

CHAPTER 5: HUNTSVILLE

Texas had been readmitted to the Union two years ago, even though the state hadn't yet met all the requirements necessary for reentry. The Civil War had been over for some time and Texas had not seen much of the war action. I wasn't involved in the war. I was in college when the war started and was well below the age of conscription. By the time I got back from graduate school in Great Britain, the war was over.

I was shocked at the scars left in the aftermath of war. The loss of life was overwhelming. But the thing that bothered me most was the nation was still deeply divided. As I headed west two years before, I was stunned to find out most of the people I encountered continued to think of the south as being, if not at war, at least at odds with the rest of the nation.

From Fort Worth, I turned south with the thought of just exploring Texas with no particular destination in mind. After about two months, I arrived in Huntsville. I found the town friendly but also suffering from racial tension.

Reconstruction was difficult on Texas. In 1865, President Andrew Johnson appointed a Union General as provisional governor of Texas. Amnesty was granted to the ex-Confederates so long as they promised their loyalty to the Union. Before the war, thirty percent of the six hundred four thousand Texans were slaves, though few in Texas would consider slaves true Texans since as slaves, they were thought to

be less of a person than someone who was born free. With the end of the war and all former slaves now free, new tensions arose.

The Freedmen's Bureau was set up to help former slaves make the transition into free society and to oversee labor contracts since they would be paid wages under the free labor system. This was a federal program but the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas was very active in helping, at least on the surface, make sure former slave's rights were protected. However, it seemed more like another bureaucracy, which was more concerned with the appearance of things rather than their true nature. It kept records of such things as the number of *murders and outrages* committed by *freedmen and white men*. They even kept records of the inspections of the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville and how the freedmen who were prisoners were being treated. According to reports, the prisoners were *well fed, well clothed, and kindly treated by the prison keepers* but there were many unofficial reports of continued mistreatment of the newly freed slaves. White supremacist groups were forming; there was a great deal of violence and intimidation toward Blacks in Texas.

Huntsville's economy, once being virtually all based on cotton production, began to diversify. Lumber businesses started to grow and several sawmills were established. In 1871, the International and Great Southern Railroad came to Huntsville and helped spur lumber development. At least, it came near Huntsville.

The city fathers of Huntsville, in their esteemed wisdom, decided not to pay the bonus demanded by the railroad to get the railroad to run through the center of town. So, the railroad company simply laid their tracks bypassing Huntsville. Faced with the possible extinction of the community, the citizens of Huntsville went into an emergency fund-raising drive to raise money to build a spur from Huntsville to the main railroad. Huntsville residents raised ninety thousand dollars and the county contributed another thirty-five thousand dollars. Finally, the Huntsville Tap was built and connected Huntsville to the main railroad near the town of Phelps.

There were over one hundred plantations in Huntsville. Most were less than five hundred acres. Cotton was the main cash crop in central Texas and it depended

heavily on slave labor. With the end of the Civil War, plantation owners were struggling to cope with the new reality of having to pay their former slaves for doing what they once did for free. Sixty percent of the people living in Walker County, Huntsville being the county seat, were black. Racial tensions had escalated.

One of the results of Reconstruction was the leasing of the state penitentiary to private individuals. These individuals paid the state for the convict labor and in turn they were responsible for feeding and clothing the convicts and paying the guards. An outside camp system had developed where railroad companies and wealthy plantation owners hired convict labor and set up a labor camp near the railroad or on the grounds of a plantation. In one instance, a plantation owner was well known for brutalizing his labor force. While there were guards present, they defaulted to the supervisors of the plantation. The Valdosta Plantation was the largest in Huntsville with over one thousand acres. Under orders from the plantation owner, those convicts, as well as the freedmen who didn't fill their daily cotton picking quota, were severely whipped. The whippings were so common they were hardly noticed. I became aware of the mistreatment after visiting with a justice of the peace in Huntsville.

Using the practice I adopted in Fort Worth, I used an alias while in Huntsville. I continue to use Robert as my first name, since I'm accustomed to answering to it and because it was my late father's name. This time I used the surname of Johnson.

