the two and find out who the stranger was and why Cookson was meeting him this way. But he was worried that he couldn't get close to them before they would notice him and beat a hasty retreat. So it seemed following them would only invite frustration. As he continued to watch them in what seemed earnest conversation he became convinced this other man must be some member of the Panther Gang to whom the hotel owner had been delegated to deliver a message.

As he continued to watch, he formulated a plan in his mind. He waited until the meeting between the two came to an end. The stranger rode off the way he had come, and Eben Cookson took a different and more direct route leading back to town. Watching him, Cal decided if he went back down the divide and high-tailed it in the same direction, they would be bound to meet somewhere before the road led into the village proper.

This decision reached, he spurred the pinto into action, and they made the difficult descent down the rough terrain. After that he pounded through brush and open country until he came to the main trail. He'd barely reached it when from the other direction Eben Cookson on his sorrel mare rode into view. The little man was almost abreast of him before Cal coaxed his mount from the protecting brush and rode out to greet the hotel owner.

Cookson reined the sorrel and looked as if he might collapse right there. He wore a distinctive flat-crowned black hat with a wide brim to match his sombre black suit. The suit and hat were now liberally covered with dust from the trail, and the one-eyed man's sallow face was streaked with perspiration.

He gave Cal a panicky glance. 'You startled me!' he gasped.

'I didn't mean to,' Cal said lightly. 'Were

you out having a ride on your own?’

The little man at once fell into the trap. ‘Yes, I was, as a matter of fact,’ he quickly agreed. ‘It gets tiresome being cooped up behind the counter at the hotel. Every so often I need some fresh air. And this is how I get it.’

‘No better way,’ Cal said, allowing the pinto to canter along beside the little man’s sorrel. ‘Both you and the horse look mighty warm and tired. Why do you ride so hard?’

Eben Cookson looked frightened. He managed a ghastly smile. ‘It’s a bad habit. Bad for the horse and me. I should know better.’

‘You should,’ Cal agreed dryly. ‘Anyone would think you were rushing out to meet somebody.’

‘They would be wrong,’ the little Britisher assured him. And changing the subject, ‘Congratulations on your appointment, Deputy. I hear you did a neat bit of work on Nevada Noonan last night.’

‘You heard about that?’

‘Indeed I did,’ Cookson said. ‘And I give you credit. We need a lawman who can defend himself and stand up for law and order in this town. The sheriff is too old. It takes someone like you.’

‘Thanks,’ Cal said.

‘What’s going to happen to Nevada?’

‘That’s up to the judge.’

The little man looked startled again. 'He's really going to stand trial? I'd have thought Tim Bates would have tried to get him off?'

'No doubt he may still try, but it won't do any good,' Cal promised him.

They were now in town again and approaching the hotel. Eben Cookson said, 'Well, if you get Nevada before a judge, you'll make a real impression here. A lot of people won't believe it until they see it.'

With this remark Cookson nodded again and rode off to the livery stable.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cal rode back to the sheriff's office with the feeling he hadn't managed to accomplish much.

When he reached the jailhouse he saw that the sheriff and Rusty had gotten there ahead of him. But he wasn't prepared for the avalanche of gloom that reached him when he entered the office. They were all there, Sarah, her father and Rusty. The minute he saw Rusty's face he knew there was trouble. Sarah and her father were standing by the desk a distance away from the red-haired man.

Sheriff Munro's strong old face held a hint of despair as he told Cal, 'Our friend Nevada Noonan won't ever stand for trial.'

Cal frowned. 'Did the Mayor make you let him go?'

The sheriff shook his head. 'Nothing like that. Some of his friends came while we were all away. They shot him to death in his cell.'

'I heard the shot,' Sarah told Cal. 'But by the time I got there he was dead.'

'They rode up to the window of his cell and let him have it through there,' the sheriff explained. 'They had gotten away before Sarah really knew what had happened.'

'One thing is sure,' Rusty said. 'Those outlaws weren't taking any chances on Nevada spilling anything.'

'And he must have known plenty,' Cal said.

'We've lost our best hope of breaking the gang up.' The sheriff sighed. 'But we have no choice. It just means starting all over again.' He asked Cal, 'Did you get a chance to talk to Joe Hawkins?'

'No luck. When I caught up with him he was too drunk to say anything. But I did hit on something else.' And he went on to tell them about seeing the hotel owner hold a rendezvous with the stranger.

When he finished, the sheriff said, 'There's no doubt he took a message to one of the gang. We know he's in it deep.'

Rusty made a wry face. 'A lot of hope we'll have of getting any of them to talk after what happened to Nevada.'

Sarah's pretty face was marred by remorse. 'I feel responsible,' she said. 'I should have kept a better watch. I didn't think of them going to the window and shooting him.'

'I don't reckon that ornery Nevada did, either,' Rusty said. 'The way they got him between the eyes, I'd say he lifted himself up to the window by the bars, thinking they were going to spring him.'

'And instead they shot him down,' the veteran Ed Munro said disgustedly. 'Whoever heads this Panther outfit is completely ruthless. Nevada found that out too late.'

'Rusty is right,' Cal said. 'It won't make it easy dealing with the others. They'll all be more frightened.'

'We've still got to try,' the sheriff said. 'And the next time we have a prisoner of Nevada's importance here, one of us will remain as guard.' The old man had barely finished saying this when Mayor Drew appeared in the doorway.

The Mayor at once seemed to sense the taut atmosphere. With a frown for the sheriff, he asked, 'Well, what kind of conspiracy is going on here?'

'Nevada is dead,' the sheriff said. And he went on to explain.

The Mayor looked shocked and then enraged. 'Let me see the body,' he demanded.

They all went out to the cell with him

except for Sarah, who took the opportunity to retire discreetly to the living quarters of the jail. The Mayor only glanced at the wrecked face of the livery stable man when Rusty drew away the blanket that covered him. He didn't speak until they were back in the office again.

Then he asked the sheriff, 'You say it was some of the outlaw gang who killed Noonan, but how do I know it wasn't one of these two?' He indicated Cal and Rusty. 'They had it in for Nevada, and they are plenty quick with guns.'

'These men are my deputies,' the sheriff told him. 'I'll be responsible for them.'

Mayor Drew raised his iron hand in an angry gesture. 'That's something else again. You had no right to hire them without the council approving.'

'The council gives me the right to run this office as I see fit,' Ed Munro countered.

'We'll see about that,' the Mayor said harshly.

'I'm calling a council meeting as soon as I can and when they hear what's been going on, it's my guess they'll demand you get rid of these two.'

'I'll worry about that when they make up their minds,' the sheriff told the ill-tempered Mayor evenly. 'I happen to have some weight with the council, too.'

'In the meantime, you two take it slow,' the Mayor threatened Cal and Rusty. And then

he strode out as quickly as he'd appeared.

The sheriff grimly watched him go and then slumped down in the swivel chair behind his desk with a sigh. 'Well, at least we've got that over. It's going to be touch and go when the council takes this up. But I'm betting that I'll win out over the Mayor. There are enough on the council who know he's trying to shield the Panther's outfit and don't approve of it.'

'We ought to come up with some action so you can go before the meeting with proof we're making some progress,' Cal said.

Rusty gave him a bored look. 'Got any suggestions?'

'Not yet. But I'll keep working on it,' he promised.

For the next couple of days he did just that. But all his leads ended in blind alleys. The old photographer dropped out of sight, and his shop was still locked whenever Cal went there. He began to give up hope of making any headway. The piano player at the Crazy Bear avoided him whenever he went in there, and he'd had no luck getting the hotel owner to talk. Everyone was afraid.

Finally one afternoon the sheriff came up with a plan to screen the nearby countryside in an effort to nose out the Panther Gang.

Munro frowned as he studied the rough map set out on his desk. He placed a forefinger on a section in the upper left corner of it. 'There,' he said, 'somewhere in those

hills, is where they must have their hide-out. It's the area the rider came from to meet Eben Cookson when you watched the other day.'

Cal studied the map over his shoulder. 'You're probably right,' he agreed.

The old lawman sat back with a sigh. 'I'm desperate to get something to show the council. Unless I do, there could be a new sheriff in this office. Not that I'd mind that if things were cleaned up. I'd like to stay on until the Panther outfit is brought to justice.'

'Ain't they been uncommon quiet lately?' Rusty asked. He was lounging in a wooden chair tilted back on its rear legs.

'Around here,' Sheriff Munro said. 'But they travel a long way when they raid. Stories about a couple of bank robberies in Missouri have been filtering in. And the jobs have all the earmarks of the Panther Gang. One of them was a neat dynamite operation.' He gave Cal a significant look. 'Sounded like something Steve Grant would set up.'

Cal nodded. 'I guess there's no doubt he's with the gang.'

'I never had any,' Sheriff Munro said grimly.

Rusty let his chair come level with the floor again and leaned forward with a shrewd expression on his broad, freckled face. 'In a game like this it's important to know who you're looking for. You've been around here since the Panther moved headquarters to this

part of the country. You must have some theory about who he is.'

The veteran lawman's reaction was immediate. 'I could be wrong,' he said, 'but I think our man is Tim Bates. A lot of the trouble seems to begin in the Crazy Bear, and he owns it. On top of that, he came here just about the time the Panther Gang arrived.'

Cal asked, 'Why is Mayor Drew such a supporter of his?'

'Because he's got money in the saloon, along with Bates,' the old lawman said with a sigh. 'Violence has come to be a profitable commodity in Haddon City. Rusty and I will hit out for the hill country tomorrow, Cal. We'll plan to stay out a couple of days. In the meantime, you'll be responsible for things here.'

'Why not let me and Rusty do the outside work?'

'I know the territory better,' was the Sheriff's reply.

