

# LAWLESS PRAIRIE

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Charles G. West



A SIGNET BOOK



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## **The Sound of Death**

At first Clint could see only three bodies. Then he spotted the woman, bound hand and foot and tied to a tree near the horses.

Satisfied that she was out of the line of fire, he walked into the camp, his rifle ready before him. A short, gap-toothed warrior was the first to discover the sinister visitor. He sat up, childlike in his attempt to brush the sleep from his eyes. The peaceful night was shattered by the crack of Clint's rifle as a .44 slug smacked into the warrior's chest.

In rapid succession, Clint leveled the Winchester to pump a fatal shot into each of the other two as they sprang from their blankets. It was all over in a matter of seconds, and the peaceful night was quiet again except for the frightened sounds from the horses. . . .

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*For Ronda*

# Chapter 1

“Ballenger, Washburn, Conner—stables!”

Clint Conner looked up in surprise when he heard his name called. This was the second time this week he had been assigned to the horse barn to clean out the stalls. It wasn't a bad job. It was better than working in the broom factory behind the prison. He tossed the last slug of coffee down his throat and put his cup and tray on the table beside the door, then walked over to the opposite wall to join the two prisoners already standing there. *Ballenger and Washburn*, he thought to himself as he waited for the guard to secure the short chain between his ankles. Of all the inmates in the forty-cell prison, he couldn't think of any two he'd less like to work with.

*What the hell?* he thought, reminding himself that the only way he could prevent his mind from rebelling against imprisonment was to cling to the belief that his mind and spirit were someplace outside these stone walls. With those two as partners, he would probably do most of the work in the stables, but he didn't care. Working made the day move faster. The more he thought about it, however, the more curious he became. How did a convicted killer like Clell Ballenger manage to get himself assigned to stable detail? Ballenger was already sentenced, and a hanging date had been set for a week from yesterday. A prisoner sentenced to hang was not usually sent to work in the horse barn. That job was typically given to men with lighter sentences, because of a temptation to attempt escape. The prisoners mucking out the stalls were accompanied by only one guard, so the job was routinely assigned to short-timers and trustees. As a rule, men sentenced to be hanged were confined to their cells until execution day. Clint had to assume there had been a payoff to somebody, and he would bet that Nathaniel Boswell, the warden, knew nothing about the arrangement. Boswell was a hard-nosed former U.S. marshal with a reputation as a stalwart enforcer of the law. He would hardly approve of assigning a dangerous man like Ballenger to the stables.

Clint barely glanced at the smirking face of Clell Ballenger as he waited for the guard to finish locking his chains. He knew the notorious outlaw by reputation only. There had been a great deal of talk about the man supposedly responsible for the murders of twelve people during a spree of bank robberies over the last two years. Ballenger's repute made him somewhat of a celebrity in the recently opened Wyoming Territorial Prison, and he was the cause of much talk and speculation among the prison population. A big man, though not unusually tall, Clell Ballenger possessed an aura that tended to cow other men. With black hair, long and heavy, resting on the back of his collar like a bushy broom, a flat nose, dark eyes set deep under heavy eyebrows, and an almost constant scowl on his lips, the notorious outlaw was thought by some to be Lucifer himself. Ballenger had never sought to discourage that speculation. His hands were unusually large with fingers thick and powerful. It was rumored that he had once strangled two men at the same time, although those present on that occasion would tell you that it was actually a Kiowa woman and her infant son.

There were some, like Clint Conner, who had little use for him, or the man standing beside him for that matter. Bob Washburn was a brainless dolt, doing time for the assault and rape of a thirteen-year-old girl. He had eagerly assumed the role of Ballenger's personal servant.

Clint had made it a point to avoid the two of them up to this time. He had no fear of either man, or the combination of the two; he just didn't like their kind in general. He thought about the day the guards had brought Ballenger into the cell block. They seemed to purposely walk him by every cell in the prison to exhibit the notorious killer to all the inmates before locking him in next to Bob Washburn. It was a regular circus parade with four guards escorting the smirking outlaw. But for the most part, instead of demonstrating the punishment coming to those who broke the law, the parade only served to inform everyone that the new prison was now graced by the presence of a famous person. For many of the prisoners, Ballenger was someone to be looked up to for being feared by honest folk throughout Wyoming and Kansas. As far as Clint Conner was concerned, men like Clell Ballenger were little more than scum on the slime of humanity.