"So, Mr. Johnson," asked Justice of the Peace Oscar Simpson, "what's your business in Huntsville?"

"Well, first off, I need to find a job. Mainly I'm just driftin' and lookin' for a place to settle down."

"You'll find Huntsville to your likin' all right." The justice looked at my worn boots and then lifted his eyes taking in every detail of my dress. "But I don't know about jobs. You see the colored folk take care of most of the plantation work. Besides that, you don't look like you're hankerin' to hoe any cotton. That's about all the work that's goin' on this time of year."

“You’re shor right about that.” I had to be conscious to use as much of a western twang as possible. After spending my formative years in New York and Boston, I have always been cognizant of using proper grammar and avoiding the idioms that are part of colloquial speech. In the two years I’ve been in the west, I’ve become more skilled at mimicking the speech patterns and inflection of the west. Sometimes I’ve found I can even think with a Texas drawl. But most of the time I’ve had to make a conscious effort to sound more western.

“Don’t know nothin’ ’bout cotton. Much better acquainted with cattle and horses.” I accepted Simpson’s offer of coffee and a chair.

“Well, that puts a different light on things. Most of the plantations have a small cattle operation and some of them are hirin’. In fact, you might try the Valdosta Plantation just west of the Trinity River.”

Simpson told how that plantation had a labor camp for convicts from the Huntsville Penitentiary to work off their sentence. The labor camp and presence of the convicts made it easier for the owner to discipline his own former slaves, now share-croppers, in the same way. Those poor souls didn’t know any different treatment and hadn’t seen any change since the war ended. Yes, they were told they were free but to them, nothing had changed.

“Things are purty quiet round here now,” Simpson continued. “But there weren’t nothin’ quiet a few months ago after Sam Jenkins got killed. S’pose you heard ’bout that.”

“Don’t reckon I did. What happened?”

“Well, Jenkins was a freedman who was murdered. Weren’t purty atall. Capt’n McNeely himself came down here to ’vestigate.”

“Who?”

“Capt’n Leander H. McNeely of the State Police. He’s ’bout the best lawman in the state. He arrested four men for the murder. Three of ’em were found guilty. But then right there in the courtroom, all hell broke loose. Someone shot McNeely and some other lawman. All three who were found guilty escaped.

“But that weren’t the end of it. Governor Davis declared martial law. The militia came to town. Didn’t think they’d ever leave. Must have stayed nigh onto two months. Claimed they never did find who lynched ol’ Jenkins. Weren’t right. He’s a darkie and all, but nobody should be lynched.”

I could feel the Scales of Justice tilting badly in my head. I know from experience when that happens, I have to find a way to balance them. I thanked Simpson for the coffee and got directions to the Valdosta Plantation.

Ever since I was a child, I’ve found it difficult to watch people being treated unjustly. When I was a boy and tried to intervene with my fists, I got whipped more often than not. But when I went to prep school at Georgetown, I joined the boxing team and learned some skills that would help me defend myself. After boxing practice, some of the older and larger team members taught me how to defend myself without the constraints of the rules imposed by formal boxing. Those skills have come in useful through the years.

I mounted Midnight and headed out following the directions the Justice of the Peace had given me. I didn’t have to ride long before I came to a sprawling parcel of land covered with row after row of green plants I guessed were cotton. I slowed Midnight to a walk and rode down the side of one large field. Each row had several black-skinned men and women with hoes chopping weeds. I listened and heard the workers singing in cadence.

Rounding one corner of the field, a man came riding toward me on horseback.
“Can I help you?”

“Just rode out from town. Oscar Simpson said someone ’round here might be hirin’.” I waited to see what kind of response I would get. The rider looked me up and down. I knew from experience the man was probably thinking *what a little man to be ridin’ such a big horse.*

“Well, might be hirin’. What kind of work you lookin’ for?”

“I reckon I’m a good hand with cattle and can do most anything—’cept chop cotton.” I grin as I said it.

The rider smiled back. "Yeah. Know what ya mean. I guess you'll do. I'm Happy Jack. I'm foreman. If you can help with the cattle operation and some of the other things 'round here, you've got a job. That is long as you're not particular 'bout working with darkies, and you ain't specting to get rich."