Cal's first real break came the evening of the following day. Rusty and the sheriff left early in the morning, and he remained to keep law and order in the town. Just after dark he rode up the main street in the direction of the Crazy Bear Saloon, and when he passed the photo studio he saw a light emanating from its front window for the first time. He quickly dismounted, went over to the door and knocked on it.

It was several minutes before it was cautiously opened by a short, stout man with steel-rimmed square spectacles, a florid face puffed from alcoholism and an unkempt head of unruly iron-grey hair.

‘What do you want?’ the old man asked in a gravelly whiskey voice.

‘I’m Cal Haines, the new deputy sheriff,’ Cal said. ‘I’d like to talk to you a few minutes.’

Joe Hawkins was immediately on the alert. The rheumy eyes behind the steel-rimmed glasses showed fear. ‘I haven’t time to talk to anyone.’

‘It won’t take long,’ Cal told him. ‘I hear you have a fine collection of Civil War pictures. I’m interested in them.’

‘Yeah?’ The tone was suspicious. Cal expected the unkempt head poked out the crack of doorway might be withdrawn at any second and the door closed in his face.

‘I’d like to see some of your photo studies,’ Cal said.

‘You a photographer?’

‘No. But I served under Grant,’ Cal said. ‘I was at the siege of St. Petersburg.’

The bleary-eyed Hawkins studied him with new respect. ‘You couldn’t have been much more than a boy!’

‘I wasn’t,’ Cal smiled grimly. ‘But I soon learned to be a soldier.’

‘I was with Sherman when he gave good

old Abe Lincoln Savannah for a Christmas present,' Joe Hawkins said. 'I suppose you had a fine time in the war?'

'No,' Cal said. 'I was glad when it ended. I never want to see another one.'

The drunkard's face showed amazement. 'Wouldn't expect to hear anyone your age talk like that. But you're right. War is a rotten, cruel insanity. I hated every minute of it. Yet I had to see it through.'

Cal said, 'The talk is that Matt Brady is the greatest war photographer of all time.'

'Matt Brady!' the old man said with disgust. 'You come inside and see some of my work. I was just sortin' through it. I don't get much time these days. I ain't been well.' And he opened the door wide to allow Cal to go in.

Cal followed Hawkins into the room, in which a single small lamp with a smoky chimney gave a feeble light. Now he could see the stacks of photographs. The old man went over to a group on the table where the lamp stood and selected one to hand to Cal. 'Take a look at that,' he said with a grim smile. 'Anything that Brady took ever beat that?'

Cal studied the photo. It showed a moustached soldier in a Union Army uniform sitting against a stone fence for support. Several of his buddies stood by him. The shock value of the photograph lay in the fact that the soldier wore a dazed smile while one of his outstretched legs had been blown off

below the knee. The mutilated limb and the blood spilling from it were plainly there to see.

Cal said, 'It's typical and horrible.'

The old man chuckled. 'Thought it would get a rise out of you. Everyone blinks at that one. Caught him just after it happened, before the pain set in or a doctor had reached him. He didn't feel a thing. Just sat smiling for the camera. I used the wet collodion process, same as Brady.'

'It's a masterpiece,' Cal said. And he handed it back.

'Sure,' the old man said. 'Look at some of these others.'

Cal did. They all showed similar sensitivity to the horror of war. Some of them were outstanding.

Cal returned them to the photographer's trembling hands. 'You should be very proud of these.'

Hawkins made a weary gesture to the stacked tables and the photography equipment standing gathering dust. 'I have hundreds of them,' he said. 'But no one cares any longer. Brady got the fame, and I received nothing but a letter of thanks from the President.' His tone became bitter. 'How many whiskies can a letter of thanks buy you?'

'Still you manage,' Cal said.

The alcoholic photographer looked sly. 'I

manage,' he agreed.

Cal decided to come straight to the point. 'As a fellow veteran of the war who dislikes violence as much as I do, I wonder if I can count on you for some help.'

'What are you getting at?' Hawkins was beginning to turn surly. 'And what are you doing wearing a deputy's badge? Ed Munro takes care of the law in this town!'

'I'm giving him some help,' Cal said.

'It don't have nothing to do with me,' the old photographer snapped, and turned his back on him as he resumed going over the photographs.

Cal moved a step nearer him. 'You knew Steve Grant.'

The old man glanced apprehensively over his shoulder. 'What's that your business?'

'I just said you were friends.'

'He knew enough to appreciate these,' Hawkins said, indicating his photos.

'His sister is here in town looking for him. She's tried to see you and hasn't been able to reach you. She has important news for him. Good news. If you are really his friend, you'll make an effort to let him know.'

The old man turned slowly. 'I don't now where he's gone,' he said, avoiding looking at Cal.

'I think you do,' Cal told him. 'And I also believe you could tell me something about the Panther and his gang if you liked.'

Joe Hawkins at once grew upset. 'I don't want to listen to any more of this,' he said. 'Go on. Get out of here!'

'Is that any way to treat a war comrade? Cal asked.

The old photographer waved angrily. 'You ain't no comrade of mine, tryin' to make me talk about things I never heard of!'

'You might be wise to talk while you can,' Cal warned him. 'The Panther will use you, and when you're no longer important to him he'll finish you off the same as he did Nevada Noonan.'

'I got nothing to be scared about,' Hawkins protested, the bloated face distorted by fear and rage.

'I see it different.'

Joe Hawkins peered at him anxiously from behind the steel-rimmed glasses. 'If you want information about them outlaws, there are better places to ask than here.'

'Name one.'

'That's up to you to find out!' the old man said defiantly.

Cal sighed. 'Well, my advice is to think it over. You can always reach me at the sheriff's office. Or I'll be glad to come back here any time. Miss Grant would be mighty grateful for any help you can give her.'

'I told you once. Steve left without telling me where he was going!'

'For a man who doesn't believe in violence,

you're sure determined to help the Panther and his crowd,' Cal said. 'Think it over.' And he left.

The street was busy with the usual after-dark gathering of ranch hands and the transients who came into town for a few days and celebrated before moving on. Usually they were on the wrong side of the law, spending the proceeds of their illegal activities before returning to their gangs. Cal had no doubt members of the Panther's band were in the group that crowded the frontier town almost every night.

He was about fifty yards from the Crazy Bear when a shot rang out and he felt a scorching pain in his head. Without a word he fell forward and toppled out of the saddle.

CHAPTER NINE

When Cal opened his eyes he saw that someone was bending over him. It took him a moment to recognize the pianist, Fred Dixon. The cadaverous face gazed down at his own.

'You took long enough to come around,' the thin man said.

Cal frowned, and even this slight effort caused him pain. He was aware of a throbbing in his head and a stinging hurt at the top of his skull. He was in a tiny room

whose murky light came from a lamp set in a bracket on the rough wooden wall. And he was stretched out on a narrow cot.

‘How did I get here?’ he asked.

‘I found you lying in the street,’ the gaunt Dixon said. ‘I got one of the boys to bring you around to the back of the saloon. You’re in my luxurious quarters.’ This last was said with bitter humour.

Cal stared up at him. ‘What about the pinto?’

‘Tied around back. Don’t worry. Everything is all right.’

‘Except my head!’ Cal groaned. ‘It feels as if trip-hammers were pounding at it.’

‘Someone took a shot at you and almost did a neat job. But you were lucky. You’ve only lost a streak of scalp about two inches long and an eighth of an inch deep.’

‘It feels as if my entire head was blown off,’ Cal said unhappily. ‘Did you see whoever did it?’

‘No. But I heard the shot. That was what attracted my attention,’ the consumption-ridden pianist said. ‘I crossed the street and found you in the gutter and the pinto standing nearby.’

‘I might have expected this,’ Cal said bitterly. ‘There’s more than one person in town with a motive. But no one had taken a shot at me before, and so I forgot about the danger.’

Dixon's cadaverous face registered cynicism. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'So you did,' Cal was willing to admit.

'You should have never put on that badge.'

'There's a job to be done here. I've turned my back too many times before,' Cal said. 'After a while a man can't live with himself if he has to dodge every challenge.'

'You didn't manage to dodge that bullet,' the pianist pointed out.

'Occupational hazard,' Cal said with a taut smile. 'Thanks for the help, even if you're not in sympathy with what I'm trying to do.'

'I know what you're trying to do all right,' Dixon told him. 'I just don't think it can be done. And I hate to see you destroyed. If I remember rightly, I told you some time ago I'd like to be your friend.'

'Think I dare sit up?'

'You can try. You'll be dizzy for a little.' The consumptive's scrawny hands assisted him to a sitting position.

Cal looked grey. 'You're right! My head is really spinning now.'

'It should pass.'

Cal pressed his hands to his temples and closed his eyes. 'I sure appreciate your bringing me here. Sorry to be so much bother.'

'Glad to be able to do it.'

'I guess Tim Bates wouldn't be happy if he knew I was being given help and shelter back

here.'

The gaunt pianist said, 'He doesn't have to know. And I certainly wasn't going to leave you unconscious in the street.'

Cal opened his eyes and found the room was spinning less. 'That's better,' he said with relief. And then he gave the tall sickly man his attention. 'I'll get out of here as soon as I can,' he promised.

'No need to worry; he's busy outside. He never comes back here during saloon hours.' Dixon broke into a hacking coughing spell and battled it for several minutes. Then he sank weakly into the room's single plain chair and, with the usual white handkerchief pressed over his mouth, sat there recovering.

Cal stared at him. 'Have you talked with Dr Marsland lately?'

The cadaverous face smiled forlornly. 'We had our talk some time ago. I'm due to die, Haines. I won't be here another year this time.'

'You never can be sure of such things.'

'I'm sure enough.'

