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Red River Fever

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# **RED RIVER FEVER**

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ISBN 1-931391-66-1

Published 2001

Published by Okaloosa Publishing, P.O. Box 239, Columbia, LA 71418 USA.  
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2001

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**Rickey E. Pittman**

## Chapter 8

*The clouds were low and speeding south in thin restless streams* toward the river when Clifton Ray and Glenda arrived at the Red River Church of Christ. He followed Glenda from the car up to the red brick auditorium, but stopped at the door.

Glenda turned around and looked at him. "Well, let's get inside."

Clifton's eyes followed the path of the clouds. "I'm going to smoke a cigarette first. You go on in."

Glenda brushed some lint from the shoulder of her dark blue dress. "I'll save you a seat. Don't be too long."

"Damn, you look good today," Clifton said. "All dressed up and all. You look too damn good to be a man's wife."

"There's the Clifton Ray I remember," she said. "I'm glad you came to church with me today." Glenda smiled, reached for his hand, squeezed it, and went inside.

Clifton smoked his cigarette down to the filter, threw it down, and crushed it out with his Tony Llama boot. He lit another.

As Brother Steve hurried out of the classroom building toward the sanctuary, he spotted Clifton. The minister hurried over, grabbed his hand, and pumped it several times. "Clifton Ray, land's sakes, good to see you, boy!"

"Yeah, Glenda finally nagged me into comin. But don't get your hopes up. I don't reckon church going will become a real habit. I was pretty well through with it a long time ago."

"Well, God's not through with you. He loves you, and is happy you are here. I know Glenda must be really proud you came. She's been worried about you. Look, I better go on in. I've got a good sermon today. I think you'll like

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it.” Brother Steve patted him on the shoulder and went into the church, closing the doors behind him.

“Damn you, Glenda,” Clifton said. He took a step toward the auditorium but hesitated. He laid his hands on the dark oak door which the congregation had salvaged from the first church built in the valley in Indian Territory Days. He slid one hand along the coarse door’s surface, feeling the dents and scars. The song leader announced the number of the first hymn, and he listened to the nasal, scratchy voices of the congregation as they followed the shaped notes in their songbooks and strained for four-part harmony.

As a boy, Clifton Ray had attended this church with his mother, sang the same acappella gospel songs, and wept with broken heart when he thought of his many sins and the suffering of Jesus upon the cross, but now . . . Clifton thought that surely there must be some way to know, some feeling, some clarification to tell him what he should do, some way to reconnect with this part of his past, some voice to tell him what he had lost. There wasn’t. He tried to remember why he had agreed to come to church today. He couldn’t.

Clifton turned away, walked to his car, and drove back to the house. He knew Glenda would be pissed when she realized he had left her at church, but he figured she’d get over it. He changed clothes and pulled out his Model 12 Winchester shotgun, a hunting vest, and half a box of number six shot. He drove to Liberty Bottom, dusted his waist with Chigger Chaser, then sat quietly underneath some pecan trees. Before long, a band of fox squirrels eased from their hiding places and began to play in the branches. He killed three of them. The fourth jumped from the tree and fled across the pasture. Clifton pursued the squirrel into a dense thicket of oak and hickory. There, he followed a fence with century old bois d’arc posts to a NO TRESPASSING sign at a wash where he crawled under the fence on his back. The wire on the fence was old and rusted, with wide knifelike barbs that knicked his face and tore holes in his clothes and vest. He stood up on the other side, then slipped into the woods.

\* \* \*

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GLENDA shifted restlessly on the seat of the hard oak pew as the congregation finished the last verse to "Marching to Zion." *Where the hell is he?* she thought. *Probably chain smoking outside. I bet he'll come in late just to piss me off.*

"Our next song will be number 235. Number 235." The song leader held up both hands to direct the singing, and pitched the song three notes too high for his congregation. Glenda listened as the bass singers took the lead melody and she shuddered at the words:

Standing outside with the demons,  
Entrance within denied . . .

Glenda glanced over her shoulder toward the door every minute or so.

Two of the congregation's widows whispered behind her. When one of them patted her on the shoulder, she turned around.

