

## Chapter 1

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William Buchanan camped on a small ledge overlooking the main road into Standard, Texas. Buchanan had remembered the site from his childhood explorations and was surprised at how little his private spot had changed in the years he had been gone. Bushes along the edge of the small bluff had grown into trees, providing even better protection from the road. The shallow cave leading into the hill was the same as it had ever been. Ashes from his campfires of years before had remained undisturbed, indicating that nobody else had yet found the place. What had been a perfect play spot for him as a child was now perfect cover for his new job, one he would just as soon have passed up.

The road and Sandy Creek—now just a trickle of water because of the drought—stretched out before him in the moonlight like two intersecting silver ribbons. He had staked his horse at the rear of the ledge. His saddle, Winchester rifle, and other supplies were stacked neatly but within easy reach inside the mouth of the shallow cave.

The instructions from headquarters were cryptic. Apparently, his old friend, Sheriff Vince Patten, had wired the Rangers for help but had provided no details. This was a busy time for the Texas Rangers. Because of the many border and outlaw problems, only one man could be spared to look

into the reported troubles in one of the many small towns scattered throughout the state. Buchanan was that man because he had been born and raised in Standard. The reasoning was that he could better investigate the troubles in the town because of his familiarity with it and the townspeople. In reality, Buchanan had no idea what to expect. He had left six years before with no plans of ever returning. He had not even come back for his father's funeral. Buchanan would have preferred to avoid this homecoming as well, but could not disregard his orders.

The autumn weather was still hot, but the rains would come soon. When they did, the creek would change into dangerous whirlpools and quicksand. For now, Buchanan was comfortable enough; even if a heavy rain hit, he was high enough to escape the certain flash flood that would result.

The Ranger poured a cup of coffee and stepped out to the ledge. He sat on the ground, pushed the sweat-stained Stetson back on his head, revealing dark hair. Buchanan was a large man, yet moved gracefully. His somber brown eyes looked into the moonlit night. Buchanan guessed it would not rain again for at least several more weeks. It had been dry in most of Texas that summer. He wondered if the deep wells on the old home place still flowed as they had when he was a child.

As he drank the coffee, the Ranger thought about his homecoming. Maybe it would be better than he had imagined. The last letter he had received from home several years before had told of his father's death and burial beside Buchanan's mother in the small family cemetery. That final fight with his father before he left would no longer be relevant, and perhaps forgotten by his brothers, as well. They had understood better than his father why he had to put Standard behind him. It might be good to see his brothers again. It would be strange not to see his father trying to rule the pack as before.

And there was old Sheriff Patten. In some ways, Patten

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had been as much like a father to Buchanan as his own father had been. Buchanan remembered the many days and evenings he had spent with Patten, learning how to be a lawman. From the time he was ten years old, Billy Buchanan could be found working with the sheriff. At first it was cleaning out the colts, filing wanted posters, dusting the gun racks. By the time he was thirteen, however, Billy had found his talents with a Colt revolver, and was promoted to a full-time deputy when he was sixteen. Patten had always warned Buchanan that if he could control his temper and settle down with a good woman, he would be one fine lawman. The irony was that Patten had been married only briefly, in his twenties, when his wife died in childbirth. Billy was the closest the old sheriff had ever had to having a son.

Buchanan's horse was restless. It pawed the ground and moved its head jerkily, even though no gnats or flies were in the dry night air. Buchanan gave it some grain and rubbed the strong, smooth neck. Satisfied that his horse was safe, Buchanan unrolled his blanket and stretched out for the night. The moonlight puddled at the foot of the cave, near his face. He listened to the night birds, waiting for something out of place. His thoughts kept returning to what he might find when he rode into town the following morning. He realized he was, in fact, looking forward to again seeing Patten, his older brother, Cal, and to a lesser extent his younger brother, Arthur. He wondered if he would see Lucy, and what he would say to her. Even after all this time, he often found himself thinking of her.

Buchanan's thoughts were interrupted by a trembling in the ground caused by galloping horses in the distance. It was apparently a large group, which could mean nothing or it could mean trouble. Instantly, the Ranger was on his feet. He kicked dirt on the remaining embers of his fire, pulled the rifle from its scabbard, then scanned the horizon, trying to locate the horses. Minutes later Buchanan heard the sounds

of hooves against hard ground and spotted the cloud of dust in the distance, silver in the moonlight, coming from Standard. He crouched on the ledge, his rifle across his knees, hidden by the bushes, and watched the horses approach.

The group consisted of maybe ten to fifteen riders. Now he could hear their whooping and hollering across the dry night air. The riders would pass right below the ledge where he was waiting. They seemed like ghosts in the dust and moonlight until they got close enough for Buchanan to make out a few faces, which were real enough. One had a scraggly beard. Another had long greasy hair. A third had a large broken nose. Details were unclear in the night, but Buchanan knew he could pick out these men again in any crowd. It was just one of the tools he had picked up over the years. The men were apparently in a festive mood, but why?

Buchanan finally realized the reason for the party. The long-haired rider held a rope, dragging a man behind him. The others were cheering him on.

The riders splashed through the shallow creek. The limp body flipped and rolled, its arms and legs as soft as a rag doll. Buchanan knew that the man, whoever he was, had been dead for a long time, but the riders were still having their fun. As they came nearer, Buchanan saw the dead man's dangling legs and his muddy, bloody head bouncing along the ground.

Dragging was a rough way to die. It angered William Buchanan to see a man treated this way, but he also knew better than to jump blindly into any situation. His temper in the past had gotten him into scrapes he should have avoided. So he swallowed his anger and forced himself to remain calm. The riders had come from Standard, so they were perhaps part of the troubles that old Vince Patten had mentioned. If so, Buchanan would meet up with these men again.

The riders passed so closely that the Ranger could have easily picked them off with his revolver. Instead he remained

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motionless as they made circle after circle, laughing and hollering, unaware of his presence. The dust rose in clouds, hiding the moon and the men. The rider with the rope loosened his grip and left the dead man at the side of the road in a small gully. The group cheered one final time and then raced back for Standard in a full gallop.

The dust slowly cleared, allowing the moon to light the scene. The night formed a black background for the blacker images of the bushes and gully. Buchanan carefully made his way down the incline to the body.

The man was covered in blood, his face was little more than pulp. Buchanan went through the dead man's pockets and found nothing. If Buchanan had ever known him, he could not know him now; if he was good or bad, or why he had been killed. Still, nobody deserved to die like this, and especially not be left to rot.

The Ranger straightened out the body. It was as limp as a bag of dirty clothes; every bone had been broken. Buchanan hated to sacrifice his blanket, but it was all he had to wrap the body in. He prepared the body as best he could for its return to town for a proper burial.

After the work was completed, Buchanan couldn't sleep. He resumed his place at the entrance of the cave with his cold coffee and gave some more thought to his strategy. He was willing to bet that the dead man and his killers had something to do with the troubles in town. If that was the case, then the body's return might even help him in his own investigation. It might cause some concern among those responsible, or at least irritate them enough to make some mistakes.

At this point it was all speculation. He had no idea about what he might be getting into, and until he was more sure of his ground, he decided to keep his identity as a Texas Ranger to himself. The first thing he would have to do was ask some questions, try to determine exactly what problems were facing Sheriff Patten and the citizens of Standard. People would be more likely to talk to him as Billy Buchanan, Clancy

Buchanan's boy who had come home, than as Willara Buchanan, Texas Ranger,

One thing was for sure.

It would be one hell of a homecoming.