Cal said, 'If you're that fatalistic about death, I don't see why you don't try to help me. You have information about Steve Grant and the Panther Gang. You were going to talk to me, and then you changed your mind.'

Dixon stuffed the handkerchief in an inner pocket, and his sallow skeleton face mirrored his bitterness. 'I know I'm going to die,

Haines, but I don't intend to ask to be killed.'

'I see,' Cal said quietly.

'I'm not sure you do,' the pianist said. 'And I can't see that what happens in Haddon City is any concern of yours. That's why I think you were wrong to accept that deputy badge.'

Cal sighed. 'It comes to this. You've got to take a stand against what is wrong somewhere. I decided on Haddon City.'

'You should have signed with Bentley as you intended.'

'And help him rough up a lot of helpless farmers? It was Bentley who finally convinced me I had gone as far as I could along that road.'

The pianist smiled. 'My guess is it was Julie Grant who turned you into a knight in shining armour. But tonight the armour almost got pierced.'

'Julie is a fine girl.'

'She's using you.'

'Maybe.'

'No maybe about it,' Fred Dixon predicted. 'You'll find out.'

'I'm willing to do that,' Cal said.

'I told you once I wanted to be your friend,' the sallow Dixon said. 'I'm trying to give you good advice, but you won't listen to me.'

'Just call it a stupid streak,' Cal said with a wry grin. 'It's time I got going.'

'I bathed your head,' Dixon said, helping him rise. 'Your hair covers the wound, but you should have it properly looked after. Do you feel well enough to ride down to Dr Marsland on your own?'

'Yes. I'm a lot better now,' Cal told him.

The pianist gave him a worried look. 'Next time the bullet may do its job. I wish you'd get out of town, Haines.'

'I wish I could,' Cal admitted. 'But it's too late now.'

The thin man saw him safely outside and showed him where the pinto was tied. Cal swung up into the saddle and then slowly made his way along the dark alley to Main Street.

Rusty and Ed Munro returned early the next day. They had not had any luck in finding the outlaws' hide-out. And Munro was disturbed by the attack on Cal.

'I should have left Rusty here as well,' the old lawman said.

'It would have made no difference,' Cal told him.

Rusty had other views. 'It sure as rain would have,' he said earnestly. 'Cal is used to having me along to back him up. No miserable critter would have ambushed him from the dark if I'd been there.'

Cal smiled. 'You'd probably have wound up with a bullet in you for good measure.'

'We should have more men if we're going

to round up that Panther Gang,' the sheriff said. 'Another party should be out searching for the hide-out when we're back here. This way it's going to take too long, and we may never win out.'

'It's not likely to get any better,' Cal warned.

The sheriff rose decisively from his desk. 'I'm going to have another talk with the Mayor. And if that don't work, I'm going directly to everyone on the council and ask them to override the Mayor on this.'

Cal said, 'You know best. What happened to me is nothing to get upset about. It's a risk any lawman takes.'

'We need to spread the risk more,' was Ed Munro's grim verdict.

When he returned about eight o'clock, he was weary and dust-covered and not in a jubilant mood.

'I couldn't get enough to swing to my views,' he told Cal. 'The Mayor won.'

Cal was shocked by the worn look on Ed Munro's face. He seemed to have aged years since morning. He told the old lawman, 'Better hurry on to the kitchen. Sarah has been waiting dinner for you. And she's been worried.'

When the sheriff left them alone in the office, Rusty gave him a knowing look. 'The old man took his licking pretty hard,' the red-haired man said.

'No wonder,' Cal said. 'After all he's risked to give this town law, it can't be pleasant to have them turn their backs on him.'

Rusty shrugged. 'The way things stand, I don't see any reason why we should stay on and risk our necks. If they don't want protection, let them go without it altogether.'

'I can't agree,' Cal said. 'It's only the big wigs who turned him down. There are a lot of ordinary people who are solidly behind what we're trying to do.'

'If they aren't able to help us, that doesn't mean much,' Rusty said.

'When the time comes, the sheriff will have no trouble raising a voluntary posse,' Cal predicted.

'I hope we live to see it,' Rusty said. 'Judging by the bullet ridge in your head, our chances aren't too lively!'

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a thin young boy in ragged clothes and with bare feet. Cal had seen him around the Crazy Bear, where the youth was employed running errands. He had the olive skin and large brown eyes often seen in Mexican lads. He had heard the boy had Mexican blood in at least one side of his family.

The youth smiled at Cal and extended a brown hand containing a soiled envelope. 'For you,' he said in his slightly accented voice.

Cal's eyebrows raised. 'Who sent this?' he asked as he took the envelope.

'The old man at the photo shop,' the boy said. 'He ask me to bring it right away. But I had errands to do. So I bring it now.'

'When did he give it to you? Cal asked sharply.

The boy looked vague. 'Maybe two, three hours ago.'

'I see,' Cal said grimly. 'All right.' He knew there was no use reprimanding the lad, who probably had no conception of time at all. As the boy hurried out, Cal opened the envelope and took out the single sheet of lined note paper with a message scrawled in pencil in a shaky hand.

Cal read it for Rusty's benefit, 'If you want the answers to some of your questions, come see me right now and bring plenty of greenbacks.' There was no signature.

Rusty whistled. 'What do you make of that?'

There was a grim look on Cal's bronzed face. 'He probably got an extra thirsty spell and decided he'd sell some information. But that was hours ago. He's likely changed his mind by now, or else he's drunk again.'

'You think Hawkins is really going to talk?'

'Likely he would have. We can't count on it now.'

Rusty said, 'You going to see him?'

Cal nodded. 'Right now. Enough time has

been lost. With luck I may still catch him in a decent mood. Tell the old man where I've gone.'

He left at once and rode to the centre of town.

As he came near the photo shop, he saw there were a number of people standing outside it. A glance told him the situation wasn't normal. He noted a carriage in the background. As he came close to the crowd, they turned to give him a wondering look.

Cal swung down from the pinto and asked the man standing nearest him: 'What's going on here?'

'Somebody beat up poor old Hawkins,' the bearded man said. 'Dr Marsland is in there with him now.'

Cal's temples began to pound. Without waiting to hear any more, he pushed his way through to the door where a burly cowpoke blocked the way. The cowpoke said, 'Doc doesn't want anyone in there.'

'I'm the law!' Cal said, indicating his badge.

The cowpoke looked dubious. 'That's what he said. You can go in if you like.' And he allowed Cal to edge by him.

Cal found the doctor bending over Hawkins' body in the back room of the old building. The same lamp with the smoky shade was on the floor beside the body and provided a dull, eerie glow. Hearing his

footsteps, the bearded Dr Marsland turned to stare at him.

'It's you, Haines!' the doctor said with an air of relief.

'Is he dead?' Cal asked.

'He's dead all right,' Dr Marsland said, staring at the outstretched body. 'Somebody beat him up enough to kill him two or three times over.'

Cal looked at the head of the photographer and saw that it had been battered until it was a bloody pulp with no resemblance to anything human. He turned away, sickened by the sight.

The doctor stood up with a sigh. 'It's your department now, Haines; not mine.'

'He sent me a note. I was late getting it. Otherwise I might have been able to save him.'

Dr Marsland's gaze was solemn. 'He was mixed up with the Panther Gang. He must have made a wrong move. Where is this lawlessness going to end?'

'I wish I knew,' Cal said. 'Who discovered the body and told you?'

'Eben Cookson, from the hotel,' Dr Marsland said. 'He claims he came over every evening and brought Hawkins some food. When he came tonight he found him like this.'

'Any idea what kind of weapon was used on him?'

The doctor frowned. 'I haven't seen anything by the body. My guess is it was some heavy metal object. Nothing else would leave him like that.'

'So now we have a murder to solve in addition to everything else,' Cal said.

The doctor nodded. 'I wish you luck.'

After the doctor left, Cal locked up the house until he could notify the sheriff and get the undertaker. He was revolted and depressed by what had happened. He walked swiftly across to the hotel and into the deserted lobby. The little hotel manager was standing behind the counter as usual. When he saw Cal, his face went a pasty white.

'I know what you're thinking, Haines,' he said nervously. 'But I swear I didn't harm a hair on Joe Hawkins' head. I liked the old man.'

Cal studied him over the counter. 'You were the one who found him.'

'That doesn't mean I killed him!' the little man protested, his single eye blinking rapidly from nervous fear.

'I should take you in right now and charge you with murder,' Cal said grimly.

'But I didn't do it,' Eben Cookson gasped.

'But I'll bet you know who did!'

'No!'

'Don't play innocent with me,' Cal said, reaching across the counter and grabbing the terrified little man by the tie and shirt front.

'You're in with the Panther the same as he was.'

'You're making a bad mistake!' Cookson protested, trying to claw himself free.

Cal held onto him. 'What do you know about the murder?'

'I don't know anything,' the little man quavered. 'You got no right to treat me this way!'

'Come on, talk!' Cal ordered him. 'Did you see anyone around the studio? Anyone walking away from there?'

'All right,' the little man said unhappily. 'I did see someone. But it didn't mean anything.'

'Let me judge that. Who did you see?'

'Mayor Drew.'

'Mayor Drew?' Cal asked incredulously.

Eben Cookson nodded abjectly. 'He was walking back across the street just as I reached the studio with the food I was taking Joe.'

'And you say he was in there?'

'He must have been. I saw him coming from the building.'

'That doesn't mean he was actually inside or that he murdered Hawkins,' Cal reminded Eben.

'But it could mean that. I'm not saying he did it.'

Cal let go of the little man. 'All right. But remember you're under suspicion. Don't

make a move without notifying the sheriff's office.'

'All I did was try to be a good neighbour,' Cookson said miserably. 'I knew how much Joe was drinking. And he'd gotten so he wouldn't bother to prepare himself any food.'

