

## YOUR TYPICAL OUTLAW

by

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### Chapter 1

In the early morning, Nathan Evans stood beside his cabin in the Texas countryside and looked at his field of grain. He watched the golden stalks ripple in a gentle breeze, and he remembered plowing the soil, planting the seeds, and praying for rain.

"And it come, thank God," he said.

He remembered seeing the grain grow, and he remembered worrying about what could go wrong with the crop: wilt could shrivel the plants, birds could peck the heads, insects could eat the kernels, gophers could gnaw the roots.

But nothing had gone wrong. And with a little luck, nothing would go wrong. And if nothing did go wrong . . .

He looked at the cabin and smiled, then frowned.

"Don't go getting ahead of yourself, Nathan," he said.

He looked back at the field.

"You still gotta reap, thresh, sack, fork the straw into the barn, and haul the grain to town."

He frowned again, then smiled.

"But things are good now. And with a little luck . . ."

He looked at the cabin again. ". . . we just might be making a home outa that cabin soon."

Of course, he realized he wasn't the only one to decide. She'd have to say yes. But if things stayed good and he got a little luck, he'd at least be able to ask her.

He pulled a head from a stalk, pulled a kernel from the head, and moved to a mule hitched to a wagon near the barn.

"Remember what Pa said, Esther?" he asked the mule.

The mule twitched her ears.

"If you get water, it's too soon. Pulp, too late. Milk, just right."

He mashed the kernel with his thumb, then smiled.

"Let's go to town and pick up my new scythe."

He climbed onto the wagon and slapped the reins against the mule's hindquarters, and the mule pulled the wagon away.

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In the town of Longhorn, men and women strolled past a restaurant, a saloon, a funeral parlor, and a general store.

In front of the general store, Bud Webber stood beside a stack of salt blocks, rising on his toes and bouncing on his heels.

He looked up the street, down the street, and up the street again. He saw Mr. and Mrs. Andrews walking toward him.

"I got gingham, Mrs. Andrews," he said. "Like they wear in New York City!"

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews stopped beside him.

"New York City!" Mrs. Andrews said.

Mr. Andrews grunted.

"I need tools more'n you need rags," he said.

She glanced at him, then looked back at Bud.

"You got something for Mr. Andrews, too?" she asked.

Bud smiled and clapped his hands.

"I got shovels, Mr. Andrews," he said. "They'll help with that outhouse you're wanting your son to dig!"

"Been meaning to get that damned kid to do some work around the place," Mr. Andrews said.

"Like I say," Bud said, "I got shovels."

Mr. Andrews nodded, Mrs. Andrews smiled, and they continued down the street.

Bud watched them, then turned and saw Mrs. Merriweather walking toward him.

"I got all kind of things, Mrs. Merriweather," he said. "And like I tell everybody, 'If I don't got it . . .'" He leaned toward her and raised his eyebrows.

She stopped and smiled.

"You'll get it, Bud," she said.

"Yes, ma'am!"

She smiled again and walked on.

He nodded, then saw Nathan drive his wagon toward the store.

"Ready for the harvest, Nathan?" he asked.

Nathan reined in the mule in front of the store and got off the wagon.

"Yep," he said. "Got my new scythe?"

Bud picked up a scythe and handed it to Nathan, who swung it.

"On credit?" Nathan asked.

"'Course," Bud answered. "Even if I didn't know you good as I do, I seen your crop."

Nathan smiled.

"Lemme get your mail," Bud said.

He stepped into the store, and Nathan swung the scythe again.

"She'll work out fine, Esther," he said and put the scythe in the bed of the wagon.

Bud came out of the store, carrying a magazine. He raised it, and a breeze rustled the pages.

Nathan took the magazine and looked at the cover.

"Ever read True Western, Bud?" he asked.

"What the hell for? We live it."

"'The James Gang Rides Again,'" Nathan read out loud. He

looked at Bud. "We don't live that."

"Whatever we live," someone said cheerfully, "we're all going to die."

Nathan and Bud looked down the street.

Wearing a black suit, Tobias Turner strolled toward them, smiling broadly.

"Not before I build me a bigger store, I hope," Bud said. "And hire me an extra hand for all my new patrons."

