

Decklan, a freelance Texas Ranger, is sent north from the Arizona Territories to execute a murder warrant, where he learns about justice among the wealthy, love, and ultimately, personal revenge.

Decklan

By Glenn Lauer

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When you
don't want prisoners, you send...

DECKLAN



GLENN LAUER

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Chapter 3

Decklan was only a few miles north when he got the feeling. Something wasn't right and it had roots in the encampment behind him. He muttered under his breath, chiding himself. This is why he stayed to himself more often than not.

Indy snuffled and fought the reins and even the mule started acting a bit skittish.

“Yeah, smell ‘em, too.”

Decklan didn't bother looking behind him or searching for a blind to stop and catch sight of his stalkers. He'd been shadowed and tracked by Comanche. In comparison, the boys following him now were as inconspicuous as a marching band.

He continued northerly while steadily sideling towards the mountains, riding until the sun was just off the horizon behind them. With what suitable light was left of the day, he found what looked like a serviceable box canyon, littered with a dead-fall of trees and large boulders. Two-thirds the way up he found an old campsite where the high canyon walls widened a bit, with plenty of dried timber for a fire. Besides being highly defensible, the location provided shelter from the weather and would make a good camp for the night.

Decklan repaired and enlarged an old fire pit he found in the widening, kicking some of its rocks out another foot, while adding a few more to make it larger in diameter. After collecting ample wood from the assortment of dead fall, he started a large fire and stripped off Indy's saddle along with the mule's packsaddle. Hobbling the roan, he strapped them both with a bag of rationed oats to warm them up from the inside out. With those tasks completed, Decklan turned to the condition of his camp. Collecting more wood, he made a pot of coffee and perched it at the edge of the small inferno.

He finally sat down with the oversized blaze in front of him, facing outward towards the canyon entrance. Cradling the Winchester in his lap, he mentally played out the events to come, knowing the rifle would be center stage to them. To deflect attention from himself, he emptied the Winchester's tube magazine and re-chambered the spent 44.40 caliber casing from his deer shot. Satisfied with his newly formed plan, he propped the rifle up against a fallen log well out of arm's reach to the right of the campfire. Visual misdirection.

He dismissed his pre-engagement ritual of sorting out the rest of his hardware in favor of keeping it out of sight. He didn't know how long he had before his expected company might show up and it took a while to clean and check it all.

So, he poured himself a cup of coffee and perched it on the edge of the pit. Another prop. Wrapping his loose fitting slicker tighter over his lap, he intentionally didn't button it. Instead, he sat back against a slanted boulder near the firepit and put both his hands deep inside his slicker's diagonal pockets. The night fell heavy and he waited, listening to the burning wood crackle coming from the flame's heat.

It took longer than he anticipated, as Decklan estimated their proximity early on and had expected them sooner. He could only surmise their delay had involved a debate among them as to how best approach his camp. But then Indy's ears tweaked in all directions and he snickered at the approach of unfamiliar mounts. The mule added his annoying bray and the unseen horses down the canyon answered with their own chorus.

The livestock all finally said their hellos and went quiet. Now, Decklan could hear hooves on rock, the metallic sound of shod horses clopping up the rocky canyon floor. It echoed off the shear sandstone faces on either side. Decklan reflected on what he'd be facing and tried to remember as much as he

could about the three misfits from the cowboy's encampment. They were young, but that didn't necessarily mean inexperienced. However, the hard case had shown their metal with his bid for the Winchester. Of what to expect, it had been a clear sign of condition. Their approach now spoke of their intent. Outcome was the only unknown.

As to condition, he surmised they were on the run from some form of robbery, loot in hand. At least the lofty bid for Decklan's rifle had given clue to one. Probably an ill planned heist followed by an ill planned getaway. An experienced crew would've kept to themselves or split up entirely, avoiding any contact that might leave a trail for a posse to follow. A seasoned gang, opting to stick together, would already have included a long gun in their arsenal. They also wouldn't have been forced to rely on cow puncher camps for food and camouflage in their escape.

All the signs led to this crew being as green as grass. The noisy approaching hoof-falls up a narrow canyon only confirmed it. It also gave Decklan their intent. They needed Decklan's rifle to keep any potential posse at distance until they could reach Mexico. They had followed him to take it.

