

Raising Cain: A Novel

by  
Sarah Sheen

A PROJECT

submitted to

Oregon State University  
University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Electrical and Computer Engineering  
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 20, 2015  
Commencement June 2015

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Sarah Sheen for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Electrical and Computer Engineering presented on May 20, 2015. Title: Raising Cain: A Novel.

Abstract approved:

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Gilad Elbom

A Confederate soldier turned cowboy, fresh off the front lines of the Civil War, Cain Bradshaw is a hard man who keeps to himself, content to work the cattle train and bury himself in the oblivion offered by the wilds of the scarcely tamed West. But when dumb chance and a lucky shot bring him to the attention of the local law, Cain finds himself in the employ of a different kind of war, picking up the badge of U.S. Territory Marshal with a weary reluctance.

After a routine hunt for a fugitive goes south, leaving him for dead in the Arizona badlands, Cain is rescued by the infamous Apache outlaw, Coyote, and his curious band of public enemies. As he becomes entangled in the chaos and danger, violence and risky games that follow in the Indian's wake, the defrocked Marshal soon finds himself ensnared by an altogether more dangerous game: a forbidden attraction to the man himself.

Key Words: western, novel, LGBT, writing

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APPROVED:

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Toni Doolen, Dean, University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Sarah Sheen, Author

## DEDICATION

To Stef, without whom this book might never have been written, and certainly not as well as it was. She has been cheering me on and goading me onwards since the beginning of this project, and has been the best sounding board I could ask for, for all of the failed and successful ideas I've written here. I couldn't have done it without her.

To Gilad, who inspired me to treat my own voice with authority, to respect my own perspective, and constantly challenged me to make this book the best it could be. His patience and wonderful wit have been an immeasurable influence on me, this novel, and my own confidence as an author.

And last, to my parents, siblings, and grandparents, who have always fostered my love of reading and writing, and encouraged my creativity from the very beginning. They have long been the most supportive family a budding author could ask for.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Author's Foreword*

*My official recommendation is that, while located in the beginning of this Thesis, any reader wishing to enjoy this work as a piece of fiction, unspoiled or unanalyzed, should skip this section and simply begin reading with Chapter One. Feel free to come back and read this section after you've finished.*

*As, of course, the reader is outside my authorial control, this warning can also be ignored entirely, and reading could begin right here, if one wishes to take in this book as the completely work-in-progress draft that it is. It is not without flaws, errors, or inconsistencies, all of which I will be airing here, so let that be a fair warning.*

So I suppose the first question a discerning reader might now ask is just what the devil is going on here. It all started in the late summer of 2013, in the front seat of my well-loved and well-travelled 2001 Subaru Outback, a hand-me down from my dear grandfather, sitting opposite my best friend Stef, who was riding shot-gun, and we were driving nowhere simply for the sake of driving, as we often did when we grew tired of our college town.

We might have had the windows down, or the radio on, but I don't remember, and she and I were bemoaning the impending reality of our junior year, and the end of our summer. Stef had been a faithful reader, or better put, the *only* reader, of a rather raunchy story I'd been writing for months purely for the sake of entertainment, and

somewhere along the line, our complaining about classes, our impending Honors Thesis projects, and her begging for new chapters blended together in our conversations into some single hybrid, ridiculous thought. I distinctly recall the moment when it hit both of us, like a second of shared telepathy, when we looked at each other and had the thought, “Hey, what if you wrote a *novel* for your *thesis*?”

I remember the idea filling me with hesitation, that it was too good to be true, immediately followed by an overwhelming sense of giddiness that I was well familiar with in writing, that eureka moment of crystallized imagination where anything was suddenly possible.

Suffice to say that we spent the rest of the drive geeking out on just what a perfectly excellent notion this was, and I spent the next few days hunched over my laptop, coming up with half a dozen different plots, characters, and mismatched universes. I toyed with science fiction, cowboys in space, Victorian steam-punk, Vikings, and all kinds of fantasy, completely caught up in the thrill that was the possibility of writing a whole new novel; the actual process of doing so was, of course, far removed from the magic of those possibilities.

