

Ten years have passed, and Deputy Marshal David McDaniel returns to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, as a witness in the murder trial of Leon Ray. And an ordinary stagecoach ride with three other passengers becomes a supernatural journey into the unknown.

The Unfolding

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THE UNFOLDING

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THE UNFOLDING

D. CAINE CALHOUN

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Waking

It wasn't the shaking of the stagecoach or his dry tongue that woke him. He couldn't imagine anything else having the power outside the jostling to bring him out of a midmorning slumber, but the sharp pain over the left side of his chest forced his gun hand to slip beneath his vest and cradle the area that fiercely stirred him. He let out an unheard sigh of relief as the pain momentarily passed.

The heavy breathing to his left and the air of a light, fading perfume still permeating the dry and dusty air assured him his fellow passengers were still there, and that he hadn't slept through any stage stops.

"Tired", he thought to himself. "Tired and plum wore out."

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his head farther back, the brim of his hat just shy of covering his face. Peering from his left eye he examined the near motionless body of the well-suited gentlemen seated diagonally from him. A black derby covered his eyes, and a gold chain dangled from his vest and danced in rhythm with each movement. Most peculiar he noticed about the fellow passenger was his left hand pressing hard against his left vest pocket while he slept.

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“Must be headin’ back home to the city.” His thoughts started again, ‘Too hot to be wearing black...too hot for anything.’”

His eyes rolled to the young lady who sat across from him.

He figured her to be about 30. She seemed a bit overly dressed for this particular occasion; the dirt-laden hems against her white and yellow dress apparent. She leaned against the rough and worn coach paneling to her left, eyes closed, strawberry red hair about her shoulders, and lips pursed and unrelaxed. He wondered if she was asleep.

He gazed back at her hair and whispered to himself, “Jennie...how I miss you my sweet wife.” An unnoticeable sad smile drew across his lips.

He dropped his gaze suspecting he might be caught improperly staring and instead fixed both his small dark eyes through the intermittent opening of the curtains.

The open range passed by quickly, and he wondered how the horses could keep such a pace. In fact, he suddenly realized the area was completely unfamiliar. He bit his lip, sat up, tilted his hat back and peered out the curtains a little more.

“Strange,” he muttered. He had traveled every road, path, rabbit trail and then made his own trails in all of 42 years. He knew everything and anything Oklahoma. He parted the curtains a bit more scanning the range for any signs of the Ozarks, figuring they should at least be visible. The last time he set his eyes upon them was 10 years ago...a day of infamy and sadness.

He tried to swallow, and his eyes welled.

He had forgotten.

How could he forget?

How could he forget *that*?

And for a brief moment the thought of seeing those mountains sickened him; any beauty they held became a

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grotesque irony, and the once pristine vision of rolling hills stretched out before him above a sea of green now grew dark and uncomely...foreboding.

Why return now? Why now?

Regret suddenly seized him, but Jennie's voice reminded him God's ways can't always be understood, that his way of doing things weren't the same as ours, and one day he would understand that more.

He remembered the way she held his face in her hands those days; hard fought days that seemed there was no end of guilt or grief; her way of looking up at him that eased the wounds of a worn soldier. She always had that way about her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do the same for you, Jennie," he whispered. "I'm so sorry. I miss you my love."

The pain was stabbing him now. Near unbearable this time. His right hand drew up to his chest again and he held his breath, his teeth clenched. Leaning back and resting his head he again closed his eyes.

"Too tired to think about all this right now," He muttered. "I've got a job to do, one last time. And after this, no more...I promise you, Jennie, no more."

"Excuse me, sir?" She stared intently yet gently at him, her soft, English accent interrupting the silence.

"Ma'am?" he replied, opening his eyes and sitting up a little more.

"You spoke, sir...I believe it was Jennie you mentioned."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry. Pardon my wakin' ya'." His strong, broken voice brought the stagecoach back to life amid the low, dull drum of the horses, yet the coach was unusually quiet and serene amid the noise.

She smiled.

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“Sir, no apology is necessary. It’s a long trip...I’m not surprised that I may, too, have drifted off and talked in my sleep.”

Her speech was very proper, spoken with great care and clarity, and pronounced fully and completely. It seemed each word she said was as important as the others which made all her words monotone and yet soothing.

“Emily Watkins, sir,” bowing her head slightly, “I’ve started a conversation without a proper introduction.”

He nodded in return, slightly pursing his lips at the pain.

“David McDaniel, ma’am...it’s a pleasure. “

Her sea-green eyes dropped to the floor in proper respect, careful not to hold the gaze of a man longer than need be.

“Mr. McDaniel, it is indeed a pleasure. “

David saw something in her eyes...something familiar, both peaceful and yet, haunting.

“And may I ask, sir,” her voice a bit lifted and vibrant,”what brings you on this journey...business in the city?”

He paused. “Yes ma’am.” He pulled his hat down and laid it on his lap, and after running his hand quickly through his silver hair and then down his graying moustache, let out a more relaxed sigh as the pain again subsided.

“I don’t expect I’ll be there a day or so. In fact, I’d much prefer to be there as lil’ as possible.”

“I see. I suspect you do not favor the city?”

His eyes scanned out the window as the curtains parted in the breeze.

“No, not this one.” He sighed deeply and chewed his lip

In a voice more comfortable and reassuring,” Then sir, I pray your stay there is as speedy and pleasant as can be. “

It was an unexpected response that brought his eyes back to hers, and he replied,

“Well, Mrs. Watkins, I do appreciate your kind words.”

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He paused a moment, then asked, “and you, ma’am?”

“Business as well,” she responded, seemingly delighted that the conversation would ensue, “but of a more personal nature.”

“Yes ma’am... I understand.” His eyes again gazed out the curtains.

She smiled intently and yet her face remained gentle as she leaned forward towards him, her right hand over her left on her lap, “no sir, I don’t believe you do. You are a good man, and I wish to tell you, if you will allow me the privilege.”

With this unusual response, he sat upright, the back of his head just nudging the worn and wooden trim that sheltered them.

“Ma’am, I don’t mean to pry...”

“You are not, Mr. McDaniel, and it would give me great pleasure to share this with you.”

He clasped his fingers together awkwardly and nodded.

A solemn shadow cast itself across her face, and she looked out through the curtains as she spoke.

“Years ago a man, a stranger, gave me a most precious gift, and in that I found something that had been lost. He did not, and perhaps could not comprehend the depth of his actions. ” She paused. “A man of both character and conviction, his gift left me changed forever. I am taking this time to return to the city to...” she trailed off and her eyes dropped, her voice quivering somewhat as she turned back to David, and through eyes now welled peered into his soul, “to simply tell him, thank you.”

And she smiled softly again, her eyes not leaving his.

And though proper etiquette should have shied them from staring or speaking more on the matter, he was compelled to lean forward and reply “Miss Watkins, I pray you find this man that has so changed your life and deliver your precious message to him.”

Her smile widened as she held his eyes.

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And he stared in return.
And the peaceful yet haunting shadow loomed over him.
I know you, Mrs. Watkins.
I know you.

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