



The six heavily armed horsemen rode slowly into the town of Clinton, Missouri, their eyes scanning the periphery, searching for any sign of trouble, looking as though they were ready for a fight. Leading the pack was Captain Ezra Justice, a veteran officer in the Union Army, handpicked by General William Tecumseh Sherman to carry out covert missions against the Confederate Army during the Civil War.

Nathaniel York, a large, strong, black man rode next to Ezra. “Big Nate,” as Nathaniel was known to his friends, pulled his Yankee kepi cap down farther on his head to shield his eyes from the sun, squinting to get a better look at the scene in front of them. A crowd had gathered in front of The Redheaded Lady, the town’s popular watering hole.

“Look like trouble to you, Captain?” Nate asked, his eyes darting back and forth from one side of Main Street to the other.





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“I don’t think so,” Ezra replied, sitting up straight in his saddle, eyes peering straight ahead but aware of everything around him. “Looks to me like the town has remained calm and peaceful.” Captain Ezra Justice raised his right arm, and the four men following him and Nate reined their horses to a halt on the edge of town. “Let’s hold up here for a moment,” Justice said over his shoulder.

“I have Mr. Henry loaded and ready, Captain,” Reginald Bonesteel said, patting the .44 caliber long-barreled rifle protruding from a pouch strapped on the side of his horse. “Just in case.”

Justice nodded, and a faint glimmer of a smile creased his face. He knew the British-born Bonesteel was always itching for a gun battle. And with Bonesteel’s outstanding marksmanship, few men stood much of a chance against him. Less than a month earlier, Bonesteel had perched atop some of Clinton’s highest rooftops picking off villains and, along with the other Justice Riders, had helped free the town from the oppressive vice-like grip of Mordecai Slate’s Death Raiders.

“I don’t think we’ll need them, but keep your guns ready,” Ezra said. “Can’t be too careful these days. Some soldiers on both sides are still fighting their own wars.” The other men with Justice rested their hands close to their revolvers.

Carlos and Roberto Hawkins, good-looking, lighthearted twins in their mid-twenties, nudged their horses in behind Bonesteel’s mount. Fresh off the streets of New York City prior to the War between the States, Carlos and Roberto had matured quickly through the rigors of battle. Their clever exploits with





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

explosives had established them as legends among surviving soldiers, and the stories of their bold, death-defying antics grew ever more outlandish with each retelling.

Next to the twins rode the tall, muscular Harry Whitecloud, the son of a Sioux woman and a white man. Harry went by his mother's maiden name because his father had deserted the family while his mother was still pregnant with Harry. Harry's long black hair and his ruddy skin tone highlighted his finely chiseled facial features, reflecting his mother's heritage. Harry had lived off the land among the Indians, learning the mystic healing arts of the medicine man. But he wanted to study modern medicine, so he applied to and was accepted at Princeton. That's where he was located at the outbreak of war, so he joined the Union forces at Philadelphia. A fearless warrior, Harry could do things with a bowie knife that even skilled hunters only dreamed about. And his tracking abilities were the best in the Federal army.

Together the six men had worked under the direct commission of General William Tecumseh Sherman, wreaking havoc among Confederate troops and hastening the end of the war through their courageous, unorthodox methods of sabotage and destruction. Soldiers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line had learned to respect the group known as the Justice Riders.

They had just left the home of Elizabeth O'Banyon, where they had buried the seventh man in their small contingency, Shaun O'Banyon. Shaun had sacrificed his life to help save the lives of the other Justice Riders. With his dying breath, he had asked Justice to take him home to his wife, Lizzie, for burial;





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

and at great risk to themselves, the Riders had fulfilled the last request of their fellow soldier.

Now the war was over, and the Justice Riders looked forward to a time of peace and reconstruction in the reunited country. They were ready to strike out on their own individual adventures: some in search of fortunes; others looking for new challenges; others, like Ezra and Nate, were hoping to reestablish something of life as they knew it back in Tennessee before the war. The Justice Riders were making one final sweep through Clinton to make sure everything was back to normal before they headed off on their own pursuits. They also had received word from the Clinton bank that their back pay had finally arrived.