Whether their hasty plan was to take it posthumously or not was the only outcome soon to be determined. If Decklan would have a say, their newfound stint as highwaymen would be short lived.

He continued to listen as they got closer. All three horses, combined with the leathery squeak of their tack, becoming more apparent as they got closer. It suggested each mount was carrying a rider. Not even a layoff man afoot in the shadows. Overconfidence. A good thing for Decklan. The hoofing stopped just outside firelight, just close enough for the lead mount's eyes to glow in the darkness beyond it.

"Hello in camp there!" A voice called out from the dark.

Decklan recognized the hard case's tenor and meter of speech, the one who'd spoke up first at the cowboy encampment.

"Who's there?" Decklan played coy and feigned a bit of shakiness to his voice.

"Just us, from the drover's camp." The same voice came back. "Remember?"

"Oh yeah." Decklan called back in mock relief that turned to cordiality. "Come on in."

From the darkness came the sounds of more stretching leather, saddle fenders working against hobble straps. Before long, they walked into camp in the order Decklan expected, the hard case leading with the suspected kin close behind, followed more distantly by the half-breed.

They all nodded greeting to Decklan and took note of his Winchester resting well out of arms reach. The hard case smiled as he admired it and the crazy-eyed one looked at Decklan as if he was a specimen in a jar. The half-breed was the only one who looked from the rifle to Decklan and back again. Decklan could almost read his thoughts. 'Why would a presumably trail savvy journeyer leave his only protection way out there?'

'The only one with half a brain.' Decklan thought to himself as he feigned a smile and greeted them into camp.

They wordlessly tied off their horses loosely to some larger deadfall and fanned out in front of Decklan, exchanging glances to one another as they did so. Decklan remained seated facing the three of them, leaning back on the boulder with his hands in his pockets, studying their faces. The brother and half-breed approached the fire pit and settled into a crouch just opposite him. Making a show of warming themselves against the night's growing freeze, they shucked gloves and put their hands up against the flames. Both flashed furtive looks to each

other before nodding a greeting in Decklan's direction. Yet, only the half-breed made direct eye contact with their host. Decklan could see the question in the native's eyes, but the young half-breed held his tongue.

Meanwhile, the hard case drifted in the direction of the Winchester, coming to stand just within reach of it.

"That's some fire you got going there, Pilgrim." The hard case commented as he glanced at the blaze before settling his full attention on the '73.

"It's gonna be a cold night." Decklan offered as part of his time-honored façade, even though half true at this latitude.

He didn't move as he spoke. Instead, seeing where everyone's hands were for the moment, he brought his right hand out and took up his coffee cup. Taking a small sip from it, he then rested it on his slicker-covered thigh.

"What brings you boys back this way?" He asked, then let his Texas accent slip.

"Well..."

"Where's my manners?" Decklan interrupted with a wave of his cup-filled hand and looked up at the hardcase. "Name's Decklan. Sam Decklan."

"Yeah," The sudden introduction gave the hardcase pause as he seemed to weigh a response.

For Decklan, it was a test. A verbal foray against outcome.

The hardcase paused a moment or two before shrugging, his mind made up. He put his hand to his chest and started.

"My name's Jacob. Jacob Calhoun. This here's my little brother Ebenezer and that there's Billy. Billy Cloud." Jacob extended his arm to each with his introductions.

"Well, happy make your acquaintance." Decklan toasted a greeting to each with his coffee cup.

He filed the names for later as he now knew with certainty what this visit was leading to. In response, he casually put the

cup back down on the edge of the pit and buried his hand back deep into his slicker's pocket. Giving up their names told him it didn't matter that Decklan knew who they were, because they weren't intending to leave their easy mark alive after taking his rifle. He noticed the boys across from him were looking at his posture, with both hands inside his pockets.

"Too old for this weather up here." He explained matter-of-factly to Eb and Billy. "Hail from southern territories."

They both silently nodded but didn't reply, exchanging more nervous glances between them while keeping their hands up against the fire.

"Well," Jacob repeated where he left off and continued. "Guess should say why we did come back this way?"

He offered the question as he extended his hand towards the Winchester, a wordless inquiry to handle the rifle. Decklan noticed, then acknowledged the unspoken request as he shrugged, nodding his head and waving him on like he was family.