"Your hope is mine," Tobias said, stopping beside Bud. "More patrons mean more residents. More residents mean more deaths--and more funerals."

"Always looking on the bright side," Bud said.

"Indeed I am," Tobias said. "In fact, I'm thinking about hiring an extra hand, too."

Mr. Jones, an elderly man, shuffled toward them.

"Mr. Jones," Tobias said, "good to see you."

"Better to be seen than viewed," Mr. Jones said.

"But trust me," Tobias said. "When you're viewed, you'll look grand."

"That's what I'll be paying you for."

"Money well invested, Mr. Jones."

Mr. Jones shuffled past Tobias, past the funeral parlor, and past the saloon, and he stopped at the restaurant.

Tobias turned to Bud.

"A wise man, Bud," Tobias said. "He's made his plans.  
By the way, have you considered--?"

"No," Bud said. "And I ain't gonna right now."

"And you, Nathan?" Tobias asked.

Nathan shrugged, then turned and widened his eyes.

Charlotte Matthews, a beautiful young woman, walked  
toward the three men.

She stopped beside Nathan and gazed at him.

"Morning, Nathan," she said.

For a moment, he held his breath, then swallowed and  
nodded.

"Morning, Charlotte," he said.

Bud and Tobias glanced at each other. Then Tobias looked  
at Charlotte, who continued to gaze at Nathan.

"And how are you, Miss Charlotte, after your morning  
constitutional?" Tobias asked.

With an effort, she turned to him.

"Fine, Tobias," she said. "You?"

"I think I'm fine. Bud thinks he is, too." He looked at  
Bud and shook his head. "But we never know."

Bud rolled his eyes.

A stagecoach passed them and stopped in front of the  
saloon.

Charlotte sighed.

"Gotta open up," she said.

She looked at Nathan.

"See you soon," she said.

She smiled and walked toward the saloon. A breeze rustled the hem of her skirt.

The three men watched her.

"She's a lovely young woman," Tobias said.

"And you're a lucky young man, Nathan," Bud said.

"Everything depends on the harvest," Nathan said.

The breeze rustled the pages of his magazine.

\*

That night, the wind howled, a fire raged through Nathan's field of grain, and flames leaped toward his cabin. Near the front door, Nathan swung the scythe frantically, cutting the burning stalks of grain.

"Oh, my God!" he shouted. "Oh, my God!"

He looked toward the barn and saw the mule amble toward him.

"Stay, Esther!" he shouted.

The mule stopped.

He swung the scythe again.

In a horse-drawn funeral carriage, Bud, Tobias, and Charlotte arrived.

Charlotte jumped from the carriage, ran toward Nathan,

and stopped beside him.

He looked at her, then at the blackened, smoldering field.

Beyond it, while the wind continued to howl, the fire burned the rangeland.

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The next morning, the batwing doors of the saloon swayed in a gentle breeze.

In the saloon, Charlotte stood behind the bar, wiping tears from her eyes, looking at Nathan, Bud, and Tobias, who sat at a table near a piano.

"The grain'll grow again," she said, "after the rain comes." She wiped away more tears. "We'll be fine, boys, with a little luck."

"I ain't the lucky kind," Nathan said.

Bud and Tobias looked at each other.

Nathan put his head in his hands.

"That wildfire come out of nowhere," he said.

Bud looked at Nathan.

"Then salt blocks is heavy, Nathan," he said. "I could use some help with 'em."

He looked at Tobias, who sighed, then looked at Nathan.

"I doubt whether many would want to become professional undertakers," Tobias said, "but perhaps for a few months . . .

until the rain comes."

He looked at Bud and shrugged.

Cattle bawled.

Bud and Tobias frowned.

"What the hell?" Bud said, then cringed and glanced at Charlotte. "Sorry, Charlotte."

He looked back at Tobias. They stood, moved to the batwing doors, looked over them, and saw cowboys driving a herd of cattle down the street.

"Hey, Tobias," Bud said, "why . . . ?"

"I don't know," Tobias said.

Bud saw Lester Yates, a dusty cowboy riding behind the herd.

"Lester," Bud called, "where're you taking your cattle to?"

"Nebraska," Lester said.

"How come?"

"Fire burned the rangeland."

"But . . . but what about the salt blocks and all the other supplies I got for you?"