As a bit of a tangent, I’ll mention that as a bizarre kind of collector’s hobby, whenever I’m in book shops or office supply stores, I very rarely succeed in exiting the premises without purchasing some kind of blank notebook or journal. I should clarify that I almost never have a need or reason to buy one, though I use many for brainstorming, writing, and school work alike; I often times will simply buy them for the sake of hoarding them. I always find there is something magical, and rather addicting, about the crisp untouched pages, smooth and empty, but some how in their emptiness absolutely chock-full of the promise of so many great ideas that I find irresistible, filing me with the same giddiness I get upon reaching a game-changing new idea. It starts up in the brain and spreads across my face with a helpless grin, and it possesses me with the need to just *write* that’s like pure magic.

This kind of magical emptiness existed in the beginning of writing this novel, in the inception of the other half a dozen novels I might have written instead, and for weeks I let my imagination run rampant, brainstorming with Stef and ranting to myself like a mad scientist in the dark, illuminated by the backlight of my computer



screen as I furiously typed, until I eventually settled on the idea which I have attempted to execute here within this document: a gay western novel.

This begs a few questions, namely, why a western, and why a gay one?

I grew up in the Tri-Cities, Washington, a set of small cities famous for their association with Hanford and the nuclear era, nestled in a shrub step desert where fleeting glimpses of the Wild West and manifest destiny can still be found. I eagerly confess to be a fan of the quintessential scowling bad-ass of the spaghetti Western era, Clint Eastwood, and have long held an interest in the themes of the genre at large: prevailing justice, freedom, self-dependence, a thick skin, and an iron will.

While it's easy enough to accept these ideas as ones which make up the core substance of the Western story, under closer examination and reading, I reached the, albeit not novel, realization that these are also themes which permeate the very fabric of the American identity, particularly that of the ideal American man.

Those of us raised within American pop culture can reach for these images quickly and easily, a picture in our heads of a man who is strong, but not vain, who seems not to care for his appearance, but is nevertheless in possession of quaint manners or a humble charm, tough and resilient, the kind of man who wouldn't seek out a fight, but would never back down from one. A man who is free from social obligations, no wife or children, free to roam, dependent only on himself for survival and contentment with his place in the world.

This is an idea which has its roots in the history of western expansion that followed the declaration of Manifest Destiny in America, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was undoubtedly driven by men like those found as heroes of the well known Westerns, such as those written by Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey. But it's also worth noting that these ideals more than anything else have their roots in the turn of the century, when many men were feeling increasingly politically and socially threatened by the growing power of women in society, and so sought escape into the *imagined* fantasy past that became known as the Wild West.

It's easy to imagine, a man living in the city, chained to a dull indoor job, let's suppose he's a factory manager in New York, in 1905. He finds his life full of the useless trivialities of city life: keeping up with the latest fashions, dinner parties,

office politics, the endless rat race for ever more money, and he comes home every night to a woman who is increasingly outspoken and controlling, becoming involved in the politics of telling him and other men what they ought to do and how they ought to behave. Women's movements at the time were stirring up attempts at reform such as the roots of the Prohibition, and many other ethically or morally restricting philosophies, which were all advocating that men give up their vices, tobacco, alcohol, fighting, and embrace religious piety and puritanical ideology, with it coming greater devotion to their wives, children, the home, and economic stability.

This pressure was stifling, and eventually found an outlet for imagination in the Wild West fantasy, which had long been around in the less refined form of penny-dreadfuls. It was a perfect escape: a world naturally devoid of women and full of the manliest of men, men unchained by obligations to wives, the feeding of livestock or children, the keeping of a household or devotion to God, free to go gallivanting about drinking, gambling, engaging in all sorts of violence and vices. This was a man at his most primal state, yet one bound to a code of honor none-the-less among only his fellow men, an eye-for-an-eye pact of ruthless justice which culled all but the toughest from the trail; a place where a man was only what he made of himself, no woman or preacher to tell him how he ought to be.