Some might be inclined to infer that the kettle was calling the pot black. Clint didn't give a damn what others might think. He knew the man who dwelt inside his young, muscular body, and he was at peace with him. He had made a mistake as a brash eighteen-year-old, and now, three years later, he was still paying for it. Although the confinement threatened to bring him down at times, he was determined to fight against the longing to escape to the prairies and rugged mountains he loved. Halfway through his sentence, it was getting harder and harder to persevere. Thoughts of escape seemed to visit his mind more frequently with each new sunrise.

"All right, boys," the guard said, breaking Clint's reverie, "let's get moving." Holding his shotgun up before him, he motioned toward the door with the barrel, then stood watching until the last of the three prisoners filed out before him.

Once they reached the barn, the guard nodded toward the tools propped in a corner of the tack room. "Conner, fetch them pitchforks and a broom." Clint did as he was told. "Now," the guard continued, "give one of them pitchforks to Washburn, and you take the other one. Give Mr. Ballenger there that broom." He cracked a knowing smile. "I expect you'd rather have one of them pitchforks in your hand, wouldn't you, Ballenger?"

"I might at that," Ballenger replied, displaying a grin of his own.

"What are you doin' on this detail, anyway?" the guard asked. "You ain't supposed to be on any work details at all this close to gettin' your neck stretched."

Still displaying a wide grin, Ballenger said, "I ain't one to lay around doin' nothin' when I could be helpin' you boys out." He glanced over at Washburn and winked, causing the simple man to break out in a foolish grin.

Not entirely without suspicion, the guard said, "You musta paid somebody off to get sent to the stables today. Nobody shoulda sent you to work here where there ain't nothin' between you and the open prairie but this here shotgun. But let me tell you,

this shotgun is enough.”

“Ah, come on, Williams,” Ballenger said. “What’s wrong with a man gettin’ a little bit of fresh air and sunshine before they hang him? You wouldn’t fault a man for wantin’ one last day outside before they put him in the ground, would you?”

“*Mr. Williams,*” the guard corrected. “It ain’t up to me. I didn’t set the policy. I just know there’ll be hell to pay for somebody when the warden finds out.” He motioned toward one of the stalls. “Get to work with that broom, and just keep in mind that this here shotgun has got a hair trigger, and I wouldn’t mind savin’ the hangman a little trouble if you took a notion to run.”

“Why, *Mr. Williams,*” Ballenger replied in mock indignation, “I wouldn’t have no idea of cheatin’ the territory outta hangin’ me. Hell, I’m lookin’ forward to it. See what kinda saloons they got in hell.”

“I’m sure there’s a place down there for murderin’ skunks like you,” Williams said. “Now get in there and clean out that stall.” He waited to see that Ballenger did as instructed before turning his attention toward the other two prisoners. He gave Clint only a brief glance upon seeing that the young man was already at work, and paying little attention to the conversation he was having with Ballenger. Washburn, however, had to be told to put his pitchfork to work.

The morning progressed without cause for concern while Williams made sure he remained alert to any funny business. He was sure, however, that it was risky letting a desperate outlaw like Clell Ballenger work this close to the wide-open prairie behind the barn. He planned to return the notorious killer to his cell when he marched the three-man detail back for the noon meal. Glancing at his pocket watch, he muttered to himself, “Eleven fifteen.” Still an hour before dinnertime. He looked up to see Ballenger leaning on his broom handle and staring at him as if amused about something. He was about to order the insolent prisoner to get back to work, when he heard the distinct sound of a pistol’s hammer cocking. He abruptly turned to meet the muzzle of a Colt .45 only inches from his face. It was too late to react.

“Mornin’, Yancey,” Ballenger drawled, his cocksure smile still in place.

