DARK FRONTIER

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MATTHEW HARFFY



An Aries Book

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For Ashley and Leanne Dawkins, friends to ride the river with.

Chapter One

Gabriel Stokes looked down at the corpse. The young man's unseeing eyes stared back at him. They seemed to accuse him, Stokes thought, though he'd had nothing to do with the boy's death.

He sighed, sensing the familiar hold of the dead heavy upon him.

Casting his gaze over the dead body, he took in the details as he would with any crime scene. He hadn't been a serving police officer for months, but those habits he had acquired over the last seven years could not be forgotten so quickly. The deceased was scarcely more than a child really. Perhaps eighteen years old. He had the gaunt look of one unaccustomed to regular meals. His sallow cheeks and wispy moustache reminded Stokes of countless such young men who lined the Port of London docks and the airless, smoggy streets of Whitechapel in search of a mark, or a way to make a bob or two. He had seen many such boys in the army too. The lucky ones made something of themselves. Most were not lucky. This stranger's expression was one of surprise, shocked perhaps at his own lack of fortune. His gimlet eyes, gleaming with cunning and bravado in life, now grew rapidly dull in death.

It had been the shouting that caught Stokes' attention. He had been looking down the dusty street, wondering if he had missed John at the station. He'd sent a telegram ahead, as John had requested, but there had been no sign of his friend on the

short raised timber platform, nor in the dusty Union Pacific building next to the water tower and windmill.

Taking only his valise and leaving his travel chest at the station baggage room to be collected later, Stokes had headed into the small town. He had just made up his mind that he would look for a hotel and go about finding a coach, or perhaps a horse, that might carry him to Thornford's ranch in the morning, when a barrage of angry insults and jeers had cut through his weariness. There had been an edge of danger in the raised voices, a sharpness that Stokes' years in the army and the Metropolitan Police had taught him not to ignore. His instincts, though dulled by tiredness now, had always served him well. He had dropped his valise on the board sidewalk, leaving his hands free, and watched the young man swagger out of a building that bore the sign CENTRAL HOTEL SALOON AND BILLIARDS. The boy had been cocksure, voice strident with drink, as he'd stepped through the door in a cloud of cigar and pipe smoke that rolled out of the busy saloon.

Stokes took a long breath. The smell of the smoke was now mixed with the unmistakable tang of black powder from the three shots that had been fired. There were several other scents mixed in. The sooty steam from the train that still hissed and spouted thick clouds of smoke back at the platform where its tender was being refilled. The sour reek of manure from the cattle ready for loading in the lots. The sharp smell of beer and cheap liquor. And the stink of sweat from the unwashed men who had tumbled into the street after the loud-mouthed boy.

If he closed his eyes, he could have been back in London. All Stokes had wanted was some peace; to breathe the air of the wide open spaces he had so long dreamt of. How naive he had been. It was true that the gorges, forests, mountains and endless plains he had seen as the train trundled west had been breathtaking, but he had yet to find in America the unfettered freedom and fresh air he yearned for. He wondered again

about his decision to come here. It had taken him weeks to travel this far and little of the journey had been pleasant. At times, looking out over the vastness of the Atlantic from the deck of the RMS *Etruria*, or staring at distant snow-draped peaks in Wyoming and the rolling nothingness of the prairies of Nebraska, he had managed to distract his thoughts from the dark paths down which his mind seemed intent on taking him. But for long stretches of the ocean voyage aboard the cramped steamer, and then the seemingly interminable hours of the rocking train journey, he had found himself alone with his melancholy. All that had changed was the scenery; the despair remained.

Perhaps Harriet had been right. She had said it was madness. But he could not return to London. Not after everything that had happened there, and he could not stay with Harriet and Eliza in Wiltshire any longer. He loved both his sisters dearly, but the sprawling house was too full of memories.

Stokes was being jostled by the crowd around him now and he sensed the danger had not passed. This was no time for reminiscing. Allowing his training and instincts to take over, he cast a last glance down at the boy, to make sure he had missed nothing.

