

Loaded for Revenge

Dark Sheriff • Book 2

ROMEN GRAPHICS - San Antonio, Texas

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Loaded for Revenge

Dark Sheriff • Book 2

ROGER MENDOZA

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

To my brother – Richard.
He was the first to edit this book back in 2019 and encouraged me to
keep going.

* * *

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue.....	1
1 - Crimson Brooch.....	3
2 - Elizabeth Roberts.....	10
3 - Sheriff Joseph Pruitt.....	16
4 - Rock Bottom.....	20
5 - The Reckoning Within.....	27
6 - A Perfect Morning.....	33
7 - Wedding Day.....	37
8 - Reception.....	43
9 - The Offer.....	49
10 - A Caress by the River.....	57
11 - The Lockbox Trap.....	62
12 - Doubled Over in Pain.....	67
13 - Recovery.....	75
14 - Housewarming Party.....	82
15 - Exploring.....	89
16 - Meeting Alexander.....	97
17 - Party Time.....	106
18 - Pretty Blue Dress.....	113
19 - A Broken Man.....	117
20 - Help Is on the Way.....	129
21 - Back in Sacramento.....	135
22 - Investigating.....	139
23 - Stirring Up Trouble.....	145
24 - Arrest the Killer.....	150
25 - Worried About Joseph.....	156
26 - Falling From Grace.....	160
27 - Change Is Good.....	167
28 - The List.....	173
29 - Headed to Sacramento.....	181
30 - Stagecoach Ambush.....	186
31 - Chance Encounter.....	194
32 - Aunt Helen's House.....	202

33 - Unwelcomed Guest.....	205
34 - Something Terrible Happened.....	213
35 - He's My Husband.....	219
36 - All Is Good.....	224
37 - I Wanted to Kill You.....	232
38 - Put Your Gun Down.....	239
39 - Vengeance and Doubt.....	245
40 - Where's Charlie?.....	252
41 - Charlotte and Lizzie.....	256
42 - Hangman's Noose.....	261
43 - He's in Auburn.....	267
44 - Hurry.....	269
45 - What About Charlotte?.....	272
46 - What's He Planning?.....	278
47 - But He's the Sheriff.....	284
48 - Just in Time.....	291
49 - Back in Auburn.....	296
50 - Watching Out for Her.....	299
51 - Captured.....	306
52 - You Could Have Been Killed.....	311
53 - Powerful Enough?.....	317
54 - Caged Animal.....	323
55 - Do You Know?.....	331
56 - Let's Chat with.....	338
57 - Freedom.....	346
58 - Family Takes Care of Family.....	353
59 - Surprise.....	359
60 - Howard.....	364
61 - Used to Like You.....	368
62 - Reckoning and Rebirth.....	374
63 - Reconciliation.....	377
64 - Family.....	381
The End.....	384
Elizabeth's Queen Cakes.....	388

PROLOGUE

Joseph Pruitt

They say justice has a price. I've paid it in silence.

My brother, Randall, and John Walker brought their gang to my land—my land. I let them stay. Not because I wanted to... but because I had to. For my wife, Elizabeth. Her life was on the line. And I wasn't about to gamble with that.

I kept the secret. Buried it deep. Let the town think I was still the law, even as outlaws slept on my land.

The darkest secret I ever kept was to keep the town... the whole town... safe from Silas Gentry. That man and his henchmen, worse than Randall. Tried taking the town. Gunned down the sheriff. Came for my goldmine. That was before I married Elizabeth, before I wore the Sheriff's badge. Sheriff Buchanan and I drove Gentry out, but he came back. He chased Buchanan out of town. Almost killed him. That's when I got the badge. I got rid of him for good. Cost me plenty. He knows better than to set foot in my town. Not while I've still got breath in me.

I wasn't the only one with secrets. Randall had a son, Alexander. A truth he kept hidden, even from himself. And Alexander was a threat, working with the Law to expose the very men who'd promised to kill Elizabeth. They'd come after her if Alexander succeeded.

Then Thomas came back. Fifteen years gone, and suddenly my son was standing in front of me, carrying more pain than I could name. He found love in Rebecca. He found purpose. And when the time came, he did what I couldn't... he crippled his own uncle, Randall, with one shot—a bullet through his hand. Ended Randall's stagecoach-robbing days. There's no telling what's coming for Thomas for doing that.

Randall and Walker's gang scattered. I paid them to leave... and most of them did. But Walker didn't leave empty-handed. He left me two lockboxes filled with stolen gold. He left those damn boxes like a warning—loaded for revenge. Said if I ever turned on them, they'd come for Elizabeth.

So I kept quiet. I kept watch. And I kept those lockboxes hidden.

Thomas and I—we're trying. Mending what broke. But the past doesn't stay buried. Not in this town. Not in this family.

And revenge... revenge has a way of finding its way home.

CHAPTER ONE

Crimson Brooch

It was a bright morning in Sacramento, California, in 1842. Sheriff James Buchanan sat on the hotel bench beside his wife, holding their infant, Rebecca. Twelve-year-old Charlie fidgeted next to his mother.

Sheriff Buchanan handed his son a six-shooter and said, “Go practice like I taught you.”

“Yes, sir,” said Charlie as he took the weapon. His eyes flicked to his father for approval before he turned toward the practice stump.

Mrs. Buchanan’s eyes narrowed. “You gave him a loaded gun?”

Sheriff Buchanan snickered, holding up the six bullets. “It’s empty. He’s gotta get used to handling it.”

She rolled her eyes and went back to fussing with her baby.

Charlie jumped down from the porch and pointed the gun at the bushes where the rabbit had taken cover. The rabbit twitched in the underbrush.

Charlie squinted at the rabbit’s hiding spot, picturing an outlaw ducking behind cover. He leveled the barrel like Pa taught him, heart thudding with pretend danger.

He crept closer, eyes locked on the trembling leaves. With a sudden leap forward, he pulled the trigger. “Bang! You’re dead!”

A frightened animal let out a piercing, raw scream that echoed the cry of an abandoned infant. Then it bolted, a blur of fur and panic.

Charlie turned to his parents.

Mrs. Buchanan huffed. “Poor thing.”

His Pa chuckled. “Charlie, go fetch your sister. The coach’ll be here soon.”

Charlie’s pulse still buzzed with excitement. He liked seeing the rabbit bolt—liked the way it screamed when it thought it was about to die.

He turned to his mother, not out of defiance but out of habit. Her word carried more weight than his father's.

The corner of Mrs. Buchanan's lips curled. It wasn't quite a smile, but something close. "She's probably out back. Go get her."

"Yes, Ma."

Charlie rushed to the rear of the hotel and ducked behind a dilapidated wagon. He'd spotted Charlotte, two years older than him, just ahead. He crouched low in the overgrown weeds, heart thudding.