“Clell,” Yancey acknowledged, his dark eyes focused intently upon the guard’s frozen stare as he slowly reached for Williams’ shotgun.

With no choice but to yield or die, Williams made no move to resist, releasing the weapon. Stunned by the suddenness with which the sinister outlaw had appeared, the guard could hardly believe their brazenness in carrying out this confrontation in broad daylight, no more than fifty yards from the main prison. “You must be crazy,” he finally managed to stammer as Washburn grabbed his keys to unlock the shackles. “There could be guards comin’ in here any minute.”

“It’d be a sorry day for ’em if they did.” The statement came from the back door of the barn when another man stepped inside. “What about them?” he asked, nodding at Clint and Washburn.

“Howdy, Skinner,” Ballenger responded, then motioned toward Washburn. “This

here's Bob Washburn," he said. "He's in on it." Then turning toward Washburn, he instructed, "Bob, throw a saddle on one of them horses in the corral." Then he looked at Clint. "I don't know about him. He just happened to catch stable duty today." He said to Clint, "I reckon it's just your tough luck, young feller, unless you're wantin' to join up with us. I ain't plannin' on leavin' no witnesses."

"Wait a damn minute," Washburn said, quick to protest. "He ain't in on this deal." He turned to Ballenger in appeal. "I'm the one that stuck my neck out for you. That son of a bitch ain't never given either one of us the time of day."

Washburn's jealous outburst brought a trace of a smile to Ballenger's face. It amused him to see his simpleminded lackey get his hackles up at the threat of a new man moving in. He looked Clint directly in the eye and spoke. "Bob's right, you never did have much use for me or him. Whaddaya say about that?"

It was a lot to think about in a few seconds' time as Clint looked from one gun to the other, both pointing at him now. Ballenger's statement promised a death sentence for the guard, Williams, and for him as well if he didn't throw in with the escape.

"Well?" Yancey demanded, turning to face Clint. "We ain't got all day."

"I still ain't got a helluva lot of use for either one of you," Clint responded. "But you're holdin' all the cards, and I want out of this place, too." Thinking of the possibility of saving the guard's life, he said, "We ain't but about fifty yards from the main building. If you go shootin' off those pistols, you'll have half a dozen guards up here in no time."

"He's right," Ballenger said. "Better use a knife."

Clint was trying to think fast, but ideas for saving Williams' life were not coming very rapidly. There wasn't much time to come up with something. He glanced at the fright-stricken eyes of the guard as Williams, realizing Clint was his only hope, silently pleaded with him for help. "Yeah," Clint finally said, "best done with a knife." He turned to Yancey then. "Give me your knife. I'll take care of the guard, and the rest of you can get a head start. Leave me a horse and I'll catch up."

Ballenger didn't respond at once. He just stood there staring at Clint, trying to determine whether he was attempting to fool them. Up to that point, he wasn't even sure the young man wanted to join them, but he couldn't deny he was amused by Clint's response. After studying Clint's face for a long second, he turned to Yancey. "Give him your knife." Turning back to Clint, he said, "Now you can cut the bastard's throat, but we ain't goin' nowhere till we see the job's done."

Clint took the long skinning knife from Yancey, and looked at the quivering guard. Williams, seeing no hope for his safety, took that moment to bolt for the barn door. "I got him!" Clint exclaimed, and immediately took off after him. He caught him before he could reach the door and tackled him to the ground. Yancey started to go after them, but Ballenger, still finding the situation amusing, caught his arm and said, "Let's see if he can do it."

Wrestling with the desperate man, Clint, with desperation of his own, managed to

pin the guard to the ground. With his lips close to Williams' ear, he whispered frantically, "If you wanna live, you better damn sure play dead. I'm gonna have to hurt you." Sitting on the guard's back, he suddenly jerked Williams' head up and made what he hoped was a convincing show of pulling the knife across his victim's throat. The slash, though not deep, was enough to cause Williams to cry out, and was sufficient to immediately bring blood. Realizing then that his life was hanging in the balance, Williams ceased to struggle and lay still. Clint wiped the knife blade across the guard's shirt and got to his feet.