The young man's shirt was threadbare and his trousers patched, but his boots looked expensive, as did the hat lying on the ground where it had fallen beside the corpse. The heels of the boots were adorned with large spurs, such as Stokes had seen worn by some of the riders at Buffalo Bill's Wild West show at Earl's Court. Beside the boy's right hand, in the mud, lay a short-barrelled revolver.

Stokes' ears were ringing. The crack of the pistol shots had all but deafened him. The doomed boy had fired twice, both bullets missing their mark. The third shot had come from the man who had stepped out after him.

He looked old enough to be the father of the youth he had killed. Even his grandfather, Stokes thought. The man's grey

hair hung down in unruly greasy waves over his shoulders. His face was weathered and wrinkled, his long moustache white and his cheeks bristled with several days' worth of stubble. His clothes were simple, chosen for comfort rather than fashion. His hat and jacket were dusty; the trousers, tucked into supple riding boots bearing short spurs, showed signs of wear, perhaps from long days in the saddle.

The man might be old, but Stokes had witnessed how deadly he was. As the boy ranted and screamed, the grey-haired man had watched, hand resting lightly on the butt of his holstered pistol. He didn't move and had said nothing for a time until he uttered the few words that had sent the boy into such a blind rage that he had jerked his revolver out of its holster and fired wildly. The old man had not flinched, though there had been less than ten feet separating them. An instant later, his revolver, a gleaming Remington, had appeared to leap into his hand. It had barked once, silencing the boy and his frantic shooting forever.

"You son of a bitch!" shouted a long-faced man with pox scars on his cheeks who had followed the boy out of the billiard hall. "You killed Wyc." His face was growing redder by the second. "You didn't need to kill him." His hand dropped to the dark wooden butt of the revolver he wore in a black leather holster on his right hip.

"Done a lot of things I didn't need to," said the old man who had shot the boy called Wyc. "Killing your friend ain't one of 'em." The barrel of his Remington did not waver as he pulled the hammer back with his thumb. He had fired only one shot, but the bullet had caught Wyc in the chin and exited from the back of his head, leaving a hole the size of a teacup saucer.

Several men had come out of the billiard hall with Wyc, voices raised and joining in his brash insults, but Stokes noticed that none of them had been foolish enough to reach for their own guns. Most had already fled, running off as the shots were

fired. The few that remained now edged away from the angry man who vented his ire at the calm, grey-haired shooter.

The pock-cheeked man swallowed, perhaps suddenly aware of his predicament. He was staring into the smoking barrel of a revolver in the sure hands of a proven killer. His fingers trembled above the butt of his handgun.

"Halt," Stokes said, his voice cutting through the hubbub. "Both of you." Everybody turned to look at him. Everybody except the old man with the Remington. His hand did not move and his gun remained trained on the red-faced cowhand. Stokes was used to having his voice listened to, but nobody here seemed inclined to obey him. He took a step closer and snapped his fingers.

"Give me the gun," he said to the old man, using the tone he had employed when ordering men in battle, or in the slums of the East End. "There is no need for any more violence. I am a witness that you did not shoot first. Now, uncock your pistol and hand it over." He held out his hand and was pleased to see it was not shaking.

The old man did not move.

"You ain't from around these parts," he said, without taking his eyes off the pock-faced man.

"No," replied Stokes, pulling himself up to his full height of six feet and two inches. "I am from London. I was in the police force there," he added, thinking the comment might lend weight to his position. He regretted saying it as soon as he uttered the words.

"Well, policeman. You're a long way from home. You can put your hand away. Ain't about to give you my cannon. Don't know how you do things in London, but this is Oregon, and here we keep ahold of our guns while there are snakes around who might need shooting."

"Who are you calling a snake?" spluttered the furious man.

A thin smile played across the old man's face as if he was enjoying himself.

