

The Truitts of Texas Book Two

Seeds of Hope

TERESA WELLS



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To Mom

*Thank you for sharing your love of writing with me. You set the stage
years ago for this journey.*

I love you.



Chapter 1

While the typical West Texas settler in the late nineteenth century may have taken the prosecution of violent criminal offenses rather lightly, thefts of livestock were most assuredly taken seriously—very seriously.

—Getting Away with Murder on the Texas Frontier, by Bill Neal, 2006, Texas Tech University Press.

February 19, 1896

Waxahachie, Texas

“State your name and occupation for the court, please.”
“Reuben Rabb Truitt, deputy since December 2, 1895.”
A snort rose from the criminal Rabb was to testify against.

“Deputy Truitt, you jailed a man shortly after you became deputy. Is he in the courtroom?”

Rabb raised his finger. “Sitting over yonder beside his lawyer. Name’s Herman Blackstone.”

The prosecutor nodded before glancing at the courtroom stenographer. “And you can identify Herman Blackstone as the man coming out of the bank that day?”

"I can."

"Objection. The deputy's report paints a different picture, judge."

Rabb sank against the chair back, the old familiar unease worming its way through his gut. He should've gone over that report before he came.

The judge peered at Rabb. "You understand you're on the witness stand, son?"

"Yes, sir."

The judge returned his baleful gaze to the lawyers and sighed as if the world settled its burdens upon his shoulders. "I'll allow it."

The prosecutor repeated his question, adding, "Answer carefully, Deputy."

Rabb wiped his moist palms on his trousers. "That fella over there, Herman Blackstone." He shifted on the hard chair.

The defense attorney stood, lifting a piece of paper. After the judge approved the document, the lawyer shoved it at Rabb. The paper floated on the air and landed on his boots. The report.

Rabb picked it up and stared at the loopy handwriting on the crumpled paper. The more he stared, the faster his pulse, the emptier his lungs, the darker the room. *God, help me.*

The defense attorney slammed his fist on the table. Rabb jumped.

"Deputy Truitt! Are you deaf?"

Rabb gasped for air. Heart pounding, he wiped the sweat that trickled along his jawline. "I-I'm sorry. W-what was the question?"

The lawyer chuckled. "Come now, Deputy, let's not stretch this out. We all want to get to our midday meal. If you'll do us the *honor* of reading the man's name you arrested, which is contained in your report, we'd be ever so grateful."

The document trembled in Rabb's fingers. "I ... can't."

"Can't? Or won't, Deputy Truitt?"

The answer pulsed through his mind. *Can't. Can't. Can't.*



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A half hour after he left the witness stand, Rabb sat in the narrow hallway outside the temporary courtroom. What happened to him in that witness chair? It was like someone squeezed all the breath from his lungs. Sweat drenched his shirt, despite the room's chilly temperature. For a few terrifying moments, he thought he'd pass out. He'd never experienced anything like it and never wanted to again.

The door burst open, releasing reporters and spectators, along with the verdict. The jury cleared Herman Blackstone.

This was his fault.

He pinched his forehead. What now? Slink out of this place and crawl back home in humiliation? Or summon his last crumb of courage to face the prosecutor? He stood. Any good, decent lawman would walk back through those doors to hear for himself the final ruling.

Hat in hand, he made his way up the aisle toward the prosecutor, who paused in gathering his things to glare at Rabb. "It's the man of the hour."

Rabb studied the floor as the prosecutor's voice rose.

"Do you realize, sir, that when your sworn testimony didn't match your report, not only did you cast doubt upon yourself, you made sure a guilty man went free?"

Rabb shifted his feet in miserable silence.

"Why didn't you inform me that the name in your report didn't match the defendant? Or didn't you consider that worth sharing?" He lifted his arms and let them fall. "But that's not even the point, is it? The real question is, why did the report contain Chap Sinclair's name, yet you arrested someone entirely different?"

Rabb forced himself to meet the man's narrowed gaze. He owed the attorney an explanation, no matter how weak it sounded. "Last December, when I brought Herman to the jail, one of the deputies wrote my report as I told it to him. I remember getting the names mixed up. Chap Sinclair and Herman Blackstone are often seen together." Just like now, a mere ten feet away. Laughing, clapping each other on the back, waving around cigars and asking for the best saloon in town. "I told the deputy to correct it ..." But he obviously had not.

"And why didn't you tell the judge this story? Or simply read the report and tell the court why there was another name written there?"

