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Branded Outlaw

GALAXY
PRESS

Chapter One

LEE WESTON'S big hands clenched tightly around the handle of the spade. For a little while he could not continue and then, taking a breath that held the shudder of grief, he began to scoop thick red gumbo into the grave, covering the body of his father.

It was done, and the two mesquite sticks he had tied together with a rawhide thong in the form of a cross cast their shadow across the raw, ugly earth.

Lee Weston dropped the shovel and turned to walk with weary gait back to the heap of still-smoking ashes which had been his home. There was nothing left there. Not even the frame which had enclosed his mother's picture had survived.

As he stood staring at the broken corrals and the ashes where the barn had once stood, his hands strayed to the guns on either thigh and his palms went up and down against the walnut, as though they itched.

His young face was a haggard mask and his blue eyes plumbed the depths of hell. Three weeks of riding, enough to kill a weaker man, three horses dead under him and now—this!

He remembered the letter in his pocket and he drew it forth. The chill morning wind rippled the stained paper.

Son:

I wish you could come back, if only for a little while. I realize that you are making money and a name for yourself, and I know that you probably still think that I was unduly hard on you at times, but believe me, my boy, when I say that I need you.

The day of the small rancher in Pecos Valley is over and the combines are moving in with better stock and more capital. Men, because of their money, think that they can buy a thing for which other men have given their lives.

Some day my part of this range will be yours. I have tried to keep it for you, son. But now I need help. Harvey Dodge, whom I once knew on the old Chisholm Trail as a raider, has come here.

Please do not fail me!

Your father,
Tom Weston

Lee put the letter back in the pocket of his batwings. The name Harvey Dodge was scorched into his sight so that everywhere he looked, the letters danced before him as though they were written in flame.

His strong mouth hardened into a bitter line. Three horses dead and three weeks of hell—and he had been only hours late! He looked at the hoofmarks in the churned earth and saw that at least twenty riders had made this raid. If he had arrived before their attack, he would probably now be dead. But he wasn't thinking of things like that. He was thinking of only one thing—of finding Harvey Dodge and pouring twelve slugs into him.

He had often thought of coming home, but never had he dreamed that it would be like this. Smoking ashes and dead men—those three sprawled riders, who might have been friend or enemy, he did not know which.

Coming home, with the acrid smell of powder smoke still lingering in the air. Coming home, and finding that he had no home.

He turned to his mount, intending to ride away. But the horse stood in deep dejection, lather dried upon his flanks and eyes glazed with weariness. Lee took the riata from the horn and walked out to the small band of broncs which had escaped from the corrals. He dropped his noose over the head of a buckskin who had not run away with the rest. Even the horses had changed here, but Lee Weston had been away for six years.

He saddled, forgetting that he himself was ready to drop from fatigue. He saw no ashes now, no mound of earth. He saw only the blazing letters that spelled Harvey Dodge.

Wyoming had hardened him, and Lee had every reason to feel confidence in his ability to even this score.

He did not take the wagon road to Pecos. He had a better way. Quirting the buckskin, he headed straight across the valley, down ravines and across gullies, sending the white dust swirling as he streaked through the sage.

He knew but one way to settle this, and until it was settled he knew that his mind would be hazed by the cold rage which had come into him with his first glimpse of the smoking ruins.

He guided his running horse into the main street, the only street, of the desert cow town. The place was hardly alive,

though it was an hour short of noon. A dog yelped and fled out of the sun. A handful of loafers on the porch of the general store sat up, startled by the sight of the lone puncher who drew up and was immediately hidden as his own dust caught up with him. When the yellow fog cleared, the loafers stared appraisingly at the stranger's rig and, by riata and saddle, knew that he came from the north.

Lee spurred the buckskin closer to the porch. "Can any of you tell me where I can find Harvey Dodge?"

An ancient looked intently at him and then removed a pipe from his toothless mouth. "Say, now, ain't you Tom Weston's boy? Tom was in town last night. I reckon you'll find him out at his spread."

"Tom Weston is dead," said Lee. "I'm looking for Harvey Dodge."

The old man shook his head, wisely avoiding any taking of sides in what he immediately saw as a coming feud. "Reckon you better ask Tate Randall. He's sheriff here now. That's his office down the street."

Lee swept his cold glance over the men on the porch. They fidgeted, but took their cue from the old one.

"Much obliged," said Lee heavily. He swung down and led his horse toward the low 'dobe structure, half office and half jail, which housed law and order in Pecos, New Mexico.

A leather-faced, sun-dried individual with a star on his chest was drowsing over a stack of reward posters, waking up occasionally to swat at a fly which buzzed around his ear. But the instant a shadow appeared in the door, Tate Randall, through long and self-preserving habit, swiftly came to life,

one hand half stretched out as a welcoming gesture and the other on the Colt at his side. His bleached eyes squinted as he inspected Lee.