"You, Rab Tovey," he said, still smiling. "You and your dickless friends. You're worse than Wyc there. At least he had the sand to draw on me. You're too much of a coward to clear leather. You're all wind." He paused, as if waiting for a response. "Well, if you ain't gonna fight, pick up your dead and get."

Some of the colour drained from Rab Tovey's cheeks.

"Why, you son of a bitch. If you didn't have the drop on me, I'd fight you. But everyone knows you're a killer."

The old man's eyes narrowed and grew cold and hard, all humour gone.

"You say you know I'm a killer, Tovey. And still you've called my good Ma a whore twice. Perhaps you're a brave man after all. I've killed men for less. So tell me, which is it? Brave or stupid?"

The crowd had fallen silent. Tovey chewed his lip, caught in an agony of indecision. Neither man paid any attention to Stokes. The men around Tovey moved further away from him. The air crackled like it did before a thunderstorm. Any second the storm would come and there would be another corpse beside Wyc. Perhaps more than one. And for what? Too much whiskey and some clumsy insults. Stokes contemplated making a grab for the gun in the old man's hand, but immediately dismissed the thought. He had seen the ease with which he had killed, and despite his age he looked strong. Feeling foolish, Stokes lowered his arm. He should not have got involved. This was not his fight.

The locomotive let out an echoing whistle in a great plume of steam, breaking the tense spell that had fallen over the gathered men.

"What's going on here?"

The loud voice came from behind Tovey and a fat man pushed his way through the crowd. He wore no hat and his hair was an unruly mess, as if he had just been woken up. He was in his shirt sleeves, and the shirt was untucked. The long tails of the garment hung halfway down his thighs, reminiscent

of a nightgown and further enhancing the impression he had recently been asleep.

The newcomer was bleary-eyed and sweaty, and it would have been easy to disregard him but for the Winchester rifle he held in his hands. He actioned the lever, chambering a cartridge, and levelled the gun to cover both the old man and Tovey. Stokes took a step away from them, lessening the chance of a stray bullet finding him.

"Lower the smoke wagon, White," the newcomer said, quickly assessing the situation. "There'll be no more shooting here unless I'm the one doing it. Now, holster your handgun."

The old man fixed him with his cold eyes for a few seconds, then, without a word, he uncocked his revolver and slipped it into its holster without looking down.

As soon as the gun had been lowered, whatever bravery Tovey possessed returned along with his rage.

"Now see here, Deputy," he said, "that bastard White killed Wycliff Furlong. He wasn't nothing more than a boy."

The fat man stepped close and looked down at the prostrate form of the dead boy.

"He was man enough to have a gun." He bent down and scooped up the revolver from the muddy street. Standing straight again, he rested the stock of the Winchester on his hip and raised the pistol to his nose with his left hand. "Old enough to pull a gun and fire it too, it seems to me. If he was stupid enough to draw on Jedediah White, I'm guessing he got what was coming to him."

"Now listen here, Josh—" Tovey said.

"That's Deputy Briggs to you."

Tovey sputtered, his face flushing once more. The portly deputy stared at him, unblinking.

"Now listen here, Deputy," Tovey said at last, and Briggs nodded. "White here shot Wyc in cold blood."

The deputy held up the pistol he had retrieved from the ground.

"That's not how I see it."

"Well, you wasn't here to see it."

Some of the other men spoke up, lending their voices to the protests against the man they called Jedediah White, emboldened by the fact that the old man's gun was no longer pointing at anyone. Their voices rose in pitch and Deputy Briggs looked about him, his air of control slipping, looking more like a drunk who had just been roused from sleeping off the effects of a long night.

Briggs tried to speak, but nobody was listening. In the distance, the train's whistle sounded again and the locomotive began to move with a squeal of metal on metal and the slow rhythmic thump of the steam engine. The men raised their voices to be heard. Briggs was growing increasingly agitated. Stokes felt sorry for him. He knew all too well what it was to be harangued by a group of angry men all defending their friend. He was contemplating stepping in to help the beleaguered deputy when Briggs lifted his Winchester off his hip one-handed and fired it into the air.