This is an idea which has not lost its glamorous appeal, and even to myself, as a woman in my early twenties here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I still found the genre of the western to be one which presented alluring qualities, all the while remaining saturated in traditions which I have great respect for. The Western genre was also one which drew me for the unique chance to make a modern impact on such an old and somewhat abandoned genre, one written almost entirely by men, and bring with me a fresh perspective, namely in the introduction of a gay male character.

Many historians have speculated on the prevalence of male romantic or homoerotic behavior in western pioneer history, and are often backed up in their postulations by the existence of such documents as poorly written and misspelled pieces of gay love poetry written and exchanged between halfway illiterate cowhands from the time period, which was roughly during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This, of course, was not talked about by writers of the time, much less writers

from the turn of the century onwards, leaving the western genre, while rich in what could be called somewhat homoerotic traditions, completely barren of any acknowledgement of the existence of gay men in cowboy culture, who were surely prevalent in a world which was sorely absent in female company.

It's easy to explain this lack of address with the reality that until the past few decades, the topic of homosexuality has been either ignored or considered taboo, and is only now beginning to become a topic that is open to discussion and exploration. Even now, often, gay characters exist only to provide color or comic relief; they are the convenient butt of jokes, or at worst simply a character that exists only to be killed off, in a kind of subconscious cultural admission that "they had it coming."

At best, the sexual identity of a gay character is an overwhelming facet of the plot or personality of that character, something that overpowers other aspects of the story, and is often overdramatized or hyper-aware of itself. This is evident in stories such as *Brokeback Mountain*, which let's admit, is probably the first thing that pops into anyone's head when they think of a "gay cowboy" story.

While the characters are handled seriously, the central aspect of the plot is the gay identity of the main characters, and how they and their surroundings handle that, which is in my opinion over-dramatic, and while perhaps historically more accurate, unnecessarily obsessive and harsh in its delivery of "reality," in its dramatically angst heavy and tragic ending.

It is evident of the pervading reality that we still, in this country, handle the idea of homosexuality as something which is pivotal or defining of a person's identity, and as such, as soon as a character in a TV show, movie or book turns out to be homosexual, all of a sudden, they're "that gay guy" or "that lesbian chick," much in the same way that *Brokeback Mountain* is not "that one tragic western" in anyone's mind, it's "that one movie with the gay cowboys."

The sexuality element of these character's identities overwhelms whatever personality or plot might have evolved around them normally, rendering them flat and two-dimensional, useful only as a plot device, and never as a true three-dimensional character.

It was from these two critical elements, the silenced gay cowboy that was, and the

overwhelmingly gay modern character that is, that I hit on the idea of writing a western with a gay main character. I actually hesitate, if not resist the labeling of this work as a “gay western” precisely for the reasons that I’ve stated above, and I would urge the reader to completely abandon the idea of reading this book as such.

The main character, Cain Bradshaw, is indeed gay, but I assure you, a great deal of this novel is more caught up in the bullet strewn, alcohol soaked, smoke riddled, train-robbing and trail-busting glory of the Wild West than it is in Cain’s sexuality, so if you’re looking for some kind of heart-throbbing gay bodice-ripper harlequin, this book will come as a disappointment.

Don’t get me wrong, there is sex in this novel, and it does play an important role in the plot. As part of giving the unsung gay cowboy a fair shot at the spotlight, I certainly haven’t shied away from openly depicting his explicit sexuality, the same way I haven’t censored violence or any other often glossed over scene. I attempted, and hopefully succeeded, in holding Cain to a higher ideal, as first a Western hero, and perhaps third or fourth a gay man. Instead, I was most interested in exploring Cain, and the Western genre as a whole, through a modern lens, examining all those beloved stereotypes and famous scenes, and revealing whatever gritty underbelly could be found that historical writers of the genre long ignore.

For example, take the idea of the lone ranger, the drifter, the man who rides alone with nothing but his horse for company. He is a man who drinks his whiskey straight and doesn’t flinch at gunning someone down who looks at him cross-ways, the kind of man who L’Amour and Grey often depict, hard and ruthlessly self-contained, impervious to the need for creature comforts which so often plague us mere mortals, tight lipped and friend-less, seemingly unshakable. This aspect of the cowboy hero is one which is both admirable and inherently conflicted; he is mysterious, ever a stranger, impossible to get close to and thus irresistible to those who wish to.