Charlotte stood across from her boyfriend, John Walker. He and two other boys sat on the fence.

Charlie knelt, raised his gun, aimed it at John, and pulled the trigger. "Bam, you're dead," he whispered. As he pushed himself upright, his hand struck something hard. He reached for it. "A bullet!"

Grinning, he brushed away the dirt and fiddled with the gun. He'd seen his pa load it countless times, though he'd never been allowed to try. Slowly, carefully, he replayed each step in his mind and slid the bullet into one of the chambers. He beamed at his handiwork. His gaze locked on John. He aimed and fired. Nothing.

John's cackle snapped Charlie's attention toward him.

Charlie's pupils grew pinpoint sharp.

John hopped down from the fence and planted a kiss on Charlotte's cheek.

"John! I oughta slap you," Charlotte yelled. "My ma's just right around the corner. How could you?"

Charlie's breath caught. His eyes narrowed. His grip tightened against the gun, his finger planted on the trigger. He charged, gun raised, shouting, "You stay away from my sister!"

Charlotte snickered. "Put that thing down!"

John's two friends burst into laughter and tore across the yard toward the boy.

One of them shoved him, knocking him to the ground as his pants caught on a jagged stone and tore. He lay stunned on the ground, his fingers wrapped tight around the gun handle. He didn't cry. But the ache in his chest wasn't from the punch—it was from Charlotte's laugh.

Boots crunched on the gravel next to him. It was his father, the real sheriff of this town. The edge of his lips curled up slightly. His father was there to avenge him.

His father turned to the two boys. They ran. He turned to Charlotte and waved her to come.

She walked up and helped Charlie to his feet.

Then Sheriff Buchanan said in a stern voice, “Go get in the coach! We’re leaving. Your mother and the baby are inside waiting for you two.”

Moments later, Sheriff Buchanan settled into the stagecoach, ready to depart. His wife sat beside him on the front bench, Rebecca asleep on her lap. Charlotte and Charlie faced him from the rear.

His face was filled with frustration as he gazed at his children. Charlie shifted restlessly in his seat, fingers tapping the barrel of his gun. Charlotte held a smirk on her face as she slid the curtain aside. She smiled and gave a quick wave.

Sheriff Buchanan looked out his window and saw John standing near the entrance, waving. He barked to the driver, “Let’s get a move on!”

He pulled back inside, his eyes narrowing on Charlotte. Her gaze flicked to his, then dropped to her lap. She let the curtain fall, jaw tight, and sank into her seat.

Sheriff Buchanan exhaled sharply, his gaze settling on his son. He’d once imagined the boy growing into the badge one day. But fate, it seemed, had other plans for Charlie.

Mrs. Buchanan nudged him. “He’s told me so many times he wants to be just like you when he grows up.”

He grimaced. “At least he’s learned how to hold a gun properly.”

Charlie lifted the gun again, carefully lining up the sights with Charlotte’s face. He pulled the trigger.

Mrs. Buchanan muttered, “I wish you hadn’t given him that. It’s made him loud and rowdy. I liked it better when he was quiet and reserved.”

The sheriff half-smiled. “It’s about time he’s excited about something. I should have put a six-shooter in his hands long ago.

Maybe he would have been shooting by now. Charlotte knew how to handle hers by her tenth birthday!”

Outside, six majestic horses led the stagecoach away from Sacramento, headed to Auburn. The driver, perched high above, whistled a tune as he always did on this route. But a half hour later, his tune disappeared. He tightened his grip on the reins as the road narrowed with a canyon wall on the right and a dangerous drop on the left.

The coach lurched as it rounded a bend, a shower of rocks falling from the stony wall ahead. The driver leaned into the reins, guiding the coach through the debris with practiced ease, dodging the larger boulders. The wheels crushed the smaller stones, their crackle lost in the dust.

Another twenty minutes passed. He pulled back on the reins as he approached a thicket of trees off to his right. The horses snapped out of their rhythm, ears twitching, pace faltering as something unsettled them.

The driver reached for his rifle, eyes fixed on the road and its many hiding places. This was the site of a robbery that had occurred the previous week. His gaze lingered on the brush ahead just long enough to spot a stray dog scurry away. Yet he remained vigilant. A deep unease settled in his gut. The coach crept on, its pace cautious.

Further down the road, three men crouched in silence, poised to strike as the stagecoach approached. Each had a finger curled around the trigger of his rifle, eyes fixed on the bend. Their breath came slow, measured—seasoned hands at a familiar job.

A fourth man, Silas Gentry, stood near the roadside, shotgun leveled toward the curve. His coat flapped in the breeze, dust gathering at his boots.

“Wait for my signal,” he rasped, voice low and gravel-thick.

They weren’t after blood. Word was, the Sacramento coach carried a lockbox loaded with gold dust. Easy pickings. Only a driver up top—no guards, no trouble.

The leader’s eyes narrowed. He’d timed it to the minute. The driver would be slowing now, horses twitching at the canyon’s edge. Any second...

* * *

Inside the stagecoach, Charlotte wore loose-fitting pants instead of the pretty dress her mother had insisted on. Her father had promised her an afternoon of target practice in Auburn, and she meant to be dressed for it the moment they arrived.

She looked at Charlie and shook her head. Earlier, she'd carefully pressed his pants and his shirt, polished his shoes, and made sure he was ready for their trip to town. She'd even helped him pin that shiny sheriff's badge onto his shirt. It was a toy, sure, but his eyes lit up bright when she gave it to him.

Now, his shoes were scuffed, his trousers torn just below the knee, and a black eye gave him the look of a one-eyed raccoon. At least he hadn't lost that little badge of his.

"Bang! Bang!" yelled Charlie as he pointed his gun at her.

She glared at him. "Put that thing away!"

She turned to her mother.

Mrs. Buchanan's lips were tight as she covered her sleeping baby's ears. Charlotte watched as her mother shifted in her seat. Pinned above her heart, an ornate red brooch gleamed against the deep blue fabric. The large stone at its center caught the light, fracturing it into a tapestry of crimson hues that shimmered across the cloth.

Charlie had helped fasten it.

Charlotte glanced at his black eye and sighed.

He leveled the barrel at her, his finger hovering on the trigger.

"Stop putting that in my face," she squawked. She spun around to her mother and pointed at Charlie. "Mother!"

Mrs. Buchanan blew out a tight breath. "Charlie, you know how I hate violence. Don't point that at your sister!"

Sheriff Buchanan grinned at his wife. "At least he's holding that thing like he knows how to shoot." The sheriff shook his head. "He's too soft. I should have let that other boy beat the tarnation out of him. Maybe it would've toughened him up."

Charlie glared at his father.

Charlotte chuckled. "He sure is soft."

