

# Loaded for Justice

*Dark Sheriff Series*

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# Loaded for Justice

*Dark Sheriff Series*

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ROGER MENDOZA

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To my mother – Carmen.  
She called me to this life and nurtured and cared for me.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### *It's About That Time*

Randall's heart was heavy, longing for the days he felt alive. He'd spent a decade away from the thrill of a stagecoach robbery. Back then, he had a loyal ally in Deputy CJ. Randall had reason to trust him. CJ had risked his career as a deputy, his family, and even his life for Randall. CJ had informed him whenever there was a stagecoach with cargo worth robbing. Randall and his gang — his brother Joseph, the sharpshooter Juan Cortez, and the strategy expert Sam Williams — had made a fortune from raiding the stagecoaches. They had worked well together for several years and often enlisted like-minded men in the robberies.

Now, at fifty, Randall was alone and bitter. He couldn't shake off the overwhelming sense of loneliness that engulfed him. Most everyone he trusted had either met their end or turned their back on him. Even his best friend CJ had left him behind without even a word.

Sam Williams, a ranch hand for the Pruitt family for decades, was the only one who stayed. Though his mind was not as sharp as it once was, his dedication to Randall and the land remained unyielding — or at least so it seemed to Randall. Sam was the same age as Randall but looked old and worn with his leather, dried skin. The sun and the hard work had taken a merciless toll on his wire-thin frame.

"Ten years is long enough," Randall muttered. He drank the rest of his whiskey and slammed the glass on the table. He grabbed his rifle and started for the door. It was time to begin again with the stagecoach robbing. A corrupt new friend had told him that a coach carrying a wealthy bank customer was headed south from New York City. "There's a lot of money on that coach, and it's poorly protected," his informant said.

Randall went outside and shut the door behind him. Thomas, his nephew, was next to his horse while Frank, Sam's boy, was up on his, rocking forward and backward, chomping to go.

"Are you two ready to leave?" asked Randall.

Frank, at twenty years old, idolized Randall. Frank was clean-cut, well-dressed, and clean-shaven. He sat up tall. "Yes, sir!"

Thomas, also twenty, had long, oily, unkempt hair and could stand to have a proper bath now and again. He grunted as he climbed up on his horse. "No one's getting hurt, right?" asked Thomas.

Frank snorted.

Randall shook his head at Thomas. "You boys ride up ahead. I'll be there in a few minutes. Sam and I need to talk."

Frank smiled. "Sure thing." He threw a sideways glance at Thomas and then raced away.

Thomas snapped his reins and chased after Frank. "Hey, wait for me!"

Randall stared, glassy-eyed, as the two boys disappeared behind a cloud of dust. Pride swelled in his chest for Frank, his loyal protégé, following in his footsteps. Alternatively, his rebellious nephew Thomas seemed to revile him. Randall recalled a much younger Thomas, his face etched with innocent fear, clutching Randall's leg and sobbing, "Don't go. Uncle Randall, I love you." The echo of his soft voice, laced with a desperate plea, was a stark reminder of a bond severed by time and circumstance. Randall, his face wrinkled with disappointment, muttered, "He'd sooner see me dead than say he loved me." He kicked at the dirt and then went to Sam's place.

Randall pushed open the creaky door of the rundown shack.

"Frank?" yelled Sam from the room at the back. He was in bed recovering from a gunshot wound.

Randall closed the noisy door behind him. "It's me." The inside was neat and orderly. He walked to Sam's bedroom.

Sam sat up and grinned, his teeth stained yellow. "I thought you left already."

"The boys went ahead. Let's talk about yesterday."

Sam's face soured. "That Alexander Johnson shot me in the chest." His eyes darted away from Randall. "The doctor says I was lucky; the bullet went clear through me. I'll be back in the saddle in a few days."

Randall clenched his jaw and glared at Sam as he closed in on

him. Randall rested his hand on his holstered gun. “Why did you shoot at Alexander after I told you not to.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “He hadn’t seen us. No one had.”

Sam’s eyes shot back to Randall. “I couldn’t believe my eyes seein’ him all grown up. He’ll be trouble for us whenever he’s on one of those stagecoaches.”

A wave of disbelief washed over Randall. His jaw slackened, lips parting in a silent gasp as if he’d been struck speechless. “You know damn well I swore to his pa that I’d care for him, no matter what. None of us would be this well-off if it weren’t for CJ.”

Sam’s gaze narrowed into slits, his nostrils flaring as his breath hitched in his throat. “CJ helped and clued us into which coaches to rob; that’s true. But then, all of a sudden, he got sloppy, drinkin’ all the time. That lawman was turnin’ out to be a big problem for us. Eventually, he would have had to turn us all in.”

Randall gripped his gun. “CJ would sooner die than betray us. You never liked him. You taunted and bullied him. That man didn’t deserve being treated that way.”

Sam’s cheeks reddened with rage, and his forehead ridged with hate. “A good-for-nothing drunk, that’s what he turned into. Always whining about him missing his dead wife and having to take care of that boy all on his own.”

Randall narrowed his eyes and leaned in. “CJ thought the world of his son. I’m telling you again, leave Alexander alone.”

Sam snarled at Randall and sat taller. “As soon as I’m on my feet, I’ll hunt him down and kill that troublemaker, just like I did his—pa.” Sam smiled. “His gun is hidden in the closet.” He used his chin to point.

Randall, his face drained of color, cocked his head back in shock. “You told me that CJ up and left.” His breathing slowed, his heart pounding. “After he disappeared, I went searching for him.”

The edge of Sam’s lips curled upward, and his eyes lit up bright with fire. “The coward was walking away from me when I shot him.” Sam scoffed and leaned forward with a cold, defiant look. “Always following you around like a puppy dog, looking at you funny. It wasn’t natural. I did you a favor. That stinkin’ body is buried behind the barn.”

A wave of nausea hit Randall hard.

Sam moved to stand and then winced as bright red blood oozed, staining his white shirt. He examined his wound. "Shoot. I'm bleeding again."

The loud click of a cocked gun broke the silence. Sam gasped. Randall had his weapon pointed at him.

Randall spit on the floor. "He was my one true friend." Randall holstered his weapon and then headed to the door.

Sam's eyes, crazed with rage, shouted, "Wasn't I your friend? You up and left me here. You took most of our bounty and bought that huge ranch down south. And worse yet, you took my son and Joseph's boy and left me alone to care for this place. And then you moved back here after ten years — wanting to rob stagecoaches again."

"The boys and I came up and visited now and then."

Sam scoffed. "With my cut of the money we made back then, I should have lived rich all this time — you with your fancy boots and expensive clothes."

"I gave you plenty."

Sam's jaw clenched tight, and his eyes narrowed to icy slits. He hissed, the words barely escaping through his gritted teeth, "I know your damn secret. I know all about it. CJ told me everything."

Betrayal flashed across Randall's face, momentarily erasing the rage. Randall's face crumpled as if he'd been physically struck. "No! You're lying."

Fury contorted Sam's face, his chest heaving as he lunged at Randall.

Randall, a lightning draw, sent a bullet into the oozing wound on Sam's chest.

Sam fell back into his bed, his eyes wide with shock. He looked at his chest and then back at Randall. "I knew you'd be the one to kill me."

Randall stood emotionless and silent as the life fled from Sam's body. Almost a minute passed, and the bright red stain still ate away at the once-white shirt. Randall shook his head.

Randall went to the closet, which was neat and orderly. He spotted an old, tattered wooden box hiding at the back of the top shelf and pulled it down. Sam needed a ladder to reach that high,

he thought. The smell of linseed oil and stain escaped when he opened the box. A cleaned and oiled six-shooter was inside, wrapped in an oiled rag. The handle was smooth and faintly engraved with CJ's initials. No doubt, Sam had tried to erase the last of CJ from the gun.

It was the late 1850s in New York City. In his early twenties, Alexander Johnson, a tall, well-dressed bank manager, walked into his office carrying a stack of ledgers and loose papers. Alexander plopped them down on his large, ornate desk that was too fancy for his liking. Wallace Holt, the bank owner, told him, "All of our customers, especially the wealthy ones, regard the bank's appearance as an indicator of wealth and stability. We must maintain this image!"

Alexander took his two six-shooters out of the side drawer. Six bullets were nestled safely in the first one's chambers. He holstered the gun and picked up the other one. He'd cleaned it the night before and hadn't loaded it—he always cleaned his guns after firing them. A bullet from that weapon had found its mark in an outlaw's chest. He, along with another two or three masked men, got away.

He put six shiny bullets into the gun's chambers. He glanced at the papers on his desk as he holstered the second gun. The journals seemed to be beckoning to him to address a severe error in the account of a wealthy customer. He checked the time and shook his head. He'd promised Wallace he'd ride on the next stagecoach headed out of town instead of his regular one. Alexander figured he had enough time to examine the records again to exonerate his good name. He plopped down onto his chair. The barrels of his weapons dug hard into the side of his legs. He pulled both guns, put them on the desk, and returned to the ledgers.