Many of these elements I sought to explore in Cain’s character, and I imbued him with a similar surliness, few words and fewer emotions on the surface, but then sought to challenge these traits as I wrote them. Unlike the stereotypical western hero’s thoughts and words, which are often merely flat reflections of his outer persona, I wrote Cain with a more modern freedom of expression. What if he doesn’t

like whiskey, and has to fake it? What if he doesn't like women, but found himself friends with a female prostitute? How would he feel killing a man, even for the sake of honest justice?

I let him get hung-over and dirty, and let his headache and had him long for a bath. I let him get fed up over sore feet, and tired of riding, let his mysterious past wake him in cold sweats, and leave him with fears and regrets. I let him feel all the sorrow of war veteran, stubborn pride, all the aches and pains of humanity, and when there was joy I let him smile and laugh, and when there was sadness, I let the tears well up, even if they went unshed.

In a sense, I wanted to take the Western hero and let him be as complicated as he probably would have been in real life, and allow him all the human failings and weaknesses, humors, affections, fears and joys which all people possess, while still keeping the admirable qualities which such a hero represents.

Frankly, after I finished trying to do that, the fact that Cain was gay barely factored into it, which I think is important. In the face of life and death situations, complex morality and a struggle to survive in a harsh landscape, why would the fact that the man is gay matter much at all, except in actual romantic or sexual situations?

I started out down the trail of writing this novel with these ideas in mind, with Cain's character first and foremost, and little else but the aforementioned lofty ambitions of juggling Wild West authenticity and grittier, sexual and violent modern realities. I then set out to formally declare the whole project as a legitimate thesis project.

I worked out a rough sketch of the plot, which was essentially just a vague conglomeration of every Western movie I'd ever watched with a healthy dose of genre-awareness lamp-shaded over top of it. I created the outlaw Indian, Coyote, a natural foil to law-abiding, sexually and emotionally tight-fisted Cain, along with his brassy lady love, Mercedes, a pair of adopted twin boys and a mute giant for comic relief in the outlaw band, a corrupt judge and a cruel Territories Marshal for some adversaries, and sat back and felt somewhat ready to write.

I then, of course, had to find a mentor. Gilad had been an instructor of several of my few writing and literature classes at Oregon State University, and I immediately

thought he'd be perfect for the job. As a modernist fiction author from Israel, I'm sure he was initially confused as to my desire for his involvement in my writing project, as I was attempting to write a genre-centered Western adventure novel about a gay cowboy.

From the first time I approached him with the project, he has challenged me to think beyond whatever box I was attempting to place myself, my characters, or my novel into, and consider all the angles, to question my motivations or rationale in certain decisions, or my preconceptions about who it is that ought to write a novel, or what it is a novel ought to be written about. He especially raised important questions I'd never considered on why I wanted to write a book about men going on adventures, when I myself could have interesting stories to tell about my own life as a twenty one year old woman from eastern Washington. While he didn't succeed in turning me down the righteous path of modernist fiction, he was certainly an immeasurable influence on my writing process from the beginning until even now, looking forward into the future of revising my draft.

And of course, as university instructors are wont to do, he was quick to assemble a list of novels I should read for homework, in continuing my research into the genre. In particular, I read several more modern or unusual western novels such as *Heartbreak on the High Sierra*, a spaghetti lesbian western by Fiona Cooper, a gay novel set in the 1940's by Coleman Dowell, *Too Much Flesh and Jabez*, and the hilarious satirical western, *The Ballad of Dingus Magee*, by David Markson.

In addition to these titles, I also read a handful of more classical Westerns, such as Louis L'Amour's *Hondo*, and *Riders of the Purple Sage*, by Zane Grey, as well as revisited some of my favorite Clint Eastwood westerns, *Hang 'Em High* and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. It was survey that yielded a great number of interesting ideas, as well as an increasing focus on ideas I'd already had. In particular, *Heartbreak on the High Sierra* was a great contrast, as it read somewhat similarly in style and language to classic Westerns, and yet was almost completely cast with female characters instead of male.