The others started toward him to confirm the kill, but stopped when Clint warned, "There's a couple of guards lookin' this way." He stared out the open barn door as if watching them. "He's dead," he stated, anticipating the question forming in Ballenger's mouth. "Let's get the hell outta here while we've got the chance."

Ballenger hesitated for just a moment, giving the guard's body another look. "All right," he finally decided, "let's get goin'. You'll be needin' a horse. You'd best be quick about it."

Like it or not, the die was cast for Clint Conner. To refuse to escape with Ballenger and his men would mean a death sentence. And although he had no desire to accompany the small band of outlaws, neither did he have any wish to defy them when the odds were four to one. He had gone to sleep many nights dreaming about escaping his imprisonment, but he never intended to actually attempt it. Now the decision had been made for him. He grabbed a bridle from the tack room and ran into the corral to pick a horse. The only saddle left, after Washburn took the best one, was a well-worn single-rigged model. The last rider to use the saddle was evidently short in the legs, but Clint didn't waste time adjusting the stirrups. Climbing aboard a mousey dun gelding, the best of the lot of poor choices left in the corral, he could not deny a feeling of freedom to be on a horse again. Ballenger held the gate open for Clint while he waited for Yancey to bring his horse from behind the barn. When all had mounted, the five fugitives left the prison grounds at a fast lope, riding on a line that kept the barn between them and the main prison until crossing a low hogback that offered concealment. Veering south then, Yancey led them toward Colorado, the daring daylight escape a success.

Clint rode last in the single file of riders, his knees bent like a jockey's in the short stirrups, a hailstorm of conflicting thoughts swirling in his head. He had never considered himself an outlaw, but he was damn sure one now. He could turn around and hightail it back. Ballenger might shoot at him, but probably wouldn't chase after him, and maybe he could square things with the warden, explain the situation as it had occurred, leaving him no choice. The guard, Williams, would surely vouch for him. The problem was, running free again across an open prairie, he didn't want to return to the stone walls and his tiny cell for another three years. The three he had already served were killing his soul day by relentless day until he had come to the point where he feared he might one day explode.

*I've given them enough of my life,* he decided as he followed the outlaws down a grassy draw and across a shallow stream. Three years was enough for the crime that he had committed. His thoughts then went back to recall the reason he had been

sentenced to six years in prison. His troubles all started with the purchase of a horse—six horses, actually. Clint’s father had made an especially good trade for the horses with a Texas cattleman who sold off his remuda after a cattle drive. Among the six, the most valuable one was an Appaloosa gelding that caught young Clint’s eye at once. He worked with the horse every day, and a bond between horse and rider was soon created, as Clint spent every second of his free time training the spirited mount.

Clint’s eye was not the only one attracted to the handsome gelding. Judge Wyman Plover, who owned a stable of fine-bred horses, spotted the unusual breed when Clint rode into town one Sunday morning. Immediately coveting the horse, the judge wasted little time before riding out to Arthur Conner’s ranch, determined to own the Appaloosa. Arthur Conner was not a wealthy rancher, and the offer Judge Plover extended was too much to pass on—even knowing it would deeply distress his son to lose the horse.

Clint understood his father’s position, and tried to make the best of it. He resigned himself to the loss of the Appaloosa until he happened to witness the treatment the horse was subjected to at the hands of Plover’s foreman. Clint tried to tell the brutal foreman that the horse responded to a gentle touch. “I’ll gentle the son of a bitch with an ax handle,” the foreman responded, and ordered Clint off the property.

Clint, concerned for the horse, went to see the judge to protest the foreman’s rough treatment. “Mike Burke has been training horses since before you were weaned,” the judge said. “I expect he knows better than you how to train a horse.”

“Not from what I saw today,” Clint had responded heatedly. “He’s gonna break that horse’s spirit.”

His patience with the young man having run out, Judge Plover dismissed him abruptly. “Well, at any rate, I don’t see that it’s any concern of yours, so I’d advise you to mind your own business.” When Clint turned on his heel to leave, Plover called after him, “And don’t be coming around here anymore.”

