

# BLOODSTONE, ARIZONA

## CHAPTER ONE

The gates of the territorial prison swung open and he was a free man for the first time in five long years. He dropped the saddle he was carrying and took the gunbelt one of the two guards escorting him out handed him. As he took it, he saw there were no bullets. When he asked, the guard laughed and said, “What, did you think we were gonna give you back a loaded gun? Not a chance.”

Laughing, both guards turned and went back into the prison. As the gate was closing, one of them called out, “We’ll keep your cell ready Harris, for your next visit!”

He turned and looked to the horizon as the gates swung shut with a bang. *‘Where was he,’* he wondered? He looked at his pocket watch and then back down the road. The sun was beating down as hour after hour the horizon remained empty. Then, near sundown, he saw what he’d been waiting to see all day. It started as just a speck on the edge of his vision but, before long he could make out a rider leading a horse.

On and on the man rode until finally he stopped a few feet in front of him and dismounted. “Sorry I’m late, Brother Joseph, but the bishop showed up early and I had to get him settled before I could come all the way out here. Matilda is entertaining him until we get there.”

The two men shook hands and then Joe picked up the saddle and put it on the riderless horse. As he was tightening the cinch, the other man remounted. Joe swung himself up in the saddle and said, “No matter, you’re here now.”

They turned and headed back the way the man had come. After a while Joe asked, “Does the bishop know I’m comin’? Did you tell him my story?”

He nodded and said, “Yeah, he knows everything and he’s still willing to perform the ceremony. In fact, he wants to do it tonight.”

“What’s the hurry?”

Amos smiled and said, “He told me that he has an assignment for you but he wouldn’t tell me anymore about it.”

They were silent for the remainder of the ride back to Fort Lee. The sun had set by the time they reached Amos’ house and the lights showing through the windows made Joe feel a twang of homesickness. That feeling passed quickly as he remembered the last time he’d seen his home.

The war was over and Joe had fought on the losing side. After the Union Army had taken his gun; and everything else he had of any value; they let him return home. For three long days he walked till he finally met a farmer who gave him a ride the last twenty-five miles. He hopped off the back of the wagon and

walked up the drive. As he crested the hill, he saw the old house, or what was left of it.

Some the windows were broken and the front door hung on only one hinge. In the front yard there was a new flag pole with the Union flag flapping in the breeze. He entered the house and was met by a Union soldier. "What're you doin' here, Reb?"

"I live here," was his reply.

The soldier laughed and said, "Not any more. This here's a cemetery now. Rebs on one side and Yanks on the other. Nobody lives here but ghosts."

Joe's heart stopped as he asked, "What happened to the people who lived here?"

The soldier looked at a map and said, "Aisle 2, plots one and two. Seems they resisted when the cavalry swept through towards the end of the war. Old man shot and killed a cavalry officer so the troop killed him and his wife right then and there. Graves Registration decided this would make a good cemetery so the army confiscated it."

Joe was about to respond when an officer came out of what used to be the parlor and, seeing him said, "What are you doin' here, boy?" When Joe told him he said, "This ain't your home no more boy, you'd best leave unless you want to join your parents."

Joe's hand reached for his pistol but it wasn't there. The officer laughed and said, "Go on, Rebel, threaten a Union officer, see what happens." He laughed and pulled his Navy Colt and pointed it at Joe. "Get out, rebel scum. Get out and never come back."

Joe saw there was nothing else he could do so he turned and walked out. Both the officer and the soldier were laughing as he walked back to the road. They weren't laughing five days later.

Joe walked the six miles into town and went to his childhood friend Matthew Richardson's house. When he answered the door, Joe barely recognized him. His face looked as if he'd aged thirty years in just the few years since he'd seen him last and the left sleeve of his shirt was empty. He realized he must have changed too because it took Matthew a few seconds to recognize him. Once he did, his face lit up like the sun and he exclaimed, "Joe Harris! Man, you're a sight for sore eyes!" and took him in a one-armed hug that nearly crushed him. "Come in, come in! My God, how long has it been? I barely recognized you; you must have lost twenty pounds!"

Matthew ushered him in and called, "Liza, look who's here!"

Liza came out of the kitchen and exclaimed, "Well I'll be, Joe Harris; as I live and breathe!"

She hustled over and pulled him into a hug, all the time saying, "Thank goodness, you made it. So many others didn't. Thank goodness you came home safe." As she released him, she added, "We were so sorry to hear about your

parents and the vineyard. Those despicable Yankees came ridin' into town and took everything that was left and killed anyone who tried to resist. It was horrible to watch them ransack the town and what they did to the women... well, a lady doesn't like to speak of such things. But it's over now and maybe they'll leave soon and things can get back to normal."

Matthew said, "Even if they do leave, I'm afraid there's no normal to go back to, Liza. There's nothin' left and very few left to pick up the pieces. I'm afraid this is normal now, we'll just have to get used to it."

Then he smiled and said, "No matter. Things will be close to normal, at least for tonight; Joe's back with us, safe and sound!"