"Name's Johnson. Robert Johnson. I reckon that sounds all right. When can I start?"

"Go back to town and get the rest of your stuff. You can start when you get back."

"Don't have no more stuff. Just me an' my horse."

"You travel light. That's good. You can drop anything you don't need on the trail at the bunkhouse out back. There's two long buildin's where these folks live. The bunkhouse is much smaller. Don't think you'll have problems findin' it.

"Are these all former slaves?"

"You mean *freedmen*. That's what the law calls 'em now," Happy Jack replied. "Bout half of 'em are *freedmen*. The other half are convicts. They're servin' out their sentence here. Most of 'em ain't much trouble. But I do have to stay on 'em to make sure they work and don't slack off. Found a whip does a pretty good job of keepin' 'em in line."

I listened and took in what Happy Jack said.

"I'll head on to the bunkhouse. Where do I go after that?"

"Go south along the river. 'Bout a mile or two, you'll find the rest of the cowhands. They're movin' the herd to the southernmost pasture. Just tell 'em I sent you."

I dropped off my saddlebags at the bunkhouse and headed down the river in search of the herd. Midnight adopted the easy lope he anticipated I wanted. I always smile when I think about my stallion's intelligence. It far surpasses that of some people I've known.

After about half of an hour, I came upon the herd. Riding up by one of the outriders I introduced myself.

“Name’s Robert. Happy Jack just hired me.”

“Name’s Casey. Most call me One-Eyed Casey, ’cause I don’t see so good in one eye. You go back and tell Wheeler to come on up. You’re the new man. You get drag.”

“Suits me fine. Eatin’ dust is my specialty.”

I dropped back and met Wheeler who sure was happy to meet me. As he rode off I thought I’d made a great first impression on Wheeler. But I smiled to myself as I realized Wheeler was just happy to not be the last man on the drive.

As it turned out, riding drag wasn’t so bad. There had been a shower earlier in the day so the cattle didn’t kick up much dust. Truth be told, I liked working by myself and listening to the cattle bawl. As I rode, I hummed and sang. Midnight always whinnied in response. I just kept riding and smiling.

About dusk, One-Eyed Casey called for all of us to bunch up the cattle for the night and make camp. Horses and cattle alike don’t need much encouragement to stop and take a long drink of the silt-laden Trinity. While the water didn’t look like much, it seemed the hands knew it was clean and fresh.

I rode into camp and unsaddled Midnight. One of the hands already had a campfire going and a pot of beans hanging. I hadn’t realized the small drive included a chuck wagon. I accepted a plate of beans, a cold biscuit—no doubt left from breakfast—and a cup of coffee and took a seat with my upturned saddle to my back.

“Aren’t you gonna hobble your horse?” Wheeler asked.

“Nope. Midnight’ll be right here in the mornin’. Horse has more sense than most people.” Wheeler made introductions for me to the rest of the cowboys.

“This here’s Robert. Happy Jack hired him today. You know One-Eyed. Then there’s Pete and Justin.”

“Howdy,” I said and the other hands nodded in response.

Supper was pretty silent. Finally one of the hands said, “Wonder who’s under the quirt tonight?”

“Don’t matter. Those who don’t get it tonight’ll get it tomorrow night.”

I wasn't sure which hand said that but as I listened I learned more about how Happy Jack gets the production he needs on the cotton plantation. It seemed Happy Jack was happiest when he was doling out punishment to the prisoners and the freedmen. I learned Happy Jack was a sergeant in the Confederacy. He hadn't taken well to the thought slaves had to be freed. But he certainly seemed to enjoy being able to use his power to keep all the plantation hands in line.

When the sun came up, the cowboys were already saddled up and ready to ride as soon as breakfast was over. To my happy surprise, there were fresh biscuits and bacon and some of the best coffee I've ever had. None of the hands seemed to find the breakfast out of the ordinary. I kept my opinion to myself. Above all else, I didn't want to stand out.

