

Chapter 1

I heard the sounds of horses and Charlotte screaming as I ran outside. I pulled my six gun and would have shot but was fearful of hitting Charlotte. I headed behind the barn to retrieve Midnight and give chase. That's when I realized they'd taken my horse and Slim's too. Anger grew in me so great it could only be described as a blind rage. I was determined to find those responsible for kidnapping Charlotte and killing Slim. If it took me my entire life, I would devote myself to seeing justice was served to those responsible.

As I ran back to the barn I heard a moan. I looked around in the darkness and tried to locate the source. Then I noticed I was hearing Slim. I rushed to his side and saw he was gravely wounded but still alive. He was losing blood fast. I searched for something to use as a bandage but couldn't find anything. Over in the corner of the barn I found an old feed sack. I tore the sack into strips and did my best to wrap it around Slim. The bleeding slowed but blood was still flowing from him.

Outside I heard a horse whinny. I recognized the sound. Midnight had come back. Either the men who stole him let him go or, more likely, Midnight pulled loose and escaped. I went out and removed my saddlebags.

Slim had lost a lot of blood and I knew for him to have a chance, I was going to have to take out the bullet and cauterize the wound to stop the bleeding. I looked through the saddlebags and found some bandaging material, a bottle of whisky, and some ointment.

I tore Slim's shirt away and found he was shot in his shoulder near his neck. There was a great deal of bleeding. I guessed the bullet must have done a lot of damage. I poured the whisky right in the wound. As I did, Slim let out a scream.

"I'm sorry, Slim. I don't want to hurt you but you're gonna feel a lot of pain. I have to get the bullet out and get the bleedin' to stop."

"It's—it's all right," said Slim as he took shallow breaths.

I built a small fire there in the barn. While Slim rested, I heated one of my daggers in the edge of the fire. Then I took another, poured whisky on it and prepared to remove the bullet.

"Slim, this is gonna hurt pretty bad. I need you not to move as I get the bullet out and stanch the bleeding."

In a whisper that was barely audible, Slim said, "Go ahead and do what you have to. I'll...not...move."

Wasting no time, I quickly dug in his shoulder until I found the bullet. I pulled it out and immediately took the hot dagger and held it in the open wound.

Slim screamed and tried to move. I held him down as best I could keeping the hot dagger in place. The smell of burning flesh was repulsive but I knew this had to happen

to save Slim's life. I held the heated dagger in place to the count of ten. When I removed it, Slim's body completely relaxed and his screaming stopped. He had passed out. It only took a couple of minutes to put the ointment in place and bandage the wound.

The rest of the night I stayed at his side, struggling to stay awake so every few minutes I could make sure his bleeding wasn't starting up again. At first light, Slim was resting comfortably. His breathing was deeper and more even. Though I never had an experience like this before, it seemed to me like he was going to pull through.

I loaded the bodies of Sally and Toby into her buggy, took my shovel from my saddlebag, and drove out about a mile from the ranch. I dug a single grave but made it deeper than normal. It made sense to me if Sally wanted to be mixed up with this lowlife cowboy in life, she wouldn't mind spending eternity with him in close proximity. I rolled both bodies into the grave and shoveled the dirt on top of them until the grave was full. Then I camouflaged it with branches and made sure to remove the buggy tracks.

As I headed back to the barn, I took off my hat and looked toward the sky. *God, this woman may well be the most wicked woman who has ever lived. I don't know of any redeeming qualities. And this man is bound to be no better than her. I commend them to your care. You'll be the one who'll pass judgment on them.*

Chapter 2

My name is John Crudder. I was raised to wealth and privilege in New York City. My father owned the Great National Railroad. When he and my mother died in a buggy accident, I inherited the railroad and everything else he had accumulated in life. My education at Harvard and Oxford prepared me to take over the railroad. But after several months at the helm, I realized I didn't care about business. What I wanted most of all was to be an advocate for those who couldn't help themselves. That's when I went back to Harvard to get a law degree.

Traveling west to look for a place to set up a law practice, I fell in love with the town of Bandera, Texas. As it turns out, the town didn't need a lawyer but they asked me to be their marshal after I killed the man who murdered the previous marshal. I found great satisfaction in being a lawman. I was still seeing justice served but in a different way.

I think I could have been happy having a career as a marshal if I hadn't found out the town council of Bandera was composed of thieves and murderers. They were able to operate above the law for they had accomplices in Austin in the governor's office and also in the Texas State Police. If justice was going to be served, I realized I would have to be the one responsible.

I guess you could say I was forced into the role of being the Midnight Marauder. My self-appointed job is to see that the Scales of Justice are balanced. I work in the shadows because if anyone knew who I was, they would harm those I love just to get to me. That's where Slim and Charlotte come in. Before becoming marshal, I worked on Slim's ranch, the H&F. His daughter Charlotte is the prettiest girl I've ever seen. Though I don't know much about women, I care very deeply for Charlotte and I think she cares for me.

Someone kidnapped Charlotte hoping to force Slim to give up his ranch. I believe the town council is involved either directly or indirectly. Time is running out. I have to find Charlotte soon. The longer it takes, the greater the likelihood she will be harmed.

Sally was a member of the town council. Originally there were seven. The first of the council to die was Judge Gideon Anderson. Sally owned the Better Days Hotel. I killed her as I tried to rescue Charlotte. Now with Sally gone, there are only five of these evil people remaining. Other council members include Betsy Hawkins at the Cheer Up Saloon, Seth Davis who owns the mercantile, banker Harvey Fowler, and Mayor Farley Wright. I knew something was evil in the town but it was only when I eavesdropped on a council meeting I found out each of them had been directly involved in multiple murders and were systematically fleecing the town.

I'll do whatever it takes to get Charlotte back. Nothing and no one will stand in my way.

