

## PROLOGUE

**G**et out and don't ever come back!"

Clint couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could his wife be so angry with him? Sure, he had cheated before.

But each time he was caught, he was able to alter his ways long enough for her to change her mind and let him stay.

It was different this time. Not only had he been caught in his most recent affair but had that woman with him when he wrecked his pickup and got arrested for driving under the influence. His lawyer told him since it was his third DUI, he may have to spend a few months in jail and he was sure to lose his driver's license permanently, though it had already been temporarily suspended. Life was spinning out of

control.

Clint didn't see himself as being that different from other hands on the ranch. Most of the men he knew liked to drink and several of them ran around on their wives. It was true he took his fun to a higher degree than most. In fact, he partied most weekends and even a few evenings during the week. He is about average in height with a ruddy complexion and a hawk-like nose. His rugged good looks brought out a vanity that caused him to never miss a chance to check himself out in a mirror. He knew he was attractive to women and took advantage of it.

He guessed things got worse when he realized he could get a nice high on pills without having to hear his wife tell him he smelled like a brewery. At first, he just did the pills a few days each week. Before long he was using every day. They didn't affect his work so far as he knew. He was able to keep a little buzz going without being noticeably under the influence. In the evenings he would drink, usually at one of the several bars in Bandera.

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Bandera is not a big city. The population, according to

the sign at the edge of town, is 957. The city keeps a pretty careful count as families move in and move out, but the population has remained stable for decades. It is called the “Cowboy Capital of the World” because it claims to have more world champion cowboys as residents than any other city and also because of the large number of dude ranches in the area. It didn’t become an incorporated city until 1964 and remains the only incorporated city in the county by the same name.

The name Bandera is Spanish for “flag.” Polish immigrants founded it in the mid-1800s. Located in the Texas Hill Country, it is about fifty miles northwest of San Antonio. Known for hot, humid summers, the unrelenting heat could fry an egg on the sidewalk on most days in the summer. But the spring and fall months are so temperate that this remains one of the most popular destinations in Texas.

Main Street is the site of most of the city’s businesses. In a several block stretch, stores sell antiques, western wear, auto parts, and barbecue, and assorted cafés sell steaks, Mexican food, as well as Chinese and Italian food; along with a washeteria, several banks, and as many churches—though most of the churches are relegated to the side

streets. There is a dollar store, a Christmas store (must be a popular holiday in this town), even more banks (do people have so much money here that they need more banks?), hardware stores, a car wash, liquor stores, country stores, general stores (what's the difference?), a few gas stations, several pharmacies, some paint and body shops (they stay very busy fixing the many vehicles that have collided with one of the abundant deer in the area), realty offices that advertise ranches for sale, a taxidermist or two, and more fast food restaurants than can be counted. There is also a library, post office, museum, fire department, and city offices. All of this is in a downtown area that is no more than a mile long. But if you look for the police department, you will not find it because the city council decided since Bandera is the Cowboy Capital of the World, they should rename it the Marshal's Office. So instead of a police chief, the city has a marshal. Instead of police officers, there are deputy marshals. There is no jail, so the marshal's office uses the county jail at the county Justice Center. In front of the marshal's office is a planter that is made to look like a well-worn cowboy boot. It looks right at home in this western town.

In the general store downtown there is often a local

musician playing and singing. Sometimes the only people in the store are the musician's wife and the storekeeper—but he plays with gusto as though a thousand adoring fans are listening. Recently, he was joined by a guitarist from Wisconsin who fell in love with the area and stayed, not for the day as he planned, but for three weeks. He comes in the general store and puts out a tip jar and plays for hours, often for no tips. Then he goes to the local RV park and plays and collects fifteen to twenty dollars in an evening of entertainment. He was happy and so were those who comprised his tiny audience.

The courthouse was built in 1890 from locally quarried stone. It has been the center of town life since it was built but today only has a couple of people who office there. The cupola on the courthouse features clock faces on all four sides. However, the structure has never contained a clock. All four faces are painted so it appears to be perpetually ten minutes after ten o'clock. Today, most of the offices as well as court functions have been relocated to the Bandera County Justice Center located a few miles out of town.

Even though the old courtroom is seldom used, it still has rules posted:

1. Dress Code

- a. No shirts with inappropriate languages or images. (One wonders if languages other than English are not allowed.)
  - b. Shoes must be worn.
  - c. No hats or caps worn in the courtroom.
  - d. No plunging necklines, open backs, or strapless shirts.
  - e. No exposed midriffs.
  - f. No shorts above knee length or cutoffs allowed.
2. Cell phones, pagers, and electronic devices must be turned off completely before entering the courtroom.
  3. No show of affection in the courtroom.
  4. No cameras or recording equipment in the courtroom.
  5. No food or drink in the courtroom.

Any person violating these rules is subject to being held in Contempt of Court.

Clearly, Bandera takes court seriously.

