

Tom's heavy steps still echoed along the small room when the gambler looked at Bannon. The curl disappeared from his upper lip, replaced by a tight smile.

"Perhaps the gentleman at the counter would like to sit in."

If he had not taken such an immediate dislike to the cardsharp he would have let it pass. He would have simply waited for his supplies and rode on. Instead, his mind snapped back thirteen years and every emotion in his body vanished. He eased from the counter and stepped close to the gambler.

"Your deck?"

"It's an honest deck."

"Two types I don't play cards with." His low voice grated hard as a running iron. His gaze bored into the gambler, but did not miss the gunman to the gambler's right, now watching with sudden interest. "One-eyed and four-eyed."

The gambler flushed and even behind the blue-tints he could see the man's eyes cloud over at being called a cheater. To the gambler's right, the gunman tilted forward in his chair and his right hand edged to his holstered six-shooter.

"Your meaning?" the gambler cried.

"Knew a gambler up at Laramie once." His voice was deceptively relaxed. "Wore blue-tinted specs. A lucky man at the tables. For a bit. The four-eye's luck turned when he was found marking the cards with phosphorous. He used the tints to see the marks."

A deathly stillness blanketed the room. The gambler froze, as did the soldiers, all eyes fixed on Bannon. Crem grabbed the cards and stared at their backs. The gambler jerked his chair back and his right hand flashed to his chest. Bannon closed on him like a cat. He pulled the Bowie and slammed the flat side of the wide blade across the gambler's jaw. The tinhorn toppled over his chair and to the floor. Dazed, the man's right hand tugged at the watch fob and stopped when a voice—cool and measured—cut into him.

"That best be a watch."

The gambler's hand halted where the fob disappeared into his vest pocket. His blue-tints had fallen off and black eyes glared hate. Blood leaking from the gambler's jaw and nose rolled down his mustaches and splattered his printed vest. He stepped closer and pinned the gambler's right hand with his boot. He returned the big knife to the

sheath on his hip, and yanked at the gambler's gold fob. No watch came out of the man's pocket, but a Wesson derringer. He held the little gun high for everyone to see before he tossed it against the wall. He picked up the blue-tints and stepped back from the sprawled figure.

His hand shaking, the black-garbed cheat drew a white, silk handkerchief from his coat pocket and pressed it to his bloodied face.

The lanky man sitting to the gambler's right remained still, but his green eyes cut dark and cold.

"I ought to kill you," Bannon told the gambler, "but it wasn't me you were cheating so I'll let it go. You won't do any more business here."

The soldiers, rigid in their chairs, gaped. He tossed the specs onto the table top and Crem eagerly scooped them up and examined the backs of several cards. After a few seconds, the private cursed and flung down the tinted glasses and cards. Reeney grabbed them and repeated the test, with the same result. Pen had started to follow suit when a flinty voice stopped him.

"I'll take those.

The lanky man with the low-riding six-shooter rose gracefully to his feet, his manner unhurried, his eyes calm. His half-finished cigarette dangled loosely from his lips, a thin reed of smoke curling upward. His left shoulder turned slightly, and his right hand hovered near the butt of the Army Single Action tied to his hip. His eyes glinted like polished emeralds under the wide brim of his pushed-back hat. Bannon had seen his kind before. He would be good with that iron on his hip—quick yet deliberate. He would not fire hastily. If he got off a shot he would likely hit his mark.

"You got a interferin' nature, compadre." The Texas drawl was pleasant, but his face exposed his intent. "Ain't smart to call my friend a cheat."

A thin smile creased the bloodied gambler's lips, but he made no motion.

"You a friend of the tinhorn?" Bannon asked.

The green-eyed gunman shrugged. "Not so's you'd notice, but I got a stake in that craw-jammer on the floor and you're meddlin' in it."

"You back a cheat you borrow a fair amount of trouble."

"I'm doin' it. You can poach your egg right here and now or you can turn around

and slope. I won't hinder you. Far as I tell we've got no quarrel, seein's how Kramer's such a muzzle-loadin' daisy. But if you aim to stick you will have to back your play."

"I'd be glad to go. I didn't come in here to stay long."

The gunman smiled coldly.

"Good way to think of it, compadre. Ain't no reason to fight somebody else's battles."

"But the soldiers take the money before I go."

The gunman lost his thin smile. "Reckon not."

"Soldier!" Bannon called, his eyes fixed on the man bracing him.

"Sir?" Pen answered with a barely audible high-pitched squeak.

"Take the money on the table and get out."

"You move, soldier, I'll kill you."

"Me first."

"Make your play."

The gunman's hand snaked for his six-shooter...