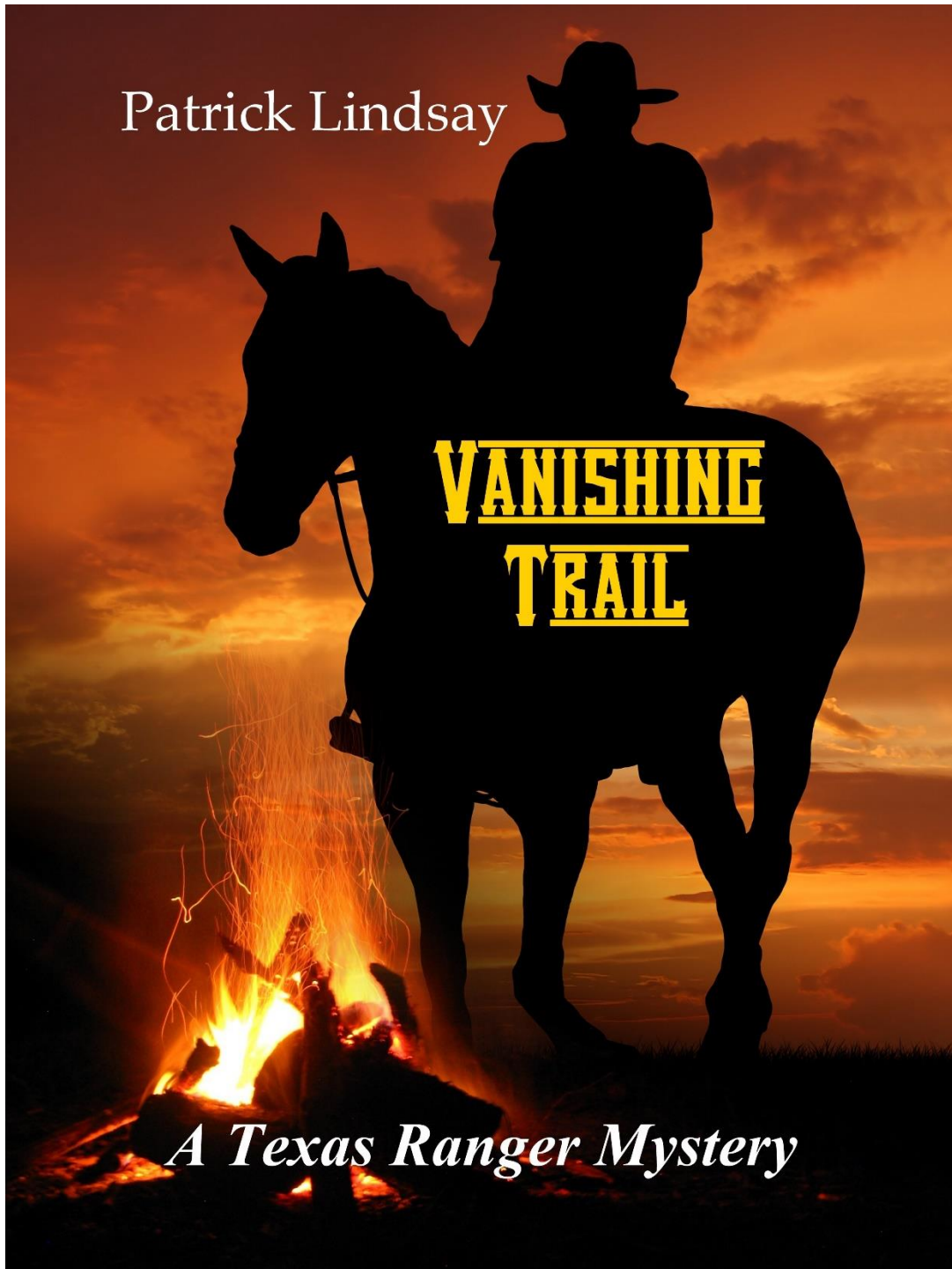


Patrick Lindsay

**VANISHING
TRAIL**

A Texas Ranger Mystery



Chapter One

Ash McKinnon

Langtry, Texas

January, 1883

I stood at the bar in an open tent saloon and surveyed the spectacle around me. A sign hung above the entrance of the tent with words proclaiming “Law West of the Pecos”. A smaller sign to the side identified the place as “The Jersey Lilly”. Several doubtful-looking characters were lined up at the bar beside me. The first was my partner in the Texas Rangers, Charlie Bass, and the rest were railroad workers or travelers passing through town. Most of us were drinking beer; a few had the misfortune of trying the house whiskey.