'So you're asking me to believe you played the Good Samaritan?'

'I don't care what you believe. It's the truth!'

Cal eyed him bleakly as he prepared to leave. 'Just don't forget we've got a call on you from now on. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if the sheriff decided to put you in jail.'

'But I've done nothing!'

'It might be for your protection,' Cal informed him. 'We're going to need all the witnesses we can get. We don't want you shot down.'

Cookson looked as if he might collapse. 'You don't think they'd do that!' he gasped.

'It didn't take them long to finish off Nevada Noonan or Hawkins,' Cal told him evenly. 'They might decide to eliminate you and make it three.'

The little man swallowed hard and glared at Cal with his one eye. 'You aren't going to panic me with that kind of talk, Haines!'

Cal raised an eyebrow. 'I'm telling you some hard facts, Mister Cookson.' And he turned and strode out again.

He had a desire to question the Mayor as to

what he knew about the murder. The Mayor's office was almost directly across the street from the photo studio. And a light showed from the bank window.

Ignoring the cluster of cowmen who were still lingering in front of Joe Hawkins' studio, he went over to the bank. The door was open, and Mayor Drew was standing in the doorway.

The Mayor scowled at him. 'What are you doing about old Joe's murder?'

'Asking some questions,' Cal said.

'You'd better offer some more action than that,' the sullen Mayor Drew told him. 'You let Nevada get killed and didn't find out who was responsible. Now we've got a second murder.'

'Cookson tells me he saw you walking away from the studio before he went in and found Hawkins murdered,' Cal said.

'Cookson must be crazy!' the Mayor fumed. 'I haven't been inside that pigsty of Hawkins for years!'

'He said he saw you crossing the street just as he came up.'

The Mayor was becoming increasingly enraged. 'Of course the idiot may have seen me crossing the street. I do that any number of times a day. But that doesn't mean I was anywhere near Hawkins' studio!' He raised his artificial hand in a wrathful gesture.

Cal didn't answer at once. He was staring

at the iron hand with its black glove. And he was thinking of the doctor's comment that it must have been a heavy metal weapon that had inflicted such cruel damage to the old man's head and face.

CHAPTER TEN

Cal finally found his voice. He asked, 'Then you deny knowing anything about what happened to Hawkins?'

'Of course I do,' Mayor Drew said angrily. 'And you have more nerve than sense to come here asking such a question.' He shook the iron fist at him. 'I have only to call a council meeting, and you and that red-haired pal of yours will be through as deputies.'

'I'm not here to talk about that,' Cal told him.

'Well, you better remember it,' the Mayor warned him. 'Ed Munro proved he's senile by hiring you two gunmen. We've had nothing but trouble since you arrived in town.'

Cal nodded. 'I'll tell the sheriff you mentioned him,' he said. And he left the Mayor still shouting threats after him as he walked back to the pinto and mounted it.

On a hunch he decided to ride out in the direction of the place where he'd spotted Eben Cookson holding the rendezvous with

the stranger. He took a different route and watched the contours of the hills carefully to come out at about the same spot. It struck him that this rugged territory was an ideal country for an outlaw hide-out. A gang could set up camp in one of the many box canyons and never be found. And it would take only a couple of lookouts posted on the hills by the canyon entrance to keep guard and give the alert. No wonder the Panther had chosen to locate his outlaw band somewhere close by.

He rode for about an hour. The sun was high in the sky now. He halted for a spell and rolled himself a brown-paper smoke. He now had the sweep of the range country below him. His eyes swept the area, and then he suddenly went rigid. Far away at the bottom of a hill two men were standing talking, their horses nearby.

Cal's problem now was to get close to them without their knowing. He nudged the pinto cautiously down a short, steep grade so that he could continue his journey for a while with the cover of brush. For ten minutes he rode along cautiously. He was close to where he'd seen the men. His plan was to circle around and reach a spot on the hill above them to eavesdrop. He tethered the pinto in the bush and, crouching low, began the difficult ascent of the hill. He had fairly to inch his way so as to make no warning sound.

At last he reached the summit and dropped

on his stomach to wiggle slowly along to the edge. He could hear the murmur of voices now. One of the horses whinnied nervously, and Cal froze where he was for a full two or three minutes. Then he moved on and was able to peer down below.

One of the men was burly Tim Bates, the saloon owner. And the other had to be the Panther. He was dressed completely in black with a black Stetson to match and wore a mask that hid his face. He seemed to be somewhat smaller than Bates. They were smoking cigarettes and seemed to be arguing about something. Now and then Cal could make out a word.

He heard Bates say, 'The Mayor wants you to move out.'

The other man spoke more softly, and all Cal could hear was, 'No hurry.'

Bates asked, 'What about Grant?'

'We'll use him when we hit Haddon City,' the man in black said. His voice dropped to rise again on the words, 'Drew's bank.'

'Where will I fit in?' Bates wanted to know. 'Once he's hit, the Mayor will crack down on me.'

The man in black answered in a low voice, and Cal missed everything he said.

Bates came back loudly, 'Why should we have to meet out here? We could have talked about all this in town.'

Again the reply was muffled, but Cal

caught, 'Had to see the men anyway.'

Bates said, 'I think you should reconsider about the bank in town. It's too risky.'

The man in black chuckled, and Cal was able to hear, 'Goodbye surprise.'

Cal was so interested in the conversation between the two men he failed to hear the careful approach of someone sneaking up behind him. The sound of a stick breaking underfoot made him glance back in fear. At the same instant the ugly-looking outlaw reached for his six-gun. But Cal already had his Colt in hand and aimed and fired. The outlaw went toppling back from the impact of the bullet. Loud oaths came from the two below, who were alerted by the sound of the shot.

Cal had a shrewd idea there were other guards in the area and he was badly outnumbered. Crouching low, he scrambled for the shelter of the brush as shouts rang out. He fought his way down toward the pinto, aware he was being followed. Realizing that speed was more important than caution for the time being, he straightened up and raced ahead as fast as he could. There were more hoarse cries from behind him, and once a bullet clipped by his head so near he could feel it pass.

At last he stumbled up to the pinto and freed it and swung into the saddle. It cost him time, and his pursuers came into sight. He

turned and fired back a couple of rounds to even the battle. They returned the fire, but he was already spurring the pinto into a gallop. He knew this territory well, and it was only a short time before he'd put enough distance between himself and the outlaws to be free from any immediate danger. He still urged the pinto on and relaxed only when he reached the outskirts of town.

Sheriff Ed Munro heard out his account of the afternoon and then slapped a fist in the palm of his thin, veined hand. 'That settles it,' the old lawman said. 'The hide-out has to be among those canyons. It's just a matter of narrowing them down.'

Rusty's broad face showed skepticism. 'Do we have any hope of that?'

'I think so now that we have some idea where they are,' the sheriff said. 'And we'd better smoke them out before they make their raid on the bank, or we'll really be in bad with the townfolk.'

Cal asked, 'What do we do first?'

The sheriff considered. 'We've got to try to force some of the local fronts for the gang to high-tail it to the hide-out. We can work on either Eben Cookson or Tim Bates, since we know they're both linked with the outlaws.'

'How do we do that?' Rusty wanted to know.

'Spread a rumour we have government aid coming,' the sheriff said. 'They've been

raiding banks in all the adjoining states, not to mention the cattle they've rustled. We can bruit it around that the government is sending in some army people to help us deal with the gang. That should get results. All we need do then is have a lookout wait for either Bates or Cookson to go give word about what's happening and follow him.'

'You'll need a posse to raid the hide-out,' Cal warned him. 'I was outnumbered a half-dozen to one today.'

'We'll look after that once we find out where they are,' the sheriff said. 'Tonight I want you to go to the Crazy Bear Saloon and talk along the lines I've mentioned.' He turned to Rusty. 'You'll keep a watch outside. And if Bates leaves, you are to follow him and find out where he goes.'

Rusty nodded gloomily. 'I doubt if it will work.'

The old lawman gave him a sharp glance. 'Can you think of a better idea?'

'Not right now,' Rusty admitted.

'In the meanwhile I'm going to have a talk with Mayor Drew and tell him to take extra precautions at the bank,' the sheriff said.

'I don't know whether that will do any good,' Cal told him.

'Not likely,' the sheriff admitted. 'But I'll have to make a try.'

After the evening meal Cal went out to the rear yard and spent some time cleaning his

Colt. He was still busy with the gun when Sarah came out to join him.

The sheriff's daughter looked pretty in a simple cotton print with the evening breeze rustling her light brown hair. Coming close to Cal, she touched a hand to his shoulder. He glanced at her with a smile.

She looked solemn. 'Something is about to happen,' she said. 'I can tell by the preparations you're all making.'

'Don't worry about it,' he said as he finished with the gun and slid it back in its holster.

Her eyes showed fear. 'You could have been killed out there this afternoon.'

'I've had a lot closer calls.'

'Why are you taking so many extra risks? To find Steve Grant? Does Julie mean so much to you?'

Cal stared at the slender girl with surprise. Rising, he faced her and said, 'Julie has nothing to do with it. I'm trying to help your father round up that gang. If I stumble on Steve Grant at the same time, that will be an extra.'

'Dad and you two are no match for the Panther Gang,' Sarah protested.

'When the time comes he'll organize a posse.'

'I'm afraid you'll all be killed before there is any-chance to do that,' Sarah worried.

He smiled. 'Don't go getting ideas like

that. We're finally getting some real information.'

Her eyes met his, and there was pleading in them. 'Please be as careful as you can. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you.'

Cal touched her arm.

'Just don't worry,' he said. And he touched his lips lightly to her forehead before he escorted her back into the house.