He worked for several minutes. Then, he took a blank piece of paper from his center drawer, scribbled some numbers in a column, and drew a line under the last one. He added them and wrote the answer beneath the line. He compared it to another number in the ledger belonging to Mr. Swanson's account. He returned his pen to its holder and then smiled.

Sudden, rapid knocks startled Alexander. A short, stout

Wallace Holt stood behind the wood-framed glass of Alexander's door.

"Come in," yelled Alexander as his self-congratulatory smile disappeared.

Wallace opened the door, huffing — almost hyperventilating, and rushed to Alexander's desk. "Why aren't you on the stagecoach with Mr. and Mrs. Swanson?"

Alexander grinned. "There's still fifteen minutes before the coach leaves."

Wallace gasped. "Mr. Swanson is not a patient man. He withdrew another \$1,000 in cash, and he's taking it to the college his daughter attends."

"That coach isn't going to leave without me."

Wallace shook his head. "He's outraged because I won't fire you."

Alexander shrugged his shoulders. "He's a damn fool."

"Mr. Swanson said he plans to withdraw the rest of his money if we don't fix this. Let me assign his account to someone else."

"No. I can do both jobs," said Alexander, although it had been two days since Mr. Swanson had discovered the discrepancy in his account. Another more skilled accountant who didn't have to split his time between protecting stagecoaches and balancing books would likely not have made a mistake.

Alexander pointed to the ledger where he had solved the mystery of the accounting error.

Wallace raised a brow. "I need you riding with them to ensure they get to the next station. The men at *Sanctuary Station* will guard the coach the rest of the way."

Alexander scoffed. "I'd rather go on the coach headed to Boston at 10:00 a.m. That's the one I'm usually on."

Wallace shook his head. "I have someone else on that one. You're the best stagecoach protector we've got."

Alexander's face tightened. "Let me show you something first."

Wallace exhaled hard and glanced at his timepiece.

Alexander moved the books over so that Wallace could see them better. "Here's the cause of the supposed discrepancy in Mr. Swanson's account."

Holt's eyes tensed with dread. He braced himself for the bad news and leaned in toward the ledgers. Loud, forceful knocks interrupted his suspense. He gasped.

Alexander gritted his teeth and shouted at the deputy behind the door's glass, "Come in."

The deputy burst into the office and yelled, "The stagecoach with Mr. Swanson left."

Wallace, his heart racing, looked at his pocket watch. "The driver was supposed to wait for Alexander. That coach wasn't due to leave for another fifteen minutes, at least."

The deputy cleared his throat. "Mr. Swanson came out of the coach, created a huge spectacle, and said Alexander could go to hell."

Alexander chuckled. "The damn fool is going to get himself killed. Do me a favor and get my horse ready." Alexander turned to Wallace and said, "It'll serve Mr. Swanson right if the stagecoach robbers rob him blind."

"Alexander! He's our wealthiest customer. It'd be a tragedy if anything happened to his mon—" Wallace blinked several times and shuddered, "...if anything happened to him."

Alexander snickered.

"Mr. Swanson and his money will be fine. Those outlaws wouldn't be dumb enough to stop a coach between here and *Sanctuary Station* two days in a row."

Wallace gasped.

The deputy shook his head. "I'll wait outside."

Alexander went back to the books.

The deputy slammed the door when he left.

Wallace winced. "How bad is it? Did you account for the \$20,000 shortage?"

"A simple missed decimal point, that's all it was. There is no shortage. I've added proper ledger entries to bring Mr. Swanson's account into balance. He'll be satisfied once he examines these ledgers."

Wallace sighed. "Mr. Swanson wants another manager assigned and said that this is the third time he's discovered an error." Wallace chuckled. "Swanson's daughter is the one who found all three of the accounting errors."

Alexander shook his head. “But this time, the mistake was minor.” He stood and put his guns in their holsters. “We sure do cater to Mr Swanson’s independent nature.”

“When he returns, we can clear this whole thing up,” said Wallace, his face returning to its pallid color. “Perhaps I could explain it to him in a more diplomatic manner—”

Alexander retrieved his rifle from the cabinet by the door. “When I catch up with him, I’ll tell him we resolved the issue.”

Wallace blinked several times. “The bank can’t lose him as a customer.”

Alexander grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.” Alexander patted Wallace on the shoulder and left.

Wallace half-smiled as he picked up the ledger and examined the journal entries. He gazed out the window. Alexander was putting his rifle in its leather holder hanging from the saddle. The deputy was a few feet away, bobbing his head as he waited on his horse. Wallace was curious about the deputy’s nervous habit but not enough to ask the deputy about it.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Stagecoach Robbery*

The robbers were escalating their attacks on the stagecoaches. Banks, desperate to safeguard their money, resorted to concealed strongboxes hidden within the stagecoach or beneath the driver's seat. Yet, even these measures felt inadequate. Each journey became a dangerous gamble, relying on a heavily armed trio: a rifle-wielding rider inside, a vigilant lookout perched atop the coach, and the driver himself, ever watchful with his weapon under his bench. Most of the time, the passengers were safe if they gave up the bank's money.

The driver sat on the stagecoach, waiting to leave New York. Inside were his two passengers, Mr. and Mrs. Swanson.

As he waited, Mr. Swanson yelled fiercely at the deputy inside. He only caught part of the conversation because he was "resting" his eyes.

"I'll follow behind on my horse instead of inside, and Alexander can catch up with us later," said the deputy to Mr. Swanson.

What seemed like an instant later, the deputy tapped the driver's shoulder.

The driver jumped and gasped for air as he awoke.

"Mr. Swanson wants you to go. He said to give you this," said the deputy. "I'll follow you on my horse until Alexander shows up."

The deputy handed the driver twenty-five dollars. The driver smiled as he took the money. Since they would be traveling less than an hour away, the trip was short enough to be safe. It was a beautiful, clear day, and he was confident he could manage any difficulty. Traversing these roads was routine, and he had never encountered a situation he couldn't handle. Of course, he couldn't remember the last time he'd traveled without an armed companion sitting next to him. No matter, he thought, Mr. Swanson was handy with his six-shooter if they got into trouble.

And with the deputy riding behind, it should be okay.

The driver shook the reins to go. The coach began its trip out of New York through the wilderness to its first stop at *Sanctuary Station*.

The driver whistled a song and imagined what he could buy with his newfound fortune. He had always appreciated Mr. Swanson, who had helped pay for a modest house for him and his wife.

Inside, the wealthy couple sat on the rear bench and swayed to and fro as the stagecoach went. The ride was relatively smooth.

Mrs. Swanson said, "I brought my mother's necklace and a few other jewelry pieces for Martha. We have to encourage her to wear the dresses I'm bringing for her."

"So that's what's in that heavy trunk up top — Lots of dresses."

She chuckled as she rolled her eyes. "There's a few things for Gertrude, too."

"If Martha dressed more like a lady, she might attract a potential suitor."

Mr. Swanson smiled. "Most women, if not all, are happy to marry and have children. Just look at how joyful you are."

Mrs. Swanson winced. "I know we agreed to allow Martha to attend the college, but I'm worried about her."

"She's fine. Our daughter knows how to care for herself and must have had a good reason for punching that boy. I'm sure it's not as bad as it seems."

Her body shuddered as if she'd tipped her toe in ice-cold water. "Oh dear, that is never how a proper young lady should behave."

He patted his wife's hand. "The telegram I received from the school indicated that they would permit our daughter to attend a second year."

"Your generous donation likely influenced their decision in her favor."

Mr. Swanson's brows rose as he tilted his head with an amused smile. "My money can be quite persuasive."

"I'm beginning to regret that you and Martha 'persuaded' me

to allow her to go to college. She needs to settle down, marry, and raise a family. Only then will she know what being a woman is.”

He rolled his eyes. “We can’t deny her this opportunity to go there and learn in a disciplined manner. After she finishes, she can live her life as she pleases.”

Mrs. Swanson guffawed.

The corner of his lips curled upward as he glanced sideways at his wife and said, “Hopefully, she walloped that boy well.”

She laughed and sat up taller. “She’s exactly like you.”

“When we first met, you were energetically independent.”

She inhaled and let it out in a huff. “Why can’t she funnel that energy in a more positive, lady-like way? Just as I did.”

“Agreed.” He looked at his watch, returned it to his pocket, and said, “We should arrive at *Sanctuary Station* in twenty minutes.”

She tried getting comfortable in her seat, and the pillow she had placed on the hard bench didn’t help much. “I’m so glad Martha is staying with my dear Gertrude.”

“Those two are inseparable.”

