

FLAME IN THE FOREST by Harold Titus

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CHAPTER XI

NOW Nat Bridger, the sheriff, though a man large in stature, was small in heart and soul.

He was alone in his office when West entered the corridor. Tod glanced around at the barred door to the bullpen straight ahead with a man standing against it, holding one hand against the other gingerly.

"Hullo, Dick!" West said to the prisoner. "Heard you drank too much of your own hooch! What alls the hand?"

"Blood poison'," the man growled. "Most drives me crazy! Doc Adams says it's better, but it don't seem so to me."

The voices had attracted the sheriff who came to the doorway.

"Oh hul-lo, Tod!" he cried. "Good lord, what happened to you!" he demanded as West followed him in to where the light was better. "Why, Tod, you're all swoll up!"

He was, in truth, badly swollen. His face was lop-sided and even the left eye slightly puffed.

"Dam' hornets got me yesterday," he said. "Was fishin' up Big Beaver and kicked 'em out of a stump. They sure are good at their job!"

"I'll say so! But what brings you here?" he asked. "Anything I can do for you, Tod?"

"Well, not for me, mebbly," Tod said "but I heard somethin' the other night that I kind of figure you ought to know."

"Yeah?"

"Yes." You know Bluejay, don't you? Thought so. Kind of scum, Frank is. He's worked for me off and on 'nd I don't trust him much, for there's things about him . . . For instance, he's always snoopin', always sees things.

"He's been camped out north of us pickin' berries and comes in most every night. Well, night before last he came to me to get a little he had comin', and I got visitin' and he told me something kind of suspicious.

"He says he'd been lookin' for berries north of Townline lake Thursday and long about sundown swung past that Downer cabin on hk way back to camp. He says he heard something that sounded like poundin' inside."

A little draft through the open transom above fluttered his grayin' hair and the lone prisoner in the bull-pen leaned closer against the bars, straining to listen.

"He peeked through the window and, Nat, he says he saw young Holt Stuart on his knees in a corner takin' money out of a tin box he's got buried under the floor!"

He watched the look of amazement spread swiftly over the sheriff's face.

"Stuart?" he asked in surprise. "Stuart, takin' money out of a tin box buried under the floor? . . . My God, Tod! . . . Why . . . 'Nd he was in that cabin the night Cash was shot!"

"Of course, Nat, you're not dumb!"

"Ezra was so damned sure that that ankle had been sprained the night Cash was killed and that the kid couldn't 've gotten out . . . Oh, well! The best of us'll make mistakes."

Bridger's face was gray with excitement. "Nobody else knows this?"

"Not a soul, far's I know. I told Bluejay to keep his mouth shut."

Bridger began to pace the floor in agitation.

"It won't do to go alone. Takin' a man as a murder suspect ain't a simple matter. As a matter of duty, I'd ought to have my deputy with me."

"Yes, and then some, maybe."

"Would you go along, Tod?"

"Anything I can do I'd feel it my duty to do." He rose. "Tell you

what: I've got to drag along home. I might hear somethin' there. I'll be waitin' when you and Butch show up."

"And that'll be as quick as I can get hold of him. I'll try it by telephone. . . ."

So it was that when Ezra Adams, rusty black bag in his hand, mounted the jail steps to make a call on his patient there, he heard the story the prisoner had heard.

Kerry Young, dog at his heels, crossed the trestle toward West's Landing.

A car stood before Tod West's house. A group lounged before the store.

Tod West, within, had his back to the sheriff and his deputy. They had not seen Young's passing but West had and for a moment the man felt panic come again into possession of his faculties.

Young, alive and in town? . . . And when he returned from Shoe-string at noon Bluejay had been waiting for him with word that Young was forever removed from the Mad Woman! The 'breed had collected his money, too — two twenties and a ten.

Frank Bluejay had been so sure; had told Tod West of how Young had gone down into the deep waters of Townline lake; of how his dog had swum round and round the drifting canoe and finally struck out for shore.

A shaking rage gripped him. The Indian had lied, then!

"We'd ought to be gone, Tod!" So, Bridger, breaking in on his swift train of speculation and doubt and suspicion. "He might light out. . . ."

"Ready soon," he said thickly.

Young was now out of Tod West's sight, but in full view of Frank Bluejay, sitting in a chair tilted against the store wall.

Kerry had been in full sight of the man for, perhaps, ten seconds, standing there in the doorway, surveying the dozen people in the establishment. This his gaze came to rest on the 'breed.