“Say! You’re Lee Weston!”

“Right,” said Lee.

“Thought you was up in Wyomin’ someplace havin’ a hell of a time for yourself! Bet old Tom’ll be plenty pleased to see you again. Used to stand down by the post office and read us your letters whenever you wrote. I thought—”

“My father was killed last night. The house was burned and the stock run off. I’m giving it to you straight, Randall. I’m looking for Harvey Dodge.”

“Huh? Why, man, you must be loco! Harvey Dodge came in and bought the biggest spread in the valley. He’s probably the biggest rancher in these parts now. *He* wouldn’t do nothin’ like that!”

“I’m still looking for Harvey Dodge.”

Tate Randall stood up and shook his head. “Sonny, I’ve burned enough powder to run a war, and I’ve shot enough lead to sink a flatboat. If I had it to do over again, I’d use my head and let the law do the findin’ and shootin’. If you go gunnin’ for Dodge without any more evidence than you’ve got, there’s only one thing that’ll happen to you. We’ll be building a scaffold out here to string you up. Now think it over. You’n me can ride out and look over this killin’ and then—”

In disgust, Lee, turning, started toward the door. But it was blocked by a smooth-shaven, rotund gentleman in a frock coat. Lee saw eyes and hands and thought, “Gambler!”

“What’s up, Tate?”

“Doherty, like to have you meet Lee Weston, old Tom’s boy.”

Ace Doherty extended a be-diamonded hand, which Lee took doubtfully.

“Doherty,” continued Tate Randall, “this young feller is about to go on the gun trail for Harvey Dodge. You can back me up that Harvey ain’t in town.”

“No, he’s not around,” said Doherty dutifully. “You’ve got Dodge wrong, youngster. He wouldn’t pull any gun tricks, like killin’ your old man.”

“I don’t recall telling you that my father was dead,” said Lee.

“Heard it at the store,” replied Doherty. “Well, cool him off, Tate. You’re the law and order in these parts.” He walked away.

Lee faced Randall again. “It’s all right to try to cut me down to size, but there’s only one thing that counts with me right now, Randall. Last night about twenty men jumped my father. He wrote me his only enemy here was this Harvey Dodge. I’m talking to Dodge.”

“Well,” shrugged Randall, “if you don’t trust justice, you don’t trust it, that’s all. Trouble with you gunslingers—”

“I don’t happen to *be* a gunslinger.”

Randall grinned thinly, looking at the well-worn Colts on the younger man’s thighs. “Maybe I heard different.”

“Maybe you did,” said Lee. “But in Wyoming, it hasn’t been fixed yet that courts and sheriffs can be used by crooks.”

“Maybe you’d better take that back, son.”

“I’ll reserve judgment on that. But everybody is taking this too calm. The whole town has known for hours what happened out on the Lightning W, and you’re still sitting here!”

He ignored the sudden challenge in the old gunfighter's eyes and turned his back upon him to stride out into the hot sunlight. The first thing he noticed was that the street was deserted, even to the loafers on the porch of the general store. He tensed, seeing that a puncher had just led a favored bronc well out of harm's way.

Lee's steps were measured as he approached his buckskin. But things were far from right. He felt a cold chill course down his spine, and turned to face the porch of the Silver Streak Saloon. A thickset man was standing there, arms hanging loosely level with his gun butts. He was unshaven and dirty, but for all that, there was an air of authority about him.

"You lookin' for Dodge, fella?"

Lee came to a stop. "Got anything to offer?"

"Yeah," drawled the man on the porch.

And then it happened. Like a snake striking, the fellow's hands grabbed guns. Lee leaped to the right, flipping his Colts free. Thunder roared from the porch, and then Lee hammered lead through the pall of smoke which drifted between them.

A pair of boots dropped into sight under the white cloud. Slowly the gunman sagged to the earth, both hands clutched across his stomach, still holding his guns. He made one last effort to fire, but the shot ploughed dust. He lay still.

Lee saw doors swing wide on the other side of the street. Three punchers leaped forth, taking one startled glance at the dead man and then grabbing for their guns.

Across the way, another door opened, to show the muzzle

of a Winchester. Lee saw that he had too many on too many sides. He jammed his toe into the buckskin's stirrup and swung over. Shots crashed and a slug almost ripped him from the saddle. Another struck, and his leg went numb.

Valiantly he fired toward the punchers, making them duck for an instant. He dug spur and sped down the street, the Winchester making the air crackle above his head.

Hanging grimly to his horn, his face white with strain, he guided the running buckskin out into the prairie and then north, toward the hill that loomed blue in the distance.

Lee knew that he had only started. The man on the Silver Streak porch had been too young to be Harvey Dodge. He knew that he had just started, but with his life pouring redly from two wounds, he knew that the chances were high against his ever finishing anything but living.