Mrs. Swanson smiled. “Yes. Gertrude has always treated Martha as if she were her daughter. Martha adores her.”

“We’re fortunate that Gertrude came into our lives.”

“When Joe brought her home to meet us all those years ago, I didn’t know what to make of her. She was very loud—and talkative.” Mrs. Swanson sighed as a tear fell to her cheek.

“I’m sorry that your brother...”

She squeezed his hand tight as a cloud of remembered pain overcame her. She took a slow, deep breath and put her head on his shoulder, trying to forget about her brother’s tragic death.

Not far behind them, three men on horseback rode furiously along a dusty road. Randall Pruitt led the way, followed by his nephew, Thomas Pruitt, and Thomas’s long-time friend, Frank Williams.

Randall, more than twice his nephew’s age, was a tall, gruff man. He was a meticulous planner who liked robbing stagecoaches. Those coaches almost always carried lots of money, especially those leaving the big banks of New York and heading to the smaller town banks that littered the well-traveled roads. “You catch ‘em in those parts where they have to slow down,” he had

told Thomas and Frank. Randall didn't like robbing banks. There were too many lawmen in and around the building. Robbing a stagecoach was fun and exhilarating. He'd tried often to get his nephew, Thomas, to share his enthusiasm for robbing stagecoaches. Thomas was too much like his father in that respect. Thomas, with his scrappy appearance, was a bit quiet and too reserved.

Frank, on the other hand, was like Randall. Frank was outspoken, neat, and well-dressed. Randall was proud of Frank. Randall liked that Frank never questioned him and was always eager to follow his orders.

That day, Frank was distracted because his father had been wounded during a botched stagecoach robbery the day before. He and his father had a long, disturbing conversation early that morning. Frank consoled his father as best he could. Frank was bothered that his father had also mentioned disparaging things about Randall. Frank didn't pay much attention to them since most of it was none of his business. He never liked gossip.

Randall roared, "Those bastards are early. Hurry up! They're getting away." Randall was angry that he was short a man. If only Sam were here, he thought. "Doggone it!"

Randall spurred his horse onward, the animal leaping into a faster gallop with a startled snort.

Alexander jumped on his horse outside the bank and smirked at the deputy.

Alexander winked at him. "Sorry about that."

"That's okay. You were being an ass as usual." The deputy laughed and took off.

Within minutes, Alexander caught up to him, and both rode side-by-side.

After twenty minutes, Alexander said, "Are you sure they didn't leave earlier? We should have seen them raising dust already."

The deputy shrugged. "Come on. We're going too slow. Let's see who can get to Swanson's stagecoach first."

Alexander and the deputy raced past each other as swirling plumes of dust followed behind them.

\* \* \*

Far ahead, the stagecoach carrying the Swanson couple thundered down the road. Its wheels, occasionally, leaped high above the ground. The driver caught a glimpse of three robbers bearing down on them. The driver, a mask of terror replacing his usual stoicism, flayed the reins, his voice ragged, "Faster!" Every lash echoed his rising panic, urging the horses to a speed well beyond their limit.

The animals pounded hooves in frantic unison down the trail headed toward what was aptly called *Sanctuary Station*. The driver knew he couldn't outrun the outlaws, yet every muscle screamed to push the horses harder. If he could get close enough, he might be able to get help. He glanced to the side, angry that he was alone on that perch. His knuckles were strained as he snapped the reins harder. The horses shrieked, but getting there was his only hope.

The couple inside clutched tight to each other as they jostled about.

"We'll be fine, my love. You'll see!" Mr. Swanson reassured her as he took his gun from his bag.

"Dear God, please protect us," she prayed.

Closing in on the stagecoach, Randall saw the trail of dust loom over the path where it went. Further away was the smoke coming from a lone house — *Sanctuary Station*. The coach would soon be out of reach unless they could slow it down.

Frank pulled his six-shooter and fired several shots at the coach.

"Come on! We got 'em," Randall shouted and then pointed at Frank. "Get up on that ridge and shoot that damn driver."

Frank raced ahead and rode up the hill. It was full of trees and shrubs, which gave a shooter like him good cover. He jumped from his horse, grabbed his rifle, and ran to the edge. He narrowed his eyes, aimed at his target, and fired.

"Yeah!" Frank shouted when he hit his target. "Damn! I'm good!" He rushed to his horse.

The driver gasped as the molten metal pierced his arm, and he

almost lost control as the coach violently shook. The coach veered left, nearly smashing against a large outcrop. A heavy trunk slid from behind him and struck his head. He felt dizzy as he instinctively pulled back on the reins, using his might to command the horses to slow down.

The horses's muscles shuddered as the coach's immense weight smashed into them. Panicked whinnies erupted as the horses skidded chaotically, and the coach bore down on them. A cacophony of scraping hooves echoed as the coach slowed to a crawl. The stagecoach finally stopped when one of its wheels collided with a rock jutting from the ground. The horses stood trembling, choking, and gasping for air. The driver slumped over motionless.

Inside, Mr. Swanson helped his wife into a compartment below the front seat inside the stagecoach—usually reserved for the strong box. It was barely big enough to hold her. She peered up at him with tears and fear in her eyes. He gestured for her to keep silent. She pulled herself tight as he closed the cover over her. He grabbed his pistol and crawled out the small window opposite the door.

Randall and Thomas jumped from their horses and ran to the cockeyed stagecoach.

Randall walked cautiously to the door. "Come on out." He slowed as he drew closer, his weapon drawn.

There was no answer.

Randall narrowed his eyes. "Come on out. You ain't got a chance. We won't shoot. No one has to get hurt."

Both Randall and Thomas pointed their guns at the door. Randall signaled to Thomas to open it.

Thomas cocked his head back, a simmering anger replacing his surprise, and then turned back to the coach. Trepidation laced Thomas's movements as he inched toward the door, his grip tightening around his six-shooter. His weapon trembled, betraying a flicker of doubt. With a sharp exhale, he reached for the latch and flung the door open.

Inside was empty. Relief flickered across Thomas's face as he holstered his gun. A humorless scoff escaped his lips as he met

Randall's gaze. "There's no one in there. No wonder they were able to go so fast."

Randall blinked, curiosity etched in his brows. He stepped past Thomas and poked his head inside. "What the hell? They had to have gotten in at the hotel."

Thomas snickered. "Maybe they got out earlier. Jumped, maybe?"

Randall offered no response and shook his head at the absurdity of the suggestion. As he turned, a jolt shot through him. Frank was charging toward them, his gun drawn, aiming at the coach, yelling something at him.

Thomas looked inside again and heard a click. His mouth fell open when the glint of metal caught his eye. A gun was pointed at him from the window opposite him.

Outside, as Frank approached, he saw Mr. Swanson pointing a weapon into the cabin.

A booming shot rang out. Thomas fell back to the ground.

A woman screamed.

Frank jumped from his horse, smoke oozing from his gun's barrel, and ran to Thomas. "Thomas, are you okay?"

Thomas stood up and felt his chest for a bullet hole.

Randall sprinted to the other side of the coach. On the ground was a wounded Mr. Swanson groaning in pain, reaching for his pistol.

Randall kicked the gun away as Frank and Thomas walked up.

A gold money clip was hanging out of Mr. Swanson's pocket.

Frank bent over and snatched it from him. "You won't be needin' this anymore. Serves you right for trying to shoot my friend. What's wrong with you?"

Mr. Swanson moaned and glared at Randall. "Randall! Back to your old ways."

Randall smirked and then nodded at Thomas. "He just withdrew money from the bank. Make sure you get every last cent. It's probably in the strongbox inside the coach under the front seat."

Thomas went to the stagecoach.

Frank walked up next to Mr. Swanson. "What do we do with him?"

Randall pointed his gun at Mr. Swanson's face and grinned.

Mr. Swanson's eyes widened in horror as Randall pulled the trigger and fired.

Blood splattered on Frank's dusty boots.

Frank jumped back. "Doggone it, Randall! These dang boots were new." Frank kicked at the ground, trying to get the dirt to soak up the blood splatters.

The ground was too hard to let go of anything more than a small cloud of dust.

"Damnit!" said Frank, wiping his boots on Mr. Swanson's pant legs.

Mr. Swanson's watch was hanging half out of his pocket. Randall leaned over and picked it up. He pulled on the chain and tried to dislodge the end of it from the man's coat. But it broke anyway. Randall grimaced and examined the watch. The watches he'd seen before were all metal, mainly gold or silver. This one had a painted picture of a young, beautiful woman on the front. He winked at the dead man as he put the fancy watch in his pocket.

Thomas came running from the other side of the coach, pulling Mrs. Swanson by the arm. His eyes widened with fright when he saw Mr. Swanson on the ground.

Mrs. Swanson screamed when she saw her husband, rushed to him, and knelt next to his side.

