

CHAPTER ONE

Faro Frank Talbert rode wearily into Baileysboro, Texas, in late March of 1865. It was six in the late afternoon, and the sun was heading toward the horizon. The brightened but horizontal orange rays slithering through the spaces between buildings and illuminating corners portrayed the sullen face of Faro Frank: sterile, yellowish eyes and a heavy whisker stubble that gave evidence of a long, hard ride. A wide-brimmed hat with a deacon's crown shadowed some of his features, but what could be seen was hawkish and predatory. Faro Frank was a stranger in town, and he considered himself a very dangerous man. He wore a dust-covered frock coat with a distinctive and expansive red bandana around his neck. But the most ominous thing was the jutting butt of his Army .44.

He pulled up to the hitch rack in front of Big Willard's Saloon and sat mulling the task at hand. He was tall and slender but not skinny. His carriage was military, but he was supple in his practiced movements. The citizens of the town moving around did not pay any particular notice of him, but if they had, they would not have mistaken him for a wandering waddy looking for work. He did appear, whether they noticed or not, like a gambler or a gunfighter. He was both. He had been paid one thousand dollars in advance to kill John Lee Johnson. He would be paid another

thousand dollars when the job was done. He had killed eight men in Kansas and Nebraska in so-called fair fights. His method was to humiliate his victims verbally until they reached the breaking point. They inevitably would draw, and he would kill them, walking away draped by the mantle of self-defense. A man representing Pugh Larrimore, the chieftain of the Comancheros, had approached him a month and a half earlier, and they had made a deal. That agreement was to kill John Lee Johnson. Faro Frank, a very confident man, had no idea who John Lee Johnson was, but in his mind Johnson was already a dead man.

He remained in the saddle soaking in the ambience of the west Texas town. Although all the towns were similar, each one had its own spirit. This one seemed especially docile. Over the twitching ears of his sorrel, he watched an inebriated cowhand stagger out the doorway and make his drunken way down the boardwalk, going in the opposite direction. The tinkling sounds coming from the rinky-dink piano bounced the skeletal notes of "Oh! Susanna" over the batwings.

He inhaled tiredly and slowly dismounted. His spur sang some when his right boot hit the sandy soil. He tied his mount and looked once more up and down the street and stepped dramatically up on the boardwalk. He decided to get the dance on. He would call out John Lee Johnson, kill him, ride away, and get back to Kansas where he belonged. He smiled when he heard laughter and the slap of cards. He imagined that would all change when he brought his foreboding presence into the midst of the impressionable cowhands. Always in the past whenever he had entered a room, he had been met by curious eyes and nervous looks. He enjoyed the heavy drama. He delighted in causing people to be unsettled and nervous. He imagined he was like a slithering serpent amidst a warren of rabbits.

He eased the right batwing open and took in the size of the joint. His eyes took in a rather large room filled with numerous cowhands seated here and there playing cards and drinking from heavy beer schooners. The long bar extended almost the length of the room. The two bartenders made his eyes move up some from the shadows of his dipped hat brim. They both were enormous men with imposing physiques. He gathered quickly that there would be few disturbances in this establishment. One of the two wore a derby hat cocked to one side of his head. He was reading a newspaper probably several days old. He appeared as though he were the

owner. Faro Frank had no way of knowing that it was Big Willard, a former pugilist from Fort Smith, Arkansas. He was indeed the owner and wanted a happy place free from senseless violence. The other man, equally large, Monk Danielson, was his bartender and his right-hand man. He looked like a gorilla. He had simian features, but his expression was jolly.

Faro Frank entered fully and stood still for a moment so that his entrance would be noted. He was disappointed that no one seemed to take particular notice of him. One cowhand raised his vision from his cards, saw him, and tossed a finger up in greeting, but not waiting for a reply he dipped his head quickly back to his cards as though he had seen nothing of consequence. Faro Frank pushed back his dusty frock coat, exposing the ivory-gripped Army .44 lightly ensconced in a black holster decorated with argent conchas. Not drawing any discernible interest in this action, he began walking toward the bar with jouncing spur noise. He looked to the left and right, but it was as if he were invisible.

He arrived at the bar and turned his back to it to survey the room once more. Again he was piqued by the lack of regard he drew. He turned toward the bar and settled his elbows on the zinc surface, awaiting the large bartender with the big smile plastered on his face. Monk ambled toward him and asked what he could do for him. Faro Frank dropped a gold dollar on the counter that made a rattling metallic noise. “Give me a whiskey with a beer chaser.”

Monk scooped up the dollar and placed his change carefully in front of him. Then he departed to draft his beer and fill a shot glass. Faro pulled a cigar from his coat pocket and struck a match on his boot sole. He lighted up, flicked the match, and turned his focus to the shot glass now before him filled with amber liquid. He downed it in one gulp and reached for his beer schooner.

Again he considered how this town and saloon were different than others he had been in. For some reason, he surmised, these folks hardly noticed his presence. In fact, his baleful look decidedly had been a waste of time. His eyebrows arched over his eyes as he weighed this over while sipping his beer. He dismissed that from his mind as he turned once from the bar and settled his back against it.

He did not see anyone that remotely fit the description of the quarry he was after. He had been informed that he was the owner of a large ranch

but could be found occasionally in the saloon. He definitely did not want to go the ranch. That would be a disadvantage to him. Ranch hands might be bad shots, but there would be more than one, and that did not fit his gambler's odds. He figured he would have to entice John Lee Johnson into town one way or another. He stood tall and absentmindedly dusted his coat off and puffed his cigar. He looked down the bar at the two big men, who now were talking to an angular cowhand who had just purchased a beer.

