

FOR THE RECORD



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JENNINGS



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Bob and Glenda Jennings
in honor of
their crowning achievement





CHAPTER I



October 1885
Pine Gap, Missouri

Only a limited patch of Earth could claim the privilege of belonging to Texas. Not that he despised the rest of the world for its misfortune, but there was a difference.

Deputy Joel Puckett dropped his saddlebags on the platform of the depot and surveyed the wall of mountains that surrounded the valley. He hadn't seen all of Texas. It'd take more years than his twenty-four to visit every town from the badlands of El Paso to the swamps of Beaumont, but he knew now that a native Texan could sense when he'd been separated from his homeland, and he felt the loss keenly.

The train's chugging had ceased to thunder through the hills, and yet no one came out of the depot to greet him. Rustling started at the top of the hill as a gust worked its way down the mountain, tumbling autumn leaves across the rocky expanse in front of the train station. The stars had already appeared above the mountain, and the air was cooling. Joel lifted his Stetson and ruffled his hair. According to Governor Marmaduke, the people here were desperate for help, begging for relief from the

outlaws who razed their homesteads. So if they were anxiously awaiting his arrival, where were they?

His boots echoed on the platform as he strode to the depot building and rattled the door. Locked. The brim of his hat bumped against the glass as he peered through the lone window but found no one. No help coming from that quarter.

Joel scanned the dense woods that surrounded him, but couldn't make out anything in the darkness. He picked up his saddlebags and studied the rocky road that passed along the railroad tracks. When they'd arranged for him to ride the train, he hadn't counted on being afoot once he arrived. He should have insisted on bringing his horse. Who knew what kind of mount they'd be able to provide? For now he'd have to make use of his own two feet. Uphill or downhill? Which would take him to civilization sooner?

The sounds shifted. Joel froze as his hearing instinctively separated the routine noises from the new element. Years of tracking had honed his senses so that any change alerted him. An unknown entity had entered the area and was even now racing toward him.

Hooves on rocks. Many hooves. Voices raised, calling to each other not in anger but in a boisterous excitement that usually preceded acts of derring-do. They were coming down the hill fast. Most men would've stepped out of sight until they knew what they were facing, but the thought never occurred to Joel. His hand flexed at his side, and he didn't have to check that his six-shooter was in place. His feet were spread wide in classic gunslinger pose. What if he was in over his head? What if he'd made a mistake? With the horses barreling out of the trees, it was too late to second-guess himself.

His blood chilled at the sight of the first rider—a torch-toting apparition straight from hell, complete with a disfigured, blackened face and horns. As more of them raced from the trees,

Joel realized the masks were burlap sacks, holes cut out for eyes and marked with white paint to make terrifying faces. Cones had been attached at the corners like horns, tassels streaming in the wind from their tips.

Hooting and hollering, the riders raced into the clearing, straight at him. Who were they? If they meant him harm, he was hopelessly outnumbered. With coats turned inside out and socks over their boots, the only identifying markings would've been those of their horses, but even they looked to be rubbed with soot. Dozens of them appeared, some waving a bundle of switches in one hand instead of a torch, but they paid him no mind. Streaming past the depot, they continued their ghastly calling as if he were of no more consequence than the squirrels darting about for acorns beneath the oaks.

Instead of being relieved, Joel fumed. He was not used to being ignored. As the men were disappearing into the trees, he cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered a challenge.

“Hey! Don’t you see me standing here, or are y’all afraid to stop?”

He was downright affronted that no one thought enough of him to break stride.

Save one.

Just before his horse dipped out of sight, one man reined hard to the left. Gravel flew as his horse cut and circled around the depot clearing. The man was massive, and the loose sack over his head only added to his bulky profile. One of his horns had twisted and pointed down like a crazed bull’s. His horse plunged its head, wanting to rejoin the herd, but the masked man held it steady and steered it directly toward Joel.

With the disguise, Joel couldn’t make out much about the man besides his size and his attitude. A leader—definitely. Fearless and arrogant. Someone he’d lock horns with sooner or later.

Might as well be sooner.

Joel stepped to the edge of the platform and looked down on the rider. Every nerve was taut. Every sense sharpened.

The man's expression was not visible through the mask. He shifted in his saddle, and before Joel knew it, he felt the cold wooden handle of his own gun in his palm. But the man hadn't drawn a gun on him. Instead of bullets flying his way, a bundle of switches skidded across the platform and landed at Joel's feet.

One glance to see they posed no threat, and then Joel had the rider back in his sights.

The man's horse pranced as the noise of the other riders faded into the woods.

"A bundle of sticks?" Joel said. "What's that supposed to mean? Who are you?"

The white painted circle over the masked man's mouth distorted and stretched with his answer. "I'm the law."

Turning his horse, the rider spurred it, and they shot off like a cannonball to catch their companions, thundering across the clearing and ducking where the road entered the woods.

Joel's scalp crawled. Releasing a long breath, he holstered his gun and only then allowed himself to consider what could've happened. They'd warned him that the mountains were dangerous. He'd thought the risk better than the fate that faced him at home, but now he wasn't sure. Whatever he'd expected on his arrival, this wasn't it.

Nope. This definitely wasn't Texas.