Thomas glared at Randall. "You swore we weren't gonna kill anyone."

Randall chuckled. "No, I didn't. Besides, Son, he was trying to shoot ya."

Thomas narrowed his eyes at Randall.

Randall stepped toward Mrs. Swanson. "Who do we have here?"

She wailed in horror at Randall and shouted, "You're a monster!"

Thomas's eyes widened, and he jumped away from Mrs. Swanson. Thomas remembered his mother yelling the same thing at Randall the day she died.

Randall glared at the woman and then drew his gun.

She started to stand. "I'm not afraid of you. You killed my



dear friend, Rose.”

Randall almost choked as if punched in the gut. He glanced at Thomas.

Thomas, his lips tight, stared accusingly at Randall.

Randall’s eyes narrowed to deadly slits and darted toward Mrs. Swanson. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

She wailed even louder, “You miscreant, good-for-nothing murdering monster.”

A guttural growl rumbled from Randall’s chest. “Shut it!”

“I’m—”

Randall pulled the trigger.

Mrs. Swanson fell silent next to her husband.

Thomas gasped and approached the dead couple. “That woman was talking about my mother. Wasn’t she?”

Randall walked up menacingly close to Thomas. Thomas cowered.

The red faded from Randall’s face, “That woman was crazy. All that screeching. You know as well as I do your pa killed your ma.”

Thomas stepped back as if trying to avoid something more lethal than a bullet. His gaze fell to Mrs. Swanson, and she seemed peaceful. The gruesome scene reminded him of the day he’d seen his mother’s lifeless body lying on the floor. His mother had been wearing a similar, fancy dress as the dead woman. It made sense that his mother would have been friends with Mrs. Swanson. Thomas gritted his teeth, and his narrowed eyes darted to Randall.

Randall was staring at him. “Son, she ain’t worth your pity.” He shook his head and strolled away.

A silent battle raged within Thomas between thoughts of revenge and his intertwined thoughts of Mrs. Swanson’s and his mother’s deaths. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to calm himself. His gaze fell on Mrs. Swanson. She was clutching something. It took some effort to pry it from her clenched hand. It was a photograph. He wiped the blood from it with his fingers and saw the image of a young, beautiful woman. He looked closer, and his eyes widened in shock. When he turned it over, his mouth fell open.

“My dearest Martha” was written on the back.

Randall walked up to him. "Whatcha got there?"

Thomas snuck it into his pocket. "Nothing."

Randall's eyes darted to Thomas's pocket and then back to his face. "Go help Frank get the money out of the strongbox. It's up top. And hurry it up so we can get back home and check on his pa." Randall winked at him and then started for his horse.

Thomas's face soured, and he went to the front of the coach.

Frank was leaning over the driver.

Thomas stood on the ground, looking up at Frank. "Is he alive?"

Frank glanced sideways at Thomas, pulled out his six-shooter, and pointed it at the driver's face. "The man might be breathing. I can't tell."

Thomas climbed up next to Frank and pushed Frank's weapon away. "Leave him be. You aren't a cold-blooded killer."

Frank chuckled and holstered his gun. "You're right. Let's get this done so I can get back to Pa."

Thomas and Frank dislodged the strongbox and threw it to the ground, and it fell open.

Frank laughed. "It ain't locked."

They jumped down. Frank gathered the money and stuffed it into a pouch. Thomas noticed the glint of what seemed like precious stones. It was a necklace and other pieces of jewelry. He put them into his pockets.

Randall rode up on his horse. "Let's go! Riders are coming."

The stagecoach stood eerily motionless, crooked on the road, hiding its tragic, bloody scene from Alexander's and the deputy's approach.

With their guns drawn, the deputy and Alexander approached cautiously, the deputy on the left and Alexander on the right.

Alexander crept slowly toward the coach's open door and jumped forward, his gun pointed inside. The inside was empty except for the luggage thrown about.

The deputy moved along the coach's left side and stopped when he saw the bodies. "We're too late," the deputy rasped, his voice tight with disappointment. He shuffled toward the couple, his weapon disappearing into its holster.

Scrambling up top, Alexander stood next to the slumped-over driver.

The deputy rubbed his neck, his face pained with disgust, as he paced back and forth beside the bodies. “They’re dead.”

The deputy looked up at Alexander, shaking his head in disbelief. His voice creaked as he yelled, “If we’d arrived just a few minutes earlier, they’d still be alive.”

Alexander sat where he should have been earlier, meant to protect the passengers. The scene that unfolded below was brutally clear. Mr. Swanson lay sprawled on his back, Mrs. Swanson crumpled beside him. Crimson stained their clothes, while the hard-packed earth had become slick mud from the blood spilled mere moments ago. Guilt gnawed at him. “This is all my fault,” he choked out, the words lost in the wind.

A sudden moan jolted him from his self-flagellation. The driver, eyes fluttering open, clutched his right arm, dark with dried blood.

“You’re alive,” Alexander breathed, a flicker of relief warming the icy grip of dread in his chest.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *From Past to Present*

Randall raced home, followed closely by Frank. Thomas trailed far behind the other two. Frank almost crashed into Randall when he suddenly slowed and turned into a narrow, winding trail. This path was one Randall used long ago to ‘escape’ from any pursuer. Anyone following them would be met with an uninviting labyrinth, most trails leading to treacherous dead ends.

Randall yelled, “Thomas, ride up here with us. You don’t want to get lost in here.”

Thomas wrinkled his face. “I’m good.”

The trio pressed on for thirty minutes, navigating a dark maze of gnarled trees and unforgiving terrain. Emerging from the dense canopy, they skirted the edge of Randall’s land. On one side, the forest they’d just traversed loomed like a brooding giant, its secrets hidden in the shadows. On the other, a stark contrast: a flat wasteland choked by tall weeds and scraggly shrubs where, long ago, vegetables once flourished. Back then, the air smelled green with life. His mother had toiled in the fields with her two boys. His father, who worked as a deputy, was tainted with corruption.

Randall took a sharp right turn into a narrow path just beyond the weedy land. His house came into view. He rode up to the hitching post.

Randall tied his horse. He excitedly pulled the saddle bag, loaded with cash, and rushed to the door. About to go inside, he glanced back. He took a deep breath and exhaled through his words, “Frank, after you’re done, go see if your pa is well enough to come on over. We got some celebratin’ to do.”

“Yes, sir,” said Frank, grinning.

Frank was tying his horse when Thomas stopped next to him.

Thomas bristled as he got down. He took an apple from the pouch hanging from his saddle, where he kept snacks. He cut two slices and gave one to his horse—she whinnied with delight.

Frank waited for Thomas to toss the other one to him for his horse like he usually did. Instead, Thomas gave the second piece to his horse.

Frank's face wrinkled as he narrowed his eyes and said, "Show some respect for your uncle. We made a lot of money today. And it wasn't easy for him."

Thomas shook his head, "Randall murdered that couple in the stagecoach just like he killed my ma."

"Randall didn't kill your ma," said Frank.

Thomas scoffed.

Their conversation carried through the open window.

Inside, Randall grunted. "Damnit! I told that boy what happened," he muttered. He took a glass and the whiskey from the cupboard, poured himself a drink, and sat at the kitchen table. Now and again, a smooth glass of spirits was well deserved, especially after the thrill of a successful robbery. Today's chase was exciting. He was skilled at robbing stagecoaches. And after a ten-year hiatus, he was back at it. He took a sip. A cursed memory, one that he had relived many times, snapped at him as he slammed his empty glass down. He gazed into nothingness as the memory accosted him.

Ten years before, he and his brother sat across each other, drinking at the same table.

A grinning Randall poured a little whiskey into a glass and slid it over to Joseph. "What were you and Juan talking about all hush-hush? Are you two planning on robbing a stagecoach without me?"

Joseph glanced at the glass and shook his head. He licked his lips and stared disdainfully at Randall.

Randall smiled. "Have a drink." It bothered him that his brother was keeping something important from him.

Joseph took a sip. He hardly remembered the last time he'd tasted anything this smooth. The whiskey comforted him like an old friend who was always there for him, at least until the next day when he'd have to go looking for more. He drank the rest down.

Randall filled both glasses.

"Rose won't like me drinking," said Joseph as he eyed the

glass, mesmerized by the reflection of the late morning sunlight swimming on its surface.

Joseph sat, his eyes fixed on the glass. He took a drink and wrinkled his face. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, his head swaying slightly. "I don't trust you. I've told you a million times to keep your hands off my Rose."

"Rose? Nothing is going on. I want nothing to do with that toad of a wife you got. She ain't family." Randall shook his head. "You imagine things when you drink."

Joseph glared at Randall and leaned in. "She's my wife, and that makes her family. I can see why she wants to move on out of here. She doesn't like it here. Mostly because she doesn't like you."