Bluejay's one foot had been swinging idly. On Young's appearance the arc it made diminished. More and more slowly it swung until it came to rest and during that interval the man's jaw sagged.

He sat so, gaping, unmoving, and then his chair came down to all four legs with a thud while the heritage of the Indian in him, all the superstition and regard for legend, swirled upward to possess him completely.

No one else had noticed this; did not until Young spoke, easily enough:

"Are you surprised, Bluejay?"

He laughed, then, and the laughter was hard, menacing laughter.

Slowly, Bluejay rose to his feet, hands behind him, shoving on the chair back to aid his weakened leg muscles. A luminous fear danced in the black eyes.

"Surprised, eh?" Kerry began to advance. "That's what I came for, Bluejay, to see who'd be surprised!"

The man was retreating, now, hands spread against the wall, sidling along, making for the rear. He did not speak, though his lips worked.

Kerry moved faster and as the 'breed turned, left off his touch on the painted boards and, half staggering, lurched down the room, was upon him.

"I didn't!" Bluejay gasped as Young's hand fastened on his shirt at the shoulders, spinning him around. "I . . . I didn' . . ." he moaned.

"Didn't what?" Kerry's voice was like the crack of a whip. "Didn't what?"—insistently when no reply was forthcoming.

He let go an arm and his hard fingers grasped the 'breed's throat.

Beseechingly, Bluejay let drop something he had held in one hand and grasped Young's wrists.

"Don't!" he moaned. "Don't, Young! I . . . I didn' . . ."

His knees were sagging, but Kerry held the man half erect by his throat.

"You lie!" he growled. "You lie, Bluejay! You're guilty as hell. And what you're going to do is this!"

"You're going out of this country as fast as the good God will let you! And if you ever show up again,"—shaking him slowly—"if you show your face here so long as I'm here I'll strangle you to death as sure as water runs down hill! Now . . . do you understand?"

With a sideways fling, he let the man go. Bluejay sprawled on the floor, but before he came to rest he was scrambling to his feet, circling to be away from Young. Toward the door he scuttled and down the steps he ran. . . .

As Kerry stopped to pick up that which the 'breed had dropped, the sputter and roar of a motor could be heard and when he smoothed out the bill and searched its crisp surface for the serial number, gears whined and a battered flyver stirred the dust of the street as Bluejay started for somewhere else with all the speed he could wring from the ancient contraption.

Mel Knight came from behind the counter. Men who had been outside were entering, curiosity aroused by Bluejay's flight.

"My gosh, Kerry, you sure put a crimp in that Injun!" Knight said



His Hard Fingers Grasped the 'Breed's Throat.

with a queer grin. "I'd like to bet he won't be seen here again. . . . My gosh, what made him look so scared afore you made a move?"

"Dam' right he won't come back!" said another.

"Did yuh see him grab him?" a third asked at large. "I thought he was a-goin' to squeeze his wizen in twist!"

Young gave no heed to these observations or questions. He knew certain serial numbers by heart. This was one; a twenty-dollar bill of a certain series, crisp, unused.

For a moment he was impelled to tell what had happened this morning on Townline lake, but as he drew breath to speak car brakes squealed outside and Ezra Adams' voice, curiously strained, called sharply:

"Has anybody happened to see Kerry Young?"

Kerry looked through the doorway at Ezra's face.

"Hi, Ezra!" he called, starting forward. "What's up?"

As quickly and as clearly as he could, Ezra told the story that the prisoner had told him.

"A frame-up on Stuart!" muttered Young. "Good God, West's hand is in this. Why, unless we beat 'em to it, they're going to make the rottenest kind of trouble for Holt!"

The thing which hurt him with the acuteness of physical pain was this:

Before sundown, Nan Downer was to see her lover led away to jail as a suspect in the murder of her father.

"And they've gone!" Ezra rasped. "They crossed th' wagon bridge just as I made the turn: Bridger 'nd Butch, his deputy, 'nd Tod West! They're bound for the cabin sure as you're born and—"

"Get out of that seat!" snapped Young.

Roughly, he shoved the old man from beneath the wheel, and stepped in to his place.

"Hang on!" said Kerry as, throwing in the clutch, he spun the car about, headed down-stream, lurched into the ruts leading to the wagon bridge and shot across with a roar.

Up-stream, then, past Nan's mill, behind headquarters and into the road the sheriff's car had followed.

Young's brows were drawn. He divided this attention between the theory forming in his mind and the treacherous ruts and chuck holes of the road.

"Listen, Ezra!" he said, "we've got to get to that cabin before they do, hold 'em off, see what's been planted there, keep Stuart from arrest."

