

DEATH OF A LEGEND

Screenplay by

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FADE IN:

EXT. CENTRAL TEXAS, 1880 - DAY

Dust swirls across a sun-baked landscape of scrub. Carried on the wind is a haunting melody from a music box.

A man on horseback emerges from a dust cloud, a worn Texas Ranger star pinned to his coat -- BEN STROUD, 50s, rugged, with an air of self-assurance and quiet nobility.

Trailing behind, his son JAMIE, 20s, listens to an ornate music box hanging from his saddle horn.

Ben leans down to examine a trail of hoofprints being erased by the increasing winds.

BEN

Horse is lame. Won't be long now.

The melody slows, and Jamie winds the key.

BEN

Put that toy away and keep your eyes peeled.

Jamie scans the barren terrain.

JAMIE

Say, Pa, there a reward for this Comanche?

BEN

You a bounty hunter now?

He doesn't see how hurt Jamie is by the rebuke. Jamie puts the music box to his ear, seeking solace. He doesn't notice a figure observing them from a nearby rise.

EXT. NARROW CANYON - DAY

Pushing through a blinding dust storm, Ben and Jamie pull up, staring at something disturbing ahead --

A dead horse with a Comanche saddle blanket is being buried in the dust.

Ben surveys the barely-visible canyon walls. He dismounts, ties the horses' reins to a bit of scrub, then pulls his Winchester from its scabbard.

BEN

(shouting over the wind)
I'll work my way along that bluff.
Try to flush him. He'll try for
the horses, so pick a spot with a
clear shot.

Jamie dismounts and unhooks his music box from his saddle.

BEN

You get bored, try remembering the
faces of those women he killed.

Jamie puts back the music box. He takes his Brass Henry rifle.
But as Ben heads for the rocks, Jamie grabs his music box.

He nestles into a nook overlooking the horses, then sets his
music box on a rock and lays his rifle across his lap.

BEN

picks his way through boulders, searching for his quarry.

JAMIE

checks his father's progress through the blowing sand, then
turns his attention to the music box, admiring the intricate
carving. He doesn't notice the appearance of a Comanche on the
bluff overhead. Two more Comanche join him.

BEN

climbs higher. He scrutinizes the area. Nothing. He looks
back, straining to see Jamie through the storm.

The wind dies for a moment, and he spots Jamie in the nook...
and three Comanches on the bluff above. Ben's rifle snaps to
his cheek, but dust clouds obliterate his target. He hurries
back.

JAMIE

spots the Comanches. He presses deeper into the nook, clutching
his rifle close.

TWO SHOTS ring out -- two Comanches crumple. Jamie leaps out,
knocking the music box off the rock, and aims his rifle up at
the bluff. The third Comanche is gone.

Jamie squeezes back into the nook, frightened. The wind picks
up, blowing dust obliterating his view. He hears the haunting
melody, and spots his music box down the slope.

THE COMANCHE

in savage war paint, with a bow and arrows, crawls past his two fallen friends to the edge of the bluff. He can't see through the storm. But he hears the music.

BEN

hears it too. With a new urgency he hurries back along the bluff.

JAMIE

gathers his courage... then scrambles down the path. He grabs the box and shuts it off. He turns back. An arrow WHIZZES out of a dust cloud and THUDS into his shoulder. He fires his rifle blindly. A second arrow WHIZZES from the storm and THUDS into his back.

ON THE BLUFF

Ben pokes the fallen Comanches with his Winchester to make sure they're dead, then hurries on.

JAMIE

struggles to raise his rifle. The Comanche materializes from a cloud of dust behind him. Jamie spins, reaching for his handgun. The Comanche's knife slashes his throat, opening a huge gash.

BEN

desperately scrambles down the rocky terrain.

JAMIE

falls backwards over a boulder. He stares up, helpless, as the Comanche leaps on him, plunging his knife down.

Ben charges out of the storm, firing his Winchester.

A bullet rips through the Comanche's shoulder, spinning him around. Two more shots tear through his chest. He falls, jerking in the dust as Ben empties his rifle into him.

Ben drops to his knees by Jamie. Tries to dam the flow of blood. It's hopeless. Jamie stares up with pleading eyes.

Ben cradles Jamie's head in his arms, grief cutting into him like a knife. He squeezes Jamie's hand. A silent prayer.

The melody slowly winds down as Jamie dies in his father's arms.

EXT. DESOLATE HILLSIDE - DAY

A shovel protrudes from a mound of fresh earth. Beside a gaping hole, Jamie's body lies wrapped in blood-stained saddle blankets bound with a lariat.

Gathered are a handful of Texas Rangers with hard, weather-beaten faces, going through an all-too-familiar routine.