Now that the Justice Riders had destroyed Mordecai Slate's rogue gang of malcontents known as the Death Raiders, Ezra had felt free to contact General Sherman to inform him that the Justice Riders' mission was complete. In a telegram message to General Sherman, Justice told his commanding officer: "Shaun O'Banyon delivered. Mordecai Slate's gang destroyed. Mission accomplished."

Ezra had earlier telegraphed General Sherman, requesting that the army pay the Justice Riders their six months of back pay. Justice suggested that the army could send the back pay to the Clinton bank, and the men could pick it up there, subtly letting General Sherman know that the Justice Riders would soon be going their separate ways.

General Sherman responded promptly, promising to contact the bank so the Justice Riders could receive their pay.





A THREAT TO JUSTICE



BEFORE THE JUSTICE RIDERS left Elizabeth O'Banyon's farm and proceeded on their way back toward Clinton, they had casually talked about their future plans. British-born Reginald Bonesteel planned to go west, hoping to make a fortune in the newly discovered gold fields of northern California. Harry Whitecloud planned to go back to the university to pursue his medical studies and one day move back to the Sioux reservation to help his people. The Hawkins twins longed for exciting adventures and hoped to find them in St. Louis or perhaps in New Orleans. Ezra and Nate planned to return to the Justice family plantation in Tennessee—if there was anything left of it.

“Everybody ready?” Ezra asked, knowing the answer before he asked. “Alright, let’s go.” Ezra led the way up Main Street. As Ezra Justice and his men rode slowly into Clinton, they were not prepared for what greeted them. Men, women, and children alike poured out onto the town’s boardwalk and began to cheer and applaud. Some of the children fell into line alongside and behind the Justice Riders, forming a spontaneous parade through the center of town.

“Wow, Ezra! They sure are happy to see us!” Nate said.

“Yeah, they are able to walk the streets safely again,” Ezra replied. The Justice Riders continued riding toward the bank. Ezra slowly raised his hand to acknowledge some of the men along the boardwalk. Seeing the response from Ezra Justice, the men began calling out words of thanks and gratitude to the





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

Justice Riders, and the cheering increased. The Justice Riders slowly made their way up the street, the crowd growing larger, with more and more people following behind the six soldiers.

“Welcome back,” one man called from the crowd.

“Sure hope you plan on staying!” someone else called out.

“Our town is your town. We can’t thank you enough!”

The adulation of the townsfolk caused Ezra to feel a bit uncomfortable. He appreciated the many kind comments of the people, but as far as he was concerned, he and his men had simply done their jobs in ridding the town of Slate and his evil gang.

They rode up to the bank where the army paymaster had sent their back pay. When Ezra and his men dismounted, the crowd gathered around and cheered as though the Justice Riders were favorite sons coming home after the war, the men shaking their hands and slapping the Justice Riders on their backs, the women nodding their appreciation, and some of them even hugging and kissing the Justice Riders on their cheeks.

“Oh, thank you for what you did for us,” one woman gushed. “You saved our town.”

Not usually one for speeches, Ezra felt compelled to say something. He stood on the boardwalk in front of the bank and addressed the crowd.

“Less than a month ago, this town was under siege by a ruthless gang of misguided gunslingers, following the lead of a truly evil man,” Ezra said. “But with God’s help and yours, we faced them down and wiped them out. Freedom is your right; don’t ever let anyone take that away from you again.”





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“We won’t, Captain!” a man called out from the crowd.

“Never again!” another agreed. The crowd erupted in applause. Ezra tamped his hands and arms toward the ground, trying to quiet the cheers. He looked over at the other Justice Riders, who were standing behind him in front of the bank. The cheering continued, so Carlos and Roberto took off their hats and waved them to the people in the crowd; Reginald Boneteel, Nathaniel York, and Harry Whitecloud removed their caps and simply nodded.