"Careful. Keep her loaded."

"Sure, always a good idea." Jacob grinned wryly as he hefted the '73 lever action repeater in both hands and now smiled in full confidence. "Boy, that's one heavy pile of iron."

"Extra barrel. Longer reach with better accuracy." Decklan commented with a shake of the head and shrug. "Sorry can't sell her, but like said..."

"She's the only one you got." Jacob finished the sentence for him as he ceased admiring the rifle and smiled down into Decklan's placid eyes, this time with a hint of malice. He brought the lever action Winchester up across his chest using both hands, his left on the barrel stock and right through the cocking mechanism with finger around the trigger.

"Well, Pilgrim..." He started.

“Decklan.” Sam calmly interrupted again with the correction as he seemed to look on in amusement. No one but the half-breed seemed to notice the change in his eyes. “Sam Decklan.”

Jacob paused briefly as if for dramatic effect as Decklan gazed across the fire-pit. Billy was staring back at him, now wide-eyed, as if seeing him for the first time. He stiffened and turned a little pale. Eb seemed oblivious, differing to watch his older brother’s performance.

“Well, Pilgrim,” Jake put emphasis on the word. “We didn’t come back to buy it.”

He moved the lever action open just enough to see the gleaming brass casing peeking back at him, but not enough to see that there was no slug in it. Smiling broader, he closed it, then looked back down at Decklan as his thumb moved the hammer back to the cocked position.

Neither of the Calhoun boys were noticing Decklan’s tell, but Billy was.

“Uh, Jake?” He started, as Decklan stared directly at him over the firepit.

“Shut ur yap, Billy.” Jacob cut him off sharply, long pegging him as the doubting Thomas, the only one of the three with an over-cautious nature.

“Why you boys need a long gun so bad?” Decklan’s tone turned quiet as he continued stare at Billy. “Suspect ya’ll be among the willows. On the dodge from a job.”

Billy’s eyes continued to widen, watching as Decklan’s grew black as the night sky.

Eb was still admiring his brother like a half-wit, now nearly drooling with anticipation, in awe of Jacob’s easy manner of killing. Billy slowly swiveled slightly on his crouched stance, attempting to use his body to cover a sly movement to reach for the pistol holstered under his turnout.

Decklan's stare never wavered from Billy's as he slowly shook his head slightly side to side to warn him off any such notion. Billy licked his lips as he returned his now damp palm to view to rub it on his denim-clad thigh.

He was only one of the three who now realized the mistake they'd made. Decklan was not the easy mark Jacob had no doubt argued about on their ride in. Billy's eyes darted down to the Decklan's lap, covered by the slicker. He put it together and broke into a free sweat.

Decklan could see the game was up for Billy, but continued to read his eyes as to what he was going to do about it. He was clearly third down in pecking order and trapped in confederacy with his companions. Billy's gaze finally drifted up to Jacob with no alternative but to wait out his play.

"Well, you'd be right on that, Pilgrim." Jacob carried on unawares as he continued to admire the Winchester in his hands. "We just took us a fat bank few days back and figure sooner or later we'll have a posse ridin up our backsides."

"So, you need rifle ta keep posse at bay. Till you cross the border." Decklan quietly finished for him, still staring at Billy to keep him in check. "Saw a Spencer in camp. What was wrong with that?"

"You figure right on that." Jacob sobered a bit at the comment and looked down at Decklan in a new light. "And your-a saving us from have'n to go toe to toe with those dusters back at camp. Too many for safe resolution. And for what? A broken-down Spencer? Was good thing you come along."

"So, why not just take it?" Decklan's voice didn't change, but stayed low and flat. "Lessen you already bedded some folk an don't need witnesses pointing your way."

"Right again." Jacob boldly confessed as he cocked his head quizzically at his intended target. "Teller done called us on our play. Must'a figured us fer jus foolin about."

“Don’t forget me.” Eb giggled his interruption. “I got one, too.”

“Ain’t forgetting you, baby brother.” Jacob slowly leveled the barrel of the Winchester down in Decklan’s direction. “We took ourselves two tellers, didn’t we?”

“Mine was goin for a gun sure, Jacob.” Eb cried out. “I got ‘er ‘fore she bring it up.”