Charlie slapped her arm hard. "No, I ain't!"

Mrs. Buchanan gasped, her eyes wide. "You're not supposed to hit girls. Not even your sister. She's liable to give you another black eye." She glanced at Charlotte.

Charlotte narrowed her eyes at her brother, her patience waning. “He needs another black eye to have a matched pair.”

Sheriff Buchanan cleared his throat. “You should have protected your little brother!”

Charlotte’s eyes shot to her father and then swung back to Charlie, narrowed.

He sneered at her. “When I learn to shoot, I’ll be better than you.”

He pointed his weapon at his mother. “See, Ma. I know how to hold a six-shooter.”

Charlie pulled the trigger. A loud explosion followed.

Charlotte’s gaze snapped to her mother.

Mrs. Buchanan gasped and brought her hand to her chest. Blood stained her hands and darkened her dress as it dribbled down the face of her brooch. Her eyes were white, her mouth hanging open as she slumped over. Young Rebecca fell onto the seat next to her and began to cry.

Charlotte’s eyes flicked to her father. His face was frozen as he reached for her. He didn’t seem to be breathing.

She grabbed the infant and brought her to her chest, shielding her from the chaos.

Charlotte choked back her shock as she turned to Charlie. “Charlie! No!”

He sat frozen, his eyes brimming with tears, his weapon still fixed on his mother. Smoke oozed from its chamber, his hand twitching. “I didn’t mean to...”

She snatched the six-shooter away from him and tossed it to the floor. An explosion of gunfire erupted outside. A bullet flew into the cabin, splintering the ornate wood trim above the window, and Rebecca cried louder.

As the stagecoach lurched forward and jostled them about, Charlotte tucked her baby sister on the floor behind her feet.

Time seemed to stop as she watched her father. His mouth was open, his face pale. He gently laid his wife across the bench. He avoided looking at her face. An instant later, he withdrew his rifle from the compartment below. He yanked the curtain aside and fired out the window.

Time continued, fast and furious, as he snapped at Charlotte,

his voice rasped with urgency. “Stagecoach robbers! Get your brother down before the boy gets shot, and grab your weapon!” He turned back to the window, bracing the rifle against its frame as another shot cracked through the chaos outside.

Charlotte pushed her brother down beside Rebecca and yelled, “Take care of the baby!”

She grabbed her rifle from under the bench and leveled it out the window. Her aim was steady. She squeezed the trigger. Her pupils narrowed, sharp and dry, as tears threatened and bullets ripped from the chamber.

Charlie crouched on the floor, clutching Rebecca. He looked across at his mother, whose eyes bore into his. A single tear traced her cheek as she reached for the baby. Then came a long, weary sigh as her final breath left her.

He recoiled in horror as his mother’s lifeless, accusing eyes remained fixed on him. He’d forgotten about the bullet. Now, with tears clouding his vision and guilt pressing on his chest, he whispered, “I killed her!”

The gunfire still roared, but for Charlie, it had faded into silence. Only the ringing remained in his ears. The brooch caught the sunlight coming through the window. The crimson light, sliced by the gem, scattered across Charlie’s stricken face.

CHAPTER TWO

Elizabeth Roberts

On January 25, 1850, the Auburn, California, sun beat on Elizabeth Roberts's sunbonnet as sweat trickled down her forehead. Three months had passed since she'd pulled into this boomtown with her husband James and Aunt Helen, each with dreams of gold nuggets dancing in their eyes.

Joseph Pruitt arrived with them from New York on the same wagon train. The two men had been close throughout the trip from New York to California, and Joseph partnered with James in a gold mine shortly after arriving.

She stepped down from the porch and looked down the road. Nothing.

James was gone, perhaps buried under tons of unforgiving mud and rock. Joseph promised to keep up the search.”

Elizabeth wiped her eyes with a calloused hand and straightened her shoulders. Grief could wait. Today, survival was all that mattered. She started for the porch and then stopped suddenly.

A galloping horse was headed her way, a whirl of dust in its wake. She reached for her rifle, a familiar comfort in this unfamiliar world.

The rickety cabin door creaked open. Elizabeth turned to see Aunt Helen walking out of their shack that was barely large enough for the three of them. The older woman moved quickly to Elizabeth, who stood at the foot of the stairs. She squinted in the direction of the approaching rider. “Elizabeth?” Aunt Helen asked, her voice soft and raspy. “Is that James?”

Elizabeth’s gaze hardened. “No.”

Silence settled between them, heavy and suffocating. Helen came west with them, and both Elizabeth and James persuaded her to invest most of her life savings in the mine alongside Joseph. Now, they struggled to survive on what little remained in their bank account.

Elizabeth rested her rifle against the wall. “It’s Joseph. It doesn’t look like good news.”

Joseph galloped up, the horse’s hooves hammering the ground in frantic rhythm. Dust billowed around them, clinging to his sweat-soaked shirt as he dismounted in a rush. His boots skidded on the dry earth, and he stumbled toward Elizabeth, breath ragged, eyes wide with something that smelled like panic. His face was already grieving what his lips hadn’t yet spoken.

Elizabeth saw it before he spoke. Joseph’s face was a map of mourning—swollen eyes, red-rimmed and puffy, a crease dug deep into his brow, and his mouth held tight as if damning a flood. The news was already there, etched into his features like a wound that wouldn’t heal.

Elizabeth covered her mouth as tears filled her eyes. “No... it can’t be.” Her shoulders slumped.

“There were no survivors. Sheriff Buchanan is at the mine site right now. He officially called off the search.”

A short, loud breath caught in her throat. “He called it off?”

She turned to Helen.

Helen’s hands trembled as she reached for her mouth, her face pale and unreadable.

Elizabeth brought her close.

Joseph’s voice rasped. “I’m sorry. They searched for three days. Buchanan said it was too dangerous to continue.”

Helen yelled at Joseph, “It’s your fault.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks tightened. “Aunt Helen! Please!”

Joseph stepped close to Elizabeth and touched her hand. “You know that I care for you and James deeply. I would never hurt you.”

Elizabeth withdrew her hand. “I know.”

Joseph took a deep breath and let it out all at once. “I’ve always considered you family. James was like a brother to me and a great partner. And...well, there’s the matter of the mine.” He hesitated, his gaze shifting uncomfortably.

Elizabeth’s heart hammered against her ribs. “The mine, Mr. Pruitt?” she asked, her voice tight. “You want to talk business already?”

“No, of course not.” Joseph cleared his throat.

Elizabeth stepped back.

Helen stood beside her. "Go inside and rest, dear. I'll talk with Joseph."

Her eyes, still red from tears, locked with Helen's as she raised her head. "I'm okay." She shook her head and straightened up. Her chin went forward as she turned to Joseph. "What is it that you wanted to discuss?"