My attention was caught by the activity at the far end of the tent. This I had learned, was a combination saloon and court room. Judge Roy Bean was holding court down there, and it appeared to be a wedding. I heard him asking the man and woman some pretty standard questions, and there were mumbled answers that I couldn’t quite make out. Finally, the judge grabbed his gavel and raised it in the air. I leaned forward, knowing what he would say next.

Roy Bean slammed the gavel down and bellowed “I pronounce you man and wife. May God have mercy on your souls!” With that, he shepherded the happy couple toward the bar and let them know they were expected to buy whiskey, in addition to the five dollars they owed him for the wedding.

I snorted into my beer and turned back around to the bar. Never having gotten married myself, I couldn’t be certain, but I was pretty sure the “God have mercy on your souls” part wasn’t something you would generally hear at a wedding. Seeing the judge headed in my direction, I slid my five cents across the counter and got myself a refill. The judge didn’t like to see empty glasses, and this was the only place to get a beer for miles.

My name is Ash McKinnon and I have been a Texas Ranger for about a year and a half now. I was recruited after a cattle drive from Central Texas to Kansas. It turned out that a Ranger named Red Corbin was one of the men on the drive. He had arranged for me to be hired by the Rangers, along with a friend named Mike Stone, because he liked the way we had handled ourselves on the drive.

I come from the hills in Tennessee, mighty close to North Carolina. Most folks have never heard of Ford Creek, the town I’m from, so I generally just say I’m from the hills in Tennessee. My Ma claims I was big enough to sit at the dinner table when I was born. I don’t know about that, but I stand about six feet three, and weigh in at 235 pounds. People and things generally get out of my way when I want them to. I might also mention that my granny says I’m good lookin’, on account of my brown eyes and dark curly hair, but you know her eyesight ain’t what it used to be.

I’ve spent three of my twenty-six years in Texas now, and I reckon I’ll stay here. I had been sent out here to West Texas just a few months before, mainly to deal with bandidos from the south stealing cattle and horses from the ranchers in this remote area. Also, the railroad appreciated having a Rangers presence if it was needed. It had been pretty quiet, all things

considered. Quiet wasn't bad, but I felt a little cut off out here. My main source of entertainment had been watching Roy Bean conduct his "court".

A disturbance down the line at the bar got my attention. I saw a man standing at the bar, arguing with Roy Bean. I knew that wasn't generally a good idea. I hadn't seen the man around here before, and he was dressed too nice to be a railroad worker, cowboy, or drifting miner. I had a feeling he had been overcharged for his beer. Bean tended to fleece the strangers around town sometimes. I exchanged a glance with my partner, Charlie Bass. So far, we had stayed out of these things, not really knowing what our authority was around town.

The stranger raised his voice. "I gave you a twenty-dollar gold piece for a beer. Where's my change?"

Roy Bean polished a glass absently and stared at the newcomer. "You kin have a refill. Just holler."

The stranger was turning slightly red around the gills. "I don't want another beer! Look at that sign!" He pointed at a sign behind the bar, proclaiming beer for sale at 5 cents per glass. He waved his finger back and forth for emphasis.

Bean didn't bother to turn around and look at the sign. "This is my bar," he announced loudly. "Also, it's my court." He pointed at the Law West of the Pecos sign. "I like to keep the peace around here. It don't seem to me you're bein' peaceful." He slammed the glass down on the bar and leaned over the counter. "You need to pipe down."

The stranger, completely red in the face and almost at a loss for words, leaned in to get face-to-face with Roy Bean. "Where's my change?" he shouted. "You owe me \$19.95."

Bean leaned down, fished around under the bar, and came up with a gavel. I glanced over at Charlie. We had no idea he kept a gavel under there. Bean lifted it up and rapped it down sharply on the counter. "I'm finin' you \$19.95 for disturbin' the peace," he thundered. "I'd advise you to go back outside an' get on your train. If'n you disturb the peace any more, I'll be chaining you to that tree out there." He pointed toward a large ash tree outside the bar. "That there is my jail," he finished.

The stranger whirled around, looked at the ash tree, then looked around the tent, hoping for some help from somebody. No takers. Nobody looked in his direction. Finally, he drained his beer, slammed the glass down on the bar and headed off toward the train station.

"Probably a good idea," I observed. "No fun getting' chained to that tree, I expect."