## CHAPTER 1: PATIENCE

*“Patience is waiting. Not passively waiting.  
That is laziness.  
But to keep going when the going  
is hard and slow – that is patience.”  
~ Unknown*



Cowboy. For some it is a term of derision. It's used to indicate someone was not known for taking stock of a situation but would just react and "cowboy" his way through. For others, it is used to indicate a person who was not yet full-grown and a bit less than a mature man. But, to the many who have ridden the range now or in generations past, cowboy is a name to be proud of; a word that conveys a person is a rugged individual who has a sense of pride and an even deeper sense of integrity. A true cowboy is not someone who wears fancy jeans or western store shirts that come out of Hollywood. Real cowboys—Texas cowboys—work from before dawn until after dusk for little pay, building fence, caring for cattle, and upholding the code of the old west—the code of their forefathers. They are men who have adapted to the necessity of embracing modern technology, but will gladly park their pickups and holster their cell phones as they saddle up for another long day on horseback doing work they love.

Today's cowboy is a blend of renaissance man, pioneer, jack-of-all-trades, and good ole boy. Some make fun of him. Others envy him. But what today's cowboy knows is, ranches can't run without him and his kind. Today's cowboy is a dying breed but also a resilient creature who delights in giving a hard day's work and is known to tip back a few cold ones after the sun goes down.

Meet Clint Hazard. He's a modern-day cowboy who believes he was born one hundred and fifty years too late. He daydreams about living in the old west, when things were simpler, where the measure of a man was in how hard and how long he worked. Clint dislikes computers, cell phones, and other forms of modern technology, though he has to use them on his work at the H&F Ranch. Everything

on the ranch is inventoried and that inventory, along with every part of the ranch operation, is kept on computer. At a glance, the owners can tell how many head of cattle they have, where on the ranch they are located, how much oil is being pumped from each well, the condition of the irrigation system, and which water wells are due for pump maintenance.

Clint is about five feet and nine inches tall. He walks with a bit of a limp thanks to being thrown too many times when he rodeoed. His face is dark brown from the many years he's spent working in the sun. He's lean to the point of being skinny and is always moving like he's full of nervous energy. Women find Clint to be ruggedly handsome—which continues to lead him into trouble. He sees himself as a good-hearted, God-fearing, family man who is a top cowboy. It is true he runs around with other women, but he still considers himself a pretty good husband.

He's smart. Clint could have completed college, but he found it hard to tone down his partying and do any studying. He flunked out after a year at Blinn College—a junior college in nearby Brenham—and moved back to Bandera. Married his high school sweetheart. Had a son within a year. His wife loved him in the past but got tired of his unfaithfulness. She didn't like the way he flirted with her friends and the off-color jokes he told in mixed company. He could be short-tempered, prone to violence, quick with his fists, but quicker with a sharp retort.

Clint is a cheater—he cheats on his wife and at cards. Always believes the deck is stacked against him. He justifies his unfaithfulness because he's a hard-worker and a good provider. Clint is also a hard-drinker. He never drinks when he is working but knows he is not worth much many mornings after a long night of drinking and carousing. He takes pride that he can drink more than most of the other hands and still pull more than his weight when it comes to work on the ranch. Clint secretly fears what life will be like in the future. He wonders how long it will take him to completely self-destruct. At times like this, he doesn't like himself much, even though he acts like he's the most confident man around. He keeps these thoughts secret—and most of the time, he keeps them secret from himself.

Clint is good at his job. Out of seventy-five or so hands at the H&F Ranch, he feels he is among the best. And many of the younger hands look up to him. The work is hard, but he loves it.

He is the assistant to the section boss, Micah Goodfellow. They have worked side by side since arriving at the H&F. He and Micah get along well. They have known each other all their lives. When they graduated high school twenty-five years before, they both got jobs on the H&F. In the past they used to party together. They even chased women together. But some kind of change had taken place with Micah. He's not been the same for most of the past year.

Micah has a strong enough physical resemblance to Clint that they are often asked if they're brothers. A couple of inches shorter than Clint, Micah outweighs him by several pounds. Like all the ranch hands, he's solid muscle.

Clint always thinks of himself as a cowboy's cowboy. He works harder, drinks longer, cheats with more women, and is mostly lucky any time he plays poker. Days are for working. Nights are for fun. Both are filled to capacity. But, his wife had finally had enough of his cheating and kicked him out. What's worse is that his son will not speak to him—he has to work with his son Tripp. No one had to tell Clint that Tripp was following in his footsteps. He knew Tripp partied hard and had learned it from his dad.

Clint dreaded having to tell Micah that he wrecked his pickup and his wife had kicked him out. Clint got a room in a run-down motel called Better Days Lodge. It was actually a very old motor court, held over from fifty years earlier. In the early days of Bandera, there was a hotel downtown that was called the Better Days Hotel. The rundown lodge on the edge of town held no resemblance to the once regal hotel. Clint wondered if anyone else saw the irony in the name of the dilapidated motel. Three hundred dollars a month was more than he wanted to spend on a room, but he reasoned it was just ten bucks a night. All in all, pretty cheap accommodations. And cheap was the word for it. The room was several steps down from frugal. It was not far from where Micah lived so Clint hoped he could bum a ride to work each day

since he totaled his truck and lost his license.

When Clint called Micah and told him the most recent chapter in his never-ending saga, Micah just listened and didn't say much. At the end of the conversation, Micah said, "Sure, I'll give you a ride. Not a problem. I'll be by at five in the morning."

"I'll be waiting out front. And Micah, I really 'preciate this."

"Don't mention it."

Clint should have been promoted many years before, but he continued to act like he did when he was twenty. He has a defiant streak that causes him to challenge anyone who doesn't agree with him and question most orders he's given. If it were not for the fact that he probably works harder than anyone on the ranch, he would have been fired long ago.