Randall winced, the vein growing thick on his throat. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "You're moving? We got a good thing going here. You could help—"

"I'm not interested in robbing stagecoaches. I want to be a lawman out West who protects innocent people from the likes of you." Joseph drank the rest of the whiskey and shoved his empty glass closer to Randall.

Randall snickered and filled Joseph's glass halfway. "Like Pa? Bad is in our blood, brother. There's nothing you can do about that. He was as crooked as you are."

"That's not true." Joseph drank the whiskey in one shot, put the empty glass down, and stood. "I'm nothing like our pa. I have respect for the law."

Randall scoffed.

Joseph half-smiled. "Juan is organizing wagons to get us to California. We're leaving tomorrow. Rose is at his house right now dropping off the last of our provisions for our trip."

Randall flinched and glared at Joseph. "What the hell! Juan is going, too! You can't leave. Pa left this house to both of us and wanted us to stay here." Randall took another drink.

Joseph guffawed.

Randall almost choked. "You're my family, and I need you with me."

Joseph spun around to Randall, held up his arm, about to say something, and then lost his balance.

Randall jumped from his chair and reached for Joseph but missed. Joseph crashed head-first to the floor.

“Damnit, Joseph!”

Joseph pushed himself up and was already kneeling when his eyes flashed open. Reaching to cover his mouth, he jumped up and bolted out the front door.

Randall rushed after him. Joseph was leaning over the railing, vomiting. Joseph wiped his mouth and staggered to the bench, avoiding Randall’s gaze. The world was spinning out of control. He plopped down on the bench and closed his eyes. The chaos faded as he fell into an unnatural slumber.

Randall relaxed when he saw his brother’s breathing get normal. Randall went inside and returned with a pillow and put it under Joseph’s head. It’d been a long time since Joseph had touched whiskey.

Earlier, Randall had heard Rose and Joseph whispering to each other. Rose had shushed Joseph after he mentioned something about Juan. The whiskey was the only way to discover what secret Joseph was hiding.

Randall was about to enter the house when Rose and young Thomas arrived. Thomas rushed around and helped his mother down. Rose’s eyes darted from Randall to Joseph. Joseph was asleep on the porch. The smell of whiskey accosted her as she stepped toward the house. Dread filled her heart as she heard Joseph’s incoherent mumblings. Joseph hadn’t touched any whiskey since she’d threatened to leave him so many years before. Rose glanced at Thomas and forced a smile.

She went to the back of the wagon and pulled out a box of things she’d bought to prepare a cake for Thomas’s birthday. She and Joseph hadn’t told Thomas of their plans to move. She placed the container on the porch and turned back to Thomas.

“Thomas, take the wagon to the barn and see that one of the ranch hands takes care of the horse.” Rose always referred to Frank and his father Sam as ranch hands instead of calling them by their names.

Thomas’s eyes darted to Randall. Randall stood stone-faced, towering over his mother.

Rose smiled stiffly at Thomas, “Get going.”

Thomas nodded slowly and suspiciously, unhooked the horse

from the wagon, and then led the horse away.

She waited until Thomas disappeared into the barn and then turned to Randall. He grinned and narrowed his eyes.

She rushed to Joseph, shaking him. He didn't respond. She glared at Randall, "What the hell is wrong with you, getting him drunk? This is your doing."

"He's sleeping it off. He's not that drunk. He puked most of it up," he said with a chuckle.

"You know very well that he doesn't drink anymore. Why did you do this to him? You must hate your brother even more than I realized."

Randall cocked his head back, his face pained with surprise. "Before you came along, Joseph never kept anything from me. My brother trusted me." He took a step toward her. "You turned him against me by talking him into leaving here. You've made a mistake gettin' between us like that! You're trying to take him away."

Rose stepped back, shock painted on her face. Joseph wasn't supposed to tell Randall about their plans to move away. Her breathing went heavy. She leaned toward Randall. "You're no good for Joseph. He's a good man, and you want to corrupt him. I won't let you do that."

Randall burst into laughter. "You won't last. My brother doesn't love you. Sooner or later, he'll leave you for someone who cares for him. I know my brother better than you."

He went inside and slammed the door behind him.

Rose's eyes filled with rage. She kicked the door open and ran in after him.

"My husband loves me. You're just jealous. No respectable woman would ever love you. If your mother knew that you scour the whorehouses for love, she'd certainly be disappointed in you."

"The women there are more respectable than you." Randall stepped toward her, his eyes icy cold. "Didn't your mother work there?"

That comment choked the breath out of her. She had confided in Joseph long before that her mother had worked in a brothel for many years.

"You're a cruel monster," she shouted as she slapped Randall.



Randall shoved Rose hard to the floor. She wailed in pain and howled when Randall pulled her up by her arm.

Randall glared at her. “You—”

Randall recognized the click of the hammer of a six-shooter cocked and ready to fire. He turned. Joseph stood in the doorway, his hand trembling as he pointed a gun at him. A loud blast from Joseph’s gun filled the room as a bullet grazed Randall’s left arm. Randall, his jaws clenched, glared at Joseph. Embers of fury smoldered in Randall’s bloodshot eyes.

“Let her go, Randall! Or else the next bullet will go through your cold heart,” Joseph roared. He pointed the gun at Randall’s chest.

Rose’s eyes went wide with shock, and her jaw dropped. “Joseph! Put the gun down,” yelled Rose. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

Randall released Rose’s arm. His mouth held an insidious grin as he tilted his head down and locked eyes with Joseph.

Joseph relaxed his shooting hand.

And then, in one sweeping movement, Randall grabbed Rose and shoved her hard into Joseph’s gun.

Rose screamed.

Joseph’s gun went off, and Rose fell to the ground.

A hint of a smile crossed Randall’s lips.

Joseph gasped, dropped his gun, and pulled Rose into his arms. “Rose! Rose!”

Rose whispered, “This is Randall’s fault. Take Thomas away from here before it’s too late.”

She took one last breath.

Joseph roared as he grabbed the gun and jumped at Randall.

Randall wrestled the gun away from Joseph and stepped back, pointing the gun at his brother.

Randall shook his head as he thought of a way to spin this so that all blame fell onto Joseph. “What the hell, you drunken fool? Why did you kill her?” Randall glanced at his sleeve, which was quickly soaking up blood from the bullet that grazed him. His voice began to quiver as he said, “You shot me, you bastard. Damnit, I’m your brother. I wanted you to stay here and help me out. But it won’t be good to have a killer like you hanging around

here. You've always been a bit slow, but now you're plain stupid!" Joseph hated being called stupid. "You were going to kill me, weren't you?"

Joseph backed away slowly without saying a word.

Randall's eyes filled with rage as Joseph stepped back. Randall cocked the gun, ready to shoot.

"I want you to leave, take your horse, and go. I don't care where you go, but I'll kill your boy if I ever see you again. You got that?"

Joseph stood defiant. "You love my son. You aren't going to hurt him. I'm taking him with me."

Randall growled at Joseph, "Thomas is a momma's boy, and by killing his mother, you've destroyed his life. Ain't telling what this is gonna do to him. Thomas needs someone strong to teach him how to be a man. You, for sure, ain't got what it takes to—"

"What's going on?" yelled Thomas from outside.

Thomas burst through the front door. His nose twitched from the acrid smell of spent gunpowder. His eyes, filled with horror, darted from Joseph to Randall to the gun in Randall's hand. And then Thomas's gaze fell onto the heart-wrenching sight on the floor, and his breath caught in his throat.

His mother was lying lifeless on the floor. The blood was seeping slowly away from her.

Joseph, his eyes moist with guilt, reached for Thomas. "It was an accident."

Randall shook his head. "Your pa just killed your ma. That's what happened."

Barely enough air to speak, Thomas rushed to his mother, kneeling at her side.

"Ma!" He picked up her hand and held in his tears as best he could.

Randall turned to Joseph. "Once I alert the sheriff about what you've done here, he's going to hunt you down and string you up." He used the gun barrel to point the way to the back door. "Your boy needs a father, not a drunken fool who killed his mother."

Joseph's face contorted in shock, and he whispered to his son, "I'm sorry."

Randall bared his teeth like a mad dog. "Yeah. You are. Now

get going.”

Joseph reached for Thomas. “Let’s go, son.”

Randall stepped over Rose’s body and pushed Joseph. “You’re not taking him anywhere.” He turned to Thomas. “Did you know they were leaving for California tomorrow?”

Thomas sucked in a sharp breath, his hands flying to his temples. He rubbed them in tight circles, trying to quell the rising panic.

Joseph gasped. “Your mother and I were going to tell you. We wanted to surprise you.”

Randall shook his head. “I wonder what else they were keeping from you.”

Thomas’s shoulders drooped as his hands dropped to his side in surrender, and he walked next to Randall.

