

Chapter 2



For the past two weeks, no less than twelve citizens of the town have lost their milk cows. It is claimed that the animals were driven off and corralled in Red River bottom, where they were slaughtered, and the meat brought to Texarkana and sold to the butchers.

*—The Bryan Weekly Eagle, Bryan, Texas,
November 9, 1899*

THE straw-like winter grass, tamped down by humans and animals alike, held the comfort Rabb sought. Tension caused by the earlier events eased from his shoulders. He came to this out-of-the-way place when he craved solitude. The many trees with their crooked limbs, now devoid of leaves, provided a lonely backdrop to his desolate mood.

He'd like to get his hands on that report. Maybe someone he trusted would read it to him. He found it hard to believe that deputy hadn't corrected the name of the suspect.

Suspicion crawled up his spine. Had someone purposely submitted that report with the false name? Would the attorney stoop that low to get the case dismissed? Maybe. The man almost grinned when he shoved the paper at him. Like he expected it. As if he knew Rabb couldn't read it.

But how? Rabb'd guarded that secret for a long time. Nobody knew he couldn't read.

He rolled his shoulders, then walked to a tree stump surrounded by littered tin cans and glass shards, found a can that would suit, and placed it on the trunk. He walked twenty paces away before turning, pulling back the hammer on his Remington, and pressing the trigger.

The bullet whined through the cool air. A rush of wings flapping overhead replaced the metallic ping he expected. He narrowed his gaze at the tin can. Did he miss? He cocked the hammer and squeezed the trigger again. The undisturbed target seemed to taunt him.

Jaw clamped, he spread his feet to anchor his stance, and this time when he squeezed the trigger, a satisfying plink accompanied the sailing metal container. About time.

Inhaling the familiar acrid scent of gunpowder, he strode to the stump, this time placing two pierced cans side by side. Back at his place, he squinted before squeezing off two more shots. Yet only one fell away. Worse, he wasted three more bullets in a failed attempt to hit his mark.

Something moved behind him, and he whirled, aiming his gun at whoever had snuck up behind him.

"Don't shoot!" A boy crouched on the ground beside clumps of unearthed grass and held up dirt-encrusted hands, eyes wide.

Rabb holstered his gun and willed his racing pulse to slow. What was he thinking, aiming at a teenage boy? "Don't you know better than to sneak up on a man with a gun?"

The kid paled. "I-I wasn't sneaking up. I was here before you were."

Rabb's gaze fell to the small mound of freshly disturbed, dark earth. "You burying something?"

The boy's eyes widened in denial, head moving side to side. Huh. So he was. And apparently, it was important to him.

"What's your name, son?"

"S-Seth Donovan, sir."

Seeds of Hope

Donovan. Where'd he heard that name? "Why ain't you in school, Seth Donovan?"

"I'm going."

"What's your pa gonna say when he finds out you're skipping?"

"He knows." His gaze darted to the mound of dirt before he climbed to his feet and brushed his hands on his pants.

"Your pa knows you're here?"

"Um, I think so."

Ah. The kid was a good liar. A younger Rabb Truitt would've appreciated the craft. Even more, the stealthy way Seth Donovan flattened the dirt with his shoe.

Rabb should've demanded to know what was buried there. But he had a hard time summoning the strength to care. "Best be on your way then, Seth Donovan."

Relief shrouded Seth's face. "Thanks, mister."

He disappeared through the bushes, taking the opposite direction from the Blooming Grove School.

It was clear as day the kid was up to no good. After that blatant lie, Rabb had to follow. Maybe if someone had interrupted his youthful escapades, he wouldn't have had trouble decoding words on a page and ended up setting a known criminal free.

Rabb's heavy stride proved no match for a rabbit-like kid, and after a while, he gave up.

Just as well. He was in no mood to drag some delinquent to the schoolhouse. Besides, the time had come to face the sheriff and tell him what happened in court. He couldn't put it off any longer.

He'd keep an eye out for Seth Donovan, though. By the looks of his threadbare, too-small clothing, he bet Seth lived in the small community east of town. Eastside wasn't on his usual rounds, but there wasn't any harm in riding through there a time or two, just to make sure the kid was all right.

Rabb stalked down the road that turned into Main Street, dread at speaking to his superior dulling his usually ebullient mood. His gut churned as every step brought him closer to the jailhouse. No telling what Sheriff Akin would say to him. Maybe he ought to tell

Akin about his trouble reading and force the man to fire him. No lawman wanted a deputy who couldn't read the wanted posters.

"Truitt."

Rabb slowed at the familiar voice. Of all people to run into, why Turner Jones?

The slight reporter rushed to him, breathless. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Need you to see something."