He didn't think they had been seen. But when he and Rusty were riding to town at dusk, the big man gave him an amused glance. 'You were making out pretty well with little Sarah in the yard,' he drawled.

Cal frowned at him. 'Were you spying?'

'I just happened to look out the window,' the big man said. 'No harm in that.'

'There's harm in talking about what you saw.'

Rusty chuckled. 'Seems to me you've got yourself a girl too many. First you make up to that prissy Julie Grant, and now you're kissing the sheriff's Sarah. Ain't you kind of fickle?'

'You see things and don't understand them,' Cal said with a touch of anger as he nudged the pinto into a faster trot.

They were nearing the center of town, and the lights of the Crazy Bear were blazing just ahead. Cal reined the pinto to a halt and told Rusty, 'We'd better part company here. We

can discuss my romantic affairs later. You know what you're to do?'

'I've been told often enough,' Rusty said.

'Remember this could be the important night,' Cal said. 'Don't let Bates get away from you if he leaves the saloon.'

'I've been trailing men just as long as you,' Rusty said importantly. 'You get things rolling inside and don't fret about my end of it.' And with that he wheeled the roan around and rode off in the darkness.

Cal watched him go. He knew that Rusty would circle around and take a stand in the dark alley by the Crazy Bear, where he could watch both the front and rear exits of the saloon. After he'd allowed what seemed sufficient time, Cal rode on down Main Street.

There were still quite a few in the street, and the laughter and piano music from the saloon indicated it was lively enough inside. He pushed his way through the swinging doors and gave the smoke filled room a sweeping glance. A few of the cowpokes standing by the door saw him and stared with open curiosity. They were no doubt aware he'd been avoiding the Crazy Bear since the night of his brawl with Nevada.

He moved slowly across the room to take a place at the bar. The fat bartender came down to him, and he ordered a double whiskey. While he was waiting for the drink,

he glanced up at the platform and saw the familiar figure of the gaunt Fred Dixon bent over the piano. He was working hard to make his ragtime music heard over the noise of the big room.

'Double whiskey,' the fat bartender said, and put it down in front of him.

Cal took the drink and downed half of it at a gulp. Then he took a deep breath. His mission in the saloon was to start talk about government aid coming in, and he wondered to whom he might talk. Most of the saloon patrons seemed wary of him. A law badge wasn't the best card of introduction in a spot such as the Crazy Bear.

His problem was solved easily and unexpectedly by Tim Bates himself as Bates came over to him. The bulldog-faced man stood beside him at the bar and scowled.

'When you finish that drink, Haines, I'd suggest you get out of here,' the saloon owner growled.

Cal held up his half empty glass. 'I may linger over it awhile, Bates.'

The big man's face turned purple. 'We don't want any trouble here.'

'Then I'd expect you to welcome the law.'

'I don't count you as the law proper,' Bates said scornfully. 'You're just a tinhorn gunman wearing a tin badge.'

Cal took another mouthful of his drink and smiled calmly. 'Those words would rile me,

Bates, if I didn't know you were all wrong. You'll be feeling different after the government men arrive.'

Tim Bates looked startled. 'What government men?'

'You'll know soon enough,' Cal said playing along as the Sheriff had instructed. 'They're coming to look after the Panther Gang.'

The big man stared at him uneasily. 'You think I'm fool enough to swallow that story?'

Cal shrugged. 'Believe it or not, I'm doing you a favor by giving you an inside tip.'

Tim Bates showed a nasty smile. 'You're likely to!'

'If you're smart you'll listen.'

'When are these government men supposed to arrive?' Bates asked.

'In a couple of days; maybe sooner,' Cal told him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was a silence between them as Cal downed the rest of his drink and set his empty glass back on the shining hardwood bar. Tim Bates was still regarding him uncertainly.

Finally the big man said, 'You know what I think?'

‘What?’

‘You’re trying to pull a bluff on me.’

Cal managed a derisive smile that he hoped would be convincing. ‘If you think that, forget it. It doesn’t matter to you anyway. And when the government men get here, you’ll know it.’

Tim Bates signalled to the fat bartender. ‘Serve the deputy another double,’ he said.

Cal registered surprise. ‘I thought I wasn’t welcome.’

‘You’re welcome for one more drink,’ Bates said, studying him with narrowed eyes. ‘I like to hear you lie. It tickles my funny bone.’

‘I don’t see you laughing.’

‘I’m laughing plenty at the way you, the sheriff and your pal are messing things up,’ the saloon owner said. ‘You’re not cut out to be a lawman. Why don’t you give it up as a bad mistake?’

Cal took the second drink the fat bartender had brought him. Raising the glass of the fiery amber liquid, he said, ‘To the Crazy Bear Saloon, and I hope its owner gets smarter.’

Bates glowered as he watched him down the whiskey. ‘Oh, I’m smart enough for a dozen like you,’ he said. ‘You go and peddle your rumors about troops coming here somewhere else.’

‘Why not?’ Cal said casually, although he was disappointed. For a few minutes he had

managed to get Bates worried. But he must have overplayed his hand, for now the big man no longer believed him. He finished the drink with a flourish.

'Now if you want to stay healthy and keep the peace, you'll leave,' Tim Bates said.

'I could give you trouble,' Cal warned him. 'Maybe close up this place.'

'Try it!'

'It could come to that,' Cal said slowly.

'And tell the sheriff from me his little scheme didn't work. You didn't worry me at all!'

Cal glanced toward the platform and saw there was no one at the piano. Fred Dixon must have left while he'd been having his argument with Bates. He had planned to stall by going up to see Dixon, but he had no excuse for remaining now.

'I'll leave,' he told Bates. 'And don't look to the law to give you any protection if you need it in a hurry. Not after treating me and the others as you have.'

'Get going!' Bates urged him angrily.

Cal offered him a pleasant nod of farewell and went out. He was again conscious of the many eyes on him. When he stepped out into the darkness he didn't immediately go to pick up the pinto. Instead he stood there for a moment staring up at the starry sky, with his thumbs notched in his gun belt. He imagined Rusty was somewhere in the darkness of the

alley waiting. He'd have a long wait if he expected Bates to come out and head for the Panther's hide out. The saloon owner seemed to have seen through their scheme.

Cal strolled down the wooden sidewalk, still deep in thought. He walked part of the distance to the hotel. And then the tall, gaunt figure of the piano player materialized out of the darkness and caught him agitatedly by the arm.

With a nervous glance around to be sure they weren't being watched, the piano player said, 'Have you gone stark, staring mad—flashing your badge in the Crazy Bear again?'

'I had to go in there tonight,' Cal told him. 'Sheriff's orders.'

'Then the sheriff is loco,' Fred Dixon said urgently. 'I almost collapsed when I saw you in there talking to Bates. You know he's itching for a chance to put a slug of lead in you!'

'It's all right,' Cal told him. 'I know what I'm doing.'

'Not when you go in there,' Dixon said. And he seemed about to say more when another of his coughing bouts stopped him from talking. Cal watched as the lanky man cupped a handkerchief to his mouth and fought the racking series of coughs. When it was over he removed the handkerchief, and Cal had a glimpse of the ruby red of a fresh

bloodstain. The pianist thrust the cloth in his pocket and went on weakly, 'Promise me you'll keep out of the Crazy Bear.'

'I reckon my going in there didn't do much good,' Cal said, without explaining. 'So it's not likely I'll be making another visit.'

'Good!' The pianist's cadaverous face brightened. 'It will ease the nervous strain on me.'

Cal eyed him seriously. 'You ought to take a rest. Playing in there until all hours of the night isn't helping that cough.'

Fred Dixon looked wise. 'I'll soon be taking the long rest, Haines. While I'm around I'm anxious to let folks know I'm alive. Come to think of it, I would like you to visit the saloon some morning when it's empty except for the boys cleaning up. I'd like to have you hear me do some Chopin.'

'I'll keep that in mind,' Cal promised.

'Time for me to get back,' Dixon said nervously. 'Won't do to let Bates miss me. He's warned me about talking to you.' And he dodged away into the darkness again.

Cal stood there for a moment staring into the dark alley where the piano player had vanished. Dixon was a sad case. In the few weeks he'd known him, he had seen the gaunt man fail in health. It was frightening. At the start he'd hoped to enlist him in the fight against Bates, but the sight of his condition had discouraged him from trying it.

He was about to turn and go back to the hitch post for the pinto when he heard his name called out down the street. He looked and saw Eben Cookson standing in front of his hotel. The diminutive Britisher was waving him to join him. Cal began to walk briskly in the direction of the hotel, hopeful that Cookson might have finally decided to do some talking.

The little man looked relieved as Cal joined him. 'I couldn't believe my luck when I saw you, Mr Haines,' Cookson said. 'I was going to send someone to the sheriff's office for you.'

Cal showed interest. 'What's doing?'

Cookson focused his one eye on him warily. 'I have a guest just checked in at the hotel who wants to talk to you.'

'Who is it?'

'Never saw him before,' Cookson told him. 'Name of Smith. Paul Smith.'

'I don't know any Paul Smith,' Cal said. He was not exactly pleased by the way the little man was behaving. He seemed glib and yet under a strain.

'He claims he has something important to tell you,' Cookson said. 'That's all I know. Maybe you should see him.'

'Where is he?' Cal asked.

'Upstairs on the second floor. The door at the head of the stairs.'

Cal was suspicious. 'Is he alone?'

‘Checked in on his own. I’d say he was a stranger in town. Gave Jericho as his home address.’

Cal stared at the hotel and sighed. He couldn’t risk not following this up. It might be one of the gang who had decided to make it easy for himself by talking. He turned to the little man again, ‘What exactly did this Smith say!’

‘Almost as soon as I showed him to his room, he told me he wanted to get in touch with the law,’ Cookson said. ‘And so I thought of you. I told him you were a deputy and a decent one.’