Their way was now through an old burning where the ruts ran straight and the chuck holes were few. With foot throttle down to the floor-boards, Kerry shoved the little car. For a mile they traveled at high speed and then, brakes on, stirred vast dust clouds as they skidded for a left turn into a dim trail.

"Here! Where you—that's the only way!"

"It was, Ezra, until a few weeks ago. Beaver dam's out. I came through here on foot this morning."

Down grade they went; down into a cattail bottom.

He slowed as they reached the creek bed, eased the front wheels gingerly up on the water-bleached corduroy, held his breath as the car's weight slowly went on the structure and then, as it gave and crackled beneath them, gave the motor everything it would take.

The spinning wheels found purchase. They crawled forward, slewed sideways and finally, with a bump and a bounce, were away from the culvert, roaring for the high land beyond.

"Made her!" Kerry yelled, "and we'll have most a half hour before they can get to the cabin by the good road."

They were ahead of Bridger and his companions, for certain, but they had not gained a whole half hour. The one tire, frayed by its tussle on the culvert, went down and they made the last two miles of sand trail through the timber on a flat.

Young was out of the car before the motor stopped spinning.

He strode to the door, threw it open and paused.

"See that dirt?" he asked, pointing to the trickle of dust across the floor.

The doctor's old eyes followed his pointing finger, traced the stringer of fine lumps and granules across to the far corner.

"That's where it'd 've been," he muttered, glancing at the one window. "Bluejay said he looked through the window. It's the only corner he could see handy."

"And he said he saw Holt in here about sun-down, Thursday?"

"As I recollect it."

"A plant for sure! I was in here about then, Thursday. The floor was clean, Ezra. But today . . . this stuff was here. Let's go!"

He was on his knees beside the two short sections of flooring, eyeing them closely.

"See? Here's where they were pried up with something," he said excitedly. "Then they dug a hole

for the box and carried it out; maybe in a bucket or paper . . . anything. But either careless or what they leaked. That's why they the floor. . . . Now!"

He reached for an at against the wall, inserted in a crack between boards pried carefully.

"Ah!" The nails gave way. They may be evidence. . . . we go!"

He began scooping some of which crumbled in the handling. Then his hands suddenly touched Ezra, stooping far over him quickly. With care Young his fingers beneath the ed, and out it came, a dirt flat box of japanned metal.

"Cash's box!" the physician muttered; and . . .

His voice trailed off in as Kerry tugged at the cover. Was the money would forever put Nan Downer yond the reach of Tod West? Was emancipation for this get?

The catch gave; the cover and Ezra's low moan joined sound of a swiftly appearing car.

"Only that!" he said faintly.

"Three of 'em," muttered "Three hundred-dollar bills!"

"And the rest of it p beyond—"

"Not for sure! This is remember. He'd put only here to pin the thing on But —scrutinizing the bills —the proper numbers. The rest is cached somewhere yet!

"And here they come!" The motor swung into the ing, its motor died and a re sharply:

"What th' hell?"

Other voices sounded, Then they heard the word bus . . ."

"What'll we do now?" a man whispered.

"Stand pat!" Kerry closing the box; closing it and ping the cover up again quite stare at the inside surface and glossy, its lacquer still A curious smile of triumph his eyes as he raised his ha.

"Ezra, this is your invest Don't let 'em get their hands piece of this evidence beca—"

It was Nat Bridger, through the door.

"What comes off here?" manded and stopped, pointed within the roof, frowning. "You, Ezra!" His ready dropped from the hip. "You're eh?"

"Yes," the coroner said, up his spectacles. "Yes, Nat, afternoon! Howdy, Butch!" —the deputy appeared.

Bridger turned to his nate and then looked past Tod West who approached as if, perhaps, he were not sure of how to conduct him.

"Well, this is a surpris sheriff growled. "How come here, Ezra?"

"Official business, Nat. I tip this afternoon that there'd be somethin' of interest the coroner of this county in camp. 'Nd I guess, mebbly, wasn't so far wrong."

At that point Tod West himself in the doorway. He there and his eyes rested at stand on the old physician, as if he forced himself to deal, they swung to Kerry, if he expected to find challenge accusation on Young's face be wrong.

"They heard it too, Tod!" Bridger and in his voice was appeal for guidance, perhaps.

But West's mind was not He was thinking things, things, trying, in his swift ing, to encompass all the possible to this situation.

"Frank probably peddled story," West said.

Bridger now moved closer Young and his deputy followed.

(TO BE CONTINUED)