"What do you want?" He grimaced at his sharp response. Despite Turner's annoying persistence, he liked the man. They'd gotten to be chums at the boardinghouse. And, to be fair, last week Turner warned him that no matter the outcome of today's trial, he was writing an article about it.

"This is exciting stuff," he said at the dinner table. "The whole county is eager to see Herman Blackstone put away, especially after the heroic way you captured him. Ah, what a great story. My first time to make headlines, you know. Folks want to know Herman Blackstone will get the justice he deserves."

That'd been two days ago.

Now, after that disastrous trial, the remembered words stabbed him like a knife. "Look, Turner, I know you gotta tell what happened this morning. Just write the truth."

Turner heaved a sigh and reached into his pocket. "The truth doesn't cast you as the hero Blooming Grove wants to see." He handed over a folded paper. "Thought you oughta be the first to read it. Mr. Carruthers wants it to headline a special edition for this evening. But I snuck this out of the building before it went to press. I was hoping you'd tell me I got it wrong." Turner shook the paper at him impatiently. "Go ahead, take a look. Then help me make this better for you."

Rabb's mouth went dry. He accepted the paper and opened it to see typewritten words that appeared to melt together on the page. His pulse quickened, and beads of sweat dampened his collar.

The pit in Rabb's stomach grew. He managed a shrug, which made Turner lift his arms in exasperation.

"What's wrong with you, man? I don't want to crucify you."

Seeds of Hope

Rabb pushed the paper back at him. "It's my fault Blackstone got off. Write the truth, Jones."

Turner snatched the paper, frustration written on his face. "I don't get it. Why didn't you just read the report? It was your testimony, wasn't it?"

Rabb squeezed the bridge of his nose. Maybe he should come out with it. That'd make everything easier, wouldn't it? "I gotta be honest with you—"

"Jones! Where's that copy?" Mr. Carruthers stood outside the newspaper office with hands on his hips.

Turner sucked in a breath. "Gotta go." He squeezed Rabb's arm. "Sure am sorry about this."

Rabb's gut tightened like a noose around his middle. That was it, then. If he had any doubts about keeping his job, that sealed it. He was done as a deputy.

He took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead, eyeing the jailhouse down the street where Sheriff Akin and Thad Lewis waited. Jamming the hat back on his head, he resumed his trek down the road. Once that special edition came out, he'd be looking for another job. He better resign before the sheriff fired him.



Rabb's steps slowed as he got closer to the jail, chest constricting with dread. Facing the men he respected was the last thing he wanted to do, especially after this never-ending day.

For a moment, he considered turning away. But this had to be done, tonight rather than tomorrow. At the door, he paused to take a deep, fortifying breath. Resigning within a few months of taking this job rubbed him like an ill-fitting pair of boots. Still, his performance today was a failure. Because of him, a crooked man walked free.

He twisted the knob and pushed the door open. Clouds of tobacco smoke billowed toward him. He choked and turned his head away, eyes burning. "What in the world?"

Thad Lewis shot up from the sheriff's desk, toppling the chair behind him with a clatter. He held a fat brown cigar. His thin body

flagged with relief, a guilty smile on his long face. "It's just you. Whew, you gave me a scare."

Rabb waved his hand to clear the air and propped a brick against the door. "You must be feeling lucky."

Thad returned to the massive desk and righted the seat. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Rabb hung his hat on a peg. The sheriff's cigars were off-limits to anyone but the man himself. Sheriff Akin cherished his stash hidden in the bottom drawer of his desk, but only enjoyed a smoke when he was sure his wife or daughter wouldn't drop in unannounced and catch him in the act. Since Mrs. Akin or Milly stopped by almost daily, the poor man rarely enjoyed the pastime. "Wait 'til our pals at the diner hear this." Rabb wagged his eyebrows.

Thad scowled. "I could tell plenty on you, don't forget." He sighed as if to signal a shift in topic. "Did that reporter find you?"

Rabb jerked his head once. "Wanted to show me the special edition."

"Must be something about the trial. What'd it say?"

When Rabb didn't respond, Thad said, "Didn't you wanna read it? See what they wrote?"

"Living through it was bad enough."

The chair creaked in protest as Thad leaned back, interlacing his fingers behind his head. "Heard Blackstone got off."

Rabb turned away and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on top of the small stove. He swallowed the bitterness in one gulp and set the cup down with a thunk. Thad was the last person he wanted to talk to about the disastrous morning. They were friendly enough, but the underlying competition between them couldn't be denied.

Before Rabb could ask where the sheriff was, a female figure stepped into the open doorway. "Hello, boys. You hungry?"

Milly Akin, the sheriff's vivacious daughter, smiled as she pranced into the office holding a basket aloft. "Mama sent along pork chops and some yellow squash." She sniffed suspiciously. "Oh, those awful cigars. I'm gonna tell Mama he's at it again."