If only he could. "I didn't mean to be uncooperative. It's just, I ... I get nervous to read in front of people."

"Did someone coerce you into altering your report?"

Rabb jerked his head up. "I'd never take a bribe. I told the truth, sir."

The prosecutor's gaze didn't waver. "Records don't lie, Deputy Truitt. For whatever reason you may've had, you told a different story on the stand than what you wrote at the time of the crime. You're lucky the judge didn't charge you with perjury." Shaking his head, he said nothing as he placed papers inside his case, effectively dismissing Rabb.

"I'm sorry." What else could Rabb say? He sure wouldn't reveal his secret.

Oh, there were plenty of men who couldn't read or write. But most had missed out on a formal education. Rabb wasn't one of those. Whether it was due to not paying attention to the teachers or simple disinterest, understanding how letters made sounds and together, made words, eluded him. One by one, his siblings surpassed him in literacy, leaving Rabb to divert attention from his grades to his ability to make people laugh.

It hadn't caused a problem. Until now.

"Do me a favor, Mr. Truitt. The next time you see someone committing a crime in this county, look the other way, will you?" The prosecutor stalked out.

Rabb blew out a stream of air. A year ago, if someone had suggested a future as a lawman, he'd have scoffed. Or punched them, depending on his mood. Even now, there were days he couldn't quite believe this was his life. Of course, Sheriff Akin recruited him for the job only after he shot and killed notorious Bert Mason last fall. Plenty of folks had questioned the lawman's judgment, including Rabb.

Only, after getting a taste of upholding the law, he liked the job.

Few things brought him pleasure like protecting his town. Not much he wouldn't do to keep his family, friends, and community safe from harm.

But now that his reputation was in shreds, he had to give the sheriff his resignation. With a heavy sigh, he donned his hat and walked up the aisle. This would be one long train ride back to Blooming Grove.

"Hold up there, Deputy Truitt." Herman Blackstone, followed by Bones Renfro and Chap Sinclair, stepped into the doorway, blocking Rabb's exit.

"Step aside." Rabb flexed his fingers, aching for an excuse to punch that grin off Blackstone's face.

"Now, don't be a sore loser, Rabb—uh, excuse me, *Deputy*. You tried your best to punish me for my misdeeds. A little naive. I spent a few days in jail, a very unpleasant endeavor. However, I'm a forgiving sort of man. What say we shake hands and declare a truce?"

"I'd rather shake a rattlesnake."

The bigger man, Bones Renfro, growled and took a step closer. Despite the size difference, Rabb closed the distance between them. "Outta my way, Renfro."

Blackstone clucked. "Come now, Bones, do let our esteemed deputy pass. We don't hold grudges, do we, boys? Seeing as we'll be neighbors with Mr. Truitt here."

Surprise slackened Rabb's jaw. "Neighbors? What're you talking about?"

Herman Blackstone blew a stream of cigar smoke beyond Rabb's head with a smile, revealing yellowed teeth. "Have a good day, Deputy."

The men chuckled and followed Blackstone out the door. By the time Rabb emerged, the trio had disappeared into the crowded streets of the bustling town.

The cool February wind braced Rabb's heated face and took his mind off the unpleasant morning. All around him, buggies and wagons rolled along the dusty roads, and women called warnings to

their children as they strolled along the busy streets. The chinking blows of hammers on stone could be heard all around, yet few passersby joined him to gape at the work in progress on the future Ellis County Courthouse. What an impressive building, with all the flourishes and fancy columns. When this was finished, he'd come back.

The memory of the prosecutor's last words soured that thought. He wasn't welcome here. He'd just as soon forget everything about this day, even the huge building. He buttoned his jacket against the cold as he strode to the train station. This city, with all its fancy homes, was more than he could stomach. A simple, no-frills town like Blooming Grove was more to his liking. He jogged across the road and made his way toward the depot, clamping his hand on the crown of his Stetson to keep it atop his slicked-back red hair.

On the platform, he stood apart from waiting passengers. He squeezed his eyes shut.

What had Herman meant, they'd be neighbors?

A tug on his jacket got his attention. A pair of boys, no older than ten, stood before him with shining eyes, panting as if they'd run to catch him. The taller one spoke. "Begging your pardon, but wasn't you at the shooting competition last week?"

Rabb forced a smile. "I was there, all right. Name's Rabb Truitt."

The two boys gaped, first at him, then at each other, before recovering and introducing themselves. The smaller boy said, "You was something! We never see'd a man hit every bullseye before. You sure showed them others."