“I’m not one for long-winded speeches, so I’ll just say this and be done. It’s time for my men and me to move on.” A collective sigh swept over the crowd, followed by a hush as Ezra continued. “We’ve made some good friends here, so don’t be surprised if you see us come back from time to time. But until then, keep freedom alive and don’t let any threat to justice stand.” Ezra tipped his hat to the people and said, “Thank you, folks, for this kind reception. May God bless you. Good-bye.”

The crowd broke into loud applause and cheers once again as the Justice Riders waved their hats high in the air, then replaced them, turned around, and walked inside the bank.

Amos Smithson, the bank manager, had been watching and listening to the commotion through his window. He slid his spectacles higher on his nose and hurried to greet Ezra and the men as they came through the door. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” he said, reaching out his hand to Ezra. “And welcome back to Clinton. I’m Amos Smithson, the manager here at First National. We’ve been expecting you. As you can tell, the folks of this town are greatly indebted to you and





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

are much appreciative of your . . . er . . . ah, shall we say, your *talents*.” Smithson eyed the large LaMat revolver strapped to Ezra’s thigh.

“Thank you, Mr. Smithson,” Ezra replied. “We won’t keep you long. We received your message saying that General Sherman’s package had arrived for us.”

“That’s right, Captain,” Smithson said. “Your back pay is here. We have already counted it out and prepared the individual payments for you, but allow me to double-check each one to make sure the amounts are correct.

“Please step right over here to the tellers’ windows,” Mr. Smithson said, “and I’ll get the money out of the safe and distribute it.”

As Amos Smithson counted out the cash for each of the Justice Riders, their eyes got wider and wider. “That’s more than six months of pay!” Carlos said to Roberto.

The bank manager looked up and smiled but kept counting. “The letter here says to pay each of you a thousand dollars,” Mr. Smithson said. “The letter is from General Sherman. And it says, ‘Job well-done.’”

“Hot diggides! We’re going to have a great time in New Orleans with all this money!” Carlos crowed.

“If we don’t spend it all in St. Louis,” Roberto added.

Ezra Justice was the last member of the group to receive his back pay. “I’ll be paying you double, Captain Justice,” the bank manager said. “My instructions are to give you the pay belonging to Sergeant Shaun O’Banyon, as well.”

“I understand,” Justice replied. “That will be just fine.” After Ezra received his and O’Banyon’s pay, he turned to his





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

men and said, “Nate and I will drop off Shaun’s portion to Elizabeth on the way out of town.”

“That’s a good idea,” Reginald Bonesteel said. “No doubt, it will be a pleasant surprise to her.”

“More than that, Reginald. This money will be a great blessing to Mrs. O’Banyon,” Nathaniel York said. “She can now hire someone to help with the farm. Lord knows she can sure use the help.”

His job complete, Amos Smithson came back out from behind the bank counter. “I just want to add my thanks, Mr. Justice, for all that you and your men did to set our town free. Before you showed up, I was afraid to open the bank for business because those Death Raiders were always around. Nobody had the courage to challenge them, so they pretty much took whatever they wanted—food, drinks, some of our women, and a lot of our money. This town would have died had it not been for you men.”

“Bullies will always be around, Mr. Smithson,” Nate said. “The faces change, but the hearts are the same. They’ll try to get away with as much as they can. But if good people will stand up to them and say, ‘That’s enough,’ the bullies can easily be beaten.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Smithson said, “but I sure appreciate your courage and willingness to stand up for what is right.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smithson.” Ezra nodded. “You take care now.”

“Oh, I will,” Smithson said. “You men do the same.”





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“We will,” Ezra replied. Ezra and his men filed out of the bank.

Once outside the door, Nate nudged Ezra in the ribs. “Take care? You ain’t never taken care in all your life, Ezra Justice.”

Ezra almost smiled. “Well, Nate, some people like to take care, and others like to take charge. I figured Mr. Smithson would rather take care.”

The men continued counting their money as they headed for the general store to get some supplies, ready to strike out in search of their fortunes . . . or misfortunes.

After everyone had purchased the items they wanted and packed them onto their horses, there was no longer a reason to stay, but Roberto Hawkins didn’t want to see the group disband. “Before we all go off in various directions, let’s have one final drink together,” Roberto suggested.

