

## Chapter One

Three Years Later

Lawless, Texas

“You boys ready to have a good time?” notorious gunfighter Harley King asked his men as they rode into town late in the afternoon.

“You know it. We’ve got some serious celebrating to do,” Al Denton said.

“Yes, we do,” Jim Thomas and the others agreed.

It had been over a month since they’d last been in Lawless. They’d spent the past few weeks planning and carrying out a very successful stage robbery and were more than ready to relax and enjoy themselves for a while.

“I wonder if Sheriff Anderson’s moved on?” Al remarked with a grin, remembering their last encounter with the local lawman.

“If he’s got any sense, he has,” Jim said.

The sheriff had single-handedly tried to run them out of town during their last visit. Harley had gotten the draw on him and had pistol-whipped him severely. Harley believed Lawless was now his town.

“What do you say we find out?” Harley asked.

The gang leader didn't wait for them to respond. He spurred his horse to a breakneck speed and started to shout as he drew his gun and began firing wildly.

The rest of the gunmen followed Harley's lead. They raced down the dusty main street after him with their guns blazing, heading for their favorite saloon, the Tumbleweed.

The people from town who were out on the streets heard them coming. They knew immediately it was the King Gang and ran for cover.

Down at the Sheriff's Office, Sheriff Anderson heard the sound of gunfire. He and the new deputy he'd hired on, Charley Pierce, were just starting out the door to investigate when Slim Jones, who worked at the telegraph office, came running up.

“It's the King Gang, Sheriff! I just saw them! They're back!” Slim warned them.

The lawman stopped in his tracks.

“What are we going to do?” Charley asked, hesitating.

“I warned you this day would come, and it looks like it's here.” Sheriff Anderson looked back at him, his expression dark. “We're going to lock them up.”

“But Sheriff --” Charley started to protest. It had been one thing talking about arresting the outlaw gang. It was another to actually do it.

The lawman turned on his uneasy deputy. He'd vowed after his last encounter with Harley King and his gang that they would never set foot in Lawless again, and he'd meant it. It

wasn't going to be easy ridding the town of their unwelcome presence, but keeping the peace never was easy. He challenged him. "If you're afraid to do your job, then hand over your badge right now."

Sheriff Anderson waited.

Charley didn't respond.

Satisfied that the deputy would back him up, he looked to Slim. "You coming with us?"

Slim was scared. There was no doubt about it, but knew he couldn't let the two lawmen take on the entire outlaw gang alone. This was his town, too. "Yeah. I'm with you."

The sheriff grabbed a rifle for Slim and handed it to him. The three men started off toward the saloon where they knew they'd find Harley King and his men.

"I need a drink!" Harley declared loudly as he entered the Tumbleweed and holstered his gun.

Dennis, the bartender, had heard the commotion outside and feared it was the King Gang returning. Wanting to keep things as quiet as he could, he rushed to set glasses out for them.

"I thought it sounded like you were back in town. You wanting whiskey tonight?" he greeted them as they came up to the bar.

"Smart man," Harley said.

Dennis quickly poured the drinks, and the outlaws settled in for a long and raucous night.

As Sheriff Anderson, Charley and Slim neared the saloon, they split up. The sheriff sent Charley and Slim around back to help him get the upper hand on the gunslingers. Once he was sure they were in position, he made his move.

“Hold it right there, Harley King!” Sheriff Anderson was feeling close to desperate as he drew his gun and came to stand just inside the swinging saloon doors.

Harley had been about to take a drink when he heard the lawman. He slowly set his tumbler of whiskey down and turned to face him. He smiled arrogantly. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t Sheriff Anderson.”

“Listen up! You and your boys are under arrest. Put your guns up on the bar -- real slow,” he ordered, eyeing the outlaws nervously.

“You can’t just throw us law-abiding, peaceful citizens in jail,” he said sarcastically.

“Oh, yes, I can,” Sheriff Anderson declared, growing even more furious at his arrogance.

Harley was not the least bit afraid of this man. He’d only let him live the last time because he’d thought he was too lily-livered to give them any real trouble. Harley realized now, he might have been wrong.

“You think you’re man enough to lock us up?” he asked.

“I know I am. Now, do what I told you. All of you! Put your guns on the bar.”

Harley ignored his order. He turned his back on him and took another drink, all the while watching the reflection in the mirror. He could see the outrage in the sheriff's expression and smiled to himself.

Dennis knew the tensions were rising, and he could tell Sheriff Anderson wasn't going to back down. The last time there had been a confrontation between them, Harley had severely beaten the sheriff. Dennis wasn't going to let that happen again. Determined to try to help him, he started to reach for the shotgun he kept safely stowed under the bar. He couldn't help but wonder where the sheriff's deputy was, but he didn't have time to worry about it. He just knew he couldn't let Sheriff Anderson try to handle these gunmen all alone.

"Don't," Al ordered in a low voice, anticipating the move the bartender was about to make.

Sheriff Anderson finally caught sight of Slim and Charley when they came to stand in the back doorway, and he knew the time had come to bring this confrontation to an end.

"I've got all the exits covered, King, so let's go." He had to prove to them once and for all that he meant business. "You're under arrest!"

Harley had had enough. He didn't know how many men the lawman had with him and he didn't care. Lawless was his town. It was time this sheriff learned that lesson once and for all.

Harley turned slowly. "Whatever you say, Sheriff."

Al and the other men knew exactly what Harley was up to.

“Now, boys!” Harley yelled.

The sheriff managed to get a few shots off before Harley’s aim proved true. He shot the sheriff and watched in satisfaction as the lawman collapsed to the floor.

Slim and Charley had been ready as the shooting started. They fired several rounds and managed to scatter the outlaws, but when Charley saw the sheriff take a bullet, he lost his nerve and turned to flee.

“Where you goin’?” Slim demanded.

“You want to end up like the sheriff?” Charley was ready to run for his life.

“Aren’t you going to stay here and fight?”

“Hell, no!”

“You can’t just run off!”

“Watch me!” He was heading for the door to the alley.

“The sheriff’s been shot! You’re our deputy!”

“Not any more, I’m not--“ The coward took off his badge.

“You can’t let him get away with shooting Sheriff Anderson!”

“Then you go arrest him!” he said, throwing the badge at him. “I quit! You know damn good and well what will happen if we try to take them on - just the two of us! As far as I’m concerned, if Harley King wants this town, he can have it!”

The ex-deputy wasted no time running off.

Slim was horrified to discover what a coward Charley was, but he realized, alone, he had no chance to change things. He dropped the rifle and disappeared out the back door before the outlaws could catch up with him. Slim knew if there was ever going to be any hope that the townsfolk and neighboring ranchers could reclaim Lawless for their own, they were going to have to band together and find a way to drive the outlaws out.

Slim hurried to get his horse and then rode quickly out of town, heading for the Madison ranch. He had to let Will Madison know what had happened. Will was one of the biggest ranchers in the area, and Slim hoped he would have some idea of how to drive the deadly gunmen out of Lawless. Harley King and his men had proven they would stop at nothing to get their way.