We mounted up and drove the cattle through the day down to just north of Madisonville. When evening came, we made camp by a small lake. The chuck wagon was already set up and the beans were hot. I smelled the coffee and remembered how much I enjoyed it at breakfast. This time the coffee had a burnt taste. I realized the cook was serving leftover coffee to go with the leftover beans and biscuits.

I put my back to my upturned saddle and tasted the beans. For a brief moment, I had a flash of memory of the wonderful meals my childhood nanny, Alvelda, had cooked for me. I also couldn't help but think of the world-class fare I regularly ate in New York, Boston, and London. In spite of being raised with wealth and privilege, I don't miss the lifestyle. I felt at home in the west.

That evening I spent time with Wheeler talking about a variety of things including Happy Jack's propensity for violence.

"Things got a bit tense round here late last year. Sam Jenkins worked here. He used to be a slave and was always makin' trouble for Happy Jack—'till Jack killed him. Seems he felt his freedman status gave him some special privilege. There's never a week when Sam was whipped with a quirt less than three times. Sometimes it happened every day."

"How can anyone survive that kind of treatment?"

"Well that's the thing. Each day he got weaker and weaker. He first got the quirt because he missed his pickin' quota. Then the next day he missed it worse. Happy Jack thought he was doin' it on purpose—just tryin' to show 'em he was right."

"So what happened?"

"Happy Jack just kept whippin' Sam. Every time he did, he just smiled like he was especially enjoyin' it. That's why he's called Happy Jack. You'll see for yourself one of these days. Jack likes to put on a show when he's whippin' someone, freedman or convict."

I felt the Scales of Justice swing wildly as I listened to Wheeler. How could someone get away with murder and then brag about it? It seems I kept running into people who're able to live above the law and remain untouched.

"I never heard of a quirt before."

"That's Meskin for whip." Wheeler continued telling his story. "Anyway, even as weak as he was, Sam would stand and take it. Jack couldn't break him. He started talkin' crazy about takin' Sam out and lynchin' him. We said we didn't want no part of it. But the next night, shor 'nough, ol' Sam got strung up right down on the river 'bout a half mile from the bunkhouse. Hung him from an old sycamore that's got a low hangin' limb."

"So did Happy Jack kill him?"

"No doubt 'bout it. Jack was even arrested by Capt'n McNeely 'long with three other hands from the plantation. Jack was the only one not convicted. But 'fore the judge could announce the sentence, there was shootin' in the courtroom. Capt'n got shot. So did another lawman standin' 'round. No one knew where the guns came from but all four who were on trial had one as well as many of the men a watchin'. The three who were found guilty rode out of town. Ain't been seen 'round here since."

"So if Jack was found not guilty, why do you think he did it?"

"Everybody knows Happy Jack done it," Wheeler continued. "He even brags 'bout it. They just never had any evidence to convict him. Then after he got off, they

say he can't be tried again so it don't matter him sayin' he done it."

"It's called double jeopardy."

"Double what?"

"Oh nothin'. Just means that a person can't be tried again after he's been found not guilty."

"Don't seem right to me."

After supper, I tried to go to sleep but I just kept hearing the words of Wheeler and how Happy Jack lives above the law and brags about it. The worst part is the law couldn't do anything about it.

This was where I had a real battle going on inside. I don't think I have been appointed by God to see justice is served. But I do believe someone has to stand up for those who don't have the protection of the law. Ever since I first saw the Scales of Justice in law school, it's as though the scales are in my head and as long as they are out of balance, I am not able to rest.

Just before sunrise, I woke up thinking about Sam Jenkins being hung for being proud and defiant. Neither thing was a crime. I'm not sure when I would have a chance to see that justice was served and Happy Jack paid for his crime.

Shortly before sunrise, One-Eyed Casey woke up the hands.

"Better get up. If we're gonna make the plantation by dusk we better git ridin'. I sent the chuck wagon on ahead after supper last night. The cook's mules know the way back home and Cookie'll sleep in the back like a baby. Prob'lly beat us home."

And with those words, all of us saddled up and took some day-old biscuits for later. I mounted Midnight and got the feeling my handsome steed would love to challenge the rest of the horses to a race. I laughed at the thought of the spectacle that would make. I held the reins taut for a few minutes until Midnight realized he would need to lope with the other horses. I could tell the stallion didn't like being around more ordinary horses.