The sharp report of the rifle silenced the crowd.

"I didn't see what happened," Briggs said, now that he had their attention, "but I got eyes, and a man with half a brain can see what went down here. Wyc pulled his sidearm on Jed." He inspected the revolver in his hand quickly. "And Wyc must have been drunk or just a bad shot, 'cause he got off a couple of shots before White plugged him."

"He was provoked!" shouted Tovey.

"I don't care how much provocation there was. If your man shot first, no judge is gonna convict White for defending hisself."

Tovey's face took on a sly look.

"You gonna arrest him then?" he said. "He should answer to a judge for what he done."

"I suppose I should…" Briggs said uncertainly.

"Ain't nobody arresting me today," said White, his tone flat. "You said it. All I did was defend myself."

"And if that's true, you will be free just as soon as you stand before a judge."

"And when would that be?"

Briggs sniffed.

"A few weeks." He shoved Wyc's revolver into his belt. "A month perhaps. Judge Olmsted had an apoplexy couple weeks back, poor man. We're waiting on a new judge."

"I ain't sitting in your jail for a month, Briggs. Got nothing against you, but I doubt you could keep me safe from the likes of Tovey and the rest of the Cabin Creek boys. Likely as not they'd throw me a necktie party before any judge came to town."

The deputy was becoming flustered. He could sense the situation unravelling again. The sounds of the train were fading now as the locomotive picked up speed, pulling its carriages towards the setting sun.

"Now listen here, Jed—"

"No, you listen to me," interrupted White. "I'm needed back at the ranch and I ain't done nothing wrong. Ask this gent." He turned towards Stokes.

"Who cares what this easterner says?" sneered Tovey.

Briggs ignored him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Stokes."

"He's a lawman too," interjected White.

Briggs looked Gabriel Stokes up and down, taking in the wrinkled dark suit and narrow-brimmed hat.

"That right?"

"Until this year I served in the Metropolitan Police Force of London."

"London, England?"

Stokes didn't know of any other Londons.

"The same."

Briggs' eyebrows rose. His eyes flicked to the bag Stokes had dropped on the sidewalk.

"Just arrived?"

"On the train from Granger, Wyoming, yes."

Tovey stepped forward, his fists clenched at his sides.

"You're not gonna listen to this damned Englishman, are you, Josh?"

"I've told you already, Tovey. You need to refer to me as Deputy Briggs."

"Well, hell," said Tovey. "You know me. This foreigner just stepped off the train and you're gonna listen to him over me?"

"I'm getting tired of hearing your voice, Tovey. If you don't shut up, you'll be spending the night in the calaboose."

"You'd have to hear me all night then," replied Tovey testily. Briggs glared at him. Tovey stopped talking.

"Did you see what happened here?" the deputy asked Stokes.

"I did," he replied. "You have a keen eye. It was as you described it." Briggs stood a little taller, enjoying the praise from a fellow professional. "They stepped out of the saloon and the deceased was shouting and insulting this gentleman." Stokes indicated White. "Calling him a liar. And other things."

"He ain't no gentleman," said Tovey with a snort.

Briggs and Stokes ignored him.

"Mr White exchanged words with the young man," Stokes said.

"What did he say?" asked Briggs.

Stokes drew in a deep breath. He didn't wish to repeat White's words, but he owed it to the deputy to give him all the facts. He cleared his throat.

"He said that the boy's mother was a…" he hesitated. "That she was a lady of ill repute and…" He faltered again, before rushing on. "That she pleasured Indians."

Someone in the crowd let out a barking laugh.

White spoke up.

"I said his whore of a mother sucked redskins' pizzles for whiskey. That's what I said."

"You see?" said Tovey, his face redder than ever. "How's a man to stand for such talk?"

"That's fighting talk all right," said Briggs, shaking his head. "But I've heard worse, and it seems to me that nobody forced Wyc to pull his pistol. Is that so, Mr Stokes?"