Faro Frank cleared his throat, and hearing it, Monk turned his head and made his way dutifully toward him. Faro, with his cigar severely clenched in his teeth, looked the fearsome bartender in the eyes and asked, "Do you know a man named John Lee Johnson?"

Monk innocuously nodded since the man's voice was neutral. "Hell, yes, I know John Lee. He's got big ranch just four hours' ride from here." Monk, not getting any response from Faro, carried the conversation further. "You got business with John Lee, do you?"

Faro removed his cigar from his mouth and nonchalantly spit a tobacco fleck to the side. He said, "Yes, I have a message for him." He gave Monk a steely look and inhaled to make his statement even more momentous. "I think he is a cowardly rebel who deserves shootin'."

Monk's smile evaporated fast. His deep-set eyes took on anger and surprise. "Mister, I don't you from Adam." He paused, and his expression morphed into a puzzled look of horror. "But if I was you, I would head to that door and get on your hoss and ride back to where you come from real fast."

Faro let a creepy smile move across his face as he flannelly retorted, "But you see, bartender, I have no intention of getting on my horse and riding anywhere. I intend to shoot the bastard."

Monk nodded slowly as he sized up Faro Frank. He turned his head a few degrees and said loud enough for Big Willard to hear him, "Boss, you need to come down here."

Since it was out of character for Monk to make those types of importuning requests, Big Willard courteously nodded at Stony Adams, folded his paper, pushed his derby hat up some with his index finger, and made his way to Monk and the guy who appeared to be a gunman. "What can I do you for you, Monk?"

Monk nodded toward Faro Frank and replied, “This gent is calling out John.” Monk’s tone sounded like a cross between surprise and condolence.

Big Willard’s head swiveled pronto toward Faro Frank as his eyes narrowed. “Have you gone loco, Mister?”

Again the course of conversation was disturbing to Faro Frank. He had not expected this response. He shook it off and stated, “I intend on killin’ him, if he is not a coward like I have heard people say.”

Monk sighed and said, “Mister, you been listening to the wrong crowd.” He started to say more, but Big Willard held up his hand as though he had heard enough.

Big Willard looked over the bar and down at Faro Frank’s boots; then his eyes moved up his body until he got to his hat. He then turned his head toward Stony Adams, the lanky cowhand who worked for John. Stony had his back to the bar where he and Big Willard had been talking earlier. “Hey, Stony, go get the undertaker and bring him here, would you?” When Stony looked confused, Big Willard indicated the gunman with his index finger and said, “This bird just called out John.”

Stony nodded abstractedly and shrugged his shoulders in disbelief. He quickly perused the stranger and placed his beer on the counter and left without any further questions.

Faro Frank let a ghoulisish grin move across his hawkisish features. “I ain’t killed him yet.”

Big Willard snorted contemptuously, and Monk suppressed a tight, mirthless smile. Big Willard leaned in toward the gunman and countered, “We ain’t gettin’ him for John.” He rapidly wiped his face two times as though searching for words. “We’re gettin’ him for you.”

Faro Frank’s eyes narrowed. He started to say something but held back since Big Willard’s statement had flummoxed him. He felt awkward, and the course of the conversation was unwieldy. He frowned, and his eyebrows slanted over his angry but confused eyes.

Big Willard looked over at Monk and said, “Get the cards out, and high card gets the first choice.” Monk nodded dutifully and pulled a deck of cards from a tray behind him. He began shuffling. Monk set the cards on the bar and tapped them with his index finger. Big Willard cut and slapped the deck together. He gave a nod to Monk to draw a card. Monk

drew the queen of diamonds, to the chagrin of Big Willard, who drew the eight of spades. “Damn,” he exasperatedly said.

Monk looked over the counter and down at Faro Frank’s boots. “His boots look like he has been in the horse lot a lot.” He sighed and let his vision pan up Faro Frank’s body. “I want his gun belt and pistol.”

Big Willard nodded approvingly at the good choice his bartender had made, and he looked over the bar and down at Faro Frank’s pants. “I don’t think either of us want his pants and drawers.” He then knowingly nodded his head. “I want what money he has on him.”

Monk nodded in admiration of his boss’s good choice. “I didn’t think of that.”

Big Willard sighed dramatically and said, “I don’t think either of us want his hat.”

Monk dolefully sighed and said, “It looks like the type of hat a man would wear who likes other men.”

Faro, getting angrier by the minute, grated out, “Now, just wait a minute!”

Big Willard put up both hands to shush him. “Listen, you turd, if John comes through that door, you’re a dead man—pure and simple. Besides that, you ain’t gonna have any use for clothes or guns or hats or money where you’re going.” He sighed deeply and looked at the batwings, expecting the undertaker at any moment. His eyes then settled on his fancy window with his name written on it in curlicue letters. That window view struck a disturbing chord in his mind. He added, “When he gets here, stand away from my window.”

Monk leaned toward Faro Frank to get his attention. “Stranger, you have no idea of how expensive that window is.”

Faro Frank, not sure whether Monk was seriously naïve or sarcastically condescending, angrily whipped his head back and forth from bartender to bartender. This perception that he was not being taken seriously was working on his self-esteem like an acid. Remembering that Big Willard had called him a “turd” seemed the avenue to regain his leverage in the conversation. He grasped his gun belt threateningly and grated out, “Don’t call me a turd again.” He exasperatedly flung his hand towards the window. “I don’t give a damn about your window—or for any of you, for that matter.”