

THE PEACEMAKER - Keith Davidson 613.722.9230

FADE IN:

EXT. CENTRAL TEXAS, 1880 - DAY

Swirling dust blows across a sun-baked landscape of scrub. Carried on the wind is a HAUNTING MELODY from a music box.

Two men ride slowly along in silence. In the lead, the rugged BEN STROUD, 50s, has an air of self-assurance and quiet nobility. A Texas Ranger star is pinned to his coat.

Trailing behind, his 20-year-old son JAMIE listens intently to an ornate music box hanging from his saddle horn.

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

BEN
Horse is lame. Won't be long now.

The melody slows, and Jamie starts winding the key.

BEN
Put that toy away and keep your
eyes peeled.

Jamie does a quick scan of the barren terrain.

JAMIE
Say, Pa, is there a reward for this
Comanche?

BEN
What are you, a bounty hunter?

Ben rides on, too focused on the tracks to see how hurt his son is by the rebuke.

Jamie finishes winding the box, seeking solace in the music.

He fails to notice a figure observing them from a nearby rise.

EXT. ROCKY CANYON - DAY

Pushing through a blinding dust storm, Ben and Jamie enter a small canyon.

They pull up, staring at something disturbing on the ground ahead --

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

Sensing they're being watched, Ben surveys the boulders for their quarry. Ben's in his element, and the danger makes it more exhilarating. He dismounts and ties the horses' reins to a bit of scrub.

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

As Ben heads for the rocks, he glances back and sees Jamie unhook the music box from his saddle.

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

Suddenly on edge, Jamie searches for a place to hide.

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

BEN

picks his way through boulders, searching for his prey.

JAMIE

checks his father's progress, then admires the carving on the music box. He doesn't notice the appearance of a Comanche on the bluff overhead. Two more Comanche join the first.

BEN

climbs higher. He scrutinizes the area. Nothing. He looks back to where Jamie is, but can't see him through the storm.

The wind dies briefly, and he spots Jamie hidden in the nook. Then he sees the three figures on the bluff above. His rifle goes up instinctively, but dust clouds obliterate his view.

JAMIE

spots the Comanches. Clutching his rifle close, he presses deeper into the nook.

TWO SHOTS ring out, and two Comanches crumple. Jamie leaps out, knocking the music box off the rock, and aims his rifle up at the bluff -- but the third Comanche is gone. Jamie squeezes back into the nook, heart pounding. The wind picks up.

Wiping the stinging sand from his eyes, he looks left then right, terrified the Comanche is going to leap out at him.

He hears the MELODY -- the music box is just down the slope.

THE COMANCHE

looking savage in war paint, is enraged at the sight of his two fallen brothers. He glares down from the bluff but can't spot Jamie through the storm. Then he hears the music.

BEN

scrambles back along the bluff. He too hears wisps of music in the wind. With a new urgency, he hurries to reach his son.

JAMIE

realizes the music could give him away. He gathers his courage, then scrambles down the path. He grabs the box and stands up. Behind him, the Comanche materializes out of a cloud of dust.

ON THE BLUFF

Ben pokes the fallen Comanches with his Winchester -- both dead.

JAMIE

freezes for a split second, then goes for his handgun. Too late -- the Comanche's knife slashes his throat, opening a huge gash.

BEN

hurries to the edge of the bluff. With horror he sees Jamie attacked. Ben raises his rifle... but can't get a clear shot.

JAMIE

staggers backward, drawing his revolver. The Comanche slashes his arm. The revolver tumbles from his grip.

BEN

desperately scrambles down the rocky terrain.

JAMIE

stumbles over a boulder. The Comanche leaps on him. Jamie tries to cry out, but no sound comes out. He stares up, helpless, as the Comanche viciously plunges 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 is stuck in a mound of fresh earth. Jamie's body lies beside a gaping hole, wrapped in blood-stained saddle blankets bound with a lariat.

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

Ben stares at the body, only his eyes hinting at the enormous depth of his grief. So many things he wanted to tell his son.

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...

He chokes up, unable to get the rest of the words out.

OLD RANGER

Aw, 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 sympathetically 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, he 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, a military fort is 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. Deep in thought, there's a resignation in his look. For the first time in thirty years, he's not wearing his gun.

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, 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?
(a long look)
You ain't dyin'?

BEN
Going to 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 of the story, 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

The stagecoach bounces along the rough terrain. Ben's saddle and roll are mixed with luggage on the top rack behind the DRIVER and shotgun rider.

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 past, the bird takes flight.

INT. STAGECOACH - DAY

The stage stops, waking Ben. The door opens, and an attractive middle-aged WOMAN and her equally-attractive DAUGHTER climb in. They exchange a cordial nod with Ben as the stage pulls away.

Ben stares out the window at the sage and cacti flowing past. Feeling he's being watched, he glances across at the mother. She is gazing unabashedly. Ben manages a shy smile.

The daughter shoots her mother a disapproving look. Embarrassed, the mother turns and looks out the window.

Then the daughter gives Ben the eye. He smiles politely, then returns his attention to the view outside.

EXT. ARIZONA DESERT - DAY

As the stage continues west, the setting sun creates an exquisite panorama of vermillion and magenta.

INT. STAGECOACH - NIGHT

Nestled into the corner, Ben is jolted awake by a sudden lurch. He tries to get his bearings in the dim light of the oil lamp.

Mother and daughter are dozing. Ben notices the daughter's petticoat has slipped up, revealing her leg. He can't help staring at her exposed ankle. Then his eyes move up her calf.

DAUGHTER

Just how far are you intending to go?

She gives him a look that would make a kettle boil.

BEN

I was hoping to make it all the way to the ocean, ma'am.

DAUGHTER

Well, in case you were wondering, I'm getting off at the next stop.

She stares enticingly with dark, inviting eyes. But Ben pulls his hat over his face and tries to go back to sleep.

EXT. KNIGHT'S STATION - DAY

Under the morning sun, the stage rumbles towards a remote cluster of buildings. A Butterfield depot. The driver slows the horses to a walk.

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.

Ben climbs out and helps the mother down. She smiles sweetly. Then he helps the daughter, whose smile is less innocent.

As they wander off, the daughter glances back over her shoulder and gives him a look. Her mother scolds her.

Ben smiles to himself. Behind him, a hand sets about changing the stagecoach team.

INT. KNIGHT'S STATION SALOON - DAY

Ben wanders into the gloomy saloon, feeling right at home.

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 muscular 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
this way to Arizona Territory
to arrest me. Or die tryin'.

Ben slowly and 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.

Reluctantly, they holster their weapons. They glare menacingly at Ben. 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 in Clayton's eyes. And respect.

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 son'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
Think 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
Nope. 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.

The name catches Ben by surprise. His expression darkens.

BEN
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.

The confidence drains from some of the faces.

MARSHAL CLAYTON
I just buried my only son.

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.