“You beefed a woman?” Decklan adjusted his narrowing gaze on the youngest of the three, his eyes now black as a moonless night.

“Killin’s done as killin’s needed.” Jacob intoned in this brother’s defense. “Man, woman alike.”

“And you saw the iron she was bringin’?” Decklan nodded slowly at Eb to seek confirmation.

“Reaching under the counter.” Eb glanced at Decklan laughingly and shrugged. “What else could she be goin fer?”

“You think?” Decklan’s eyes narrowed to slits as he pinned them on the dolt. “Then again, maybe not yur strong suit.”

“Don’t matter now.” Jacob retook center stage. “It’s done.”

“That’s a fact.” Decklan said in quiet finality, looking up at the elder highwayman.

“Ya know,” Jacob’s face hinted at a bit of puzzlement, squinting down at Decklan. “Fer a Pilgrim dumb nuff that lets anyone come in and pick up his only protection, you could almost be figured fer near smart.”

“First haul, is it?” Decklan inquired, keeping his low tone while still taking a study on Eb.

Billy used the distraction to edge towards his pistol again, but Decklan again cut him off with a side-glance.

“Yeah, but we scored big and spect it’ll do for some time.” Jacob’s smile broadened as he turned to the business at hand, now setting the rifle to shoulder and pointing it squarely at Decklan’s midsection.

“A clean kill would be ta head.” Decklan suggested, side-glancing back and noting where the barrel of his rifle was pointing. “Belly shots make fer long and painful deaths.”

“Headshot spatters.” Jacob shook his head. “Seen it before and don’t want blood all over us. Won’t look good next time we run into folk if it’s all over our turnouts.”

“Well, hope yer first kill be clean one,” Decklan said almost too quietly to be heard. “Cause likely be your last.”

“You be a surly cuss for someone ‘bout to meet his Maker.” Jacob furled his brow as he studied his mark over the sights of the Winchester.

“Jacob!” Billy almost shouted in a shaky voice.

“Shut up, you Cur.” Jacob snarled, completely mistaking Billy’s alarm as skittishness. “If’n you don’t have the stomach, ride out. Got your cut, same as us.”

“Think Billy tryin’ to warn ya’ll.” Decklan whispered, his Texas accent always surfacing when things got serious.

“Billy’s yellow. That’s all.” Jacob leaned in at the expectation of the rifle’s recoil. “Say good-bye, Pilgrim.”

“Sam. Sam Decklan.” Decklan’s eyes came up and locked on Jacob’s.

“Why you keep tell’in us your name?” Jacob paused and raised his head slightly over the Winchester’s sights.

“Think only right you know who gonna end ya’ll.” Decklan said calmly.

“That’s rich.” Jacob said, taking aim again and pulling the trigger on the Winchester.

The hollow metallic click of the hammer falling on the spent casing could be heard over the crackling campfire. For Decklan, the perception of time slowed to a crawl. He watched the animated faces of Jacob and his brother turn. Every facial twitch, turn of a lip, every blink of an eye. Jacob’s went from wide-eyed expectation to furrowed puzzlement while Eb’s

childlike look of fascination turned from awe to confusion. Billy was the only one who reacted in understanding. He slumped, looking down at the ground between his legs while shaking his head and audibly groaning.

Decklan watched Jacob inspect the Winchester. Perhaps in belief the chambered cartridge was an empty casing kept in the chamber for safety reasons, he worked the action through a full cycle. The casing popped out the top of the Winchester and clanked on the canyon floor next to the campfire. The action closed with the hammer back, ready for use. Jacob's face reset to the task at hand, again taking aim on Decklan.

But this time Jacob looked straight into Decklan's eyes as he dropped the hammer a second time. In that half a heartbeat, he realized something wasn't right. It wasn't what he saw, but rather what he didn't. There was no look of terror or horror in expectation of dying. There was only a solemn face dancing in the red flames with eyes like black slits reflecting the firelight.

"Problem?" Decklan more sensed his assailants than looked at them, assessing which one would be first.

