

### **Rust, Riot, and Revenge**

The bleeding sky growled and crackled, but the people inside the saloon chatted amiably, all except one man. He sat at a rickety old table while his brown cowboy hat sat crooked on his head, hiding most of his long face. Dust fell in waves from his duster coat as he moved his arms. A faded, red bandana effectively tied around his neck hid the tin star badge. Crashing through the batwing doors, the younger lawman grinned before strutting over to perch on the seat across from the eagle-eyed loner.

“Cliff, I finally struck a gold mine!” cheered the young lawman, Texas Ranger Langston.

“You don’t dig,” muttered Cliff.

Langston laughed pulling out a leather money pouch, “I won a poker game against this old timer. Sadly, he had to leave for Chappell Hills. I got maybe twenty dollars and an old ring. Probably would have won more if he had stayed. Wore some awfully nice duds, though.” He held the ring for Cliff to see. “Think I could sell this for a good price? It might be real silver.”

Cliff’s eyes locked on the grimy ring. He ripped the ring out of Langston’s hand and inspected it. The silver band was engraved with a horseshoe. Cliff didn’t need to look to know the letters engraved on the inside of the band.

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*“JJJ?” asked a nine-year-old Cliff. He held the ring in his hand, watching the shiny silver band glint in the soft light from the nearby candle.*

*“Jim John Jefferson, your father’s initials,” Elizabeth hummed softly. Cliff turned the ring over and brushed his small thumb over the horseshoe engraving.*

*“Ma?” Elizabeth glanced at Cliff, their dinner sat forgotten on the table. Cliff held the ring out towards his mother. “Don’t cry, Ma. I’m positive Pa would want us to be happy.”*

*Taking the ring, Elizabeth carefully slid it back onto the chain around her neck. The steady rhythm of horse hooves rang into the night. Grabbing the rusty shotgun, Elizabeth aimed it defensively at the door while she hollered, “Whoever’s there, just ride on out of here.”*

*“Lizzy-beth, ya ain’t gonna shoot ya favorite brother!” the gruff voice answered.*

*“Uncle Winston!” Cliff ran around Elizabeth and threw open the door. Winston wrapped his arms around the boy. Uncle Winston, covered in leather and animal fur, gave a toothy grin. Cliff buried his face in the frayed leather jacket while his fingers petted the soft roan fur.*

*“I’s ride nearly almos’ a day and get to meet you’s shotgun. Ain’t I lucky?” remarked the weathered man.*

*“Winston, I strictly remember you having some schooling. I would appreciate if you helped me teach my boy how to talk right,” growled Elizabeth.*

*“Aw, Ma!” complained Cliff. “Uncle Winston is an Indian tracker; he don’t need to speak good.”*

*“Cliff, ‘he doesn’t need to speak well.” Elizabeth pointed her gun at Winston. “See, you already have corrupted my boy’s impressionable mind.”*

*Winston smirked, his hands held up in surrender. “I’s got news about the inheritance.”*

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*“No need to look so shocked!” chuckled Langston. “Underneath my gruff exterior I’m a great bluffer. I was thinking four dollars for that ring. What do you think?”*

Cliff tore his eyes from the ring and pulled the crumpled money from his duster pocket.

“I’ll give you two for it.” Langston gaped as his friend tossed the money at him.

“No just wait one minute,” Langston yelled after Cliff. “Where are you going? Are you all right? What’s wrong? Can I come with you?”

“No.” Cliff paused long enough to hold the door open for a petite woman. Leaving the saloon, Cliff rushed to his horse tied at the hitching post and jumped into the saddle. Spurring the animal, he left the town with dust curling from the thirsty earth. The sun had set before Cliff thought about resting, too eager and too overwrought to be close to finding the truth.

Cliff’s horse resembled him, covered in dust and worn from a full day’s ride. With his saddle against a boulder and his horse chomping at the brown prairie grass, Cliff stared at the dancing fire lost in thought. The horse jolted and focused on the horizon. Springing to his feet, Cliff had his revolver ready from the holster at his side. A small white horse with an overenthusiastic rider loomed in the darkness.

“Had I not known better, I would say that you were worried about me,” called Cliff, returning his six-shooter to the holster.

Langston easily replied, “Me? Worried about you? Never.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I just need some time to...check a few things out,” Cliff hesitated.

“Partner, I’m just here to help. What can I do for you?”

Cliff sighed, “I need you to go back to town and telegraph the Chappell Hill Bank. Let them know that Cliff Jefferson is coming to discuss the Dixon inheritance.”

“Dixon? As in, your mother?” Langston leaned closer to put his hand on Cliff’s shoulder. Cliff looked towards the horizon, his face expressionless.

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*Young Cliff pretended to sleep on the straw mattress while Uncle Winston and Ma spoke in hushed voices. The next day while he hammered the mossy fence post back into place, Cliff’s mind wandered toward the quiet conversation between the two adults.*

*Screams pierced the silence. Racing over the hill that hid their small shack, Cliff’s heart stopped. Horses waited in front of the door. Cliff followed the noise. Nearly to the house, three blood-chilling bangs bore through the screams and left a tense stillness.*

*Creaking on the rusty hinges, the door swung open revealing the cold eyes of a stubby cowboy. The gun in his hand was still smoking. Pale lines like a spider web covered his right hand. Cliff froze and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting to meet his mother in heaven.*

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Over the years, the law had gained control of the Chappell Hills, but Cliff could see the rough similarities from his childhood. The saloon sat like a black mark against the town’s less than perfect reputation. The law office, however, had a fresh coat of paint and drew attention.