“You ain’t fit to own a horse,” Clint had muttered in parting.

During the past three years, he had often thought about the price he was paying for his rash actions that followed his confrontation with the judge. He earned his conviction as a horse thief when he removed the Appaloosa from Plover’s corral. And he added the charge of assault when he broke an ax handle across the foreman’s back when Burke tried to stop him. The only satisfaction Clint enjoyed was in knowing the Appaloosa gained his freedom. *Hell*, he thought as he guided the dun after the four riders preceding him, *I’d do the same thing if it happened today.*

Bringing his thoughts back to the present, he considered the situation in which he now found himself. One thing he knew for certain was that he must extricate himself from Ballenger and his friends at the earliest opportunity. However, he was reluctant to strike out on his own without weapons and supplies. It might be necessary to ride along with the men until there was some way to equip himself to go it alone. He had to consider himself a real horse thief now, since he was riding a horse stolen from the prison barn. But at the moment, the dun was his only possession. He had no gun, no

clothes other than the prison-issued garments he wore, no supplies, and no money. There seemed little chance he could acquire these things lawfully.

As the riders slowed their horses in order to file down through a rocky draw, Clint glanced over at Washburn to catch the brooding simpleton glaring back at him. *What in hell did I do to make an enemy out of him?* Clint asked himself. *I'm liable to have trouble with that one before this is over.*

## Chapter 2

Pete Yancey stood for a moment, thoughtfully watching the last-minute addition to their small party as Clint adjusted the stirrups on his worn-out saddle. He commented to Ballenger, "I don't know about that one. Maybe we shouldn'ta brought him along. I got a funny feelin' about him." He stopped short of telling Ballenger why he had this feeling about the quiet young man who had immediately volunteered to slit the guard's throat. Yancey never confided in anyone about the one fear that had haunted him since he was eighteen. Shortly after joining the Confederate army to escape a prison sentence, he had been visited by a black angel in a dream one night. In his dream, the angel had told him that he could not be killed by anyone but one man, and then that man had appeared. Yancey could still see the man's face clearly after waking. It was a broad, youthful face, and it was distinctive in that a single lock of light brown hair hung down on the assassin's forehead. In the dream, the killer pointed his pistol directly at Yancey's head, and Yancey could see the bullet coming straight at his eye as if suspended in flight, deadly and certain. It had seemed so real that he had determined it to be a prophecy. After the dream, he had survived several major battles without a scratch while men were falling all around him, reinforcing his belief that he could not be killed except by that one man. The critical thing for him was to always keep a sharp eye for that man, and kill him before he had a chance to fulfill the prophecy.

But now this familiar face had appeared unexpectedly, looking very much like the face in his dream. He might not have thought that much about it except for the single lock of hair that fell across Clint's forehead when he removed his prison cap. Coincidence, he told himself, but the man worried him. He decided to keep a close eye on him.

Ballenger shrugged indifferently after Yancey's comment. "Hell, I expect he's in the same boat as the rest of us."

"Whaddaya know about him, anyway? What was he in for?"

Ballenger reached for the coffeepot resting on the coals of the campfire. "Horse thief is what I heard," he answered. "Don't know much more. I didn't have that much to do with him." He paused to consider what he had just said, then added, "Like Bob said, he didn't have much to do with anybody. Just kept to himself mostly."

"I reckon we'll find out when we get to Fort Collins," Yancey said. "Might be better if we run him off before somebody spots him in that getup, though."

"Might at that," Ballenger allowed, turning to gaze at Clint again. There had been no plan to bring along two extra men on his escape from prison. He had gotten word to Yancey that there would be one other, Washburn. Consequently, Yancey brought weapons and clothes for Ballenger and Washburn only. Now he was looking at Clint in his prison stripes and wondering whether Yancey might be right. There was no sense in advertising the fact that they were escaped convicts.