"Brother Steve thinks our church and community needs an old time revival," the old woman whispered. "He says we got to get God's help if we want to defeat the evil comin upon us. Oh, if only my Roy were still alive today, he'd know what we should do."

Glenda nodded, then turned back around as Brother Steve began his sermon. When she realized her husband wasn't coming in, she cursed Clifton Ray under her breath and focused her attention on the minister's words.

\* \* \*

CLIFTON followed the dry creek wash to a big oak. Lonnie Fogle, an old farmer from Ivanhoe, Texas, had once taken him to this tree and told him that the oak once served as the valley's hanging tree, back when the Kemp community was known as Warner Springs. He said one of the Doolan gang had been hanged here. The outlaw had come down with a bad case of the crazies, and left the gang's cabin in the middle of the night. When he returned a week later with stolen horses and scalps he had taken from a Carpenter's Bluff family, Bob Doolan, Ellis B.'s grandfather, bound and gagged the incoherent man with rawhide and deposited him in front of the Warner Springs jail with a note of apology pinned to the man's shirt. The note was still pinned to his shirt the next

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day when the Panola County sheriff kicked the apple box from under his feet and left him swinging from the limb.

Another man hanged here had stolen a horse from Beauford's father. Beauford and a few others pursued the horse thief and found him hiding in a canebrake near the river. They took him to the sheriff who put him in jail on a Friday. After Sunday church services, they tried and hanged him.

Fogle said most of the valley community came to see the hangings. Hangings not only administered justice and deterred future crimes, but were social events which edified the community. After sumptuous picnic lunches, local politicians made speeches, young girls were admired and courted by young—and sometimes older—men, the smaller children held mock court and played sheriff and outlaw games, while their parents bartered and caught up on gossip and news.

Clifton climbed the tree and swung by his arms on the biggest branch, wondering what a hanged man felt and looked like, and how it would feel to hang someone. He had sensed an excitement in Fogle's voice about the hangings. Clifton thought he must have missed something significant and that Fogle and his generation had known and experienced things he and his generation would never know and never be edified by.

Past the hanging tree, Clifton moved through the blackjack and post oak scrub until he came to the edge of a half-acre clearing. The trees were bare, skeletal, and the area stank of rotting flesh. Buzzards circled lazily overhead and a group of them roosted across the clearing in the dead treetops and croaked as if they were engaged in cabalistic conference. The discolored ground around him was covered with bones, bird shit, and vomit.

Clifton felt a gust of air and heard the swoosh of wings as a vulture dived to the ground near him with a worm-covered, half-devoured rabbit in its mouth. The vulture dropped the rabbit and tore at its skin, and Clifton could see globs of fur and blood sticking to the bird's beak.

The vulture's blank eyes followed Clifton as it waddled and hopped around the roadkill with the arrogance of an ancient lammergeier. The stench of death and corruption filled Clifton's nostrils, and he moved on, restless and detached, and prowled the woods in his prosaic perambulations.

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When he neared the river, he came upon a rattlesnake coiled by a clump of prickly pear. Clifton sat on a nearby stump and studied the agitated serpent, which rattled, hissed, and flitted its tongue in strange discourse. Clifton crushed its head with a log and stuffed the writhing reptile's body inside his hunting vest. The six-foot rattler squirmed and wriggled against his back, and he felt the shifting flux of death in motion.

He pushed on, all the way to the river but never saw another living creature. There were no tracks or trails. Clifton knew that in the last century the river thickets were once thick with deer and other game. But now, it seemed to him as if nature and man alike had abandoned this part of the valley and discarded the thickets to desolation. Clifton sat on the riverbank until sundown, leaning against a tree with the initials E.R. carved deep into its trunk. He gazed thoughtlessly at the muddy water swirling past him until all light had faded.

And the river whispered to him, whispered malevolent, brutal, goading utterances of an ancient demonic language it had spoken to other lost men who had once moved and lived along its banks—Indians, Comancheros, Jayhawkers, scalp hunters, outlaw gangs, and good farmers' boys. Clifton Ray listened, then walked back to the road in the dark.

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