‘I’m impressed,’ Cal said dryly. ‘Then what?’

‘He said he knew you. He’d met you in Jericho. And he mentioned Jim Gordon. I told him about Jim’s accident and that he was dead. It was then he asked me to get you.’

Cal studied the one-eyed man grimly. ‘You’re telling the truth? This is not a trap?’

‘I swear I’m giving it to you just as it happened,’ the hotel owner insisted nervously.

‘It better be the truth,’ Cal went on, ‘or you’ll have to do a lot of explaining. And you’re under suspicion right now.’

Eben Cookson looked distressed. ‘I can’t think why!’

‘Acting as a messenger boy for the Panther may pay well, but it doesn’t build up

anyone's reputation,' Cal informed him.

Even in the semi-darkness, it was plain to see that the hotel owner was now looking terrified. 'People have been talking against me,' he said. 'No one can prove anything.'

Cal gave him a sharp look. 'You still want me to go up and see this Paul Smith?'

The little man shrugged. 'All I can tell you is that he asked for you.'

Cal said nothing. He was more than half certain it could be some kind of trap. But tonight he was after action. It was part of his job to offer himself as a decoy to get the Panther Gang to reveal themselves. So he went inside and started up the dark, narrow stairs slowly. He drew his Colt and listened for any unusual sound. It was deathly quiet. A board creaked as he came to the landing, and he eyed the door straight ahead. It was in there Paul Smith was supposed to be waiting.

If he was walking into a trap, he intended to make it as interesting as possible for whoever was waiting for him. Moving to the door, he knocked on it while he retained the Colt in his right hand. There was no answer. He placed his ear against the wood panel and could hear nothing from inside. Then he tried the door handle, and the door swung open easily.

It was a small room with a plain table bearing a lamp and a cot. On the cot someone lay covered by the bedding. The someone

didn't move. Cal took a step inside.

'Paul Smith!' he said, watching the motionless figure on the bed.

As he called the name, he felt the cold steel of a gun muzzle pressed in his neck and heard a soft laugh. The door was closed behind him, and a voice with a cultured Easterner accent said, 'I can't imagine you falling for that old one, Haines. That's only some old blankets rolled up on the bed to look like a body.'

'And you are Paul Smith?' Cal asked calmly.

'Drop the Colt,' the unseen man holding the gun against him ordered crisply.

Cal knew there was nothing else he could do. He let it clatter to the plank floor.

The man said, 'Walk over to the bed.' Cal did so. After a moment the voice continued, 'All right. Now you can turn around.'

He did so, to see a handsome young man with a pencil-line moustache holding a gun on him. The young man was dressed fancily for a cowpoke. And his classic features showed little signs of exposure to the wind and sun. It took him only a moment to guess who Paul Smith probably was.

He said, 'You're Steve Grant!'

The young man looked amused. 'You catch on quick, Haines. How did you guess?'

'Your accent and appearance. And then I've been expecting to hear from you. I

figured you'd show when you got your sister's message.'

There was a mocking, hard light in Steve Grant's eyes. 'So you are a friend of my dear half-sister, Julie?'

'She asked me to help find you,' Cal said. 'And you don't need to keep that gun aimed at me. It makes me nervous. I won't try to leave or play any tricks. I'm anxious to talk to you.'

'I prefer to take no risks,' Grant said. 'Please sit down on the cot. I want you to relax. Gently, if you please.'

Cal sat down slowly, his eyes never leaving Grant's handsome but weak face. He said, 'Julie is worried sick about you. She needs to see you and talk to you.'

'We'll get around to that,' Grant said impatiently. 'According to what I hear, my father died since I've been out here. And the little problem I had has been settled.'

'That's so,' Cal told him. 'Julie wanted to be sure you understand there is nothing to stop you from returning to the East.'

'I'm not interested.' The young man smiled coldly. 'I'm doing fine out here.'

'As dynamite man for the Panther Gang? Not much of a career for an engineer.'

'I don't happen to be much of an engineer,' was the youth's swift taunting reply.

'It's not yet too late for you to save yourself,' Cal reasoned with him, 'if you'll

talk about what you've found out.'

'You'd like that.'

'Julie would be happy. She's come all the way out here to try and find you.'

'She can if she wants to,' the young man said with the same supercilious smile, keeping the gun pointed at Cal.

Cal had come to a couple of swift conclusions. He hadn't liked Steve Grant on sight, and he didn't think he had Julie's safety in mind. The young man had left the East a wastrel, and his nature hadn't been changed by this new environment. Like many before him, he had only become more reckless.

'Julie has a lot of things to say to you,' he told the young man. 'And she has it all fixed so you can start over again back East.'

Steve Grant laughed in his overbearing way. 'I can see you don't understand the situation very well, Mr Haines.'

'I understand that Julie has made great sacrifices for you and you don't seem to appreciate them,' Cal said angrily.

The youth continued to seem amused. 'Don't tell me you've fallen for Julie's unquestioned charms, Mr Haines? Is that it? Do you find yourself in love?'

Cal moved restlessly on the cot. He'd had enough of Grant's taunting. And he was considering what move he could make to catch the youth by surprise and somehow get

that gun.

It was as if Grant had read his mind. 'Sit still, Mr Haines,' he said in a firm voice. 'We still have things to discuss. Don't make me shoot you. You're not going to get away.'

Cal sat still. 'All right,' he said in a flat tone. 'Go ahead. Let me hear it all.'

'Much better,' the youth said. 'Now let me assure you I find Julie's presence in Haddon City an embarrassment. I've made new friends and started an exciting new way of life for which I believe I'm eminently fitted. Too bad she had to turn up.'

'She is your half-sister,' Cal said. 'You mean a lot to her. She wants to save you.'

'I find that amusing, since I have no intention of being saved,' Grant said.

'If that's the way you feel, why bother to have me come here?' Cal asked.

Steve Grant lolled comfortably against the table. In his bored, superior way, he continued, 'You're direct, Haines. I like that. I'm favorably impressed.'

Cal was grim. 'Excuse me if I'm not excited by your good opinion of me.'

Grant laughed. 'And you have a sense of humor. That's important for survival. All right. I asked you here because I do want to see Julie on my own terms.'

'What are they?'

'That she join me and throw in her lot with me,' the young man said in his cool fashion. 'I

guess I owe her that much.'

Cal's reaction was incredulity. 'You want her to give up everything to join a gang of outlaws?'

'We have a half-dozen women at the camp,' Grant said. 'They seem to be happy enough.'

'Even if I thought she'd consider it, I wouldn't deliver that message,' Cal told him. 'She's too anxious to help you. She might be willing to sacrifice her own future to do it.'

'That's the only way she'll ever see me again,' Grant said. 'And frankly, it's up to her. I'm perfectly satisfied as things are.'

Cal was becomingly increasingly angry and baffled.

He said, 'You'd better talk to Julie yourself.'

'Sorry,' Grant told him. 'If Julie wants to come with me, tell her to ride the main trail south from town tomorrow night. Have her wait until midnight before she leaves. Someone will join her along the trail and bring her safely to me.'

'Is that all?'

'That's all. Except that I'd like you to stand up, Mr Haines. In order to give me time to put a little distance between myself and you, I'm going to have to tie you up. But don't let it worry you. I'll see that Cookson frees you reasonably soon.' The young man took several steps that brought him close to Cal.

Cal slowly stood up. He debated trying to

tackle the arrogant Grant and decided against it. At this close range the young man had only to press the trigger, and he couldn't miss plugging him. Better to accept the humiliation of being bound and settle the account later.

'No wrong moves,' Grant warned him. 'Just turn around and cross your hands behind your back. I'll make this as simple as possible.'

'There's still time to change your mind,' Cal told him. 'I'm willing to forget all this for Julie's sake.'

'Noble of you! It really is!' the man with the gun sneered. 'Save us both time by turning around.'

Reluctantly Cal obeyed and placed his hands behind his back as he'd been instructed.

'All right, Haines,' Grant said.

The next instant Cal felt the numbing impact of a gun butt against his head. He fell like a log. When he came to he automatically touched a hand to his aching head and realized the young outlaw hadn't bound him up. He quickly raised himself and saw that he was alone in the dingy room. In a disdainful gesture Grant had even left Cal's Colt lying on the bed.

He picked the gun up and examined it. It had been emptied of bullets. He quickly refilled it from his gun belt and tried to get

some thoughts moving clearly through his splitting head. He had no idea how long he had been on the floor unconscious. But without a doubt Grant was a good distance from town by this time.

At least he had one source of information to help him with his pursuit of Grant. Eben Cookson would have to talk now. He'd deliberately helped lead Cal into this trap. He could no longer pretend innocence. With a stern expression on his bronzed face, Cal started downstairs.

The hotel lobby was as silent and empty as usual. This was not surprising, since the hour was very late and the hotel wasn't very busy at the best of times. He expected to see the diminutive figure of Eben Cookson behind the counter, but there was no sign of anyone. Cal frowned. It was likely that the little hotel man had finally skipped. With the gang soon ready to move and his guilt established, he wouldn't be anxious to remain in Haddon City.

Still, it could be that he was hiding somewhere out back.

He moved down the silent lobby with its mixture of stale aromas, thinking he had made a bad error in not risking a struggle with Steve.

Lifting the hinged counter board, he went through into the back. The sickly light from the lamp hanging from a ceiling fixture above

the desk cast his shadow on the wall in a fantastic exaggeration. He saw the outline of his body and the gun held high as if he were playing some weird shadow game.

He moved on to the partly opened door of a small back room that he assumed was the hotel owner's sleeping quarters. Not wanting to be surprised again, he stood back carefully as he kicked the door wide open. And then his expression changed as he saw the small shoes dangling a foot above the floor.