“You do come up with a good idea once in a great while, little brother,” Carlos said. Everyone laughed as the men tied up their horses in front of The Redheaded Lady saloon and stepped inside. The saloon was busy, especially for late afternoon, and when the men inside recognized the Justice Riders, another spontaneous cheer broke out.

“I’d like a round of drinks for our men,” Harry Whitecloud said to Joe Thompson, the stout, bearded, apron-clad bartender.

“No sirrie, today the drinks are on me,” Joe said as Harry Whitecloud tried to hand him some money to pay for the drinks.





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“We can well afford to pay you, Joe,” Harry Whitecloud said, pushing the money across the bar toward the cash register.

Joe pushed the money back toward Harry. “Mordecai Slate and his men just about put me out of business,” Joe said, “and would have if it hadn’t been for you men.” The bartender shook his head as he spoke as though trying to shake off a nightmarish thought. “So today it is my privilege to offer the Justice Riders anything you want to drink, to show my appreciation.”

“Here, here!” several men in the bar shouted, as they raised their glasses high in the air in a salute to the Justice Riders.

Ezra Justice and his men stayed for a short while, talking with the men of Clinton, reliving some of the escapades of the Justice Riders, recalling the ferocious life-or-death gun battle between the Justice Riders and the Death Raiders and the personal duel between villainous Mordecai Slate and Ezra Justice in which Justice felled Slate with one shot. The Justice Riders relished the kind words of the well-wishers and felt reluctant to leave, yet they knew the time was rapidly approaching for their departure.

After they had their drink, Ezra and his men left the saloon and walked outside to their horses. As they prepared to mount, the men who had lived together for more than a year before the end of the Civil War—eating, sleeping, fighting the enemy, watching out for one another every day and night—looked at each other awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

“This is strange,” Carlos said, shaking his head. “We’ve been locked at the hips for the past year, depending on one





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

another and defending one another with our lives. It's tough just to say good-bye and walk away." The men fell into a heavy silence, pretending to be cinching their saddles tighter, placing items in their saddlebags, or checking their horses' hooves for stones. For the first time since they had met, they shared an odd uneasiness.

Ezra finally broke the silence. "Remember, men; just as we agreed before we left Elizabeth O'Banyon's place, if any of you ever need me, just contact Elizabeth; I'll keep in touch with her, and she will know how to reach me."

"That goes for me, too," said Reginald Bonesteel.

The others chimed in with, "Same here; me, too!"

"Alright, let's agree; keep Elizabeth aware of your whereabouts so if any of us are needed, we can be contacted quickly through her. When Nate and I drop the money off with her, I will remind her about our arrangement."

As everyone was shaking hands and hugging, a man from the telegraph office came running up. "Captain Justice! Mr. Justice," he called out as he approached.

"This just came in from Washington, sir," he said, waving a telegram toward Ezra. "The salutation said it was urgent."

"Thank you," Ezra said, as he took the telegram from the messenger's hands.

"Urgent, hmmm. I don't like the feeling of this," Ezra said, looking at the telegram. He stood staring at the important message in his hands.

Nate raised his eyebrows and said, "Are you going to open it?"

"I don't know if I want to . . ."





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“You gotta open it, Captain Justice,” Carlos Hawkins howled. “Maybe you inherited a fortune or something.”

“Or maybe the law finally caught up with you two hooligans,” Bonesteel deadpanned in the direction of the Hawkins twins.

“I think he just insulted us, Roberto,” Carlos said, pretending that his feelings were hurt.

“Nah, you have to care about the opinion of someone before he can insult you,” Roberto quipped. Ezra Justice ignored the playful repartee between his soldiers.

“Maybe the army is reassigning us,” Harry Whitecloud suggested. “Would that be possible?”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out, Harry,” Justice answered as he tore open the envelope. “Now that the war is over, most men are mustering out. You’d have to make a special effort to stay in the army. Most soldiers are looking forward to going home and getting back to work.” Ezra’s eyes scanned the telegram in his hand, slowly shaking his head as he read it. “Everyone except us, I guess.”