I rode quietly through the day contemplating what I'd learned about Happy Jack. The time would come when I'd see justice come to Huntsville. Little did I know the

time was coming sooner than I realized.

That evening, I was treated to my first meal at the plantation. There was a small dining hall, just big enough for the cowhands and others who worked for Happy Jack. The freedmen and convicts were fed in the yard where they sat on the ground and ate with their hands since none were afforded the privilege of using a fork or a spoon.

When I came from the dining hall, I heard several cowboys yelling like they were rooting for someone to win a fight. What I saw instead was Happy Jack violently whipping one of the former slaves. The man was tied across a barrel with his naked back exposed. With each lash, I saw Jack smile to the point of laughing. I lunged forward to stop the violent beating but Wheeler stepped in quickly and pulled me back.

“You best not git mixed up in that. Happy Jack’ll turn on you. He’ll give you worse than he’s givin’ that darkey.

A noticeably pregnant woman ran to Happy Jack and grabbed his whip hand. Jack shook her off and she fell at his feet. I watched in horror as Jack pulled back his leg and kicked her hard in her swollen stomach then pulled back and kicked her again.

“Let that be a lesson to all you darkies. You mess with Happy Jack, you’re gonna pay the price. You don’t do your work, you’re gonna pay. You cause any trouble, you’ll pay. Anybody else want some of this?” Jack lifted the quirt into the air and let it fall one more time on the back of the nearly unconscious man. His back looked more like ground meat than human skin. He was covered in welts and many of them were bleeding

When Wheeler released his hold on me, I was shaking with anger. I was sick to my stomach with what I had seen. I wouldn’t have believed it possible one human being could do that to another if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.

I walked a few yards away and vomited my supper. My stomach continued to heave until there was nothing else to wretch up. It was that moment when I knew I

couldn't work there anymore. I also knew I was going to have to be the one to make the Scales of Justice balance.

The next morning, I heard the pregnant woman who was kicked by Happy Jack prematurely delivered her baby but it was born dead—no doubt the result of Jack's vicious kicks to her stomach. Oh how I wanted to see Jack pay for what he had done!

"I'm quittin' and ridin' on," I told Wheeler. "There's too much killin' 'round here for me."

"Don't blame you none. I prob'ly won't be far behind you. I've 'bout had 'nough of this place, too."

I saddled Midnight and mounted my great horse. I turned to Wheeler and just shook my head in disgust at what I'd witnessed.

"Ain't you gonna draw your pay?" asked Wheeler.

"I don't want no part of money from a place like this." I turned my horse south and allowed Midnight to take on a fast lope. In a few minutes, I slowed to a walk as I approached the river. I pulled up at the base of the great sycamore where Happy Jack lynched Sam Jenkins. Looking at the tree, I could envision Jenkins swinging from the low hanging limb.

Slowly, I rode on by, crossing the Trinity River and continuing south. I planned to find a place to wait for the right time to rebalance the Scales of Justice. Right now, all I could do was wait.

The days passed slowly. I knew I had to go back to Huntsville and deal with Happy Jack. But for now, I needed to come up with a plan and be patient. To go back too soon would be to invite suspicion to fall on me since I so abruptly left the plantation after witnessing Happy Jack's brutality.

As I waited, I thought of Charlotte. The more I tried to put her out of my mind, the more difficult it became. And the more I thought of her, the harder it was to come up with a plan for dealing with Happy Jack.

I felt I was both the luckiest man in the world and the unluckiest. I'm lucky because I think Charlotte really likes me. She may even love me. If I was back in

Bandera working on the H&F, we might even be seeing each other socially each week. I would finally get to take her to a dance and show her what I learned about dancing from Jesse.

But, I also felt like the unluckiest person in the world because I didn't know if I'd ever be able to stay in Bandera and declare my love for her. Each day I think about what it would be like to be married to her, raising children, and settling down on our own ranch somewhere in Bandera.