“Son, you’re going to need to turn in that gun. We don’t allow guns or trouble in Chappell Hills,” growled a scraggly bearded sheriff. Cliff moved his faded bandana to reveal the tin star. “A Texas Ranger.”

“Sheriff, tell me if an old timer with fancy duds rolled through here,” demanded Cliff.

“Rolled in and out of town faster than a tornado,” smirked the sheriff. “Gambled against a sore loser who betted some ring.”

“Who is the sore loser?”

The sheriff removed his hat to scratch at his head in thought. “I can’t quite recollect.”

Cliff’s eyes narrowed, “Where can I find him?”

“That isn’t part of my job,” the sheriff spat. “I have more important things to attend to.”

Cliff tipped his hat with two fingers and urged his horse to the cemetery. Cliff tied the horse and approached the grave markers. Caught in the memory of his mother’s funeral, Cliff headed toward her headstone. Resting tauntingly on the crest of it was a rusty chain and the gold wedding band that his mother wore. Cliff collapsed to his knees and removed his hat.

“Ma,” he whispered. “I will find your killer. I swear to you, he will be brought to justice.” Cliff held the chain in his hand before sliding his father’s ring onto its rightful spot on the chain. Clasp the chain around his neck, Cliff cast one last glance at the headstone.

People stared as Cliff entered the bank. The bank, teeming with customers, emptied as soon as Cliff removed his hat. “Sir?” called the teller from behind the protective barrier. “Can I help you?”

Cliff faced the teller, whose glasses sat at the end of his long rooked nose. “I’m here about the Dixon inheritance.”

“Cliff Jefferson?” asked the teller. “That inheritance is already gone. Elizabeth Dixon’s husband, Mr. Jefferson, claimed it about four days ago.”

“Can you tell me how he claimed it, when my father is dead?” snapped Cliff, his eyes deadly. “I am the only person with the rights to that inheritance.”

The teller shook, “Well, you see, sir. He claimed to have left to protect his family, but he had the right documents. He also had personal effects.”

“Personal effects?” repeated Cliff. “Like what?”

“Mrs. Jefferson’s wedding ring.” Cliff unconsciously reached for the rings on the chain.

“What did the man look like?” Cliff persisted. “Tell me everything you remember.”

The teller’s eyebrows knitted. “He was about your height, same dark hair. Nothing really stood out about his appearance. Just a cowboy.”

“Any scars, deformities, a limp?” urged Cliff. “Anything?”

“Now that you mention it, he did have a strange scar on his hand. It almost looked like shattered glass or a cobweb.” Cliff’s breath caught, but the teller continued, “I don’t like spreading rumors, but that man had over ten notches in his gun.”

A dangerous glint filled Cliff’s eyes. “Do you think you could spread another rumor?”

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The old fences, often mended by a young Cliff, lay in heaps. Outlaws had burned the house and the barn barely stood. Snap! Cliff spun and faced the barrel of a gun peaking around the old tree beside where the house would have been. Holding his hands up, Cliff froze.

“Don’t move, Jefferson,” commanded the sheriff. He slunk around the tree with his gun trained on Cliff. “Heard a rumor that you were looking for something! It wouldn’t be anything incriminating, now would it?” The posse of deputies approached from behind the barn with their guns drawn smirking. “I should have ended your life when I killed your mother.”

“My mother?” gasped Cliff. “It wasn’t you! It couldn’t have been. He had a scar!”

“A shattered glass looking thing on the back of his hand?” laughed the sheriff. “Jim John Jefferson may be many things, but he could never kill his wife or child. I was lucky to survive.”

“The three shots,” realized Cliff. “Then why did my so-called father disappear?”

Suddenly, a gun fired and the sheriff ducked. In a hail of bullets, Cliff had enough time to knock the gun from the sheriff's hands before diving for cover in the barn. Arms pulled him down and Cliff struggled against the confinement. The familiar voice of his partner halted his struggles. Released, he turned to clap his partner on the back.

"Bet you are glad to see me, partner," grinned Langston. A volley of bullets struck the barn. Langston ducked and muttered, "Too bad I didn't bring more bullets. How many do you have?"

"The six in the cylinder and seven extras."

"Before I even get a chance to spend the money I won, I'll be killed for that stupid ring," commented Langston. "Well, if one Texas Ranger is a riot, then lets find out how much damage two can do!"

Langston leaned around the door, firing his gun at a crooked deputy. He fell suddenly, as another series of bullets raced through the barn. Cliff swung into the doorway, squeezing the trigger. Two more deputies fell. Cliff wrapped an arm around Langston and dragged him back.

"Where are you hit?" demanded Cliff. He searched for blood in Langston's clothing. More bullets sent the decayed wood exploding. Cliff shielded Langston with his body. Horses screamed, men yelled, and bullets rained down onto the two Rangers.

A daunting silence followed the chaos.

"Partner, get off me," begged Langston. "My arm is killing me."

Cliff sagged in relief. He refilled his gun before helping Langston to his feet. He nodded at the door, "Be prepared for anything."

Guns drawn, Cliff and Langston stared open-mouthed at the scene before them. The crooked lawmen lay unmoving, strewn across the ground. Cliff rushed to one fallen man whose hat covered his face, his chest still rising and falling. With a shaking hand, Cliff removed the hat. The gray-haired cowboy stared at Cliff, his hand with the spider-web scar reached toward Cliff.

“One riot, one ranger,” whispered Jim John Jefferson. His hand falling slack with a final breath. A thick book tucked inside Jim John’s pocket drew his attention. A simple, gold wedding band tied to twine held together the dark, leather-bound journal. Pinned on the inside of the journal cover was a rusty Texas Ranger badge.

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