“What do you mean? What does it say, Captain?” Carlos asked.

“It’s from General Sherman,” Ezra said slowly, the surprise obvious in his voice, “and he is summoning us to Washington, as soon as possible.”

“Washington? I’m planning to spend some time in St. Louis,” Roberto blurted.

“Yeah, me too,” said Carlos. “I hear there are lots of pretty women in St. Louis, all looking for just the right man.”





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“So pray tell, my man, why would you be going there?” Bonesteel said. Ezra continued to ignore the banter between his soldiers as he read the telegram again, just to make sure he hadn’t missed anything.

“It looks as though our orders have been changed,” Ezra continued. “General Sherman wants us to report to him in Washington before we go our separate ways. He says it is a matter of utmost importance.” Ezra read part of the telegram aloud to the others:

*“To Captain Ezra Justice and the Justice Riders.
Return to Washington as soon as possible. There are
matters of utmost importance to discuss.”*



Ezra rubbed his chin. “What could possibly be more important than getting back home and restarting our lives?”

“Wait a minute,” said Carlos. “We just got all this money! And me and my brother are itching to spend it, beginning in St. Louis and then in New Orleans—if we have any money left that is, after we’ve spent some time in St. Louis. Is this an optional trip, Captain?”

“You tell me, Carlos,” Ezra said. “I haven’t finished reading the telegram yet. The General also says that if we don’t show up, he will hunt us down and skin us alive!”

“Oh,” said Carlos, his countenance drooping. “That answers my question.”

“Well, we’d better get going then,” said Nate. “I don’t look to being skinned by the General.”





A THREAT TO JUSTICE

“Are we really required to go, Captain?” Harry Whitecloud asked seriously.

Ezra waved the yellow telegram in front of him. “It is a command, Harry,” Justice said, “not a suggestion. As long as we are still in the army, we have to obey. Disobedience of a direct command could be costly.”

“I understand, Captain,” Whitecloud replied.

“What do you think we should do, Ezra?” Nate asked.

“Let’s head on up to Jefferson City, which is the next big town where we can replenish our supplies again for the trip. It’s a long way to Washington, even if we can catch some trains along the way. We’ll go to Washington, meet with General Sherman, and then we can all go our separate ways from there.”

“Hmm, Washington, you say,” Bonesteel said thoughtfully. “Fine dining, sophisticated female company, and afternoon teas. Wonderful.” The stately Brit tilted his head back and looked to the sky as he spoke. “Perhaps I should retrieve my uniform from West Point, the one I wore when I was still with the Queen’s Coldstream Guard.”

“Ha! That silly plumed hat that stood about two feet tall?” Carlos hooted. “The soldiers in Sherman’s ranks will think you are forming a marching band or something. Forget it, Reginald. You’re one of us now—not that I wouldn’t enjoy seeing you in that stuffy British dress uniform again, with all the brass buttons and sashes. I could use a good laugh!”

“Why you . . .” Bonesteel looked as though he was ready to dismount and take after Carlos.

“Let’s be on our way, men,” said Justice. “We have a long journey.”





A THREAT TO JUSTICE



BEFORE LEAVING CLINTON, the Justice Riders returned to the O'Banyon farm to give Elizabeth her husband Shaun's back pay. As the Justice Riders approached the house, Elizabeth walked out on the front porch. "Back already? Looks like you boys just can't live without me," she said with a smile.

Ezra responded, "Elizabeth, we do think a lot of you, but we're not staying. Our reason for returning is simply to give you Shaun's back pay of one thousand dollars." Ezra dismounted and handed a bag of money to Elizabeth.

"One thousand dollars!" Elizabeth placed her hand over her heart. "Oh, thank you, Ezra; this money will go a long way in keeping up this farm. Now I can afford to hire some help."

"Don't thank us; thank General Sherman for being so generous."

The Justice Riders reminded Elizabeth that they would keep in touch, and she agreed to be the conduit through which information about the other men could flow. They said their good-byes once again, and the Justice Riders galloped off toward the east to find out what was so urgent that General Sherman would ask them to return to the Capitol.