“Hell,” Yancey cursed, becoming more convinced that Clint’s presence might bring them bad luck, “we can’t ride into that town with him in that damn jail suit. Somebody’s likely to shoot on sight.” The plan, known only to Ballenger, Yancey, and Skinner to this point, was to hit the bank at Fort Collins. Yancey figured that Washburn would be included since he had supplied part of the bribe that got him and Ballenger on stable detail. He was wondering now what use the extra man might be, especially since he didn’t even have a gun. The more he thought about it, the more he was certain he wasn’t going to agree to a five-way split on the bank job. “We got one more man than we need,” he said to Ballenger.

“I expect you’re right,” Ballenger replied. “We’d best get rid of him.” They didn’t know that Bob Washburn was already working himself up to take care of their problem.

In Washburn’s mind, Lady Luck had placed him in the cell next to that of Clell Ballenger. To Bob, it was the answer to a longing to be associated with greatness. Clell Ballenger was a living legend among outlaws. At least that was his picture of the notorious murderer, and he was honored to have been the one inmate allowed close contact. He was avoided by the other inmates because of the crime for which he was sentenced. And now, when they referred to him at all, they called him Ballenger’s lackey. But he didn’t see himself as Ballenger’s lackey. He thought he was Ballenger’s friend and confidant. After all, wasn’t he the only inmate privy to the famous outlaw’s escape plan? Now the presence of Clint Conner made him fear that his status as Ballenger’s friend might have suffered.

The more thought he gave it, the more he suspected Conner’s intention of moving in to take his rightful place as Ballenger’s right-hand man. Why, he wondered, had Ballenger let Clint kill the guard? *I coulda done it*, he thought. That would have proved to Ballenger and Yancey that he was worthy of their respect. Maybe they thought that because he was imprisoned for raping a child, he didn’t have the nerve necessary to kill. He needed to prove to them that he could.

Suddenly everything about Clint made Washburn angry, and his resentment toward Clint swelled up inside until he felt about ready to burst. When Washburn could stand it no longer, he approached Ballenger with a suggestion. “I don’t think we need that son of a bitch, Clell.” Washburn spoke in a low tone, all the while eyeballing Clint coldly. “He ain’t no good to us, and he’s gonna draw attention to us in them prison stripes.”

Ballenger looked mildly surprised. “Why, me and Yancey was just talkin’ about that. We was sayin’ we got one more man than we need. We’re figurin’ on hittin’ that bank in Fort Collins, and four’s an easier split than five—and four of us is plenty to take that little bank.”

“I knowed it!” Washburn exclaimed. “I figured Clell Ballenger would have a job all picked out!” Like a child, Washburn could not conceal his excitement at the prospect of robbing a bank with Clell Ballenger. He then jerked his attention back to the

situation with Clint. “Why don’t I take care of Mr. Smart-ass Conner for you?” he suggested. “We don’t want him around messin’ up our plans.”

Ballenger grinned. “Why don’t you do that, Bob? Do us all a favor.” He glanced over at Yancey and winked.

Seated at the edge of the creek where they had made camp, Clint looked up to notice that three sets of eyes were focusing on him. He glanced over his shoulder at Skinner, who was evidently taking the opportunity to get a little shut-eye. Looking back again at the other three, he sensed that something was about to happen, something that involved him, and he didn’t like the feeling. Being the odd man, he had already given thought to the possibility that he might be eliminated. He was anxious to take his leave of the four, but not this way.

He put aside the saddle he had been working on when Washburn took a couple of steps in his direction. There was a smug expression on the simpleton’s fleshy face and he walked with an exaggerated swagger. Never taking his eye off the three outlaws, Clint casually reached behind him, feeling around until his hand rested on a sizable rock. Then, after another fleeting glance to make sure Skinner was oblivious of it all, he waited, watching Washburn carefully. Whatever the play, it appeared that it was to be Washburn’s alone, for Ballenger and Yancey seemed content to hang back and watch the show.

The only weapon he had was the rock his hand rested upon, not much to rely on when facing the six-gun riding on Washburn’s hip. He was thinking that it could amount to a swift execution if Washburn had brains enough to simply pull the pistol and shoot him. He was gambling upon the notion that the bumbling child molester would want to gloat over his position of dominance to satisfy his jealous ego.