Randall’s lips curled upward slightly. “It’s time to go, Joseph.”

Joseph shuffled out the door. Randall, his gun poking his brother’s back, followed behind.

Once outside, Joseph pivoted and lunged at Randall.

Randall quickly shoved him to the ground. “You’re slow. Maybe it’s the whiskey. Now off you go, little brother!”

Joseph got on his horse and glanced at the door where Thomas stood. Thomas winced and then turned away and disappeared into the house.

Randall laughed. “You ain’t wanted here.”

Joseph snapped at the reins and left.

Randall went back inside and found Thomas crying over his mother’s body.

“Thomas, let’s go get some air.” Randall pointed to the door with the gun that had shot Rose.

Thomas, his lip quivering, ran out of the house and kept on running until he got to Frank’s house.

Frank jumped down from the porch. “What’s wrong?”

“He killed my mother.”

Frank gasped. “Randall? No!” He glanced down and then locked eyes with Thomas. “This morning, Randall told me he wanted Rose dead. He said she was turning your pa against him. I thought he was joking.”

Thomas’s mouth fell open. “What?”

Frank pulled away from Thomas as Randall rode up.

Randall strained to smile, the tension evident in the tightness of his jaw. "Thomas, you should stay here tonight."

A shiver went up Thomas's spine at the feigned smile. He gripped the porch railing, knuckles white. He inhaled deeply, the air catching rough in his throat. He exhaled loudly. Things were about to get complicated between him and Randall. Thomas's eyes narrowed like slits as he watched Randall's smile disappear. Thomas turned and marched up the stairs.

Randall's eyes were narrowly fixed on Thomas as he continued into the house. Randall jumped when Thomas slammed the door behind him.

"Frank, come over here."

Frank rushed over.

"Where's your pa?"

"He's still out in the fields."

"Tell your pa that I'll come by later. Watch Thomas while I get the sheriff. And keep him here. Joseph killed Rose."

In the present, Randall poured himself more whiskey and glanced out the window. Thomas and Frank were out of earshot and headed to the barn.

Once inside, Frank asked, "Why are you mad at me?"

"I'm not mad at you."

"Well then, what's wrong? You've hardly said a word since we robbed that stagecoach. And just now, you didn't even give my horse a piece of apple like you usually do."

"Sorry." Thomas took a deep breath. "I've been thinking. That woman said that Randall killed my ma."

"That woman didn't know what she was saying. When I asked Randall what happened, he told me how Joseph shot your ma."

Thomas exhaled loudly. "Remember that day my mother died when I snuck out of your house?"

"Yes. You wouldn't talk to me for a long time after that. That's the day that I lied to Randall for you. I'd never kept the truth from him before that day. That's when I went looking for you 'cause I knew you were upset."

"I know." Thomas half-smiled at his friend. "Anyhow, I heard

them arguing that day. I was in the barn putting the horse up. Ma screamed ‘Monster!’ just like that woman on that stagecoach today. I dropped everything and ran to the house. Then, Ma yelled at my pa to put the gun down.”

Frank straightened up. “See! Your pa did shoot your ma. He had the gun.”

Thomas’s voice rose a notch, his words laced with urgency and simmering frustration. “Later that night, I went to look for my pa. When I got near that little shed, he called out to me with a tune he would whistle now and then.” Thomas whistled a bit of it.

“Oh yeah. I remember,” said Frank.

Thomas nodded as the memories overwhelmed him.

Ten years before, Thomas peeked out the window and saw Frank and Randall talking. Randall had told Frank, “Joseph just killed Rose.” Thomas gritted his teeth and then snuck out the back door. Having decided to chase after his father, he bolted to the barn to get his horse. A familiar, whistled tune caught his attention as he walked past the shed.

Thomas turned toward the melodic sound. The full moon’s light partially lit a silhouette of a man standing at its entrance. Thomas squinted at the apparition.

“Thomas,” yelled Joseph.

Joseph ran to Thomas and hugged him. “Son, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Pa, what happened? Why did you shoot Ma?”

Joseph led Thomas to the shed. “It was an accident — a terrible accident. Randall was hurting your mother. He shoved her. I was drinking, and the gun went off.”

“Why don’t you come back? Tell that to the sheriff. It’ll be fine.”

“I can’t.” Joseph hesitated. Randall had threatened to kill Thomas if he returned. A wave of nausea hit him. “Randall will kill....”

The moonlight caught Thomas’s face as he turned away to wipe his tears.

Joseph gasped at the sight of Thomas’s eyes. They were filled with a deep, raw pain that tugged at Joseph’s heart. “Everything is

going to be okay, son.” He walked over to a corner of the shed and removed some boards from the floor. He pulled a wooden box from the dark hiding place and held it where the light was better. “Your ma made me promise I’d take you from here.”

Thomas scrunched his face, confused. “To California?”

Joseph nodded. “Your ma and I arranged to travel by wagon train. We wanted to surprise you with this for your birthday, and we thought you’d be excited about it. Juan organized the trip.”

“Mr. Cortez?” asked Thomas. Thomas didn’t know him all that well. It’d been about two years since he’d last seen him. Before that, Mr. Cortez used to come by the house almost daily.

“Yes. We’re going to meet at his place tomorrow.”

Thomas’s shoulders dropped. “But I don’t want to go. I like it here.”

“Son, there’s no life for us here. Staying here will lead to a life of stagecoach robberies and who knows what. Your mother and I wanted so much more for you. We’ll have a great life there. Did you know there’s gold pouring from the ground in California?”

Joseph withdrew two pouches from the wooden box. “This will be enough for us to make the trip and set us up once we get there. You need to go back for now, and don’t tell Randall you saw me.”

Thomas stepped back. His world was crumbling too fast for him to know what to do. “Yeah, but....”

Joseph didn’t notice the doubt creeping into his son. “I’ll be waiting for you at that mine just west of here in the morning. Let’s say 9:00 a.m. That’ll give you ample time to do your chores and leave unnoticed. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll ride to Juan’s place and head out to California. He’s expecting us.”

Off in the distance, they heard Frank calling out to Thomas.

Joseph jumped. “You better get back.”

Thomas nodded. He thought about his mother and started to feel more comfortable about the idea of leaving. “I’ll see you at 9:00 a.m.”

Thomas returned to the house and found Frank sitting on the front steps.

Frank smiled at Thomas. "Randall came by while you were gone, and I told him you were asleep, even though I knew you weren't."

"I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk."

"Did you find your pa?"

A wave of surprise crashed over Thomas. Had Frank followed him, he thought.

Frank half-smiled. "If I were you, I would have done that."

Thomas took a deep breath. "My father is leaving town and wants me to go with him. We'll meet at 9:00 a.m. at that mine where we used to hang out. Why don't you come with us?"

"Leave Pa? No way!" Frank's voice cracked with desperation, and his eyes glistened with disbelief.

"Your pa can come with us. It'll be great," said Thomas.

"No." Frank stammered, his face etched with worry, "He can't.... He won't." He ran a hand through his hair, the gesture betraying his agitation. "Look, maybe... maybe I could visit you one day. But, I can't just...."

The following morning, Thomas finished his chores early. After he cleaned up, he collected some of his things and left. It was 9:00 a.m. sharp when he arrived at the mine. There was no sign of his pa. Several crows were cawing from their trees above. Thomas had always been fascinated with crows.

"They're intelligent and cunning," His pa had told him. "Don't let 'em look at your face. They'll remember you and attack you if you do them wrong."

"They're just birds," Thomas scoffed, dismissing the memory with a shake of his head.

Loud chatter came from up ahead. He ran in that direction and stopped dead in his tracks. Frank was on his horse, and Randall stood a few feet away. Randall was holding a small leather pouch like the one he'd seen his father with the night before.

Randall walked up to Thomas and tossed him the pouch. "Your pa left without you. He asked me to give this to you. He said something about it being for your future."

Thomas opened it and found it contained bits of gold, some paper money, and some jewels. He narrowed his eyes at Randall.

“You ran him off, didn’t you?”

Randall’s face held a sly smile. His eyebrows bumped up.

Thomas’s eyes darted to Frank. “Why?”

Frank looked away.

Randall chuckled. “Son, I don’t see why you would want to go with your pa, especially since he killed your ma. He’s probably on his way to California by now. I guess you’re stuck with me. I’ll take care of you. Family takes care of family.”

Randall got up on his horse. “It’s best you put that pouch somewhere safe. You never know when you might need it.” He started to leave and then abruptly turned back. “Oh, and I wouldn’t hide it in the shed. I’d find someplace else. That’s where your pa and I hid stuff from your grandpa.”

Thomas stood alone, holding the leather pouch as Randall and Frank rode away.

Back in the present, Frank and Thomas walked out of the barn. Thomas said, “I miss my pa.”

