



Chapter One

THE LAST CHANCE SALOON

Chip McGraw stood at the counter of the Last Chance Saloon.

"Barman, get me a lemonade - on the rocks," he drawled.

"How do you like it, cowboy?" asked the barman.

"In a dirty glass," replied the cowboy.

Where Chip McGraw came from, nobody drank lemonade from a clean glass.

"Do you want nuts, cowboy?" asked the barman, wiping the glass on his dirty shirt-tail.

"Yup, that'd be mighty fine, partner," replied Chip.

"Shells off or shells on?" asked the barman.

"Shells on," said the cowboy, not looking up.

Where Chip McGraw came from, nobody ate nuts with the shells taken off.

Chip McGraw leaned on the dark wood counter. He took a long swig on his lemonade. Taking a handful of nuts he cracked the shells with his teeth and spat them on the dusty floor of the Last Chance Saloon.



Chip McGraw wore a leather waistcoat over a faded, checked shirt. On his head he wore a white Stetson hat pulled low over his eyes. His jeans were blue denim, buckled

with a wide, leather belt. A pair of silver spurs were fastened to his brown, cow-hide boots.

And, slung low on his waist, he carried a leather holster.

It was empty.

Where Chip McGraw came from, no one ever carried a gun.

Just then Chip heard the swing doors go. He took another swig on his lemonade and put down his glass. Pushing his Stetson back a little, he glanced up. Behind the counter there was a long mirror the length of the saloon.

Chip took in the scene: the glasses stacked along the mirrored wall; several round tables scattered about the room; four men playing cards in the corner.



The stranger in the doorway was just a shadow against the bright sunlight spilling in from the main street.

Chip saw the barman move away and duck down behind the counter. The four men in the corner put down their cards.

The stranger was dressed like most other cowboys in the saloon: checked shirt, waist-coat, faded jeans. Only one thing was different: a red Stetson hat. The Crimson Cowboy was in town.

"Step outside, partner," said the Crimson Cowboy.

Chip finished his lemonade.

"Turn around," drawled the newcomer.

"I haven't finished my peanuts, yet," replied Chip.

"You ain't got time for peanuts, partner," said the Crimson Cowboy. "Just turn around."

Chip looked up into the mirror. The Crimson Cowboy folded back his coat-tails and Chip saw the glint of silver in his holster. Chip knew the Crimson Cowboy packed a Smith and Wesson 45 in his gun holster. Chip knew that there would be ten red bullets tucked into the belt.

In a blur of speed, the Crimson Cowboy went for his gun.

Chip McGraw turned. A length of rope came snaking from his hand. The Crimson Cowboy gave a yelp of surprise as his feet disappeared from under him. The noose tightened about his ankles and Chip McGraw hauled the struggling bundle across the dusty floor, and out of the swing doors. With a flick of his wrist Chip threw his end of the rope over the wooden sign that read, Last Chance Saloon.

Nearby, a horse was slowly munching on a cactus. Chip tied the end of the lasso to the saddle of the horse and slapped it gently on the bottom. The horse trotted a few steps and stopped.

The Crimson Cowboy was lifted, struggling wildly, into the air. And there he hung by his feet, bits of string, chewing-gum wrappers and a tennis ball spilling from his pockets.

"Hey," called out the Crimson Cowboy. "Aren't you going to hang around?"

Chip stopped. "I think you're the one who's hanging around, partner," he grinned. As Chip McGraw turned away he tripped and stumbled on a large stone in the middle of the road.

He hit the ground with a thud

...and his head rolled off.