Charlie finished his beer, then glanced over in my direction. "Don't never let him chain me to that tree, McKinnon," he said.

"It's a deal," I agreed, finishing my glass and moving out of the tent with Charlie. "We don't pay more than a nickel for a beer around here, and we don't let each other get chained to that tree." Sometimes, I thought, it's good to wear a star on your shirt. Even Roy Bean hadn't tried to mess with us yet.

We left the Jersey Lilly/courthouse and ambled down to what passed for a main street in Langtry. Our horses were hitched outside the only café in town. The menu ran heavily to beef and beans, but it beat anything Charlie and I might be cooking. Before stopping in to eat, we were interested in getting any mail that might have come in on today's train. There was no post office out here, nor was there a telegraph office. News came once a week in the mail on the train.

We lined up outside what passed for a railroad office. There was a tent stretched out next to the tracks. There was a table under an awning outside the tent, and once a week they passed out mail. The wind kicked up heavy swirls of dust in the street as we waited. December and January were the driest months of the year around here, and we had just come through an exceptionally dry six weeks. I had to admit there were times when I longed for those green hills of Tennessee.

At long last I heard my name called, and stepped up to the table to take the letter they held out for me. A quick glance told me the letter was from the captain of our division, Samuel McMurry. Most of the rest of our division, Company B Frontier Battalion, was stationed in El Paso. I glanced quickly at Charlie as I tore the letter open and slowly began to read.

I was to report to Captain Bill McDonald in Austin for reassignment. Charlie Bass, my partner, was to rejoin the rest of our unit in El Paso. I looked up from the letter and caught his questioning glance. "You're to report back to the unit in El Paso," I told him. "I'm going to Austin."

I looked back down at the orders and the next sentence jumped out at me. "Red Corbin had been killed," it said. "Catch the first train to Austin and report to Captain McDonald immediately." I reread the sentence, my lips moving wordlessly, then stared off down the street. Red had recruited me into the Texas Rangers and had pretty much taught me everything I knew about bein' a Ranger. A few memories of working with Red on the cattle drive, then on assignments with the Rangers swirled through my head.

I took a couple steps back toward the railroad office and read the handwritten sign posted at the tent entrance. The next train east left in two hours. I looked around to see Charlie watching me, saying nothing. I began to move across the street. "I'm having another drink," I said to him over my shoulder. We both moved back into the Jersey Lilly. Looked like Judge Bean was done with court for the day.

The Southern Pacific line from Langtry back to San Antonio was close to empty on this trip. I sat alone in my row, huddled next to the window and staring out at some pretty dry, empty landscape as we rattled our way through West Texas. Being originally from Tennessee, I welcomed the idea of getting back to the hilly country around Austin, but I wondered why it was me they were bringing back to look into Red's death.

Following a cattle drive to Kansas, I had worked with Red, among others, on a case involving an old confederate of Sam Bass by the name of Louis Sharpe. Following a series of train robberies and bank robberies, we had tracked Sharpe to an area just north of Austin. On a piece of land belonging to my friend and fellow Ranger Mike Stone, we had caught up to Sharpe. Stone had killed him in a gunfight in the middle of a small creek on that property. I had been reassigned to the frontier division shortly after, and hadn't seen Red since that time.

I was still wrestling with memories and questions as the shadows lengthened outside the train and darkness closed in. It would be late tomorrow before we arrived in San Antonio. I would probably need to stay there overnight and then catch another train to Austin. I reached up and

pulled down my bedroll from the rack above me to serve as a pillow. I laid it between me and the window, then composed myself to get the best night's sleep I could under the circumstances.

Sleep hadn't come easily on the train to San Antonio. I kept remembering Red Corbin and some good times on the drive to Kansas. I wondered how he had been killed and whether they wanted me to track his killer. If so, why me? I wondered if my old friend Mike Stone would be assigned to the case. I had arrived at San Antonio completely exhausted. A night's stay at a hotel near the train station had helped. I was on my way to Austin now, and figured I should arrive in a couple hours.

When the train pulled in, and I was no more settled in my mind than I had been two days before, when the message first arrived. I hopped down from the train, carrying my bag, and went to claim my horse. The new captain in the area, Captain McDonald, was unknown to me, and I had to ask a couple people for directions to the address I had been given. Austin, I could see, had been growing a lot since I'd been gone.

