

Chapter 1

Brisbie, Texas
Early Friday Morning
June 26, 1840

Witherspoon pulled his second boot on, tucked his favorite green and white checkered shirt into his pants, buckled his colt-holstered belt around his 34" waist and headed for the door.

"Ain't you forgettin' somethin', cowboy?"

He turned to the smiling brunette on the pillow. In mock drudgery, he tossed a coin on the bed beside her.

"Been married to you for six years, Lottie, and you still demand payment for havin' the pleasure of my company."

"Your company, Jeb Witherspoon? You've taken advantage of my delicacies for all these years and still lack the proper appreciation; but I'll forgive you again if you come over here and give me a kiss before you walk out that door."

"Is this goin' to cost me another silver?"

"You bet your skinny ass!" Lottie smiled. She sat up on one elbow as he slid his left arm around her neck.

"And don't you go pokin' my eye out with that big ol' star on your shirt!"

He dropped the silver piece down her gaping night shirt.

"For our retirement then," he quipped, as his right hand tried to follow the coin, only to be jerked away by her lightning-fast free hand.

"Coin only, cowboy. Squire's a'waitin'," she laughed. "Now run along!"

He stood, pulled his hat down firmly to his ears, turned, took one last, lingering look at his delicious bride, tipped his hat brim, mumbled something under his breath, showing her another wistful face-full of disappointment, and pulled the door open.

Sun was just about ready to poke its nose over Mt. Daggett. Jeb shut the door softly behind him, yawned, stretched his 6'5" frame, tightening every muscle from toe to finger tips, and thanked the Good Lord for another day.

"Star, hell!" he muttered aloud, -- but only to himself. Texas Rangers haven't got the money for real stars, he mused; just a five-sided star printed on a piece of official-looking paper, and signed by Steven Austin back in 1836. Jeb kept his in his vest pocket at all times for identification.

He and Squire decided long ago to make their own stars out of Mexican Pesos. Had old man Dutch Cairns, the blacksmith in Wichita Falls, fashion ten of them, patterned after the picture on the letter -- had them inscribed, too, all around the circle --



Cost \$2.30 for the star with the pin on the back, and an extra \$2.00 for the inscribing.

Someday soon this Republic will be rich enough to make up some stars for us boys who are keeping the citizens safe, he thought to himself, but

for now, we do just fine. He made his way down the worn oak planks of the walkway. Someday soon, he mused, "Hell, they's always a someday."

The front of the Good Night Hotel was shaded by a long veranda held up by three ornate, white columns. Hitching rails, in turn, were fastened to these support columns, and this morning it seemed all the ponies in Northeast Texas were tied to these rails.

"Hmmp! This must have been a good night for the Good Night," he spoke aloud, then turned to left and right to see if there were any who heard. But the street was empty in the early dawn, so smiling to himself he ducked beneath a rail and pushed his way between a couple of saddle-weary sorrels, noting they had just recently been ridden. Patting their wet, quivering flanks as he strode by, he stepped off the boardwalk, and counted nine more ponies, still saddled, tied along the rail, wet with sweat.

A few curiously disturbing thoughts flashed through his mind: Who just rode into Brisbie in such a hurry? Why were there four different brands on the rumps of the only four of the nine which were branded, since they'd obviously come in together? One brand was vaguely familiar -- he couldn't really place it -- and he recognized none of the others - so, just where were these strangers from? And lastly, since it was just barely dawn, and most of these nags had surely been ridden long and hard, what was the big hurry to ride through the night?

So before he crossed the dusty main street toward The Copperhead, one of the many Brisbie

waterholes, the Ranger retraced his steps to the hotel's lobby, where Frank Knight smiled up at him as he pushed open the door and approached the check-in desk.

"Comin' in for breakfast, Jeb? Where's Lottie?"

"Howdy, Frank. No, Just a question. I see a few horses tied up outside. Been rode hard. You servin' some strangers this mornin'? Looks like quite a bunch -- mebbe seven, eight, nine from the look of it."

"Matter of fact, yes. Dusty bunch. Rented one of our bunkhouse rooms for tonight. They're in the washhouse right now, cleanin' up a bit. Said they'd be in here for some grub shortly. Claim to be down from Nor-east of here, headin' fer some feller's ranch out New Mexico Territory after a day's stop- over here. A fella called Jacks signed in for the whole bunch."

"Hmmp! New Mexico, eh? Thanks, Frank." Jeb again retraced his steps, closing the hotel door softly behind him, and pondering the Jacks' boys, he made his way to The Copperhead.

Squire and some others were already there, including that new fellow, Drummer, enjoying a cup, waiting for him and the remainder of the expected lawmen; should be quite a powwow, he mused. Smiling and raising an arm in greeting, Ranger Jacob 'Jeb' Witherspoon stooped his lanky frame low through the door and entered.

George Birdwell, sitting at the head of the long table, only grunted an abbreviated greeting as Witherspoon ambled in. Pulling out a plush-

bottomed wooden chair, Jeb slid in between Drummer and Squire, tipped an empty mug right-side up, and poured himself a coffee from the steaming pot in the center. He offered a refill to all those seated, placed the pot back on the hot pad, then leaned back, sipping the strong, freshly brewed eye-opener. He listened to the small talk going around the table, and as usual, he had a few things to say as well.

"Anyone here ride into town through the night?"

"Hell no, Jeb. I rode in yestiday, along with George," Harlan drawled. An' I saw this young feller," pointing to Drummer, "draggin' his saddle off'n that big buckskin over at the livery stable early last evenin'. An' Squire, you stayed upstairs here -- didn't ya, Squire? Why you askin', Jeb?"

Everyone at the table figured Witherspoon was about to come out with a typical "Witherspoon witticism", but he remained sober.

"I counted ten or eleven nags tied up at Knight's place, still frothin' at the bit, when I started over here. Didn't recognize any brands. Curious."