Rabb straightened. "Appreciate you saying so." He wagged his forefinger between them. "You men shoot?"

Inwardly, he grinned as both boys stuck out their chests. Calling them men was a stretch, but when he'd been their age, respect was all he wanted.

"My pa got me a shotgun for Christmas."

The shorter boy's shoulders drooped. "I ain't got one, but I'm saving every penny so's I can be a crack shot like you, Mr. Truitt."

Rabb nodded with assumed solemnity. "Reckon someday you'll

best me with that kind of determination.” The train’s whistle shrieked a warning. He doffed his hat to the boys. “Right nice meeting the two of you. Hope to see you both at the next shooting exhibition.”

He shook hands with each before striding away, chuckling softly at their excited chatter. As he boarded, he glanced back to see the two surrounded by other boys, holding court as if they were kings for a day.

Avoiding the curious gazes of the other passengers aboard the train bound for Blooming Grove and beyond, he took his seat and burrowed down. Rabb brought his hat over his eyes and crossed his arms, willing sleep to come.

Instead, his unsettled thoughts swirled. What kind of deputy didn’t know how to read? The kind who made a career of skipping school and not getting caught. His past misbehavior seemed like an asset for this job. He knew what trouble young boys could get into, because he’d pretty much done it all.

But he couldn’t avoid the need to read. He could ask one of his sisters to help him. Only, there’d be no end to the grief they’d give him for those wasted years. Maybe someone else.

Sallie Parker’s face floated to mind. Out of all his sister’s friends, he liked her best. Sallie was different from other women, sweet, practical, and refreshingly sincere. Honest to the point of hurting feelings. But her kindness outweighed her blunt nature.

She’d be a natural choice to teach him to read, except she still struggled to recover from injuries sustained in the fire that almost claimed her life last November. Since then, she stayed tucked away in her parents’ home, healing from her burns. He couldn’t bother her to teach him to read.

Then what? If he couldn’t do any good for Blooming Grove, he needed to quit and let someone more qualified take this job.

The idea gutted him.



When he arrived home, Rabb walked to his sister Delia's house, a small cottage on a quiet street, perfect for a newlywed couple.

"Why, Rabb. Come in."

He gave her a quick hug before she pulled him into the warmth of her home. A fire crackled gently in the hearth, giving the room a cozy feel. She gestured to a small, slightly worn sofa and took the chair opposite him.

Delia frowned. "What's wrong?"

He never could sneak anything past her. Still, he couldn't bring himself to share his dour mood. He sniffed the air. "What's a fella got to do for some grub?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "You're asking me to prepare you a meal? That's rich, considering all the times you ran when I cooked."

He shrugged. "I figured you had to have learned a few things, being a married woman and all."

She chuckled. "Don't be so sure. Come on, I'll fix you a plate. And don't worry, I had nothing to do with the meal preparation. Eleanor gets the credit for any palatable food in this household."

Rabb laughed as he let go of the breath he held, grateful for the older woman who'd taken it upon herself to teach his sister how to cook. "Gotta say, something smells pretty good."

Delia made quick work of placing a roasted chicken leg, green beans, and cornbread on his plate. "It's still warm from lunch." He tucked in while she poured coffee for them. He savored the juicy, tender meat and saltiness of the bacon-seasoned green beans with a contented sigh.

She pushed the butter dish toward him. "I thought you were in court this week."

He put off his answer while he slathered his triangle of golden cornbread. "It's over."

She made an impatient cluck. "And is Herman Blackstone headed to prison?"

He laid the cornbread on his plate and swallowed hot coffee. "Nope."

Delia's jaw slackened, and for a moment she stared as if she hadn't heard him correctly. "Why not?"

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He sat back in the chair and let his eyes settle on the half-full plate before him. "He had a snake of a lawyer. Wanted me to read my testimony, the one some clerk wrote down back in December."

"And?"

Rabb studied his cup. He needed to be careful. His sister always picked up on the slightest irregularity. And though she knew him well, there was one thing she didn't know. And he wanted to keep it that way.

"I told 'em what happened. But that wasn't good enough. And you know how much I hate people looking at me when I read. There must've been fifty people in that courtroom, all of 'em staring a hole through me."

She reached across the table and laid her hand over his. "I remember all those times in school when you froze up. I hate that this happened to you."

He withdrew his hand. He couldn't take sympathy, especially when she didn't know the real reason he couldn't read the paper aloud. "Yeah, well, I ruined everything. That lawyer accused me of lying under oath. Said my story didn't match the paper version."

