

Chapter 1 — Joel

Summer, 1886

The moonlit night's beauty escaped Joel's notice. His anger coiled inside him like a snake, ready to strike.

This was it. The man—called stepfather, but “father” could not be further from the truth—had taken everything from him. Gone were his farm, his mother, his home, his peace of mind. Even all that, Joel could live with, but when he'd returned from town late that evening and saw his mother's face—well, that could not be borne. She was black and blue. Her look of terror chilled him.

His stepfather had left the house. Joel begged his mother to leave with him that evening and go to her own mother's house. She refused, partly because her mother would have most likely closed the door on her (she told her not to marry that vile man) but also because she was afraid of what her husband would do when he returned home to find her gone.

“I am sorry to say that instead, you must leave, Joel,” she had told him. “Your very presence sets him off. I overheard him speaking to one of his friends last night about transferring the farm deed to his name so he could leave it to Billy. I stood up to him, as I cannot in conscience agree with his plan to rob you of your father's farm.”

Anna was quiet for a moment, then sighed. “He lost his temper. Perhaps if you are gone, he will calm down and things will be better for me. But I cannot help you, not anymore. I am legally bound to him, and he can make my life very hard. Maybe you can take measures to regain the farm with your uncle's help.”

Of course that was hopeless. His uncle would never go up against the powerful Bill Preston. Bill had ties to the law, judges, and controlled a group of violent men who owed him — only God knew why—and who would do whatever he asked. Joel had little hope for a legal barrier to his stepfather's plan.

If the man died before his plans were complete, the farm would be Joel's without question. His mother would be safe, and he could get on with his life.

Without thinking, Joel ran as fast as he could to his neighbor Wallace Hart's house. The family was away. Joel knew where Wallace kept his rifle.

Joel found the gun in the Harts' kitchen. He picked it up, grabbed some bullets, tore out of the Harts' house and ran down the drive.

His mind racing, he decided he would wait a way down the road and ambush his stepfather before he got too close to their farm. He would do what he had to do. He ran across the Hart's farm, clutching the rifle with madness in his eyes. As he came to the town road, a wagon rolled toward him.