“I know.” Frank smiled and patted Thomas’s shoulder. “I’ll go get my pa,” he said as he rushed away.

Thomas went to the kitchen to prepare supper.

Randall had a good fire burning in the stove and had seared several pieces of meat. Thomas avoided Randall’s gaze as he poured the cut vegetables and seared meat into the deep stove pot. A mouth-watering aroma filled the air.

Minutes crawled by, heavy with unspoken tension. Thomas, a statue of silent fury, stirred the stew — enough for four.

Frank shuffled in.

Thomas glanced at him and stopped stirring the pot. Frank stood wide-eyed, his breathing shallow, in the doorway. His face was pallid.

Randall didn’t look up and said, “Hope you’re hungry.” Randall reached into the cupboard, pulled out three plates and three bowls, and set them on the table.

Thomas, his voice filled with unease, rushed over to Frank. “Where’s your pa?”

Randall turned to Frank, stone-faced.

“My pa is dead,” said Frank.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Expulsion*

Long, raven hair, nearly black, framed Martha Swanson's face, cascading a few inches past her shoulders. Flecks of gold danced within her warm, hazel eyes. Independent and fiercely self-reliant, Martha was more than ambitious; she was audacious. At seventeen, she'd charted her course: college, a respectable career, perhaps travel, culminating in marriage—bold aspirations for a young woman carving her unique path in a time of limitations. Unafraid of dissenting whispers, she remained committed to her goal. While she loved her parents dearly, their approval wasn't her compass. Her father, a successful businessman, cautioned against the difficulty of her chosen path. Her mother firmly believed a woman's place was in the home, caring for her husband and children. Yet, they nurtured her love for learning, filling their library with books that became her silent mentors. In them, she envisioned a life exceeding even her father's achievements, a future she was determined to claim. One day, she sprung a surprise on her father. It challenged their dynamic and set her destiny in motion.

“Father, I’ve read many of the books in your collection. I especially enjoy adventure books that take me to the farthest outskirts of my imagination. Someday, maybe I’ll go see those places myself.”

Martha walked over to the shelf beside the fireplace, pulled down two books, and said, “These two books seemed odd to me.”

“Odd? In what way?”

She flipped through their pages. “They depict women as tools for the men to use as they please.”

He cocked his head back, revealing an unflattering second chin. “Tools? That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

She looked at her father, astonished. How could he not agree with her about this, she thought. “The men in these books comment on the human condition and claim to have all the

answers. And most of the time, they are nonsensical. A woman's perspective should have been included to balance the extreme views. Almost all the pages have spelling and grammatical errors."

Martha held the two books so her father could see them.

Mr. Swanson guffawed. His face relaxed, his cheek bright red. "Oh! Those books. They're rubbish! Your uncle, Joe, rest his soul, gave me those two books years ago. He raved about them and insisted I read them. He told me that if more people read them, they would help solve serious social issues plaguing society." He shook his head. "He had some very extreme views and obnoxious ideas."

Mrs. Swanson walked in. "He most certainly did! I found them last week while cleaning here. They'd fallen behind a shelf."

Mrs. Swanson took the books from Martha and began paging through one of them, shaking her head.

Mr. Swanson nodded and winked at Martha. "I was going to give them back to Gertrude." He raised his brows. "Perhaps she might want them as a memento."

Mrs. Swanson shook her head. "They would only remind her of when my brother was a misogynistic mess. There is nothing but garbage in these books." She tossed the two books into the fireplace. The fire flared from the dry fuel of propaganda. "May his soul rest in peace."

Martha almost choked as she inhaled.

Mrs. Swanson hugged Martha. "I've always admired your voracious appetite for reading. Your father and I have always made it a point to add books to this library to feed your thirst for knowledge. We've avoided the many books that use falsehoods to paint the changing times negatively."

Mr. Swanson nodded, his brows raised.

Martha cleared her throat. "Thank you both. I appreciate it, and I do love reading. But it's not enough." Martha's gaze floated from her mother to her father and then back to her mother. "I want to go to college."

Mrs. Swanson gasped. "What? We have every sort of book imaginable. There's no reason for you to go to college."

Martha kissed her mother's cheek. "Mother, you know better than anyone why I must go there. These books leave me thirsty for

much more.”

Mrs. Swanson half smiled and left without another word.

A part of Mr. Swanson understood the truth of Martha’s words, yet a flicker of indecision remained in his eyes.

Martha’s voice cracked with desperation. “Father, please talk to her. You know I have to do this. Tell her I promise to consider marriage after I complete my schooling.”

Mr. Swanson looked into Martha’s eyes pensively. “Be patient while your mother and I discuss it.”

Martha smiled. This meant her father had decided in her favor when he said this. She could hardly contain her glee and nodded. “Yes, Father. I’ll be patient. But so you know, the Fall session begins in August, and Gertrude lives a few blocks from the school.”

Soon after, Martha’s father enrolled her in college.

The college was reluctant to accept 17-year-old Martha because only men (and one or two women unofficially) were allowed to take classes there. They demanded an ‘accommodation’ fee even to consider Martha’s admission. After Mr. Swanson donated twice the fee amount, the college made a narrow exception to its admission policy, allowing Martha and only her to attend. Mr. Swanson agreed to give them a similar amount for each additional term she was permitted to attend.

Mr. Swanson knew this was a bribe, plain and simple.

Martha began her first year of studies on Monday, August 16, 1858. She lived with Gertrude, not far from the college. She enjoyed her independence. Attending college was the most exciting thing she had ever undertaken. Of course, as a woman, Martha was required to take typing and other skills needed in an office. The school counselor had advised her to take classes in the arts lest the more challenging courses might overtax her. Much to his dismay, she ignored his advice and took courses like bookkeeping, accounting, mathematics, and philosophy. She wasn’t the only woman attending that college. As far as she knew, she was the only woman “allowed” to take classes designated for men. Her father’s generous donations ensured she could take those classes, no matter how controversial it was for a woman.

In her first term, she worked hard to learn her lessons. Many

of the instructors resented her in their classrooms and graded her harshly. Amongst themselves, they complained about her taking a seat away from a young man who would better utilize his education than she could. Even so, she demanded fair treatment. By the end of her first term, she had gained their respect and was consistently faring better than the other students. Her academic prowess inspired awe in some students, while her quiet demeanor earned her the trust of others.

In January, she began her second term in college and found more support as she advanced to the next level of classes. Most of the instructors no longer resented her. Instead, they encouraged her by challenging her with more complex problems and rooting for her success. Unlike the previous term, nearly all her classmates supported her. She thought they might have become accustomed to her or felt less threatened by her. Her second term ended in April.

May brought the third term, culminating in July, with mastery of accounting and bookkeeping. While economics proved more difficult, Martha tackled it with unwavering determination.

August ushered in Martha's second year; initially, things were sailing smoothly. But the calm wouldn't last. A month into the term, an incident outside the school turned her world upside down. Two instructors witnessed her in an altercation with a passerby, claiming they saw her knock the individual to the ground before he scrambled away, triggering a chase by several students. Thankfully, the instructors intervened, diffusing the tense situation. However, the repercussions were severe. The school contacted Gertrude, and an urgent telegram summoned Martha's parents for a crucial meeting. The air crackled with unspoken questions and a rising tide of worry.

Soon after, Martha's parents had wired her and Gertrude that they were coming.

On the day Mr. and Mrs. Swanson were due to arrive, Martha and Gertrude sat on a park bench holding umbrellas. Some ducks swam in the pond before them, and others rested under the nearby shade trees. The clear, blue sky provided no shelter from the sun, high in its zenith. A gentle breeze felt heavy, doing little to cool the two women dressed in attire Martha's mother would approve of.

Gertrude patted Martha's hand. "Are you okay?"

Martha half-smiled. "Do you think Mother and Father are upset with me?"

"Your parents are coming to settle the school's ruffled feathers. The school has threatened to expel you."

"They won't expel me. They like the money my father gives them too much," Martha grinned. "Besides, the man who snuck up on me and surprised me deserved what he got. I didn't know who he was. And then he had the nerve to say I didn't belong there. Well, I showed him!"

Gertrude chuckled. "Maybe next time you could just walk away or something."

"But Gertrude. All of my dreams are coming true. Nobody's going to take a single dream away from me."

Gertrude took a deep breath and snorted a little as she exhaled. Her face warmed as she took Martha's hand. "Child, I'm very proud of you. Your parents are, too. Your father will do whatever he can to keep you in school."

Martha nodded. "Mother is disappointed in me. She wants me to settle down, get married, and become a good servant to a husband."

"Servant?"

Martha shrugged uncomfortably. Her mother had told her Gertrude's mother was an enslaved person in the South. It wasn't easy to tell by looking at Gertrude. She inherited her father's fair skin and his light, emerald-green eyes.