I read, and I plotted, and I read some more, and I plotted some more. I submitted my Thesis Proposal, over came the surprise that anyone would officially approve

such a proposal to begin with, and eventually found myself on the first week of my summer break staring at a blank screen, a fresh page full of the overwhelming potential of the entire novel that was waiting to be written.

It often seemed that every word I put forth was no where near the imagined glory I wanted for it, much in the same way that as soon as I put pencil to paper on the first page of one of the empty notebooks from my closet hoard, the magic would disappear, and nothing I could possibly write there could replace the possibility of what could have been.

Eventually, I managed to force myself to continue to write through this sluggishness and lack of contentment, until I could at last find my stride, suddenly giddy once more and unable to *stop* writing, vibrating with enthusiasm in my seat at the coffee shops I'd lurk in, like the kind of over-cafeinated, obsessed lunatic people surely thought I was.

And so the summer passed in sprints and lurches, furiously typing late nights punctuating languishing days under the ceiling fan in the heat with not a worthwhile idea in sight, distractions, laziness, inspiration, and what seemed like an endless game of one step forward, two steps back, two steps forward, and back again in circles.

Plotlines were summarily abandoned, revisited and revised, characters evolved or frustratingly refused to, transitions stuck to the scenes I sandwiched them between like sloppy band aids, and eventually, by the time I'd battled my way through upper level Electrical Engineering courses, some scant semblance of a social life, late nights, too much coffee, and endless revisions, I reached the spring term of my senior year with the manuscript which the reader here possesses.

It is by no means complete, and don't take that for false humility. This draft is missing what I'd guess will become the last one hundred chapters of the ending, and after much deliberation, Gilad and I, as well as members of my thesis defense panel and my faithful test reader, Stef, have all agreed there is work to be done first in revising even what has already been written within these three hundred odd pages.

The biggest of these revisions will likely be to the delivery of Cain's characterization throughout the novel. In the beginning, when I first devised his character, I intended for him to be younger, more naive, more religious, and

accordingly, more repressed, emotionally and sexually, than he ended up becoming through the course of the novel.

As a veteran of the Civil War, and a man who has experienced a fair sight more violence and the world at large than I initially envisioned, it logically followed that this experience presented itself in the form of a more jaded attitude. Sure, he remained surly and less emotionally available, but while I abandoned the aspects of his character that made him more naïve, I kept elements of his sexual repression, which in hindsight make less sense than they did originally.

For example, after Cain has had his initial encounter with Coyote, and is at the bar in Dodge drinking with Kitty, she comes onto him physically. Cain eventually becomes aroused thinking about Coyote, and the scene he's witnessed between Coyote and Mercedes. Kitty attempts to take advantage of the situation and cajole Cain into bed with her, and after forcing her off him, in response to her demanding to know what's wrong with him, that he won't have sex with her, Cain angrily responds that what's wrong with him is that he's a sodomite.

This is problematic for two reasons, the first being that in the laws of the time, Cain would in fact *not* be a sodomite, as he has never actually had sex with a man. Legislation and cultural opinion of the time period only applied any kind of derogatory label to a man who had had sex with other men, no matter his desires or emotional attractions. A man could be wildly and romantically in love with another man, even living with him domestically, and as long as there was no suspicion of any kind of *fornication* between them, this was essentially above-board and legally ignored.

Secondly, and more importantly, this simplifies the inherent complexity of sexual identity, as it existed at the time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no “gay” or “homosexual” identity with which a man or woman could identify. In fact, there was no language with which to talk about it, except on the basis of individual encounters with people whom a person was attracted.

For Cain to possess a strong sense that his attraction to Coyote, and not Kitty, somehow made him flawed, or in any way *de facto* attracted to *other* men, is too refined or overt compared to ideas of sexuality at the time. In keeping with Cain's



more jaded and less repressed character as he happened to evolve, I plan on returning to this section, as well as others throughout the novel, and revising them to fit this more complex and vague idea of sexuality.