Joseph blinked, surprised. "The mine's business can't wait. The miners need to return to work. Some have found jobs at other mines. I can't afford to lose any more workers. I need to reopen the mines and get those workers back."

Dread curdled in Elizabeth's stomach. "I..." She paused. "We have an interest in that mine, too."

Joseph's eyes fell to the ground and then back to her. "Not any more. We agreed. If one of us dies, the other holds the claim."

Elizabeth's brows narrowed, her mouth agape. "We're left with nothing?"

Joseph froze, his eyes locked on hers.

She took a deep breath and met Joseph's gaze. "I may not know the first thing about running a mine." Her voice was steady. "James wouldn't have been happy for his share to disappear and leave us penniless. Half of the money for this mine came from Aunt Helen. She's your real partner. Shouldn't she be your equal partner now, Mr. Pruitt?"

A surprised smile played on Joseph's lips. He cast a sideways glance at Helen and then turned back to Elizabeth. He shook his head. "James was the co-owner. But with the purchase of that house in Sacramento, his remaining share in the mine is quite small."

A new fire burned within Elizabeth, a determination to survive and fight for what was rightfully hers. "What house?"

"James mentioned that you and Helen haven't been happy living in this little shack."

Elizabeth turned briefly to Helen and then locked eyes with Joseph. "That's true. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"He bought a place where you and Helen would be proud to live. It has plenty of room for the two of you. You could keep

chickens, a cow, and horses, and have space to plant vegetables. I thought he told you.”

Elizabeth gasped. James had promised that someday he would give her the home she deserved.

Aunt Helen stepped toward Joseph. “Where is it?”

“It’s in Sacramento, about thirty miles southwest of here. I’m sure you both would love it.”

Aunt Helen muttered, her voice suddenly lighter, “I see.”

Elizabeth blinked as curiosity stirred within her. “How? When?”

Joseph’s face softened, and he said, “I was with him when he bought it.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught.

Aunt Helen turned to Elizabeth. “He’s trying to get rid of us.”

Elizabeth shook her head.

Helen said to Elizabeth, “I poured my life savings into that mine, and what has it gotten us? Pain, loss, and a life of want.” She turned to Joseph. “What about the rest of our investment?”

“It’s all in a bank account in Sacramento. Our mutual friend, Douglas Holt, the bank owner, personally handled all the paperwork. You can move in as soon as you’re ready.” Joseph’s gaze settled on Elizabeth. “Does that sound fair to you?”

Elizabeth’s frown transformed into a slight smile as she thought of James’s surprise. She glanced at Helen, then nodded to Joseph. “When can we see it?”

Joseph’s eyes twitched. “How about tomorrow?” He extended his hand to Elizabeth.

She shook his hand.

The following day, Joseph accompanied Elizabeth and her aunt, Helen, to visit the beautiful house on two acres on the outskirts of Sacramento. When Elizabeth first walked up to the porch, she expected James to greet her at the door.

True to Joseph’s word, there were chickens, a cow, and a large garden beside the barn. It was everything that James had promised her and so much more.

After James’s funeral, Joseph helped Elizabeth and Helen move to their spacious home.

Over the next four weeks, Joseph often visited Elizabeth and

her aunt, helping them settle into their new place.

But at the start of the fifth week, he lingered.

Elizabeth paused, a slight curl of her lips forming. “I’ve seen you more in the past month than I ever did back in Auburn.”

Joseph’s eyes glanced away, then back—his gaze steadier this time. “I want to make sure that you’re okay. You know I’ve always cared about you.”

Elizabeth tilted her head slightly, watching him.

Joseph straightened up. “We’re digging a new mine shaft, so I won’t be able to come by for several weeks. I’ve asked Sheriff August to check up on you occasionally.”

“I was wondering why he came by earlier. Thank you. You’ve been very generous. I appreciate everything you’ve done for us.”

Joseph hesitated as his eyes caught hers. “Well, I’d better head home. If there’s anything I can do for you, please send me a letter.”

Elizabeth’s face flushed. “Thank you.”

He winked.

She stood on the porch waving goodbye as Joseph rode away. She smiled as warmth embraced her heart. Aunt Helen walked out.

“Sheriff August seems like a good man. He reminds me of James. He’s a good fit for you.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Aunt Helen!”

Over the next few weeks, Sheriff August visited Elizabeth often. Soon, the casual visits turned warm and friendly as they grew close. They frequently sat side by side on the bench right outside the front door, laughing. Elizabeth’s chuckles would elicit boisterous laughter from Sheriff August.

One particularly grueling morning, Elizabeth visited the sheriff at his office, frustration clinging to her like dust. August, uncharacteristically quiet, was at his desk with a six-shooter pushed aside. He looked up as she entered, a flicker of concern in his eyes.

“What a pleasant surprise!” he said, his voice gruff. “Is everything okay?”

Elizabeth sank into the chair next to his desk and sighed, defeated. “I brought my horse into the blacksmith’s and...” She

shook her head. “People in this town treat me like I shouldn’t be here.”

August poured her a glass of water and patted her hand. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth,” he said in a comforting tone. “They aren’t used to a strong, independent woman.” He smiled. “I appreciate you.”

She nodded as a smile crept onto her face, and she blushed. “You always know what to say to cheer me up.”

Silence settled over the room, thick and expectant, broken only by the soft hiss of the oil lamp. The air smelled faintly of gunpowder and pine soap—August’s scent, familiar and steady.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up, meeting August’s gaze.

He rested his hand on hers. “Elizabeth, you mean a lot to me.”

“August,” she began, her voice barely a whisper. “I can’t.”

He leaned closer. “Please. I know you feel something for me, too.”

The door slammed against the wall with a splintering crack. Joseph stumbled in, reeking of whiskey and sweat, his boots dragging like dead weight across the floorboards. His breath came in wet gasps, and the sour stench of alcohol filled the room.

August straightened.

Joseph blinked, eyes glassy, and steadied himself. His face lit up at the sight of Elizabeth at Sheriff August’s desk. He lurched forward, arms half-raised. “Elizabeth! I missed you. I love you.”

August stiffened, breath caught in his throat. He turned to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth’s jaw tightened. Her eyes shot to August and then back to Joseph, her voice cracking. “That’s the whiskey talking.”

CHAPTER THREE

Sheriff Joseph Pruitt

On October 11, 1864, Sheriff Joseph Pruitt gripped the window frame, his knuckles white. He hated that he even knew the trail leading to the remote corner of his land—the corner where his brother, Randall, and his outlaws were hiding. Joseph inhaled deeply, a gravelly voice echoing in his memory: “Would be a shame if something happened to your wife if you told anybody about us.”

Joseph gasped, cold fear seizing him at the thought of Randall or his men harming Elizabeth.