But he already knew. Billy was the only one who'd realized they'd all misread their mark. At the moment, the young half-breed had his head nearly buried towards the ground as he shook it side to side in remorse. Then, with the resolve of seemingly having no other recourse of action, he abandoned his foreboding and looked up at Decklan while fumbling for his sidearm. Eb was still in a state of confusion, probably the family dolt, and Jacob's hands were full of empty Winchester, momentarily out of play. Therefore, although third down in pecking order, Billy would be first.

Time slowed to a crawl for Decklan as his left-handed Colt Peacemaker came out from under his slicker as smooth as flowing water. The 44.40-caliber bullet it dispatched punched Billy in the gut. He reacted as if kicked by the mule. His half-

drawn pistol tumbled to the ground while both his arms fluttered outward, like he was spreading wings for flight. Decklan's second, right-hand Peacemaker came out next and likewise dispatched its own bullet, punching Eb similarly in his midsection. Disbelief registered on his face, with no time to turn to terror as the boy teetered back, following Billy's awkward tumble.

In an instant, Decklan was on his feet with his practiced hands re-cocked the two Colts for more deliberate use. With his arms trapped at the elbows by the slicker's false pockets, he rocked his elbows to give him play to straighten each arm enough for careful aim. He put the next two bullets simultaneously in both their heads, one through Billy's front teeth and other through Eb's left eye. In the deep recesses of Decklan's slow motion mind, a curious epiphany took shape. Jacob was right. There was a lot of blood that came with headshots.

Jacob, being caught completely off guard, backed away in shock from the sudden turn of events. His fiery aggression as a highwayman turned to ashes as he realized he'd be next. He dropped the rifle and grappled after his pistol in a desperate attempt to save his own life. Decklan placed two more bullets in the hardcase's belly before Jacob could find his holster. He was thrown back off his feet and onto his back, head thumping hollow against a nearby fallen tree trunk. It bounced once and sounded like a ripe melon, his body going limp and unmoving.

The campsite soon fell silent, but it was lost on Decklan. The ringing in his ears was momentarily deafening as time wound back up for him. His body froze in place for a few moments, with only his head on swivel to inspect the chaos at his feet. Letting his sight do double duty for his other impaired senses, he looked at nothing, but saw everything. He knew the reports of gunfire had echoed off the rock walls, down the

canyon and out into the night air. Eventually, they would sound like distant thunder as they disappeared across the high prairie. Maybe be heard as far away as the drover's camp.

He could see the livestock shuffling a bit and the thin cloud of gunpowder suspended over the flames. Nothing else within the reddish glow moved but the flames in the pit. Out of pure habit, Decklan's practiced eyes tried to penetrate the canyon below for any further threat, but nothing materialized.

Only when he could again hear Indy's snuffling did he move. As if freed from a block of ice, Decklan suddenly snaked the pistols back through the slicker's false pockets. Now free of any encumbrances, the muzzles of his two Colts took turns covering the three bodies lying inert around the campfire. He backed away and repositioned himself to where he could see all three without turning his head, still keeping the horses and mouth of the canyon in full view.

Pausing to assess his performance, Decklan reflected on his resume. He knew he possessed tenfold the experience, tactics, and awareness of the three fallen highwaymen combined. Taking such advantage sometimes felt a little murderous to Decklan, but the proof was in front of him. Three-to-one odds with intent to kill him and he was still alive and whole. Besides that, taking prisoners or even giving them the choice at such was not the Ranger's way. At least not Leander H. McNelly's way. He'd been taught by the best, if not the most ruthless.

Jacob's body suddenly wretched and twisted as a sickening moan emanated from his lips. Decklan moved to the hardcase's side, keeping the mortally wounded man between him and the other two who appeared finished. Holstering his right-handed Peacemaker, Decklan grabbed the assailant's Navy Colt from its holster and tossed it behind him, into a vacant area of the campsite.

“My brother.” Jacob managed a weak protest while grimacing in pain. “Ya kilt my brother.”

“Shot your brother.” Decklan looked down at the boy, shaking his head slowly. “But you killed him, you dumb canary. Should been home cleanin’ out stalls instead of following you up here.”

Decklan bent over the mortally wounded boy, moving his hands to the two wounds tightly stitched in his midsection.

“Keep yer hands on the holes. Might live minute, two longer. Any case, will know where they are.”