And while this label-less concept of sexual identity may seem more complex to us, from our modern, concise ideas of the topic, in reality, I think it presents a beautiful and excellent way to approach Cain's sexuality from an even less focused point of view than I originally anticipated taking.

Rather than Cain simply being a Western hero, who also happens to be gay, it becomes even simpler than that; Cain is just a man who in a particular instance, experiences a sexual attraction to another man, Coyote. There need not be broader or more defining implications of that reality, it can simply be exactly what it is, no drama, no labels, just human attraction, and human relationships.

This is also neatly in keeping with the raw essence of the Western itself, in that it embraces the rejecting of society's rigid rules, just a man living by his own law, and being unbound by the chains of civilization, free to live as he'd like in the untamed glory of the West. Even in our modern society, we are still bound by these ideas, labels, and stereotypes about what it means to be a certain sexuality or gender, but in the true spirit of the Western, these defining labels can fall away, leaving only simple people. Humans loving other humans, killing other humans, battling their way through the wilds, free and content to be as they will.

In working on altering this aspect of Cain's portrayal, I am also considering revising a scene towards the latter end of the book, namely the scene in Eltopia between Coyote and the stranger, Jack, whom Cain inadvertently watches having a tryst in an abandoned building on the edge of town. The scene is, of course, overtly explicit and meant to be shocking and erotic in nature; the reader has yet to have any contextual implications up until that point that Coyote is interested in men, although they may suspect, and so the scene itself is rather out of left field, so to speak.

I meant for it to be this way, because it creates a parallel between the reader's surprise and Cain's own shock, both witnessing the same scene simultaneously. Here is a character who *neither* imagined was involved with men, suddenly on his knees, fellating a relative stranger, and Cain helpless to look away, and likewise helpless to

avoid being aroused by the scene playing out before him. The scene itself is powerfully visceral, and of course was entertaining to write, but I think in a similar light to how I want to adapt the way I handle Cain's sexuality earlier on in the book, I think it calls for doing so here in this scene as well.

Here is a perfect opportunity to allow Coyote to be as wily and cunning as we know him to be; He conveniently parts ways with Mercedes prior to the scene, using her distaste for his gambling habits to lure Cain away from the rest of the group into a game of cards, and to ply him over a few games with whiskey and teasing words. By the time Cain notices just what it is that Coyote might be after, he's drunk enough that he's willing to give in to Coyote's wiles, and his own desires.

Cain then takes the place of Jack in the same scene, and afterwards, in the face of just what exactly he's done, he's caught between the want for another encounter with the Indian, and his own conflicting feelings about such behavior, in a less dramatic sense than he was before.

The scene then shifts in focus from being one that's simply overtly sexual, for the purposes of shock value, unsubtly declaring Coyote's availability to the main character, to one which is important to the furthering of the plot and Cain's relationship with Coyote. This fits in perfectly with Coyote's now convenient ploy to drive Mercedes, the familial "wife" and opponent to Cain, the "mistress", temporarily out of the picture, in order to pursue this new and exciting relationship with Cain.

It also meshes even better with the fight scene that follows it, which I originally wrote as a method for Cain to express his frustrations over his thwarted desires, and unwillingness to give into them, allowing it instead to become the kind of subtle (or unsubtle) Hollywood wink-nudge-hint to the sublimating of sexual desires through physical violence.

A fight scene, much like a sex scene, contains many of the same elements: sweat and bodily contact, grappling for position and control, the eventual assertion of one fighter's dominance over the other, culminated by the "defeat", a release of tension between them, and "resolution" of conflict. Cain, unwilling to allow himself the freedom to approach Coyote again for sex or affection, instead allows himself the only acceptable form of physical contact he thinks he can have: a fist fight.

From there, moving forward into the ending, I plan to explore Cain's gradual acceptance of his desires, his deepening relationship with Coyote, and on a broader scale, a sort of symbolic rejection of society's confines that involving himself emotionally with Coyote would represent.

