

Chapter Three

JOURNEY OF CONSEQUENCE

*The country, your companions, and the length of your journey
will afford a hundred compensations for your toil.*

—OVID

MANY WERE THE WAYS, BROAD AND STRAIT, trod out upon the trails of Texas. Trails renowned and trails obscure emerged upon the land, born of the myriad imprints of foot, hoof, and wheel: first a single set of prints, then another, and another, countless prints matched to human wills, wills intent on their separate ways, some to loom large in the annals of history, multiples more to be forgotten. Remembered or forgotten, these ways shared a profound importance, as each determined the ultimate success or failure of a singular human being graced with a supernatural destiny. The trails were but lines worn into the face of the wilderness, now province, now state, now nation, now state; but the ways trod out upon those trails, each determined by a human will reaching through intentions toward desired ends, with allowance for circumstances, were journeys of consequence.

At the end of August 1877, members of the Stuart-Schurtz party joined their individual ways in a common goal to journey toward consequences common and individual. Pulling away from home and its holds of love, of memories, of the fruits of labor, they merged their ways onto the Western Trail, their great journey made somehow small upon a trail renowned for epochal migrations of man and beast.

Small upon the trail, small upon the land, small against its time, and yet their souls opened large enough for all of it. The key, of course, was freedom. They were free, at least relatively free for human beings still bound in the temporal phase of life. They owed nothing material to any other human beings. What they had was theirs, and they had enough, enough to supply their needs and even some desires beyond need, though not so much as to compromise freedom with excess. They had broken abruptly with the past, its concerns falling farther away behind them with each passing mile, each passing hour. The concerns of the future lay far off in a place and time unknown to them. Still, this was not a false freedom without responsibility, which becomes the most subtle and insidious bondage, but the true freedom of accepting responsibility, indeed of taking responsibility for their destinies, and of accepting the incumbent lesser responsibilities meted out in the routine and manageable doses of the trail's daily chores, each with its immediate and visible reward, however humble, and all, in combination, laying the groundwork for the potentially life-changing reward at trail's end.

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