“I’m dyin then?” Jacob’s expression turned to guileless terror, looking more like a frightened child than a cock-of-the-walk killer. His face contorted in pain, coughing up blood while grabbing his belly, all accompanied by the sickening sounds of wheezes and groans.

“Fact is you are, boy.” Decklan continued to monitor the other bodies while squinting down into the mouth of the canyon. “Got any more confederates out there?”

“Ain’t fair. You said the Winchester was all you got.” Jacob’s mind was still trying to catch up while dealing with the fire in his gut. “You a liar.”

“Talked long-gun. Never said such of other iron.” Decklan corrected, looking down at the young man. “Learn more with mouth closed instead of runnin’ it. First lesson, not last.”

“Fuck, man.” Jacob clenched his teeth tightly showing them white in contrast to the blood starting to ooze between them. He wheezed and coughed in a new spasm of agony. “Can’t do the pain. I’m dyin.”

“Left you this a way for reason.” Decklan explained. “First, what bank you boy’s take?”

“Wha...?” Jacob’s mind was beginning to dismiss what had happened in favor of what was going to come next.

“Bank. Which bank?” Decklan pressed.

“For...” Jacob seethed in agony and tried again. “El Pu....”

“El Pueblo?” Decklan prodded. “Fort Pueblo?”

Jacob nodded slowly.

“Money?” Decklan pressed on as he nodded towards the horses they’d ridden in on. “Saddlebags? Muchillas?”

Jacob again nodded imperceptibly before a new seething ache retched his body in convulsions.

“Reason gut shot you, cause that be what you tried on me,” Decklan face set hard as he continued. “Slow, painful way to cash in. Second, last lesson of your short sorry life. Young, stupid, brass balls or not, cannot abide a sloppy assassin.”

“Who the fuck....”

“Smell you boys all way from drover camp.” Decklan continued. “Just too green know who’s doin huntin. Hail from Texas where rangered for spell. Still do for the territories.”

“So cold.” Jacob pleaded, Decklan’s biography seemingly missed through the intense agony in his belly. “Can’t take the pain.”

“You close now.” Decklan attended his last breaths. “Pain be drifting soon.”

A strange quiet returned to the campsite and only the crackling wood and horses sniggering could be heard. Decklan put his hands over Jacob’s and glanced up at the livestock. Their mounts were starting to establish a new pecking order with Indy and the mule. Such was all life, Decklan thought. Get two living things together and there was always a pecking order to be established. Decklan and these boys had just worked out theirs.

Decklan looked over at the two lifeless forms near the campfire that only a few minutes before had been menacing highwaymen, two killings under their belts and stolen loot in their bags.

Jacob's breathing turned labored and drifted into a shallow rasp, arresting Decklan's attention back to him. He looked down at the dying boy.

"Home." There was recognition of the word's meaning in Jacob's flickering eyes and voice. He whispered his last request. "Take em home."

"What?" Decklan's face contorted as he tried to understand him.

"Eb." Jacob forced his words. "Home."

Decklan nodded in recognition of his request.

"Bury dead where they fall." Decklan shook his head. "Be no markers, lessen have to use stones for hard ground."

"Please." He whispered his last.

He surveyed the scene and debated the boy's dying request. No way was he going to ride up to some squalor hut with a string of ponies carrying the rotting remains of someone's children. Decklan gave a second thought as to the money he'd be returning. How would he explain it without the bodies? Several scenarios came to mind, but they all sounded hollow in the absence of the highwaymen's remains, the ones responsible.

Looking down one more time at his would-be killer, Decklan saw he was done.

"Well," Decklan stood up, looking around while holstering his remaining Peacemaker. Speaking, perhaps to the ghosts of those he'd just dispatched, he sighed. "One more job for ya'll to do. Maybe you three lunk-heads can do least one thing right tonight."

With that, Decklan set to work. Retrieving the bank money from the three saddlebags on the robber's horses, he put the loot in his own bags and did a weapons search among their

persons and belongings for good measure. Retrieving all their pistols, he fired each one of the them in the air once or twice, after which, he collected their holsters and put all their gear into their respective saddlebags.

“For when and if called on to recollect and testify.” He commented to the lifeless bodies. “It were a firefight, not a execution.”