Additionally, I want to dabble in continuing to explore the duality of Mercedes' character, as one which is both warm and motherly, and hot-blooded and fearsome, and her own eventual resolutions with Cain, which will serve as an interesting method of partially resolving Cain's difficulties and aversions to women as a whole.

I'd also like to revisit the characterization of Marshal King, who it could be said was, or at least was the vehicle for, the primary antagonist. His personality and lack of backstory fell a little flat for me, and I think he could prove a much more interesting villain if he is allowed to be a little less two-dimensional.

Overall, this has been an amazing process for me personally, both in learning to write on a more advanced level, and in constantly challenging myself throughout the perpetual editing process to be more aware of my own styles and habits, of the way I cast characters and execute them, and above all how to sit down and write, even when the desire or the proverbial muse is absent. This is an invaluable skill, which I reckon I will be working to continue improving upon for my entire life, whether I go on to attempt to become a published author or not.

Much like staying in shape by going for a run every day, I've learned writing is a similar process; in order to get any where, or accomplish any goal, you have to haul yourself out of bed earlier in the morning, and you have to sit there on the porch, lacing up your shoes in the chill of the morning, even though everything in that left-over lizard part of your brain wants to curl up in a ball back under the covers and eat Twinkies for breakfast, or do *anything* but go running.

To write a whole novel, or even get this far into the draft of one, I had to learn how to get out of bed, find the willpower to unplug the Internet, and put one word in front of the other even if I hated every one of them, until at some point, I realized I'd been writing for hours, everything flowing and coming together, caught up in the excitement, and there was nothing I couldn't do.

I don't know when this novel will be truly finished for me, or what precise form it

will take when I decide it is, but I know that at some point I am going to finish it, shut the lid on the laptop, and I'm going to sit there for a while, enjoying the feeling, just basking in the glow.

And then I'm going to remember the magic hidden in all those blank pages of all those journals in my closet, and this whole damn process will start all over again. Maybe I'm crazy, but I'm looking forward to it.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Hookers, Gin, and Little White Lies*

The man was bigger than the average cowhand. Bones spoke of a Viking ancestry somewhere, as did the ever present flush of sunburn across the bridge of his nose and weather beaten cheeks. Tanned like leather, and still his face was always burnt, scored by a land his long-past golden-haired forbearers could scarcely have imagined. This land was not meant for him, as the ill-used skin on his body could attest to.

Alien plants covered in spines, poisonous animals, scarce foraging and scarcer game, half of what a man saw could kill him. And the things that wouldn't, the absence of would. The man squinted against the harsh morning sun, strong even from under the brim of his hat, as he scanned the restless herd for stragglers. This late in the haul, so close to the stockyards in Dodge, he'd be damned if he let any of them break off and ruin their work to keep their sorry carcasses alive until now.

The herd wasn't as big as it had been back in Texas, but then to get all the way to the end of the Sante Fe Line in the summertime with an intact herd of three thousand head was near impossible; there was just too little water, the prairie grass too parched for all the cattle to eat well, this late in the season. They'd only lost a hundred head or so, mostly the older cattle, plus a few handful that had scattered during a dust storm that caught them on the edge of Indian Territory, what had become of them he and the other hands had been unable to find out.

There was stir of dust and the pound of hoof beats as his drive partner pulled up beside him, squinting down at him funny where he stood on the ground.

"Cain! Randall made the call to move out. Git on." Snake jerked his head in the direction of the man's horse behind him.

Cain scowled over at the darker man sitting astride a snap-jawed bay pony that always seemed a little too shy, too frisky and twitchy for his taste. He spat on the dusty ground to clear the crud at the back of his throat, left ticklish from his morning smoke, before hooking his foot in the stirrup with his good leg and hoisting himself up and over into the saddle of his brute. His left leg gave him trouble, had since a bullet broke it back in the war, but these days it was a dull pain that only gimped him slightly.

He gave Snake a nod, and clicked his tongue at his horse, spurring him forward and out to work.