His eyes lifted, and he saw that it was the body of little Eben Cookson which hung from a rafter. One glance at the purple, distorted face and the limp motionless body told him that Cookson was dead.

Cal was still standing there in a state of shock when a voice came from directly behind him. 'Well, how do you explain this one, Haines?'

He turned and saw Mayor Drew. The banker had an accusing look on his sullen face, and the iron hand was pointed at Cookson's gibbeted body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mayor Drew was tense with suppressed rage. Cal could see that in the dark-garbed man's stance, in the grim lines in which his face was

set. The Mayor advanced to stand beside Cal and stare at the body.

'Looks like he killed himself,' Cal said mildly.

The Mayor sneered. 'Considering the belt around his neck and the overturned chair on the floor beside him, that is a remarkable deduction, Deputy!'

Cal frowned. 'I mean it may have been staged to look like he killed himself. I don't think Cookson was the type to commit suicide. He hadn't the courage.'

'You make me want to throw up!' the Mayor cried out angrily. And to emphasize his disgust, he drove his iron fist against the flimsy door panel beside him. It splintered, leaving a gaping hole.

Cal asked him, 'What are you doing here?'

'I was working late at my office,' the Mayor snapped. 'I often come over and chat with Cookson before I go home. Not that it's any business of yours.'

Cal nodded. 'I'd better take him down,' he said quietly. And he went about the distasteful task, carrying the small body over to the cot and placing it there. He told the Mayor. 'The sheriff will want to go over everything here.'

The Mayor had been watching him malevolently. Now he said, 'I'm sick of you and your troublemaking. It's been the same ever since you arrived here. You riled the

sheriff, and all this violence has been the result.'

'I'm going to lock this room up and notify the sheriff,' Cal told him.

'This is the final straw,' the Mayor warned him. 'I'm not resting until I clean out the sheriff's office. I'll bring peace to this town if it's the last thing I do.'

Cal rode off to rouse the sheriff and his pal.

After he'd awakened them both, the sheriff and Rusty returned to the hotel with him. When the sheriff had examined Cookson's body and the room thoroughly, he told Cal, 'I still can't be positive it was a suicide. Dr Marsland may be able to decide. Looks like we'll have to bring him down here in spite of the hour.'

Cal said, 'I'll go get him. I want to speak to Julie Grant as well.'

The old lawman gave him a knowing look. 'Yes. I expect you should do that.'

Cal had already told the sheriff of his meeting with Steve Grant and its outcome. But the business of investigating Cookson's death had taken first place for the moment.

Rusty stood staring down at the dead man in disgust. 'He was a miserable little varmint, and I don't believe he had the nerve to do this.'

'It's probably murder,' the sheriff agreed. 'They couldn't trust him not to talk.'

The town had settled down for the night.

Even the lights of the Crazy Bear were doused at this after-midnight hour. A cold breeze had come to chill the darkness. Cal shivered slightly as he headed the pinto in the direction of Dr Marsland's cottage. On the sheriff's advice he had decided to tell Julie everything.

It took only a few minutes to wake the doctor. Marsland was used to having his nights broken by emergency calls. The old man opened the door to Cal with a questioning expression in his bearded face. 'What now?'

Cal told him, then added, 'I'd like to speak with Julie Grant.'

Dr Marsland's bushy eyebrows rose. 'At this hour?'

'It's official business.'

'She's probably awake anyhow,' the doctor admitted. 'I'll go up and see.'

A few minutes later she came down in her dressing gown, looking unbelievably lovely for someone who had just been awakened from a sound sleep. Her golden hair flowed about her shoulders, and her gray eyes showed concern.

'What's wrong, Cal? The doctor said you had to see me. It's not Steve! He isn't—' She left the statement unfinished.

Cal shook his head. 'No. Steve's alive and safe.'

'Thank goodness!' she gasped.

'I still have to talk to you about him.'

The look of worry returned again. 'Let me get you some coffee,' she said. 'Dr Marsland always keeps some on the kitchen stove.'

They were interrupted by the veteran doctor, who came downstairs fully dressed. He told Cal, 'I'll go on ahead,' and went out the front door.

Julie took the lamp from the hall table and led Cal out to the kitchen. She quickly filled cups of coffee for them both. As she gave Cal his, she asked, 'What is it, Cal? I know something is wrong.'

Cal gave her a sober look. 'I met and talked with your half-brother earlier tonight.'

She put down her coffee cup and came close to him. 'Oh, Cal, that's wonderful! Did you tell him what I said?'

'Yes.'

'What is he going to do? When can I see him?'

Cal sighed. 'That depends on you, I guess.' He hesitated. 'To put it bluntly, I wasn't much taken with Steve.'

Julie showed alarm. 'What happened? I know he can be aloof and arrogant, but he's really a wonderful person.'

'Maybe,' Cal said grimly. 'He's gotten himself into bad trouble. He's joined the Panther's outlaw gang.'

Julie shook her head. 'I was afraid of something like that. But he did that only

because he was desperate about things back home. That's over now. Surely he can get away from these outlaws and return East with me!

'It's not as simple as that,' Cal said.

'I don't understand,' Julie said, looking uneasy. 'What did he tell you?'

'There's a lot I don't understand,' Cal told her gravely. 'He asked me to tell you he has no intention of going back home with you. But he made an offer for you to join him. And he seemed to think you might be interested.' He paused. 'Why?'

Julie looked stricken. 'Go with him!' Join those outlaws! Live a hunted life!

'That's right. And he seemed to think you might consider it.'

Julie bent her head and put a hand over her eyes for a moment. Then, as if gathering her courage, she looked at Cal with a kind of defiance. 'I guess you'll have to know the truth,' she told him.

'Isn't it about time?' Cal asked quietly.

Julie spoke without looking at him. 'I've always called Steve my half-brother. He really is related to me only by adoption. I was an adopted child. My mother was left a widow. And when she married Steve's father, I became one of the family. Steve's father was a fine, kind man who treated me like his daughter.'

'I see,' Cal said, guessing what would come

next.

Julie sighed. 'I don't suppose it's surprising that I fell in love with Steve. He was older and a romantic type. His father encouraged the match, and we were about to be married when Steve destroyed it all by embezzling a large sum of money from a bank belonging to a friend of his father. His father had gotten him the job. It was then he came West. So he didn't know that his father paid back the money and that the charges against him were dropped. And he didn't know about his father's death.'

'He knows now, but it doesn't seem to make any difference.'

'That's like Steve,' she said.

'There's little hope of saving him,' Cal told her.

Her expression became thoughtful. 'If I could only talk to him! He'll listen to me when he won't to anyone else. What did he say about my meeting him?'

Cal told her, adding, 'You'd be out of your mind to take that kind of risk.'

Her gray eyes were solemn as she looked at him. 'I'm afraid I'll have to chance it, Cal.'

He stared at her. 'You're not still in love with him?'

She nodded slowly. 'I'm afraid so, Cal. I guess it will always be that way.'

He left her shortly after promising to see her during the day to help arrange her

midnight rendezvous with the man she loved. Then he rode back to join the others at the hotel.

Dr Marsland was still with the sheriff and Rusty when Cal joined them. They were standing together in the gloomy lobby of the old hotel. When Cal entered, the sheriff came over to meet him.

‘It was murder,’ he said. ‘Someone throttled Cookson and then strung him up there to make it seem like suicide.’

Cal nodded. ‘I’m not surprised,’ he said. He looked at the doctor. ‘Any evidence as to who it might have been?’

Dr Marsland frowned. ‘I can only tell you it was done by powerful hands. And there were some strange bruises in the throat area as well, almost as if the throat had been pounded.’

‘By some heavy metal object?’ Cal asked.

The doctor showed some amazement. ‘Well, I was thinking of that. What made you suggest it?’

And then Cal told them all that he believed Mayor Drew might also be the infamous Panther.

Sheriff Ed Munro’s worn face showed skepticism. ‘I can see what led you to think that, Cal. But I find it pretty farfetched.’

‘Still, it is possible,’ Cal argued.

‘I’m beginning to think anything is possible,’ the sheriff admitted.

Dr Marsland stroked his short white beard thoughtfully. 'The injuries in both Hawkins' and Cookson's cases could have been caused by an iron hand such as the Mayor's.'

Rusty added, 'And he sure has been against us all the way.'

The sheriff nodded. 'For the time being it might be wise to go on the assumption that he could be the Panther. That way we'll be protected.' He turned to Cal. 'What did Julie have to say?'

'She wants to meet him.'

The old man looked troubled. 'I was afraid of that.'

Cal said, 'Since she's placing herself in serious danger no matter what, it seems to me we might use this situation to good purpose, providing you can organize a posse for tomorrow night without the Mayor finding out what is going on.'

The sheriff showed interest. 'Go on, Cal.'

'It's simple enough,' Cal said. 'Either Steve Grant or someone else from the gang will be waiting along the south trail to meet Julie at midnight. She'll be taken directly to the hide-out. All we have to do is have a posse placed out there at the proper point, ready to follow as soon as they get the signal. We might be able to clean out the whole Panther outfit.'

Dr Marsland frowned. 'Julie could be killed.'

‘She might be anyway,’ Cal reminded him. ‘This way we can at least try to protect her.’

The sheriff nodded. ‘I like the idea. And I think we can line up enough men without alerting the mayor. What do you think, Marsland?’

‘Aside from the danger to Julie, I can see no objection,’ the doctor said. ‘And if she is determined to take the risk, there’s not much we can do.’

‘She claims she’s still in love with Steve,’ Cal said.

Rusty gave him a knowing smile. ‘I’ll bet that surprised a lot of folks.’

