

## Prologue

Texas

1870's

Sarah Jenkins was smiling as she gazed out the window of the stagecoach at the vast Texas landscape. They would be arriving in San Gabriel later that day, and she could hardly wait. Soon, very soon, she would be reunited with her fiancé Jace -- She loved him and had missed him terribly during the three weeks she'd been gone on this trip with her mother to visit relatives. Their wedding was less than a month away, and she was counting the days until they would never be apart again.

"You're smiling," Martha told her daughter with a smile of her own.

"We're almost home --" Sarah said.

"And Jace and your father will both be there in town to meet us," Martha finished her thought.

"Do you think they missed us as much as we missed them?"

Martha laughed. "Where your father's concerned, I'm sure he missed us more. He's been eating with the boys out in the bunkhouse since we've been gone."

“You’re right about that.” Sarah laughed, knowing how much her father enjoyed her mother’s cooking.

“It’s so hard to believe that your wedding is coming up so soon ---“ She looked at her daughter lovingly.

“I know, but it’s so exciting! I’m going to be Mrs. Jace Madison ---“

“You got yourself a good one there in Jace, Sarah,” Andrew Norton, the other passenger and a friend from in town, told her.

Sarah grinned over at him where he sat across from her in the stagecoach. “I know.”

Hiding out on a rocky hillside farther up the stage route, the outlaws Vic Lawrence, Al Denton and Buck Carson were all watching and waiting for the stagecoach.

“It’s due any time now,” Vic told them. “Keep an eye out and be ready.”

It was only a few minutes later that the stage came into view.

“There it is, boys!” Vic shouted. “Right on time! As soon as it gets within range, start shooting!”

Al and Buck were ready. A big payroll was being transported on this run, and they were looking forward to getting their share of it. They had some serious drinking and gambling they wanted to do.

The stage drew closer.

“All right! Let’s go!” Vic ordered.

Vic led the way, and they charged down out of their hiding place, firing wildly at the stagecoach.

John, the stage driver, and Mark, the man riding shotgun, heard the sound of the gunfire and saw the gunmen coming.

“Get us out of here!” Mark shouted. He knew immediately that this was trouble, and he began to return their fire.

John whipped the horses to a frenzied pace in his desperation to escape, knowing they were still a long way from the safety of San Gabriel.

Jarred by the sound of the gunfire and the sudden lurch of the stage, the passengers knew something was wrong.

“It must be a hold-up!” Andrew shouted.

“What are we going to do?” Martha asked, terrified.

“John’s trying to make a run for it, so just hang on,” Andrew advised as he drew his own gun and leaned out the window to return fire.

Sarah and Martha struggled desperately to stay in their seats as the stagecoach raced on over the rocky road.

Though the driver was doing his best to try to outrun them, the outlaws closed in. Their gunfire proved accurate and deadly. Both John and Mark were shot and fell from the driver's bench, leaving the stage's team of horses completely out of control.

Andrew heard their screams and knew they were in big trouble. He had to stop to reload his gun and when he did one of the outlaw's bullets slammed into his chest, grievously wounding him. Sarah and Martha, both, tried to get to him, but with the horses racing wildly across the uneven terrain, they were being thrown bodily around within the stage and there was nothing they could do.

The outlaws were excited as they closed in. Everything was working out just the way they'd hoped. With the driver and the shotgun dead, the payroll was theirs for the taking.

Vic raced ahead and caught up with the runaway team. He leaned down to grab the reins and try to slow their pace.

Panicked as the horses were, though, they swerved sharply to get away from him. Their sudden move sent the stagecoach careening wildly. As violently as they were moving, the team broke free just as the stage crashed into several large boulders and overturned.

The outlaws were surprised by the force of the wreck, but they didn't worry about it. The only thing they were worried about was the strongbox. They rushed to claim it where it had

been thrown clear of the ruined stage. Gathering it up, Vic shot the lock off. They opened the box and smiled down at the sight of all the cash they'd hoped would be there.

"Al, check on the passengers while we load this up," Vic ordered. "We don't need no witnesses."

The gunman made his way over to take a quick look at what was left of the stagecoach.

"There ain't nobody in there going to give us any trouble," he called out after witnessing the carnage.

"Good. Let's ride," Buck said, eager to enjoy his share of the money.

They mounted up, ready to head back to Los Rios. There was no law to speak of in Los Rios, and that was the way they liked it. They could do their celebrating there without any worries.

As they rode off, they gave no thought to the passengers who'd been killed. Nothing mattered but the good times they were going to have with the money they'd stolen.

### **Two Days Later - San Gabriel**

Jace Madison was a solitary figure as he stood alone in the cemetery, staring down at Sarah's grave. Sweet, loving memories of Sarah played in his mind, haunting him. Anguish filled Jace as he finally faced and accepted the horrible truth - she truly was lost to him forever.

Never again would he hold her in his arms.

Never again would he know the thrill of her kiss.

The wedding they'd planned would never take place.

Despair tore at him. She had been his love. They were to have spent the rest of their lives together, and now --- now, she had been taken from him in a tragic act of violence. His eyes mirrored the pain he was feeling as his grief overwhelmed him.

Jace drew a ragged breath. He was a man who was used to being in control, and he fought hard for that control now as dark, dangerous emotions filled him, but it eluded him. Bitterness and rage drove him as he turned away from the grave and went to mount up. He knew what he had to do, and he wouldn't rest until it was done.

Jace reined in out front of the sheriff's office. He dismounted and walked straight inside to find Tom Jenkins waiting there with Sheriff Daniels and several deputies.

Tom looked over at the man who was to have been his son-in-law. "You ready to ride?"

"I'm ready," Jace answered tersely.

"Let's go," Tom said, looking to the sheriff.

"Best we can figure, it was Vic Lawrence and some of his men. They probably headed for Los Rios."

Los Rios had a reputation as a dangerous, wild town, and they all knew the reputation had been earned.

“Let’s go pay Los Rios a visit.”

“Here are your badges,” Sheriff Daniels said, handing Jace and Tom each a deputy’s badge.

Both men were grim as they pinned the badges on their shirts. Icy, iron-willed determination filled them. The killers were going to be brought to justice. They would see to it.

Jace had always been a rancher by trade. He’d never thought of himself as a lawman before, but nothing was going to stop him from finding the men who’d been responsible for Sarah’s death.

Jace, Tom and the others left the office and mounted up.

The posse rode out of San Gabriel intent on their mission.