Clint was accurate in his judgment of the man. Washburn swaggered up to stand a couple of yards from him. His feet spread wide, his hand resting on the handle of his holstered pistol, a mocking smile quirked slowly across his broad face. After taking a few moments to enjoy the situation, he spoke. “This here’s the end of the line, Mr. Smart-ass. It’s time for you to cash in your chips.” He took his time pulling the revolver, to give Clint plenty of time to think about it. Unable to understand why there was no desperate look of fear showing in Clint’s face, he thought he had to explain what he was about to do. “You dumb son of a bitch, I’m fixin’ to shoot you.”

“I figured,” Clint replied calmly. Another quick glance confirmed that Ballenger and Yancey were spectators only. His fingers tightened around the rock.

Disappointed to the point of dismay that his victim showed no signs of fear or panic, Washburn took another step closer and pointed the pistol at his head. “Damn you! I’m gonna put a hole in your head. How do you want it? Sittin’ there, or standin’ up?”

“Well, if you’re givin’ me a choice, I think I’ll take it standin’ up.”

Washburn took a step back to give himself room, still baffled by the victim’s calm acceptance of his execution, but he misjudged the quickness of the man he sought to

kill. Clint's moves were slow and deliberate until he rose to one knee. From there, however, he sprang up in a fraction of a second, hurling the heavy rock into Washburn's face. The startled man could not help but flinch when the stone smashed his nose. It was all the time Clint needed to clamp down on the wrist of Washburn's gun hand and jerk back on his arm with such force that the man's shoulder popped out of joint. Washburn's scream of pain brought Skinner up from a dead slumber. "Let 'em be!" Ballenger yelled at Skinner as the confused man drew his weapon.

With his right arm useless, Washburn was unable to hold on to his weapon. Clint easily wrestled it from him and cracked him upside the head with the barrel. Dropping to the ground like a sack of potatoes, Washburn lay still, his eyes glazed, his mind a jumble of confusion. Clint backed away, far enough to gain a field of fire that could include the two men on his left and Skinner on his right. Aiming the pistol toward Ballenger and Yancey, he waited for them to make a move.

Still grinning, Ballenger held up his hand. "Take it easy there, son. Ain't nobody gonna shoot ya." He walked over beside Washburn, who was still lying on the ground. Still talking to Clint, he said, "I like the way you handle yourself, young feller."

His head clearing somewhat, Washburn struggled up to his hands and knees. "Damn, Clell," he whined, "I think he broke my arm."

"That don't matter none," Ballenger replied. "You ain't gonna need it." When Washburn looked up, still confused, Ballenger explained, "Like I said, we got one too many." With that, he pulled his revolver and put a bullet in Bob's head. Looking back at Clint, he said, "Looks like you got yourself an outfit. You can shuck them clothes offa him. I shot him in the head so's not to put a hole in his shirt."

With no display of emotion on his face, Clint replied, "That was damn thoughtful of you."

Ballenger threw his head back and chuckled. "You're a cool son of a bitch."

Although maintaining a calm exterior, Clint could feel the cold pocket of sweat that had appeared under his arms, left by the tense moments of uncertainty when he was waiting to see whether he was about to meet his Maker. His unruffled demeanor convinced Ballenger that it was a good trade-off when he rid himself of the clumsy Washburn. He figured any man who exhibited such cool nerve when facing a .44 with nothing more than a rock in his hand would prove to be damn handy in a bank holdup.

"I'm cuttin' you in for a full share of a little job Yancey's lined up in Fort Collins," Ballenger said. "We're plannin' on hitting the bank there day after tomorrow." He then deferred to Yancey and Skinner. "That all right with you boys?"

Skinner merely shrugged. Yancey answered, "I reckon it don't make no difference to me. We'd already planned on a four-way split," he said, although still not sure it wouldn't have been more desirable to have had the threat of the dream killer eliminated.

"Whaddaya say to that?" Ballenger asked Clint.

"Sounds all right to me," Clint replied. This was not the time to tell them that he