Before long I found myself outside a boarding house, by the look of it. I knocked on the door and was directed to a room at the end of a long hall. A deep voice told me to enter when I knocked on that door, and a short, blonde man with an impressive moustache rose to greet me when I entered.

"McKinnon?"

I nodded and he pointed to a chair opposite a small, very cluttered desk.

"You knew Red." It wasn't a question. I said nothing and waited while he stared out a small window. He turned and looked at me again. "Red was bushwhacked. Shot from ambush while he was trailing a horse thief a little north of there. I'm assuming you want his murderer caught just about as bad as I do."

I leaned forward in my chair. "He was shot from ambush?"

McDonald looked down at his desk. His face was flushed, and the veins stood out in his forehead. He started to say something, then stopped. He nodded. "Bushwhacked. They found the spot where the horse thief laid down and waited for him."

The words spilled out of me. "I want him brought in just as bad as you, Cap'n, just like you said. Only I hope you're not too particular whether he comes in dead or not. I'd just as soon have him strapped over my pack horse as ridin' on his own horse." I sat back and waited for his answer. He'd have to send me back to West Texas if I couldn't have a free hand on this one.

McDonald looked out his window for a moment, then nodded slowly. He turned back to look at me. "You can defend yourself, McKinnon," he said. He shuffled a few papers on his desk. "You can defend yourself any way you need to. Does that answer your question?"

I nodded. "Is there anybody else workin' on this?" I asked. I thought for a moment. "Mike Stone? Can you assign Mike Stone?"

McDonald shook his head slowly. "I've got Stone working a case in North Texas right now." He shrugged. "Governor's request. Nothing I can do about it. If he frees up and you need the help, I'll assign him. Meanwhile, this is about tracking, and you're our best tracker."

He shoved the papers on his desk aside, then stood and spread out a map. I could see there were a few circles drawn in red on the map. I stood for a closer look. McDonald began pointing at the circles. "Lampasas—that's where the horses were stolen that Red was tracking." He pointed, one after the other, at three more circles. "Georgetown, Bartlett, Leander. Horses stolen in all three places. Don't really know if they're connected, but we think so. Two of 'em had a new hand start working a week or so before the robberies, then he disappeared a few days after. Not the same guy, though." He paused. "We haven't been able to follow the tracks after any of the robberies. Tracks seem to vanish into thin air. That's why I brought you in, McKinnon."

McDonald stopped and dropped down into his chair. I leaned over the map and studied the four circles. They weren't really all that close to each other. "Can you tell if they were headed in the same direction? I mean, as far as you were able to track? Could they have been headed to the same place to meet up with somebody or sell the horses?"

McDonald shook his head in frustration. "Don't know. Couldn't track 'em far enough to say." Another thought struck him, and he got up and began to pace. "Here's something else. None of the horses have shown up since they were stolen. I mean, a lot of times, a horse will show up later, and you can tell the brand was altered with a running iron or something, but you know it's the same horse. Not with these guys, though. Not one horse has shown up since being stolen, and we've had some guys keeping an eye out for a while, all over the state."

I was beginning to feel some of the frustration the cap'n was showing. I leaned back over the map and shook my head. "No tellin' where they're going to hit next, not with that map." I sat back down. "Anything else you can tell me? Do they steal the same kind of horses every time?"

McDonald started to shake his head no, then stopped. "They steal all different breeds, if that's what you mean. Only top dollar rides, though. These guys steal the best, most expensive horses wherever they go, and leave all the rest. That's if it's even the same guys doing all the robberies."

"I'm gonna assume it's the same gang doing all of it," I said, almost to myself. "If they prove me wrong, I'll just have to start over." I twirled my hat in my hand, trying to think of any last questions. "Did you find anything on Red, any notes?" I stopped, feeling embarrassed and not wanting to remember my friend as a dead man on a lonely trail. McDonald quickly shook his head no. I started to leave, then turned around with one last thought. "Is there a ranch, anywhere around any of these four spots," I said, pointing at the map, "that breeds really good horses? I mean, someplace maybe known as a ranch where you could go and get a top-notch horse?"

McDonald looked up, picking up on my idea. "You mean, someplace they might strike next?" I nodded. He looked at me blankly for a second, then shook his head. "I don't know, but I'll do some asking," he said. "Check back in with me sometime tomorrow, before you go."

I stood on the porch outside the boarding house and collected my thoughts for a minute. I didn't really know anybody in Austin, not with Mike Stone somewhere in North Texas. I decided grab a bite and check into a hotel. It didn't sound like I was going to be in town for all that long.