Elizabeth tapped his arm. “Are you expecting someone? You’ve been staring out that window for a while now.”

“No. Just thinking.”

Elizabeth followed his gaze and then sighed. “I’d like to think you’d tell me if there was something I should know about. We’re in this together. Right?”

“Being a sheriff is always about keeping people safe.” He half-smiled. “I’m headed to town to take care of some business. Be sure to keep your gun close. Alright?”

Her shoulders dropped as she exhaled loudly. “I always have it handy.”

Joseph kissed her cheek, grabbed his rifle, and rushed to the door.

“Wait! Did you forget? Aunt Helen and my friends are arriving today from Sacramento. I telegraphed them I’d be waiting.”

He blinked several times, and his jaw slackened.

“Now I know something’s weighing heavily on you.” Elizabeth’s lips tightened as she locked eyes with him.

Joseph shrugged.

“I suppose I couldn’t convince you to stay home instead.”

She kissed his cheek and rushed to the door. She showed him the leather pouch where she kept her weapon. “See. I’m taking my gun.”

Barely fifteen minutes later, Joseph's wagon stopped at the hotel, and he helped Elizabeth down. "I'll be at the Sheriff's office. I'll send the deputy to wait with you for your guests."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "That won't be necessary. I'll be inside the hotel. There are plenty of people there to keep me company. Now off you go."

Joseph glanced toward the sheriff's office. "Okay. But be careful." He was back in his seat, reins in his hands.

Soon after, he parked the wagon in front of his office and walked inside. The two deputies were dozing, with their legs propped up on their desks. Joseph grinned and slammed the door shut behind him.

Both deputies nearly fell from their chairs. "Sheriff!" they said together.

"When is the morning stagecoach from Sacramento due in?"

The deputy whose desk was closest to his stood abruptly. "The telegram we received this morning said they left an hour early. It should be here any minute now."

"Good." He glanced at the door and then stopped next to his desk.

"There's a matter to discuss that requires discretion," Joseph said, his voice low. "I need you both to watch out for a man named John Walker. He's a well-known outlaw, but I have my reasons for needing him to move on quietly." He paused. "I want to handle him myself. Just leave him be. Keep your distance and don't engage."

The standing deputy hesitated briefly and then smiled. "Oh, I get it. He's another one who needs some 'Sheriff Pruitt' style encouragement to move on. I wish everyone knew how hard you work to keep this town safe."

The sitting deputy nodded.

Joseph shrugged. "The sooner he moves on, the better."

He picked up the newspaper and sat at his desk.

Barely thirty minutes later, the door flung open. Elizabeth rushed in.

"Elizabeth!" Joseph put the paper down and stood.

Her face was etched with worry. Elizabeth's voice trembled, her hand clenched into fists at her sides. "The stagecoach is late.

Something's wrong.”

Joseph checked the time. “It’s an hour overdue.” He grimaced at his deputies. “Let’s ride out there to see what happened.” He turned to Elizabeth. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

Joseph motioned to his deputies. “Let’s go!”

He and his two deputies left and soon after found the delayed stagecoach. It was snuggled up against the brush about thirty feet from the main road. It was missing a horse. Further down the road, men were lying motionless, face down.

Joseph shook his head. “Looks like half a dozen or more fools met their maker. We’re gonna need a cart.” He pointed to one of the deputies.

“Yes, sir. I’ll be back in twenty minutes,” he said and raced away.

As he walked past the stagecoach, a woman peeked out. “Who are you?” yelled Rebecca. The horses whinnied.

Joseph said, “Is everyone okay? I’m Sheriff Pruitt.”

“Joseph Pruitt?” another woman from inside shouted.

His brows tightened with confusion. He was uncomfortable that a stranger knew his name. “Who are you?”

“My name is Gertrude,” she said as she peeked out the window. Her head disappeared behind the curtain.

“I’m Sheriff Joseph Pruitt. We’re here to help.” He waited for one of the women to walk out or open the door, at the very least.

Rebecca called out, “We’ve been stranded here! We have an injured man and need a horse to get moving again. Please hurry, Sheriff.”

Joseph pointed to the nearest deputy. “You get that stagecoach back on the road to town. I’ll go check those men up ahead and make sure they ain’t a threat.”

Two women, one young and one older, approached them. Joseph nodded and then rode past them to the dead men. He kept his gun at the ready in case any of them lying on the ground moved. He collected their pistols and kicked away any rifles he found.

Joseph smiled proudly at the resourcefulness of his deputy. His deputy’s horse had been harnessed in place of the missing lead, filling out the team of four. Also, the injured Sacramento deputy

was up top with the driver, eager to go.

Joseph signaled for them to leave. The driver returned a wave, whistled at the horses, and yanked the reins. The stagecoach lurched forward and disappeared down the road headed to Auburn.

The deputy approached the sheriff. “The cart should be here soon.” He smiled and pointed at the men in the road. “Those women told me they shot these men. Imagine that?”

“Is everyone okay?” Joseph asked.

“Yeah. They’re all okay except for a wounded deputy. He’ll be fine. Rebecca and your Aunt Helen were with them.”

“She’s Elizabeth’s aunt, not mine!”

A plume of dust rose from the road coming from Auburn. The other deputy, driving a large cart, was heading toward them.

Joseph watched as the two deputies loaded each of the dead men onto the cart. His breath caught when he saw the bloodied face of one of them. His skin prickled. He recognized the man from the day he’d visited John Walker’s outlaw camp.

He shook his head as worry crept toward him. He stared at the cart filled with the dead men who had belonged to John’s gang of outlaws. Soon, the outlaws would be traced back to him. He’d be accused of aiding them.

He rubbed his forehead hard, the headache already staking its claim. “What if John Walker blames me for the death of these men?” he muttered.

The deputy tapped Joseph’s arm. “Sheriff?”

Joseph jumped and glared at him. “What about the other woman? Why did she go to Sacramento?”

The deputy nodded. “The older woman, Gertrude, said her niece, Martha, commandeered a passing carriage and left for Sacramento. The driver of that carriage took the stagecoach’s spare horse to chase after her.”

Joseph shook his head. “Shoot! This is bad!”

The deputy glanced down the road leading to Sacramento. “Should we head that way? Help them?”

Joseph cocked his head back and wrinkled his nose. “No! Let Sheriff August deal with their troubles. We’ve got enough on our hands.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Rock Bottom

Hooves thundered across the clay trail into the outlaw camp on Joseph's land. The ground trembled beneath them. The riders yelled, while others grunted as they stopped in the middle of the camp.

Frank rushed out of his tent to investigate the commotion.

He spotted Randall and Charlie at the front.

Charlie jumped from his horse and helped Randall get down.

Frank ran up.

Charlie said, "Where's John's men? They were over in Auburn. They should have been back before us."