Gertrude patted Martha's arm. "Your mother admires your strength, even if it scares her some. She wishes she had the courage to live the life you dare to dream."

"Really?"

"Yes. She doesn't understand why you would choose a needlessly difficult life. However, she and your father have made peace with your decision and hope you'll marry after you graduate."

Martha chuckled warmly. "That's part of my plan too. But only after I've worked for a year or two and maybe traveled." Martha took Gertrude's hand. "Did your dreams come true?"

Gertrude's face softened as the edge of her lips curled up.

“They did — in a round-about sort of way.”

Martha looked puzzled. “Round-about?”

“Well,” Gertrude said as a flood of memories surfaced. “My father told me I was born in 1809 and was a rambunctious, wildly independent little girl. I loved playing in the field behind the house, picking flowers, and watching the birds.”

“Where was your mother?”

“I never knew her. My father told me she went down South and never came back. That’s where she was from. She worked on a huge plantation there.” Gertrude took a shallow breath. “Anyhow, my father had difficulty keeping food on the table for us. There were quite a few times I went to bed hungry. When I was about ten, my father dropped me off at the orphanage.”

“Oh, that’s sad.”

“It wasn’t so bad. Although, I did miss my father a lot. I was never hungry and loved assisting the staff with the other children. And I did have chores.” Gertrude reached into her bag, withdrew a fan, and used it to cool her flushed face. “Yes, sirree, I had chores. It was hard work, and I loved every minute of it. When my eighteenth birthday drew near, the orphanage elders offered me a job. I jumped at the chance and officially became their housekeeper, mostly cleaning and helping with the children.”

Martha gasped. “Wait. You were in the orphanage for eight years, and no one had wanted to adopt you?”

Gertrude smiled. “No way did I want to be adopted. Whenever prospective parents showed even an inkling of interest in me, I knew exactly what to say and do to dissuade them.”

“Why? Didn’t you want to be happy?”

“I was happy. I hoped my father would return to find me if I stayed there.” Gertrude sighed. “He never did.”

“I’m sorry. Have you seen him since?”

“Nope. I never saw him again. But as I said, I was happy. I was. That’s where I met your uncle.”

“Really? You’ve never told me about you and Uncle Joe. Mother cries when I ask her about him. How did you meet him?” Martha sat upright and leaned in toward Gertrude with an expectant smile that could melt any heart.

“Well, one day, I was working in the front yard while the young

ones tended to their chores in the garden. He came up the walk and asked to speak with the headmistress. He complained about the children being too noisy. He was beautiful, handsome, and smart. I loved him from the moment I saw him.” Gertrude smiled. “Well, maybe not the first moment. At first, he was a little condescending toward me. Perhaps, at the time, he had little experience with women. I set him straight rather quickly.”

“I read a couple of the books he had loaned to Father. They were — extreme views.” Martha stifled a chuckle. “Mother burned them in the fireplace.”

Gertrude turned to Martha, her face caught in a question, and then a broad grin filled her face. “Oh, yes! Your mother told me, and we both laughed about it.”

“Mother told me you were perfect for her little brother and brought him out of his shell.”

“Joe was introverted in an extroverted sort of way.”

“I know what you mean. They’re sensitive and hide it in a flagrant, extroverted manner as if it were a weakness.” Martha rolled her eyes. “Many of the boys at school are like that.”

“Have any of those ‘boys’ caught your eye?”

“Gertrude, I’m not interested in them like that.”

“Are they respectful of you?”

“At first, they weren’t. Now, they kid around a bit, but they’re all respectful. I respect them, too. They’re good-natured. Although sometimes you must dig a little to reach that part of them.”

Gertrude chuckled. “What about the boy you punched?”

Martha rolled her eyes. “Like I told you, he snuck up on me. He was tall with ragged, unkempt, long hair. The only thing not disgusting about him was his piercing blue eyes.” She scrunched her nose and continued, “His clothes were worn and smelled of sweat. I had never seen him before that day. That man had no right to be familiar with me.”

Gertrude narrowed her eyes with concern. “In what way?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He was older and rude — and most definitely not a student. I told him to go away. When he surprised me by grabbing my arm, I punched him in the face. A couple of my classmates intervened, roughed him up, and then he ran away. When the principal discovered I was at the center of the conflict,

he told me he was disappointed in me.”

“The school should have taken steps to protect you and not have suspended you,” Gertrude said, her voice firm.

Martha bobbed her head rapidly in agreement. “It’s going to work out. Let’s get back to your story. You were getting to the good part.”

Gertrude smiled and took a deep breath.

“After three years of courtship, Joe proposed. By then, he had become confident and optimistic and developed a healthy attitude toward women. He would have burned those books himself that he’d loaned to your father.”

Martha laughed. “When did you both get married?”

“It was a beautiful spring day on our wedding day. I wore a gorgeous, billowy, lacy dress. Everything was perfect. Earlier that day, his friends invited him to go for a ride. Joe took his prized horse. As they neared the house, the horse got spooked and threw him. He must have hit his head. His friends took him inside, but he insisted he was okay.”

Martha moved closer to Gertrude and nodded affectionately.

Gertrude half-smiled. “Already in my wedding dress, I rushed to him. He whispered, ‘Isn’t it bad luck for the groom to see his bride on their wedding day?’ I fought back my tears. We were married an hour later, and he fell when we left the church. I knelt at his side and held his hand. His eyes were locked with mine, his face etched with regret.”

Gertrude wiped away her tears. “Then he told me he loved me. Joe, I said, I will always love you and only you. A few seconds later, his life left him.”

Martha hugged Gertrude tight. “Gertrude, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Child, I’m fine. I feel him with me always. I’m never alone. After that, I moved in with your parents, and five years later, I helped the doctor deliver you. Both you and your parents brought me so much joy. I was incredibly grateful, and I still am. I was thrilled when your parents asked me to move here. You know that we’re living in your mother’s and Joe’s childhood home, and this is the park where the wedding reception was to take place.”

“Oh my! It’s beautiful here.”



“Yes. In those days, they owned a hundred acres of land where the house sat. Even this park was part of their property. Your mother donated most of it to the city and kept only the house.”

When Gertrude stood, the ducks near the water’s edge jumped into the water, swam away frantically, and quacked.

Gertrude laughed. “I’m getting hungry. Let’s go. After lunch, I want to freshen up your parents’ bedroom before they arrive.”

Martha took Gertrude’s hand. “I can hardly wait. Thank you for sharing that part of your life with me. I love you very much.”

Gertrude said, “I love you too.”

Martha and Gertrude walked hand in hand, each with their umbrella providing shade.

As they approached the house, a teenage boy was waiting on the front porch.

Dread shook Gertrude’s voice. “Young man, what are you doing here?”

“My supervisor told me to personally deliver this telegram to you. I’m sorry.”

Gertrude half-smiled and looked over at Martha.

“Martha, please get the table ready for lunch. I’ll be there in a moment.”

Martha hesitated and then went inside.

The courier awkwardly handed Gertrude the telegram.

She reached into her pocket and gave him a coin. He almost smiled and then left.

The telegram read: “MR MRS SWANSON KILLED IN STAGECOACH ACCIDENT — COME HOME — WALLACE HOLT.”

Thank you!

Thank you for reading this evaluation copy of *Loaded For Justice*. This book is in the final stages of editing and may have punctuation errors.

Please send any comments (good or bad) about this book to the author at:

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Roger Mendoza

## About the Author

Roger Mendoza lives in San Antonio, Texas, the seventh-largest city in the United States. In 2014, he moved back to his birth town of San Antonio from Parker, Colorado, where he had lived for fifteen years. Living on the outskirts of San Antonio, he still enjoys the taste of the rural life that he loves so much and the big city's conveniences.

He worked most of his life as a software engineer in the defense industry, where he cultivated his passion for computer programming, but he is now retired. Along with writing novels, Roger is also a professional photographer and can often be seen toting his camera, looking for photo opportunities in and around town. He loves to capture nature photography and beautiful scenery.

Family has always been a cornerstone of Roger's life. Born eighth in a family of ten children, he has a deep-rooted fascination with his family history. Over the years, he has painstakingly gathered his parent's family photographs and documents, cataloging and digitizing them all. He takes pride in keeping the family tree database updated with new family members, cherishing the thousands of family photographs and documents that tell the stories of his relatives.

Roger's inquisitive nature has always led him to ponder the philosophy of life, the intricacies of human behavior, and our place in the grand scheme of things. Despite life's occasional challenges, he firmly believes in 'happily ever after endings,' a testament to his optimistic worldview that can resonate with many.

He's always been fascinated with unusual phenomena, the

most common of which is the drama of life itself. It still amazes him why so much drama fills the lives of his friends and family. Perhaps it is observing that drama that sparks his imagination and gives his characters life.