

READ THE FIRST CHAPTER FROM BOOK TWO, *DEFENSE*

Sheriff Jones Takes Over the Situation

Sheriff Jones banged open the door of the tavern to make a notable entrance and stood there looking over the ruckus that quieted at sight of him. “What’s going on here?” he demanded.

Robert Wentworth and Miles Downing both started talking at the same time.

“Quiet, both of you!” barked the sheriff.

The men stood quiet, and the other patrons watched for the drama to further unfold.

Sheriff Jones nodded towards Miles and said, “So you tell me your version.”

Miles stammered but eventually recovered, took a big breath, and said with an air of dignity, “I’m embarrassed almost to say this, but Robert Wentworth here had incest with his daughter, even to the point of violence—he raped her. Then when she became pregnant, he blamed my sons, in order to save himself. Then he tried to blackmail me to keep it quiet. It’s a pretty ugly tale.”

Sheriff Jones turned to bid Robert Wentworth speak, and the man was white with rage.

“This is an outrageous lie before God,” Robert said, his voice shaking. He pointed to Miles. “His animal boys raped my little girl and left her insensible. She’s gone from the world.” His eyes filled with tears. “My beautiful little girl”—his voice cracked. “Downing tried to bribe me not to tell, to hush it all up. I told him . . . well, I told him . . .”

Sheriff Jones noted that Robert was uncertain here and awaited his next words.

“I told him I needed time to think of what to do—that was in this very place earlier today—and the next thing I know, it’s all over town.” Robert Wentworth looked around at his neighbors. “They say I’ve done something too terrible even to speak of. It’s not true. Downing’s sons have to be brought to justice.”

“Any other views here?” the sheriff asked the surrounding group.

They shuffled uncertainly, and Miles Downing looked at them as if awaiting corroboration of his story.

Robin Stone broke the silence. “Course we don’t know anything for sure, but I can understand the temptation. That little girl was sure a beauty.” He looked down at his shoes.

“I didn’t want to say it, but I was thinking the same thing,” said Perkin Massey, setting an overturned chair to rights.

Handel Lewis still had a massive hand on Robert Wentworth’s upper arm and seemed to realize that all of a sudden, so he released it and clamped his hand reassuringly on Robert’s shoulder. But he had nothing to say.

Miles looked pointedly at Minister Brown, who took the cue: “Tis the work of the Devil, for sure,” the minister said.

“What’s the work of the Devil?” asked Sheriff Jones.

“What this man hath done,” he said pointing at Robert Wentworth.

“This is all well and good,” said Sheriff Jones, looking hard at Minister Brown before continuing, “but does anyone have any actual evidence of anything?”

“I don’t,” said Miles, “but I know you do.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jones.

“I mean the medicines you took from the Wentworth house just in the past hours—the medicines for doing away with the child.”

Sheriff Jones now looked at the man with whose father he had made a long-standing agreement. For many years North Hinkapee had been an easy place to be a sheriff—the law was honored, and the peace kept. But now he looked long and hard at Miles, the son. This man was not Thompson Downing, and for the first time, the law might not sit easy with the Downings.

The sheriff cleared his throat and spoke to the crowd. “All right, everyone, these charges are very serious. A young girl has been abused but cannot speak for herself. We must have a trial, and I’ll call for a traveling judge to make an inquest and determine what should be done. Right now I’m going to ask both of you men”—he looked first at Robert, then at Miles—“to leave and go home. But first”—he held up a finger of warning—“I’m going to need promises from each of you.”

The men both looked at him, and Jones delivered his orders. “Stay away from each other. No more blows, no violence.” Robert and Miles each nodded.

“Don’t leave town. Either of you . . . or”—he looked at Miles—“your sons.” Both men nodded.

“And no more talk about this, either. You’ll have plenty of time to talk at the trial. I suggest you prepare for that. Got it?” Both men nodded again.

Robert angrily yanked his hat away from Handel Lewis, who had picked it up for him, and the accused man strode out of the tavern. Miles looked around at everyone and left after several moments.

Sheriff Jones sighed. Open war was now inevitable—and indeed had been declared.

The patrons of the Towne Tavern filtered out one or two at a time. The sheriff studied them and waited for the last, Earl Carver, who was sitting in a dim corner. After a few minutes, the Downing lawyer stood up, paid his bar bill, and walked out.

Yes, thought Sheriff Jones. Carver will have a lot of lawyerly work to do.