Frank said, "They're all dead." He gasped when he saw Randall. "Your leg is bleeding!"

Randall grinned. "Someone shot me. The bullet tore into my leg, and it hurts like hell." He paused, pointing at his leg. "Charlie wrapped it."

Frank's eyes widened. One of Randall's eyes was swollen, and his face was scraped and bright red. "What happened to your eye?"

"I tripped and went face-first into the dirt when I got shot."

Frank's nose twitched at the sight of Randall's eye.

Randall spat to the ground. "They were shooting down on us—picking us off, one by one."

Charlie rubbed his face. "Could it have been Alexander? I saw him peek out from behind the stagecoach, aiming his gun at us."

Randall shook his head rapidly. "Did he see you?"

"No."

Randall nodded.

Frank narrowed his eyes. "We've gotta get rid of that man. He's a menace."

Randall winced when he put weight on his bloody leg. "It wasn't him. The bullet came from up the hillside."

Frank gasped, his eyes widened, and his face drained of color.

“What’s wrong?” Randall barked. “Was that you shooting down at us? Did you follow us?”

Frank cocked his head back like he’d seen something revolting. “No! I was here. Ask anyone.” Frank looked away abruptly, and then his gaze rose back to Randall.

Randall was staring at him. “Son! You know something. Don’t you?”

Frank stood frozen. “I told Thomas. But he wouldn’t have shot at you. He wouldn’t have.”

Charlie gasped.

John rode up and jumped down from his horse. He sprinted to Randall and shoved him to the ground. “We’re done. Your stupid, supposedly brilliant plan didn’t work. Thanks to you and Charlie, all eight of the men I sent there are dead. You both botched that robbery. I’ve had it with you.”

Frank stepped back, his jaw slackened.

Charlie’s voice cracked. “What? I was supposed to go with them.”

John glared at him.

Randall moaned in pain as he struggled to stand. “It ain’t my fault. You agreed to this. Some of mine got killed, too.”

Frank started to pull his gun on John, but Charlie tugged his arm and whispered, “Let them be. You and I can help Randall after they’re done fighting.”

Frank returned his gun to its holster and watched.

John closed in on Randall. “I don’t think you care about your men. You keep getting them killed.” John kicked at the dirt. “To be clear, I’m in charge now, not you, not Charlie.”

Randall shoved John, “Get out of my face.”

John lunged at him.

Randall fell to the ground and struggled to right himself. “I—”

Frank winced and narrowed his eyes at John.

John’s eyes were bright with fire. “Shut the hell up!” His gaze swept past Charlie and then landed on the group. “Everybody, get ready. We’ll stay here as long as we can. We might have to run if the law comes looking for us. In the meantime, we’ll be lying low. I don’t know if it will be days or weeks—no way to tell.” He

turned to Randall. “If you and your men come with us, you’ll do as you’re told. Got it?”

Frank gasped at Randall’s vacant look.

John gestured for his men to follow him and stormed away.

Frank stood frozen in shock as several men, including some of Randall’s, followed John.

He’d never seen Randall treated that way.

“John is a dead man,” Randall muttered. “He’s soft. He’s weak.”

Frank’s eyes shot to Randall, and his breath caught at the threat. He rushed to Randall. “Everything will be okay, Uncle Randall.” Frank wanted to call Randall his pa, but ‘uncle’ sounded safer.

The edge of Randall’s lips cracked up slightly.

Frank gestured to Charlie. “Let’s get him to the doctor.”

Charlie said, “Let me take a look at his wounds. They don’t look too bad.”

Frank hesitated. “And his eye, too.”

Frank and Charlie led Randall to his tent. Frank whispered to Randall, “Charlie and I are both on your side.”

Fixing Frank with a piercing stare, Randall didn’t blink. “We visit Thomas tomorrow.”

Frank gasped. “But—”

Randall rasped, “Do you know where he lives?”

Frank’s voice cracked as he said, “Yeah. He told me.”

“Make sure you have a wagon ready to go. I won’t be able to ride my horse anytime soon.”

The next day, Randall sat beside Frank, silent, while Frank held the reins. Frank pulled into the road leading to Agnes’s house and stopped just outside the gate to her property. The modest house sat back away from the road on a lot bordered by large bushes and shrubs. An unassuming small barn stood to the left of the house. He’d expected to find Thomas sitting on the porch drinking whiskey or working in the yard, but it was quiet there.

He grunted when he tried to move his injured leg. He stepped down from the wagon and almost fell. He grimaced and limped to the house.

Thomas ran out of the house and stood at the top of the stairs, aiming his six-shooter at Randall.

Randall kept walking and winced when he heard an old woman yell out from the house.

“Thomas, what’s going on out there?”

Thomas glanced back, his gun fixed ahead of him. “Agnes, don’t come outside. I’ll take care of this.”

Randall stopped a few feet away from the bottom of the stairs. “I’m alone. I came to talk.”

Thomas, his eyes narrowed, shouted, “I’ve got nothing to say to you. You turn around and get going. I’ll shoot you if I have to.”

Randall cocked his head. “You’re the one who shot me yesterday. Aren’t you? I know Frank told you about our plans.”

Thomas’s voice cracked. “I could have killed you if I wanted. I got you in the leg instead. The same as you did to me back in New York when I tried to escape you.”

Randall chuckled. “I suppose I should be grateful that you spared my life, like I spared yours?”

Randall glanced over his shoulder. “Frank, come on out.”

Frank emerged from behind the shrubbery, his six-shooter fixed on Thomas, and stopped next to Randall.

Randall turned back to Thomas. “You look a little pale.”

Frank, his voice hoarse, yelled, “You’d better put your weapon down.”

Thomas shook his head and kept his gun on Randall. “You’re not my family anymore. I don’t care what happens to you. You’d best go back to New York.”

“It’s your fault I’m losing half my sight,” said Randall.

The edge of Randall’s lips curled up slightly as Thomas’s gun wavered.

At lightning speed, Randall pulled his gun and pointed it squarely at Thomas’s middle.

“I’d holster those guns,” came a voice from the side of the house. “I’d do as he says,” came another voice. Randall caught sight of a man standing on the side of the house. And another on the side nearest the barn.

Randall gasped when he saw the barrel of a shotgun poke out from the porch window.

“You two had better turn around and get off my property,” yelled the woman from inside.

Randall grinned as he held his gun sideways. “I guess I ain’t got family here.”

Thomas straightened, his voice hardening. “You too, Frank. Holster your gun, and let me see your hands. Looks like you’ve made your choice — me or Randall.”

Randall nodded to Frank.

Frank stowed his gun.

Thomas stepped forward. “Randall, stow that gun and leave before I put another bullet in you.”

Randall’s eyes flared with rage. He lowered the gun toward his holster—then snapped it upward, aiming at Thomas.