Thoughts of Jesse also made me sad and accentuated my depression. The best friend I've ever known was killed and I couldn't do anything to stop it. Part of me thinks he was even killed on account of me. If I hadn't been back at the H&F the evening Jesse came back from discovering the rustlers near Tarpaley, he wouldn't have been overheard telling me what he found. Like it or not, I was at least partly responsible for Jesse's death.

A week had gone by since I rode off from the plantation. I was sick with the violence I had witnessed. All I'd done during this time was whittle and talk to Midnight. We had some long conversations. I've told him what it was like being raised in New York City as well as my educational pursuits. It may seem odd that I talk to my horse but I really think Midnight understands a lot of what I say. He nodded his head at me. Sometimes he would shake it as if to say he doesn't agree with me. And he always whinnies when I talk softly and look him in the eye. I know he has more sense than most people.

Each afternoon, I scouted around a bit looking for some wild game to cook for supper. I've seen a few deer but it would be wasteful to kill a deer since I couldn't eat it all before it spoiled on me. So far, I've killed two rabbits and half a dozen squirrels. I ran out of coffee a couple of days ago and ran out of salt yesterday. Supper this evening doesn't sound very appetizing to me. Whether it is more rabbit or more squirrel, eating either without salt is not something I looked forward to.

After two weeks of eating squirrels and rabbit and more rabbit and squirrels, I knew I needed to go into town to get supplies. I turned back toward Huntsville.

About thirteen miles out of town, I went to a general store in the community that had sprung up around the railroad stop called Waverly Station. I bought the usual: bacon, flour, coffee, salt, baking powder, a little sugar, some hard candy, and a box of cartridges for my six gun and another for my saddle gun.

That night I made camp just outside of Waverly and made myself a supper of biscuits, coffee, and bacon I roast on a stick. It was amazing how good the meal tasted. I was pleased with the biscuits, and the bacon was a welcome change from rabbit on a stick. The coffee was as good as I got from the chuck wagon on the cattle drive from Madisonville to Huntsville.

I was getting the feeling that this would be the night for me to settle things with Happy Jack. I still didn't have a plan in mind but I knew I couldn't move on with my life until that cruel man paid for his crimes. As far as I knew, he didn't ever get far from the Valdosta Plantation. If I knew more about his habits, I might be able to catch him riding into Huntsville for supplies.

The best thing I could come up with was I would have to slip back onto the plantation at night and hope I could get the drop on him. But I wasn't on the plantation long enough to even know where he slept. He stayed in the bunkhouse with the rest of the cattle hands but I didn't know which was his bunk. And even if I knew, what I didn't know was how I was going to get Jack out of the bunkhouse without making a disturbance.

Close to the middle of the night, I rode Midnight out to the plantation. Skirting the main house and the bunkhouses, I tied Midnight to a tree about fifty yards from the plantation buildings.

As I crept into the compound, everything was quiet and dark. There was no moon and there was a chill in the air. My eyes were adjusted to the dark but the near total absence of light made it difficult for me to make out anything more than just the outline of the buildings. I wanted to be especially aware if there was anyone outside. As far as I could tell, no one was awake. I could hear snoring coming from the cattle hands' bunkhouse. Happy Jack was probably inside but I didn't know where and even

if I did, there was no way I would take a chance on being seen slipping in there in the dark.

All was quiet, that is, all except the bunkhouse where the freedmen live. Carefully I crept across the open land between the buildings to see if I could determine what I was hearing. A dog barked in the distance. I froze hoping it didn't rouse anyone from their sleep.

Finally, I got to the door of the building where the former slaves slept. Inside, I could hear the breathing of many people and soft whispers. I crept into the door and stepped into the shadows. I found it difficult to believe what I was seeing.

The former slaves had Happy Jack stripped naked. His hands were tied behind him and his feet were tied together. A rag was stuffed in his mouth. One by one, the former slaves who had been so abused by Jack, were taking the quirt he had used to beat them and administered several hard lashes with all of their strength. After regaining their composure they passed the quirt to the next person who did the same. I was struck at how silent and composed the rest of the group was as Jack received his whipping. If not for the whipping taking place, it was as though the assembled freedmen were watching a play.