Rabb grunted. Figured. Pulling up a chair, he gestured to the

woman. "Sit right down, Milly. Your father should be back directly." He gestured to her basket. "Did you say you brought us supper?"

"That, and something else." She drew out a covered plate and lifted the scarf with a dramatic flourish. "It's my granny's special recipe for gingersnaps, and I made this batch with you two handsome gentlemen in mind."

The cookies held a peculiar bluish tint. Warning bells sounded in Rabb's mind. He'd gotten his fill of strange concoctions with Delia's failed attempts at baking. He didn't need to try another one.

He reluctantly took one, waving off Milly's offer of more. As he exited, her words to Thad wafted to him. "You know, there's about a million different things you could do with gingerbread cookies."

Rabb snapped the door shut behind him, shaking his head. Nice girl. A bit too creative, if that blueberry gingerbread was any indication.

He strolled along the boardwalk. The sun was setting, and only a few people were out. He spied an abandoned rag doll and stooped to retrieve it. Scanning the dusty road, he searched for its owner. Ah, probably the small girl just ahead. Calling to the mother, he hurried to reunite the toy with the little one.

The girl's face lit up as she saw what Rabb offered. "Baby."

The mother, a woman who attended his church, sighed in relief. "Oh, thank you, Deputy. It would've been a long night without this."

Rabb grinned and lifted his hat, winking at the delighted child. "My honor, ma'am. Y'all have a good evening. Tell your husband I'll be out to help him with that well he's digging."

She gave him a grateful smile, and he resumed his stroll down Main Street. At the end of the boardwalk, he stopped and inhaled the fresh, cool air. Blooming Grove was a nice community. The people were scrappy and hardworking. The ruggedness of this place appealed to Rabb. Sure, a few folks put on airs of importance, like the mayor, Clive Waldrop, and his snooty daughter, Gert. But they were the exception. These folks looked out for each other. He had genuine friends here, and he'd give his life to protect them.

That's what made quitting so hard.

He jumped when a hand clamped his shoulder. "Glad to see you back, son."

"Sheriff Akin." Rabb's chest tightened as he shook hands with his boss, a man whose formidable height, broad chest, weathered face, and drooping white mustache fit the image of a man who upheld the law. His countenance was somber.

No doubt news about the courtroom disaster already reached him. Shame flooded Rabb. He cleared his throat to tell the man his intentions.

Before he could speak, the sheriff sighed. "Been talking to some families out north of town. Three ranches reported cows stolen." His solemn gaze met Rabb's. "I'm gonna need you and Thad to search for them. We can't have cattle thieves around here."

Rabb shifted his stance. "I gotta tell you something first."

Sheriff Akin lifted his chin and waited.

Rabb swallowed. "The trial, it didn't go very well."

"I heard. Read the paper too."

Paper? He just spoke with Turner Jones. "I didn't mean to ruin everything. I-I'm real sorry."

The sheriff studied him a moment, his wiry brows knit. "Son, if you think I care about some story the paper prints, you're wrong. I know your character. You're a good man. Nobody thinks you threw that trial on purpose."

Rabb stepped back, his jaw slack. "Who said I threw the trial?"

The older man nodded. "Haven't seen it yet? Special edition, they're calling it. I call it hogwash."

Rabb drew a hand down his face, stunned by the accusation. That must be what Turner meant when he apologized. It had to be bad for the sheriff to call it hogwash. He shook off his dismay and tried to think clearly. "Actually, Sheriff, I feel pretty bad about that trial. I think I oughta step down. Let another man, someone more qualified, take on this job."

Akin's face hardened. "I don't want to hear that kinda talk, Rabb. I chose you. Why? Because you're a crack shot, got common sense, and you can read people. But mostly, you care about this town. Ain't no replacing that."

Seeds of Hope

A buggy passed, and both men lifted a hand in greeting. The sheriff turned back to him. "I ain't said much about this, but I'm getting too old for this job. Wife's been on me to step down, let one of you boys take my place." He lifted his Stetson and scratched his head. "Both you men would do a good job. Y'all care. Town likes you both. But you—" He thumped Rabb's chest, where his badge rested. "You've got something Thad doesn't."

"What's that?" Rabb's voice cracked.

"Good instincts."

"But I'm the reason Herman Blackstone is a free man."

The sheriff spread his hands. "Son, you think I haven't messed up? That don't mean nothing."

"Means something to me."

The sheriff let out an exasperated sigh. "I need you. We've got rustlers stealing from our ranchers."

Rabb crossed his arms, emotions warring within. This man was practically begging for his help. How could he turn that down? The need to protect this town alongside good men like Sheriff Akin and Thad burned in his chest. But he had to face facts. He couldn't read. They'd be better off without him.

"Sheriff, I'll help you hunt down those thieves. But after that, I'll be leaving this badge for a better man than me."