Liza bustled back to the kitchen and it wasn't long before they were sharing a meager meal of boiled potatoes and greens. Liza told him that they hadn't had any meat since the Yankees came. "The first thing they did was confiscate all the livestock to feed their troops. They even took most of the horses."

After dinner, Matthew and Joe went out on the porch for a smoke and to talk. Joe discovered that most of the men he had known before the war were killed or maimed or just never came back. Soon the conversation turned to what he was going to do now that the Yankees had stolen his home.

"I'm gonna get a little revenge if you'll help me," Joe told him.

Matthew laughed and pulled on his empty sleeve. "What can I do to help Joe, I'm barely able to dress myself; I can't fight."

“I don’t need you to fight, Matt, I just need you to help me get a gun and a horse. Then I need you to help plan how I can get those Yankees livin’ in my house. No damn Yankee’s gonna steal my family’s vineyard and then laugh at me as they throw me out.”

Four nights later, Joe and Matthew rode quietly up to the old house. Joe dismounted and snuck around back to the kitchen window. Slowly he opened it and looked around. When he didn’t see anyone, he removed his boots and climbed through the window. It was dark inside the old house but that didn’t matter, he knew the place better than the back of his hand.

Slowly, carefully he moved up the stairs and began searching the bedrooms for that Yankee bastard who’d threatened him. He found him sound asleep in his parents’ old bed. When he thought of his parents moldering away in the ground while this man slept in their bed it just fueled his fury.

He dropped to the floor and crawled up next to the bed where the man snored loudly. He pulled Matthew’s old bayonet from its sheath and stood. Without making a sound he drove the bayonet deep into the man’s chest, piercing his heart and killing him instantly.

After making sure the man was dead, he stole out of the room and began looking for the soldier who laughed at him. He found him sleeping in his old room with two other soldiers. As stealthily as he could he moved from bed to bed and took the soldiers weapons. Then he stood in the middle of the room and drew the dead officer’s Colt and began firing. All three men were dead within seconds but

the sound woke the soldiers sleeping in the other bedroom. One by one they rushed into the room only to be met by a bullet. Joe put the empty gun away, took one of the soldiers' Navy Colts and raised it, just in case there were any more soldiers lurking in the house.

After a few minutes Matthew came in and they began phase two. Once they had taken everything of value, they went out to the shed and found several cans of kerosene. Quickly, they poured the kerosene on the bodies and the furniture and set the house on fire. They were back at Matthew's house before anyone knew what had happened.

A week later, Joe rode out of town, heading west. He never looked back.

Joe came back to the here and now as they dismounted and took the horses into the barn. After putting them away, Amos led the way to the back door and into the warm, welcoming kitchen. As soon as he closed the door Joe looked around and saw the two people looking back at him. He knew the woman, she was Matilda Washington, Amos' daughter and co-evangelist, but the man he didn't know. They both rose and came over to greet the newcomers. Matilda gave Joe a hug and turned toward the stranger, saying, "Bishop Murphy, this is Brother Joseph, Joseph Harris. Brother Joseph, this is Bishop Peter Murphy."

They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries while Matilda greeted her father. "Supper's ready if everyone will take a seat," Matilda said.

Both Joe and Amos took off their coats and hung them on the hooks near the door. When he took his off, Matilda and the bishop saw the gun on Joe's hip. The bishop cleared his throat and said, "I don't recall ever seeing a brother carry a side arm. Are you expecting trouble, Brother Joseph?"

Joe looked down and smiled. "It's a remnant of my previous life. Sorry, I forgot I had it on." As he was removing the gun belt he added, "No need to worry, the guards took all my bullets anyway."

They all bowed their heads and said grace before they began eating. After enduring five years of institutional slop, Joe relished each and every bite of the home-cooked meal. After a few minutes, Bishop Murphy said, "Brother Joseph, if you don't mind, after dinner I'd like to perform the ceremony."

Joe nodded and the bishop continued. He reached into his inside jacket pocket, pulled out a train ticket and handed it to him. Joe put his fork down and took the ticket. As he was examining it, the bishop said, "There's a train leaving at ten o'clock tomorrow morning that will take you to your first assignment; Bloodstone, Arizona."

The bishop went on to explain, "A couple of months ago, the parson of the church in Bloodstone fell off his horse, breaking his neck and killing him. Since then, his widow has been filling in but the elders are uncomfortable with a woman preaching so they've asked for the first available replacement."

He took a sip of his wine and continued, "Her name is Sister Anna Chase and she's normally the Sunday school teacher and the organist. She knows you're



coming and is willing to help you until you get comfortable in your new assignment. There is a complication you need to know about; she and her daughter are still living in the parsonage and the elders would like her to continue living there so you'll have to find other quarters. I'm sure between her and Elder Young, you should be able to find someplace acceptable in no time."

As soon as dinner was finished, the men went into the study for brandy and a cigar while Matilda cleaned up. As he lit his cigar, Joe's mind drifted back to the last time someone had offered him one.