As I watched, I thought how very much like church it was. The assembled congregation reverently and respectfully gave attention to the one who was leading the service. There was even a quiet "a-men" or two along with the nod of heads and an occasional moan that sounded more like congregants agreeing with the sermon they were witnessing.

After several minutes, I stepped from the shadows. There was a collective gasp from the assembled group. I put a finger to my lips to calm them. Happy Jack looked at me expectantly, rolled toward me, and tried to talk through the gag in his mouth. He motioned with his head to his hands, obviously waiting for me to untie him.

Looking at Happy Jack, I was shocked with the beating he had received. There was hardly an inch of his skin not covered with welts from the whip, some so deep they were bleeding. His back looked exactly like that of the freedman I had watched

him beat so violently.

“Please don’t be afraid. I didn’t come to stop you. This man deserves all you’ve done and more. I don’t want to interrupt you. But when you are done, Happy Jack has more to answer for.”

“He came in here to take away another of our women,” cried an old man. “He does that every week. He just comes and takes what he wants and no ones can’t stop him.”

“I saw you that night when he kicked and killed my baby. You tried to stop him but other men held you.”

“Yes, I saw him kill your baby. He has to pay for that. And he also has to pay for killin’ Sam Jenkins. When you’re finished with him, I intend to give him what he has comin’.”

The group silently nodded in unison.

“You take him, mister. What do we say when we’re asked who took him?”

“Tell them the Midnight Marauder took him. But I’d ‘preciate it if you wouldn’t describe me too carefully.”

“I’m gonna tell ‘em zactly wha’ch look like,” replied the slave that I saw so savagely beaten. “You six and a haf foots high. Big man, skin ’most as dark as ours. Riding a white hoss.”

There’s snickering and nodding as they collectively agreed to the fiction they had just heard. I walked toward Happy Jack and started to pick him up.

“We’ll help you Mista’ Midnight,” one of the men offered. Then they took Jack outside and found an unsaddled horse wearing a bridle tied nearby. They untied his feet and placed him on the horse. As they tied his feet beneath the horse, I mounted Midnight and was handed the reins to Happy Jack’s horse.

The assembled freedmen watched as I quietly rode away into the darkness, leaving behind the men and women who had been terrorized daily by Jack through the years. For them, their nightmare was over, so long as Jack was not replaced by someone equally as cruel. But I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as cruel as Happy

Jack. The members of town council in Bandera were all murderers and thieves but they had never tortured anyone, so far as I knew.

As I rode, a plan slowly began to form in my mind. I rode down toward the river to the old sycamore tree where Jack had hung Sam Jenkins. Jack suddenly became aware of his surroundings and became very animated. He tried shouting through the gag in his mouth. Then his vocal noises became a pleading.

Pulling Midnight to a halt, I swung down and went to Happy Jack's horse. I untied his feet and threw a rope over the low hanging limb and put a noose around Jack's neck. Jack's pleading became louder and he started frantically trying to get his hands loose.

"Happy Jack. You've been found guilty of the murder of Sam Jenkins and of an innocent baby. Truth be told, I feel certain you've taken the lives of many others. And because you didn't give Sam or the baby a chance to speak before you murdered them, you won't get one either. The Good Book says, 'An eye for an eye.' That's what's gonna take place now."

Jack was terrified as I watched him sitting helplessly on his horse. After a few moments, I slapped the rump of Happy Jack's horse and watched as Jack swung from the tree. His feet kicked several times as he struggled in vain. Finally, all of Jack's movements stopped. His body continued swinging.

I removed my hat and looked toward the stars. *Lord, I've seen nothing but bad in this man. I trust you may've seen something else. So maybe you'll consider that when you pass judgment on him.*

With those words, I replaced my hat, mounted Midnight, and rode north away from the plantation. I took it slow so I wouldn't endanger Midnight. In truth, I knew Midnight could see better in the low light than I could. After riding for a couple of hours, I pulled off the trail and made camp without a fire. I didn't want to take a chance on attracting attention. I unsaddled Midnight, gave him a good brushing, and slipped into my bedroll. That night, I slept well knowing at least for now, the Scales of Justice in Huntsville had been balanced.