Ben stares at the body, only his eyes hinting at the depth of his grief. The stillness is broken by the tired voice of an OLD RANGER.

OLD RANGER

We stand here today to pay our last respects to one James Ethan Stroud, a fine upstanding young man... a devoted son... and good friend to all who have gathered here today.

He nods to Ben, who opens his worn Bible.

BEN

"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet..."

(faltering)

"...yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me... shall never die."

OLD RANGER

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

(choking up)

Hell, you know the rest. Plant him, boys.

The men lower the body into the ground. Ben holds a handful of earth over the grave. It slowly sifts through his fingers.

The Rangers quickly fill in the grave, then pay their respects to Ben. Each time someone pats Ben on the shoulder, it chips away at his stoic shell.

The Rangers make their way down the hill to the horses picketed below. Alone, broken, Ben stares at the wood grave marker.

HERE LIES JAMES ETHAN STROUD
KILLED BY AN INDIAN
JULY 12, 1882
ANOTHER LIFE FOR TEXAS

Despondent, Ben plucks the star from his vest. He looks at it reverentially, one last time, then sticks it into the marker. It takes all his strength to turn and walk away.

EXT. TEXAS DESERT - DAY

The sun blazes down on Ben as he rides slowly across the forsaken landscape, leading Jamie's horse.

He stops at a creek to let the horses drink.

He rides up over a crest and stops. In the distance is a military fort, planted in the middle of nowhere.

EXT. MILITARY FORT - DAY

At the fort entrance, a man counts coins into Ben's hand, then leads his horses inside.

LATER

Ben sits on a bench outside the main gate, feet resting on his saddle. He's not wearing his gun. There's a resignation in his look.

Only the buzz of an occasional fly interrupts the deathly quiet. Ben pulls out a shiny new gold pocket watch with an engraved Texas star. He opens it and checks the time.

SERGEANT (O.S.)

Thought I recognized your horse,
Mister Stroud.

Ben gives a tired smile to a seasoned SERGEANT at the gate.

BEN

Henry.

The Sergeant plants himself on the bench and looks Ben over.

SERGEANT

Can't help notice you're travelling
kinda light.

Ben glances down at his saddle and roll.

SERGEANT

I was meanin' your lack of irons.

BEN

Hung 'em up.

The Sergeant is floored.

SERGEANT
I'll be jiggered. How you gonna
live?

BEN
Thought I'd try my luck in
California. Land of opportunity.

SERGEANT
That's what they said 'bout Texas,
'member?

Both men stew in their bitterness a while.

SERGEANT
I knew a man once, went to
California...

Ben waits for the rest, but that's all there is. Approaching
hoofbeats get his attention. A six-horse stagecoach barrels
toward the fort. Ben picks up his saddle.

EXT. TEXAS DESERT - DAY

Ben's saddle and roll sit on the rack behind the DRIVER and
shotgun rider as the stagecoach bounces along the rough terrain.

EXT. NEW MEXICO DESERT - DAY

Giant cacti cast long shadows as the sun rises over the desert
of scrub.

Now with three days growth on his chin, Ben stares out the
stagecoach window at the approaching wooden sign --

WELCOME TO ARIZONA TERRITORY

The mother of all vultures is perched on top. As the stage
rumbles by, the bird takes flight.

EXT. ARIZONA DESERT - DAY

The stage continues west, the setting sun creating an exquisite
panorama of vermilion and magenta.

EXT. KNIGHT'S STATION - DAY

The stage rumbles towards a remote cluster of buildings --
a Butterfield depot. The driver slows the horses.

INT./EXT. STAGECOACH - DAY

Out the window, something catches Ben's eye -- an assembly of men in a tiny cemetery. Reading from a Bible is a gaunt giant, CLAYTON. In his black frock coat, he resembles the Grim Reaper.

The stage passes the cemetery and pulls up at the depot office. The driver yanks open the door.

DRIVER

All right folks, stretch your limbs
and grab a bite. Stage leaves in
forty minutes with or without you.

INT. KNIGHT'S STATION SALOON - DAY

Ben wanders into the gloomy saloon.

LATER

As Ben tucks into a bowl of stew at the far end of the bar, a group of men from the funeral burst in and step to the bar --

A one-eyed killer called PATCH.

TROOPER, a behemoth blue-jacketed cavalry deserter.

A brute in a BOWLER HAT.

Leathery plainsmen JASPER and IKE, buffalo hunting brothers.

They all give a wide berth as RED CHILLUM moves to the bar. The cocky redhead sports a pair of Colt single-action .45s, silver-plated with ivory grips. He wears them low and loose. You can sense the leashed violence.

RED

Whiskeys. Six.