Decklan hailed from a Ranger outfit that was neither revered nor trusted for their deeds. Only begrudgingly respected for the bodies left in their wake. After the disbanding of McNelly’s Special Forces and going it alone, he’d learned the pitfalls of the burgeoning justice system. From awkward cross-examinations at least, to murder warrants briefly put out on him at best, he’d learned to cover any and all scenarios regarding his lethal exchanges.

With the more important tasks done, he unsaddled their horses and placed the tack around the campfire. Then, he dragged the three bodies and propped them up against the saddles, legs straight out with hats over their faces, giving the appearance they were sleeping and it was their own campsite instead of Decklan’s. For good measure, he draped their bedroll blankets over them as covers against the cold night. As an afterthought, he used some cut leather straps to tie their feet together, before propping and tying their hands behind their heads, a bit unnatural looking, but he knew it would serve a purpose the following morning.

That accomplished, he looked around at the setting and put his hands on his hips.

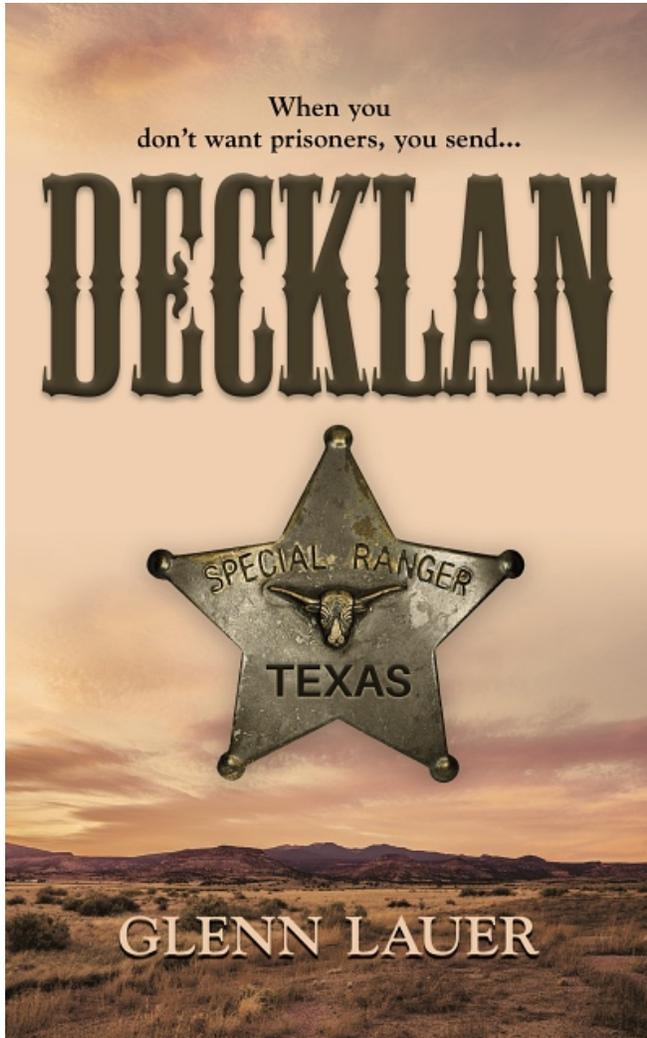
“Anyone hearin’ ruckus an get curious, will find the lot.” He shook his head slowly. “Then we’ll see what’s what.”

Decklan, satisfied with the make-believe camp scene, took his shovel and dug into the fire. Extracting some of the red embers at the bottom, he placed them in his metal bucket and

walked towards a space in the canyon wall. Just out of the firelight, he dug a shallow hole and emptied the bucket into it. Covering up the embers with a few inches of dirt, Decklan retrieved his Winchester and after reloading it along with both Colts, he toted all the guns and money into the nook and settled down under his bearskin on the warm ground.

Watching from the dark corner of the fire-lit encampment, he listened hard for anyone coming. The only sound answering was the crackling of the fire and sniggering of the mounts. He set in for the long night of light sleep and mused over the horses figuring their differences and establishing their order.

Order. The world in chaos striving for accord, only to have anarchy break out again just when it seems established. Decklan had no such desire for order. His only mission in life was to survive the given day. In nature and society there was the strong and the weak. The hunter and the hunted. The predator and the prey. Decklan had chosen sides early on and was now in a unique business. His job was to hunt other hunters.



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