Lester shrugged and continued to drive the herd.

"I offered a job to our friend Nathan," Tobias said.

"But I don't think he's interested. How about you, Bud? The extra income would help with sudden and unexpected final

expenses."

Bud scowled at him.

Tobias smiled, turned back to the street, and saw Mr. Jones shuffle past the saloon.

Tobias stared at him.

Mr. Jones climbed onto a wagon and picked up the reins.

"Mr. Jones," Tobias said, "where are you going?"

"Kansas," Mr. Jones said.

"Why?"

"No cattle, no beef," Mr. Jones said. "No beef, no restaurant."

"But . . . but what about the mahogany coffin I made for you?"

"Yeah, it sure is shiny." Mr. Jones smiled. "But me and the missus, we're headed for Topeka."

"Topeka?"

"Topeka," Mr. Jones said. "I left the beans on the stove. Eat 'em when you get hungry."

He slapped the reins against his horse's hindquarters, and the horse pulled the wagon away.

Tobias watched him leave.

"Them salt blocks really is heavy," Bud said. "And now that Mr. Jones is leaving, you'll need another job. 'Course, I can't pay you for a while."

He smiled, and Tobias lowered his head.

They moved back to the table where Nathan held his head in his hands.

Tobias sighed, and he and Bud sat.

"Something's gonna turn up, boys," Charlotte said.

The batwing doors swung open, and Thomas Grady--a tall, lean middle-aged man with a cigar in his mouth--entered. He continued to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said. "A bottle."

Charlotte put a bottle on the bar.

Bud looked at Nathan, then at Tobias.

"We need money," Bud said.

"How are we going to get it?" Tobias asked.

"There's ways," Grady said.

Nathan, Bud, and Tobias looked at him.

Grady raised a match, struck it with his thumbnail, and lighted his cigar. He inhaled, then spun a silver dollar on the bar.

"We can talk about them ways later," he said.

He took the bottle to the table, handed it to Bud, and left.

Bud put the bottle on the table.

"Who the hell . . . ?" he began, then cringed and glanced at Charlotte. "Sorry, Charlotte."

"He's not an undertaker," Tobias said.

"Or a storekeep," Bud said.

"Or a farmer," Nathan said.

He frowned.

"He said there's ways to get money," Nathan continued.

"What could he mean?"

"He means turn outlaw," Charlotte said.

The three men looked at her.

"Here's how it happens to your typical outlaw," she said.

She narrowed her eyes. "A kid does what his pa done--works with a horse and cattle, a hammer and nails, a mule and a plow. But he falls on hard times, so he tries something else. Cards, maybe. He loses what little he has, shoots at some bottles on a fence post, and figures he's got two choices: lawman and outlaw."

She moved around the bar.

"He tries lawman, but sees the outlaws get all the money. So he turns outlaw himself."

She moved toward the men.

"He robs a bank, gets some money, and spends it on a good ol' time. Then what's he gonna do?"

She stopped.

"Go back to what him and his pa done? Not hardly!"

She continued toward the men.

"He robs another bank," she said. "But this time, something goes wrong. He runs, but somebody draws his picture and puts it on a poster, and folks see it."

She stopped beside the men and looked at Bud.

"The law tracks him down, and him and them shoot it out, and maybe they shoot him dead."

Bud sat up straight.

"Or maybe they catch him, try him, and throw him in prison," she continued. "And maybe they let him out after a while, or maybe he breaks out. Either way, he goes back to doing something that ain't right. The law tracks him down again, and they shoot him, or they catch him, try him, throw him in prison, and--this time--hang him. Either way, they kill him."

She looked at Tobias.

"All because he chose to steal, not work."

She looked at Nathan.

"Work, boys!"

She pounded the table with her fist, and the men flinched.

"It just ain't right to steal!"

The men looked at one another, then stood and left.

"Oh, Lord," she said.

She'd known them since forever. Bud had always been full

of ginger. Tobias had always been full of fun and big words. And Nathan had always been full of steadiness, which of course was a very good thing to be full of--although she had begun to wish he'd make some room for a little hurry-up, too. She knew that all three were down in the mouth now. But she also knew that they could get through the hard times--if they worked.

"Oh, Lord," she said again, "don't let 'em do nothing blunt-witted."