Thomas fired.

Randall’s gun, slick with blood, crashed to the ground.

He screamed, “My hand! You put a bullet through my hand.” His eyes darted to Thomas, disbelieving at what he had done. He saw the smoke oozing from Thomas’s gun as he looked down the barrel and then up at Thomas.

Thomas yelled, “I’m not that little kid who used to look up to you. I don’t feel anything for you.” He paused. “Frank, you’d best take care of his hand. He won’t be able to use it for much anymore.”

Randall’s heart was pounding, his hand was trembling, and the pain was growing.

Thomas chuckled. “I know you’re lousy at shooting with your left hand.”

Randall bristled. He leaned over and reached for his gun with his uninjured hand.

Thomas fired. The bullet landed an inch from the fallen weapon. “Leave it. No sense in messing up your other hand, too.”

Randall growled. He spat at Thomas and motioned for Frank to help him.

Thomas yelled, “One more thing. I saw Alexander’s son.”

Randall, his eyes wide, spun back and locked eyes with Thomas.

Thomas’s gun was still trained on him as he said, “Funny how Alexander’s boy looks just like you, his grandpa.” Thomas paused.

“That boy will learn who his true family is.”

Randall’s jaw fell open, and his eyes shot to Frank.

Then he choked on his breath. His head shook, and his body trembled. He looked up at Thomas slowly, eyes dulled and fractured, as if every lie he ever leaned on had crumbled. His mouth moved, but no words escaped his shock.

Thomas said, his voice steady, “You’re responsible for killing my ma, Martha’s ma, and — Alexander’s ma.”

Randall dropped to his knees, clutching his hand. His face was etched with creases as his deepest, darkest secret was laid out for all to hear. His jaw hung loosely as his eyes darted from Thomas to Frank, to Agnes’s boys, and back to Thomas. For the first time in his life, Randall’s eyes filled with shame.

His gaze fell to the ground. Their deaths were indeed his fault. He never expected his family, his nephew Thomas, to take everything that mattered to him away—his shooting hand and the secrets that had held him prisoner long before Thomas was born. The only two people living who knew that secret were Joseph (Thomas’s father) and Frank. Randall gasped and narrowed his eyes at Frank. “You told him?”

Frank’s mouth fell open.

Randall shook his head, disbelief carved into every line of his face. He looked down at his bloody hand, then up at Thomas. “You’ve taken everything from me, nephew. I thought family took care of family.”

Thomas’s voice thundered. “So the secret’s out. Alexander’s your son — and just as vile. No wonder you bent over backward to protect him.”

Frank yelled at Thomas. “Traitor!” He spat the word, helping Randall to his feet. “Let’s go.”

Thomas said, his voice booming, “Next time I see you, Uncle, I might just put a bullet in that cold heart of yours.” He stepped closer. “Your stagecoach-robbing days are done.”

Randall, breathing hard, turned away from Thomas.

“And stay away from my pa!” Thomas yelled.

Randall hesitated, his chest hollow.

Frank tugged Randall’s arm, and they started walking away. Randall’s mouth hung open, eyes vacant. He stumbled toward the

cart, limping and half-aware. Climbing aboard was a battle.

Thomas's face flushed with satisfaction. For the first time, he felt powerfully in control of his destiny. He felt nothing for Randall—no love, no sympathy, not even hatred.

The boy who once idolized Randall was gone. In his place stood a man who'd buried his illusions.

But when he saw Frank's eyes swimming in tears, his heart sank. His heart ached as he watched his best friend glance back at him, his eyes filled with hatred.

Frank spat on the ground. He climbed onto the wagon, flung the reins, and vanished in a cloud of dust.

The friend he'd loved like a brother was gone, and in his place stood something cold, calculating, cruel.

Agnes stepped out onto the porch, and one of the boys went to retrieve Randall's six-shooter.

Thomas turned to Agnes.

Her face held a soft, supportive smile. "I'm proud of you, Thomas."

"Thank you!"

CHAPTER FIVE
The Reckoning Within

Frank flung the reins harder, and the horses flew into a gallop. Frank glanced at Randall.

Randall wrapped his hand tightly with a filthy rag he'd found on the bench. Blood turned the once-white cloth into a soggy, red mess.

Frank's heart pounded as he jerked the reins. "We're almost at the doctor's place. How could Thomas shoot you like that?"

Randall's breathing was hard. "I can't stop the bleeding. Blood's gushing from my wrist."

Frank's eyes widened with shock at all the blood. "Press harder!" His eyes darted back and forth from the road to Randall.

Randall's face grew pale as the blood pooled up in the foot well. He closed his eyes.

"There's the office!" yelled Frank, pointing ahead.

Dr. Martin sat on the porch, reading the newspaper.

Frank pulled hard on the reins and almost crashed into the hitching post.

Dr. Martin jumped to his feet, his eyes darting to Frank. "I remember you. New York?"

Frank yelled, "His hand is bleeding all over the place. It's not stopping. You've gotta help him. He's all I got!"

The doctor's eyes shot to Randall's blood-soaked hand and rushed to him. "What happened?"

Randall's eyes snapped open and locked menacingly on Dr. Martin.

The doctor flinched. "Let's get you inside before you pass out. That isn't good—bleeding from the wrist. That's a lousy place to bleed from."

After Randall was on the bed, the doctor administered ether.

Frank, his eyes crazed with worry, rasped, "Can you help him?"

Dr. Martin nodded. "I'm not even going to ask what happened."

He worked quickly and put a tourniquet on his upper arm. Then, he removed the makeshift bandage. Soon after, he cleaned the wound and sutured it shut. He locked eyes with Frank for a few seconds.

"The last time I saw you... New York, maybe... You brought your best friend in for a leg wound, if I remember right."

"He ain't a friend no more!"

The doctor shrugged and turned to Randall. "Did he try to kill himself? That's one of the ways people try it."

Frank cocked his head back like he'd been insulted. "No!"

Randall was unconscious, his breath rasped as he inhaled and whistled when he exhaled.

"Why was he limping?"

"He got shot in the leg."

The doctor pulled Randall's pant leg back and recoiled at the blood-encrusted wound. "That wouldn't have ever healed. It would have killed him eventually."

Frank shook his head. "My friend, Charlie, took care of his leg. He said it was a flesh wound."

The doctor rolled his eyes. "That isn't a flesh wound." He thoroughly cleaned the wound and pulled a bullet. "He's damn lucky. The bone isn't broken all the way through, but it needs healing. He'll need to stay off it for a while." He bandaged the leg.

"His right eye is messed up, too."

Dr. Martin shook his head and then examined Randall's left eye. The doctor wrinkled his nose. He drew a glass of water from the basin next to the bed and gently rinsed the swollen eye, washing away the grit and gore that didn't belong. Once satisfied, he took a clean cloth, folded it into a small square, and placed it over his eye. The doctor used a piece of twine to secure it in place.