Red looks down the bar. Ben glances up -- they lock eyes.

Red grabs for his Colts. But Ben doesn't move, so Red doesn't draw. Keeping his hands on his gun butts, Red steps closer.

RED

Well, well. If it isn't Texas
Ranger Ben Stroud. Come all the
way to Arizona Territory to arrest
me. Make's a man feel significant.

Ben slowly, deliberately, rises from his stool.

Red grins, itching to shoot him down. The others back away.

RED
Show me what you got.

Ben opens his coat. Red is disappointed to see he's not heeled.

BEN
Aren't you the lucky one.

Red gestures to Patch, who slides his Frontier .45 down the bar.

Never taking his eyes off Red, Ben calmly hooks his baby finger through the trigger guard and lifts the Frontier. He swings the cylinder open with his thumb and the bullets spill onto the bar.

Eyes gleaming cruelly, Red steps closer.

RED
If you think that's gonna stop me
drilling holes in you...

Ignoring him, Ben moves to slide the Frontier back to Patch -- but suddenly whips it into Red's face.

Red staggers back, drawing his twin Colts. Ben tackles him.

He grabs the Frontier and bashes Red. His forehead splits open.

Red's friends draw down on Ben, but he jams one of the Colts into Red's mouth and cocks it. A stalemate. No one moves.

Trooper draws a bead on Ben, cocking his pocket revolver.

BEN
Better pray you finish the job with
your first shot, 'cause I'll shoot
your eyes out before you squeeze
off a second.

Ben's absolute confidence makes the Trooper hesitate. Then a commanding voice from the doorway takes his decision away.

CLAYTON
Hold there!

Clayton strides into the room, exuding authority. The men back away, partly out of respect, mostly out of fear.

Finding himself standing alone, Trooper's bravado withers.

CLAYTON
There'll be no gunplay. We just
finished burying one man. That's
all I have the stomach for today.

Still glaring at Ben, they holster their guns. Clayton looks down at the bleeding, unconscious Red.

CLAYTON

Jesus. Mister, we've got laws
against beating a man to death.

BEN

Glad to hear it. You got a law
against gunslicks shooting unarmed
men?

Clayton sees Ben isn't heeled. Clayton turns to the Bartender,
who nods verification.

CLAYTON

Don't just stand there. Get
Mrs. Barnaby. And tell her to
bring her sewing kit.

The Bartender hurries out. Clayton sizes Ben up.

CLAYTON

Got a name?

BEN

Ben Stroud.

A flicker of recognition from Clayton.

CLAYTON

You're a long way from home,
Mister Stroud. He must be some
serious outlaw.

BEN

This match-stick? Never saw him
before. Sure thinks highly of
himself, though.

CLAYTON

An acquaintance of my grandson's.
Goes by the handle of Red Chillum.

Ben takes Red's ivory-handled Colts and gives them an expert
twirl, checking the balance as he admires their beauty.

CLAYTON

I'll have those.

Ben looks dubious. Clayton opens his coat, revealing a star
pinned to his vest -- UNITED STATES MARSHAL. It's backed up by
a heavy Colt-Paterson in a holster. Ben hands over the Colts.

BEN

I'd be tempted to hide those. He'll be right ornery when he comes to.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

If he comes to.

Ben returns to his meal. Joining him, Clayton pours two drinks.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

It appears I might be short a man. Would you be looking?

BEN

Stage leaves in ten minutes.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

We ride at dawn for Endeavor. You can catch another stage there. (not getting anywhere) I'm paying fifty dollars a deputy. That's near a month's salary for a Ranger.

BEN

I've had my fill. But I'm sure some of these boys'd chomp at the bit for a chance to earn fifty dollars.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

Already deputized them.

BEN

Six deputies? Who you hunting, Geronimo?

MARSHAL CLAYTON

Man named Sam Hawke.

BEN

(his expression darkens)
In Endeavor?

MARSHAL CLAYTON

What do you say?

Ben downs the whiskey, then surveys the crew of hired guns.

BEN

You're gonna need more men.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

I just buried my only grandson.

A look of empathy from Ben.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

Shot in the back by Sam Hawke.
And he's damn well going to hang
for it.

BEN

I'm truly sorry about your son.
But I think I'll pass this hand,
if it's all the same.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

These boys here aren't afraid of
him.

BEN

Maybe some'll live just long enough
to realize their mistake.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

Sounds like you know this man.

BEN

A long time ago.

He tosses a coin on the bar and heads for the door, dismissing
the Deputies with a glance.

MARSHAL CLAYTON

If there's trouble, I'm offering
five hundred dollars to the man who
kills him.

Ben stops in the doorway, deliberating.

[Contact Keith Davidson to read the entire screenplay.]