"Quite so. The boy unholstered his revolver and fired twice, just as you surmised. Mr White here then drew his own revolver and shot once, killing the boy instantly. You arrived shortly after."

Deputy Briggs said nothing for a time, mulling over what he had heard and weighing up his options. Without warning, he worked the lever on his Winchester, shouldered it quickly and aimed it at White. The grey-haired man's hand dropped to his Remington, but he did not draw it. White was clearly no fool. No matter how fast he might be, he had no hope of beating the deputy.

"Mr Stokes," Briggs said. "Would you be so good as to disarm Mr White?" There was a waver in his voice, but Stokes noted that the man's rifle was steady enough.

Stokes looked about him at the expectant faces of the onlookers. Tovey was grinning in triumph. One of his comrades whooped at the turn of events. Beyond them, on the dusty street a large wagon laden with lumber was being hauled towards them by a team of six mules. The sun was setting, and the sky was afire. The hills in the distance were shadows that promised forests and cool streams. Stokes sighed. He wished he had ignored the fracas outside the saloon. He really had not wanted to get involved, but here he was. He had travelled halfway around the world but was incapable of escaping the violence of men.

"Mr Stokes?" the deputy repeated, the quaver in his voice more evident now.

There was nothing for it. Briggs was in a difficult spot. He could not leave the poor deputy to deal with this alone. With a nod, Stokes moved close to White and pulled the Remington

from its holster. The man smelt strongly of whiskey, sweat and horses. He made no attempt to prevent Stokes from removing his gun. Stokes noticed that the man wore a second revolver on his other hip. It had been hidden by his faded black frock coat. Stokes tugged the other pistol from its holster too. It was identical to the first, but with an ivory handle, rather than dark wood.

"Any other weapons?" Stokes asked.

White turned his cold eyes on him for the first time and Stokes understood why Briggs was nervous.

"There's a Derringer in my left boot and a knife on the back of my belt."

"Thank you," Stokes said, taking those weapons too. The Derringer was a tiny pistol that held two shots and would only be effective at very close range. The knife, sheathed in buckskin, was as big as a butcher's cleaver.

Stokes stepped back, holding the weapons awkwardly.

"Next time just get 'em to unbuckle their gun belt," said Briggs.

Stokes felt his face grow hot. He was not accustomed to dealing with such heavily armed suspects.

"I am not planning on disarming any more men," he said. "Would you like me to search him?"

Stokes had learnt the hard way never to trust someone being taken into custody. The long scar along the back of his left hand was a constant reminder. He had been arresting a drunken Turkish sailor. The man had been quiet and obliging and Stokes had relaxed, believing him cowed. The sailor had pulled the razor from his sleeve and it had only been luck and instinct that had prevented Stokes from having his face slashed. Instead the man had cut deeply into his hand. It had bled terribly and even now, nearly seven years later, his grip was not as strong as it had once been.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Briggs. His confidence was returning now that White was no longer armed. "What do you say, Jed?"

"I ain't carrying no more weapons. If you don't believe me, I could strip right here in the street."

"Keep your clothes on, old man," Briggs said. "Tovey, have one of your boys send for the undertaker. See to your man and then I want you out of town first thing tomorrow."

"But, Josh—" he caught himself. "I mean Deputy Briggs, we only got into town a couple hours ago."

"And you've had more than enough fun. Unless you want to end up in the jail with White, you'll be gone before I come down to the hotel for my morning coffee."

"It ain't right," Tovey grumbled.

"It is what it is, but Marshal Mathey isn't here, so what I say goes, and I say you get out of town, the lot of you. You can come back for the trial. Until then, see to Wyc and get out of Huntington."

The men were not happy, but Briggs ignored them and began leading White in the direction he'd come from. Stokes clumsily picked up his valise, balancing one of the pistols and the huge knife on top of it. He slipped the Derringer into his pocket and, holding the ivory-handled Remington in his left hand, followed Briggs and White.