He turned to Frank. "Is there anything else wrong with him?"

Frank hesitated and shook his head. "Is he going to be okay?"

"His leg and eye will heal. I think the bones in his hand and wrist are broken. I found bits and pieces of bone. Hard to say how he'll ever use that hand again, with bones in splinters. But who

knows? I've seen worse."

"Smart thinking, bringing a wagon with you this time. You can take him home in an hour or two." He pointed to the wall. "There's a crutch for him."

The doctor handed Frank a small envelope of pills. "Make sure he only takes one if the pain is unbearable."

Soon after, the doctor and Frank laid a sleeping Randall in the back of the wagon, and Frank set off with him.

Randall stirred as the camp came into view.

"What's going on? What am I doing back here?"

Frank glanced over his shoulder. "You were hurt something awful. You're on the mend now. The doctor took care of your wounds."

"I feel fine."

"That's because of a shot the doctor gave you." Frank rounded the corner and pulled into the camp.

Frank helped Randall to his makeshift tent, a hundred feet from the rest of the group, where he was isolated from the others.

"All this damn fuss!" he rasped as he lay down and fell asleep.

That evening, Randall awoke to the loud chatter of men outside his tent. He inhaled uneasily and looked down at his right hand. It was the hand he used for shooting, writing, eating, and even pulling himself up to the saddle. He gasped as he tried to twist it. The pain was excruciating. He shut his eyes, bracing against the torture. No luck.

How could this now useless hand become his weakness? His downfall?

With his left hand, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a little envelope with the pills from the doctor. Seven pills.

He took one, swallowed it, and tucked the envelope away. Randall closed his eyes, a shiver of fear, cold and unfamiliar, running through him. How easily a man could fall.

His thoughts drifted back to a time long past. An old memory surfaced—one he had tried to forget. He remembered Alexandria, the woman he'd loved deeply, whose love he'd pushed away until she found solace with his best friend, CJ, and married him.

Randall harbored resentment toward the union. In a moment

of vulnerability, Alexandria betrayed CJ and succumbed to Randall's charm. Despite her indiscretion, she confided in him that she was expecting his child. Randall dismissed her, declaring he wanted nothing to do with the child. He promised never to reveal their secret to CJ. But as time passed, Randall and the child became very close, showering him with gifts.

Alexander was eleven when Randall told Alexandria that he wanted to tell their boy the truth. When CJ overheard, Alexandria fled in shame and took her own life. The following year, CJ disappeared. Randall was shocked. He committed to ensuring that Alexander had everything he needed. Randall had many opportunities to tell Alexander the truth, but never did.

Years later, when he was twenty-seven, Alexander Johnson and his family moved from New York on the same wagon train that Thomas arrived on. Randall and his outlaw gang chased after Thomas and ended up at Joseph's ranch.

Frank peeked into Randall's tent. "Are you okay, Randall?"

Randall jumped and wiped his face. "Yeah."

"You need anything?"

Randall shook his head.

Frank said, "Thomas needs to pay for what he did to you."

Randall cocked his head back. "He's never stood up to me like that before. He's changed."

"I'd say he's changed. He won't stop until all of us are in jail."

"No. He wants to settle down. He was angry. He's been angry with me for a long time because of what I did to him and his pa."

"What? He just shot you! That man is crazy. Thomas betrayed you. He betrayed me. He needs a bullet in his heart!"

Randall narrowed his eyes. "We don't kill family. I consider you family." Randall glanced at his bandaged hand. "You shouldn't have told him about Alexander."

Frank blinked as his head bounced back, and his jaw dropped. "But—"

"You're not going to shoot Thomas. Got that?"

Frank's eyes grew wide, and his breath choked in his throat.

Outside, amidst the cacophony of voices, several men engaged in animated conversations punctuated by the occasional shouts.

Randall glanced at the tent entrance. “What’s going on out there?”

Frank hesitated, taking a deep breath before responding. “John is gathering everyone.” He kept his voice steady despite the worry gnawing at him. “He’s been yelling at anyone who crosses his path.”

“Help me up.”

Randall and Frank went to where the men were gathered.

Charlie smiled as he walked over to Randall. “I’m glad to see you out. How’s your hand?”

“It’s useless. I’m done for without this hand.” Randall let out a sharp exhale. “What’s John doing?”

Charlie’s eyes darted to John and then back to Randall. “John’s getting everyone ready to leave.”

“What?!” Randall yelled.

John stopped talking, glared at Randall, then turned back to the rest of the men. “Make sure you got everything. We’re heading out in two days.”

“Everyone?” asked Charlie.

John snarled at Randall and then looked at Charlie. “Yup. Everyone.”

Randall, his jaw clenched tightly, narrowed his eyes at John.

Meanwhile, on the other side of his land, Joseph stood by the window, lost in thought, as thoughts of his brother, Randall, came. Randall had warned that if Joseph spoke a word about the outlaw group staying on his land, his wife, Elizabeth, would suffer the consequences.

Joseph's situation became increasingly tangled: his honesty to his wife tugging at one side, his brother's looming threat at the other, and the weight of his duty as town sheriff pressing down on him. But above all, he had to protect the secret that outlaws were camping on his land. What choice did he have? Especially with old deals still whispering at the edges.

The last time he visited John and Randall at their camp, he'd noticed tensions simmering beneath the surface. Maybe that was something he could use. If he played it right, he might be able to peel a few outlaws away from the group.

Would they blame him for John and Randall's botched stagecoach robbery? Think he'd sold them out? They shouldn't. If anyone deserved the blame, it was Alexander Johnson and Douglas Holt. This mess was theirs.

He needed to restore peace to his family and his town. But a darker storm was coming, its first signs tied to Thomas Pruitt's upcoming wedding to Rebecca Buchanan.

The celebration that should have been a moment of joy for him was instead overshadowed by Randall's threat and the outlaws hiding on his land.

As the wedding day approached, Joseph couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was coming for him. Something that would alter their lives forever.

Coming Next in the Dark Sheriff Series

Joseph Pruitt is gone. The town of Auburn stands exposed.

Judge Silas Gentry, once held at bay by Joseph's badge, now moves to claim the land, the law, and the people who remain.

Elizabeth Pruitt, grieving but resolute, turns to the one man no one expects: Randall Pruitt—outlaw, brother, and reluctant heir to the badge.

But Randall doesn't believe he deserves redemption. And Gentry doesn't plan to give him the chance. Silas Gentry is in for a rude awakening when the past reawakens with a vengeance

Loaded for Truth begins where justice ends—and where legacy, loyalty, and truth must rise from the ashes.

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 parents' 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 remains a firm believer 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.