

## THE DEVIL'S HATBAND

### Excerpt

County Road 27 was a dusty, lightly traveled gravel country access road just two steps above a path, checkered with enough potholes and tire ruts to make CJ downshift to second and ride along at less than 15 miles per hour. He had checked his odometer when he turned off the pavement. Exactly three miles later, CJ saw the house. It was a small white frame building sitting in the middle of twenty acres of irrigated land. Sagebrush and scrub oak mushroomed into rugged hillsides that rose abruptly along the sides and back of the house. CJ turned off the county road onto a lane that led up to the house. He didn't see the Routt County sheriff's cruiser parked near the porch until he crested a small rise halfway up the lane. CJ swallowed hard.

CJ pulled the Jeep to within fifteen feet of the front door and hopped out. No one came to meet him, so he took six quick steps up onto the small porch and walked to the door.

A young, curly-headed sheriff's deputy wearing black logger's boots and sprouting a poor attempt at a mustache was standing near the back of the living room reeling in a metal tape. The room was filled with clutter. Dirty dishes were scattered everywhere, on tables, stacked on cardboard boxes, and piled up against the walls. Reading material was jammed in every available nook and cranny in the room. Hardcover books, paperbacks, magazines, and newspapers were stacked on top of one another or wedged against something to prevent them from tumbling to the floor. CJ stepped over a mound of books into the center of the room, his hand extended towards the deputy.

"CJ Floyd," he announced in a firm voice, hoping the deputy wouldn't ease him directly back out the door. "I'm looking for Brenda Mathison; maybe you are too," he added.

The deputy looked a little surprised but shook CJ's hand and pumped it once.

"Better step in there and talk to the sheriff," he said, nodding CJ in the direction of one of two doorways that had yellow tape stretched across them. CJ recognized the crime scene tape and knew that a new set of complications had weaved their way into his simple plan.

Sheriff Carlton Pritchard wore neither a snappy wide-brimmed Stetson nor spit-shined Western boots. Though he talked with an exaggerated accent, it was a Tennessee drawl, a tribute to Southern rather than Western roots. His uniform hung baggy at the shoulders and in the seat, the result of a recent six-week battle with hepatitis A. He was the kind of man who could ride an illness, a person, or himself into the ground. His doctor had told him he was lucky he hadn't ended up in

the hospital for three months, flat on his back. Pritchard dismissed the doctor like a runner walking off a cramp and went on with his job.

"Come on across the tape," he said to CJ. "Just pin it back in place."

Surprised at how accommodating the sheriff was being, CJ stepped into a cramped musty area of the kitchen that he suspected served as both a pantry and a mudroom. Empty shelves lined the walls; dozens of canned goods, irrigation boots, and several shovels were scattered across the floor. A woman's body was stretched facedown across the middle of the floor.

"She must have put up one country bull of a struggle, Mr...?" The sheriff paused for CJ to give his name.

"CJ Floyd."

The sheriff looked intently at CJ, then back down to the body on the floor. He looked up again, this time with a hint of recognition in his eyes.

"You're that bounty hunter out of Denver. Yeah, you're him all right. Seen you on TV," he added, as if he were making two entries in a ledger instead of one. "What have we got up here in Routt County that draws you four hours away from home?"

"I was hoping to located Brenda Mathison," said CJ, looking down at the body.

"That's her," said the sheriff, with a nod at the floor.

Brenda's body looked for all the world like a department store mannequin being readied for display. Her arms and legs pointed in every direction. During his life CJ had seen scores of dead bodies, but he had never been able to come to grips with staring at a dead woman. Somehow it always struck him a sensitive chord, reminding CJ of the motherless void in his own life. Brenda looked like a gangly child who had taken a tumble. He remembered Womack's charge: bring back both Brenda and the papers. All Womack had told him was that there were "papers." He wouldn't be bringing Brenda back, so he scanned the room for anything resembling a packet of documents. There was nothing. CJ knew he would have to find a time to look closer when the sheriff wasn't around.

"What went down?" asked CJ, staring back at Brenda's slender lifeless form.

"Don't know. We came out here on a complaint from one of the ranchers up valley about somebody cutting his fences and scattering his cattle into the marshes. Cattle don't gain much weight when they're hung up in muck."

"Why'd you decide to make a stop over here?" asked CJ.

The sheriff looked at CJ and smiled. It was the kind of smile that said they both knew a little more than they were letting on. "Same reason as you probably, Mr. Floyd. The best place to look for the beginning of a river is to find its source."

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