They stood there awhile discussing the possibilities of the plan. Before they left, it was agreed that Cal should plot the entire strategy. All the points covered, they returned to the jailhouse.

With the doctor’s permission, Eben Cookson’s death was announced as a murder. Haddon City buzzed with excitement. When Cal made his morning rounds in the town, he could tell local tempers had reached a danger point. Tim Bates stood outside the Crazy Bear Saloon, regaling a group of hangers-on with critical comments about the way things were going.

When Cal rode up, the big man came to the edge of the wooden sidewalk with a sneering grin on his bulldog face. ‘What’s the matter with law and order in this town, Deputy?’ he

demanded.

‘Nothing that I know of, except we’re busy,’ Cal drawled.

Tim Bates laughed harshly. ‘You know what I think?’

‘No.’

‘I think that little man in the hotel hanged himself. It wasn’t no murder! You’re just saying that to stir folks up!’

‘Think what you like,’ Cal told him.

‘And if it was a murder, why don’t you do something about it?’ Bates asked, with a look at the hangers-on to make sure they were hearing and enjoying the scene he was creating. ‘And why don’t you do something about the men who killed Nevada and poor old Joe Hawkins?’

‘We’ll take care of that,’ Cal assured him, holding the reins taut on the pinto. ‘Maybe sooner than will please you.’

Bates changed from bullying to belligerency. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I’ll let you figure it out,’ Cal said, and rode on, leaving the big man staring after him angrily.

He heard the Mayor was having a special council meeting. And he guessed what would come out of that. If Sheriff Ed Munro didn’t work fast, they’d have no work to do. For the Mayor was dead set on stripping them all of their badges.

His most difficult task of the day was

interviewing the blonde Julie again. He found her in the garden behind the doctor's cottage, in a subdued mood.

'I suppose you hate me, Cal,' she said quietly.

He shrugged. 'I wouldn't say that. But I do think you're making a mistake to allow yourself to stay in love with a man like Steve Grant.'

'You don't allow yourself to fall in love,' she told him. 'It happens or it doesn't.'

Cal's eyes met hers. 'You're going through with it then? You're determined to meet him tonight?'

'Yes. I know I can reason with him.'

'And if he won't listen?'

Her face was pale and drawn. 'I don't know.'

'You'd better think about it.'

Julie turned away from him. In a small voice, she said, 'Then I may go with him.'

Cal frowned. He found her attitude hard to understand. 'He means that much to you?'

'I'm afraid he does.'

He cleared his throat. 'All right,' he said. 'I have it all arranged. And you must keep this strictly to yourself.'

He outlined again the instructions given him by Steve Grant. And he promised to see her on her way along the south trail.

Sheriff Ed Munro didn't return to his office until early evening. He was jubilant over what

he'd accomplished. 'I've got our posse,' he told Cal and Rusty. 'Two dozen of the best men in the county, most of them farmers from outside town.'

Rusty's broad freckled face took on a grin. 'Won't that be a surprise for the Mayor!'

'Especially if he turns out to be the Panther,' Cal said.

The sheriff nodded. 'But I don't expect that. The Mayor called the council together this morning. I understand they're going officially to discharge me and you two boys at the open meeting on Thursday night. So we better have luck!'

The hours of waiting until they left for their midnight rendezvous dragged by. Cal could tell Sarah Munro was on edge. She didn't know all they planned, but she had guessed enough to be nervous.

When he went out to saddle the pinto, she came to the stable after him. 'Cal, what is going to happen tonight?'

He smiled as he tightened the cinch on his mount. 'It will be all right,' he told her. 'Tonight may end a lot of trouble for everyone.'

Her pretty face was shadowed with concern. 'Be careful, Cal.'

He kissed her to reassure her and thought how right it seemed. In a way he was grateful that he knew the truth about Julie at last. No longer was his heart divided.

Julie was waiting when Cal rode up. Dr Marsland had saddled a horse for her, and she was wearing a makeshift riding outfit culled from men's things close to her size. She had little to say. Cal saw her start on the trail and then turned back to town.

A few minutes later he circled about and began trailing her. It meant following her by using an unbeaten path through rough bush country with steep inclines. But he managed. And after about twenty minutes a second rider suddenly appeared and rode up abreast of Julie.

Cal's heart began to pound. He reined the pinto and watched from a slight ridge. When the pinto moved about uneasily and seemed ready to whinny, he leaned forward and closed his hand over its muzzle.

The two on the moonlit trail below consulted for a moment. Then Julie and the newcomer, who appeared to be Steve Grant himself, suddenly wheeled their mounts off the trail to the right and galloped away. Cal waited just a few seconds, then urged the pinto down to the trail and fired a shot into the air. It was the signal to alert the nearby posse. Under the leadership of the sheriff and Rusty, they had been following some distance back along the trail.

This done, he spurred the pinto in the direction the two had gone. Thanks to the bright moonlight that bathed the countryside

in a kind of silver glow, he was able to see them far ahead.

The trail led directly to the canyon country, and here his task became more difficult. The pinto was devouring the miles but had lost some of its snap. Cal's eyes were strained. But he could hear the steady thud of the horses of the posse close behind him. And he knew they must be getting close to the hide-out.

Ahead, the two seemed to vanish. But a cloud of dust hung in the air to guide him. He urged the pinto on, and as he neared the point where Julie and Steve Grant had disappeared from sight, he saw an opening between two high walls of rock. This was it!

He pounded ahead, the posse following. And then in the distance he saw a campfire and wooden shacks. Men were shouting and running for their horses. Shots rang out, and Cal crouched in the saddle as he rode on with bullets clipping past him.

The posse raced in after him, bottling up the Panther Gang in their lair. Now it became a battle. The posse circled the camp, Indian fashion, while the outlaws fought back, some on foot and others mounted. Cal put a bullet between the eyes of a burly black-bearded man who rushed at him, firing his six-gun wildly. The next moment he tried to locate Julie somewhere in the smoky, gun-ridden mêlée.

The confusion made it hopeless. He urged the terrified pinto on until he was close to the largest shack. And it was then that Steve and the blackmasked Panther appeared in the doorway. Cal fired straight at the Panther before there was a great explosion in front of him and he fell out of the saddle. His last conscious thought was that Steve was using his dynamite tricks to good advantage.

When he regained consciousness, Rusty was bending over him. The sounds of battle seemed to have ended. He looked up at his friend. 'What about the pinto?'

Rusty grinned. 'Waiting for you to get into the saddle. How about you?'

Cal sat up. 'I guess I was just stunned by the blast.'

'Lucky you weren't blown to blazes,' Rusty said solemnly. 'Two of the boys were. But the sheriff found Julie in one of the shacks. She's all right.'

'What about Steve Grant?'

'We cut short his dynamite stunts,' Rusty said. 'He's dead.'

'And the Panther? I saw him. I'm sure I drilled him.' Cal said, on his feet.

Rusty shrugged and glanced toward the burning shacks. 'Unless he's in one of them, he's managed to sneak away.'

It turned out he had. But his power was at an end. The posse had completely destroyed the gang. Still, Cal wasn't satisfied. The

Panther on the loose could organize a new outfit. And Cal couldn't understand his escaping, since he was sure he had put a bullet in him.

It was dawn when they rode back into town. Guards had been posted at the outlaw camp. The two dead men in the posse had been brought back, and Dr Marsland, who had insisted on riding with the posse, was looking after a still dazed Julie Grant. The sheriff, Rusty and Cal headed toward the jail. With them they had Tim Bates, whom they'd found hiding in one of the shacks, and several of the Panther's other men.

When they came abreast of the Crazy Bear Saloon, Cal noticed the swift retreat of someone who must have been watching them from the shadows behind the swinging doors.

He told the others, 'I'll catch up with you in a minute.' Then he reined the pinto and, dismounting, crossed the wooden sidewalk to the saloon entrance. He drew his Colt and cautiously pushed open one of the swinging doors.

As he peered into the dark canyon of the big room, he was startled to hear the piano. And it was not the honky-tonk that he was used to hearing. Instead, it was the brisk, staccato notes of a classical number. As he moved, forward, he saw the gaunt figure of Fred Dixon at the keyboard.

As Cal listened to the pure beauty of the

music, he came nearer the platform. When he was close enough to reach out to Dixon, the pianist halted his playing as a frightening coughing attack overtook him. His frail body shook, and the hand over his mouth became covered with spurting blood. As the coughing ended he turned to Cal.

‘I always wanted you to hear me play Chopin, Haines,’ he said with a wan smile on his cadaverous face. ‘You almost spoiled it.’ And he toppled over onto the platform.

Cal bent down to examine him. And he saw this had been no spasm caused by Dixon’s consumption. There were two bullet wounds in the pianist’s chest—the bullets he had pumped into the Panther back at the camp. Dixon was dead. The Panther’s reign of terror was at an end. For a moment he felt a kind of pity. Then he turned and walked slowly out of the saloon. Sarah would be waiting.



4/1/80

BRANCH I

East Bay

East Bay

East Bay

East Bay

BRANCH I

W

32

DU

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.
Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

INCIDENT AT HADDON CITY

Of the three men riding north along the dusty Kansas road toward Haddon City, two were partners who worked together whenever they had a good thing going for them, and who were intent on investigating what the Panther Gang were doing at their destination. The third was a rowdy troublemaker whose company they had not sought but who had invited himself to accompany them. Hardly had the trio arrived in town than the third man risked all their lives by imprudently appointing himself defender of a beleaguered girl. So the two friends had to save themselves by taking over and promising, to their own surprise, that they would help her search for her vanished brother.

AN ATLANTIC BOOK

U.K. Hardback ISBN 0 7451 9608 X

U.K. Softback ISBN 0 7451 9620 9

U.S.A. Softback ISBN 0 7927 0021 X