Delia's expression turned stormy. "That man had no right to call you a liar."

He dipped his chin with irony. "Now who's stretching the truth? You and I both know how I used to be."

"But that was before you gave your life to the Lord."

He shrugged. He wasn't comfortable talking about his faith, even with her. "Nobody else knows that."

"Rabb, anyone in Blooming Grove can tell how much you've changed."

He stood, pacing to relieve the urge to move. His faith was so new, and so opposite to the wild man he'd been. He struggled to accept God's love for him. Praying was something done in the privacy of his room at the boardinghouse, largely because the act was unfamiliar and contrary to the conceited and brash person of his past. He came to this town as a man hungry for excitement. Maybe the more he prayed, the more comfortable he would be with his belief. "You think God has a reason for me to be a lawman, Red?"

"Of course I do. You make an excellent deputy. Furthermore, when the sheriff retires, you'd be the best replacement this town could ever hope for. But I don't have to tell you that. Surely you know how effective you are."

He shrugged.

Delia came to stand before him, hands pressed together in supplication. "Don't you remember when the Millers and the Cains had that property dispute? I've never seen anyone so skilled at bringing peace between two hostile people. God has blessed you with a special set of talents to make people see reason."

Her affirmation didn't soothe him. The prosecutor's reprimand bounced against the walls of his mind.

"Maybe the Millers and Cains were ready for peace and would've simmered down for anybody." He shifted his weight and rested his hands on his hips. "Besides, there's more to the job than that. It's complicated business, carrying out the law." He let his words trail as he toed the floor with his boot. "I reckon I should tell Akin I'm moving on. I can find work on some ranch. If not here, then out west."

A hollow declaration, at best. He used to want to be a cowhand. But that was before, back when he didn't care about this community and the people he now loved, and, if this morning with the boys was any confirmation, they may have grown to love him too.

"You listen to me, Rabb Truitt. God put you in this role for one reason."

"What's that?"

"Well, I'm not sure. But you'll never know if you run away, will you?"

"How do you know God doesn't have plans for me elsewhere?"

When she hesitated, he uttered a humorless chuckle. "Don't have an answer for that, now do you?"

She held up a forefinger. "Before you go traipsing off west, may I remind you of the promise I made to you when we came to Blooming Grove?"

"Promise?"

"That I would help you select a woman worthy of marriage."

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Rabb huffed. "That's the last thing I need, a wife to support while I'm searching for a new job." But wouldn't it be comforting to come home to a woman who'd put her arms around him and assure him of his value in this world?

"Don't be so sure. A good marriage is a blessing." Her porcelain skin turned pink.

He turned away. He sure didn't want to witness his sister all lovey-dovey, dreamy-eyed. Envy ate at him when he experienced the steady devotion between Clarence and Delia.

"I came here because you're one of the few people I can talk to about things, not to be hooked into a marriage contract."

"Have you considered Sallie?"

He spun around. "For a marriage contract?"

"No." She laughed, then tilted her head to the side as if considering. "Though that's not a bad idea. I meant she's a good person to talk to. Sallie's practical, sweet, and she listens."

He swallowed. Twice today Sallie's face had drifted into his mind. Not that it mattered. "She has enough trouble of her own to work out."

Behind him, Delia's voice softened. "I happen to know she feels tender toward you."

"Sallie's too good for the likes of me." He turned. "Besides, I'm gonna leave. Find me a good ranch where all I have to do is work with my hands and my horse."

Her forehead puckered with worry. "Please don't."

"Ain't got a choice."

"But you do, Rabb. That's just it. You have a wonderful job as a deputy. It isn't like you to doubt yourself."

She'd doubt him, too, if she'd been in that courtroom today. Still, his chest ached with the pull to stay in Blooming Grove. He needed this town, his friends. Even his family. They weren't perfect, but he couldn't imagine life without them. He and Delia stood in silence for a moment before he grabbed his hat and kissed his sister's cheek. "Thank you for feeding me and for listening. I've gotta go."

"Where are you going? Not to resign? Please consider what I said. You're a natural deputy."

Teresa Wells

“Don’t worry, I’m not doing anything today except ride out to do some target practice.”

He winced when her shoulders sagged with relief. He made it sound like he hadn’t already made up his mind. But he knew.

He wouldn’t talk to the sheriff or ride out to see if the bigger ranches needed help. Not today, anyway.