"Betcha' we'll make Dodge by nightfall," Snake offered in conversation, tugging his horse to pull up along side Cain's black brute. The damn thing nickered, skittish of the larger animal, and Cain held back a snort of disgust. Fucking *flighty*. Its rider wasn't. Seth "Snake-eyes" Lowery was a rangy, whipcord man with a core of lead, dark from sun and Indian blood somewhere down the line, and the way he smiled put Cain's teeth on edge, oily and mean and the grin never reached his eyes. Eyes like flint always sparking with something wily. But he'd been in a few scrapes beside him and Snake's aim was true, his gun quick at the ready, and he'd never deserted Cain yet, so that was something.

It didn't bear too much consternation, after all, out here a man's word and his aim were some of the few things that truly mattered, and while Seth Lowery might've been a piece of work, he wasn't as bad as they came.

Cain offered no verbal response, just a nod that dipped the brim of his hat only slightly, and stared back over the herd. Beside him, Snake snorted something like a laugh, although it was too mean to be a proper one, shaking his head. "Fucksake's, never seen nobody right *cheerful* as you, Cain. Ain't a southern man like you supposed ta' be a little more friendly?"

The blond glared over at his partner, but under the bandana rucked around his neck, the corner of his lip twitched up. Snake just kept on snickering to himself, pulling his own ragged bandana up as the herd, spurred on by the flank men and the

hoss, started to move out and kick up a thick cloud of dust. They'd be easy pickings in the valley, what with the dust trail from the cattle visible for miles, but it was unlikely they'd be attacked by Indians or bushwhacked so close to Dodge. Still, he and Snake were the rear guard; it paid to watch for the unlikely.

It was hot, even for the late morning, and the men were as restless as the cattle for a watering hole, anxious for the saloons and women, few that they may be, that waited in Dodge.

The sweat was already dripping off Cain's nose, the salt a slight sting against the ever-tender skin there, sweat soaking his shirt, his hands wet and chafed raw under the deerskin gloves, the seat of his jeans under his chaps; sun beating down fit to blister and scorch, this late into July.

It made a body forget what it even felt like to be comfortably warm, much less remember the feeling of *cold*.

He could almost taste the memory of the dewy green grass that had laid under the oak trees back home, shady and sweet, where the breeze was like a soft caress and the land welcomed a man into its embrace like a mother to a long lost child. Dirt so wet and black it filled the air with the smell. And the rain, the endless wealth of the *rain* that poured from the sky so often and in such abundance that Cain had scarcely imagined a world without it until it was gone.

There was no rain here, and the land was mean from the neglect, dry and pale and unwelcoming. There were rivers, but even they dried up on occasion, and in the few years since he'd gone west out of Fort Worth with a bum leg, a Winchester repeater, a Colt forty-five and his horse, he'd be damned if he'd felt the rain on his face more than a dozen times, seemed like.

He reckoned the other men felt the thirst for rain, too, but in them it seemed to feel like a thirst for other things that were just as desolate in this wretched land, where most of the water was just a simmering glaze of mirror on the horizon, forever out of reach. Women, booze, money, cards, music, the trappings of the world they'd left behind wherever they came from. But god, the *rain*. He'd forgotten by now what it tasted like. The feel of it on your face.

A piercing whistle cut him out of his daydreaming.

"Yeee'ah!" Nell called over the cattle herd, spurring them onward, coming up wide and pulling around to the rear guard. Snake snorted, wolf-grin on his face, "Don' look now, Sugar-pie, but here comes darling *Cornelius*."

Cain steeled himself not to flinch, or whip around to watch the approach of the spritely rider.

Nell, their wrangler, was the youngest man on the drive, hardly sixteen, barely not a *boy*, and for reasons no one but Nell likely understood, the poor kid was sweet on Cain. Hard to tell if it was just hero-worship or something more, but Snake thought the whole mess hysterical, if only because every time the kid opened his mouth, Cain's face clenched up like his stomach just turned over.

"How'dy, Cain!" Nell greeted cheerfully, and Cain bit back a grimace.

"Marnin' *Cornelius*!" Snake jeered back, mockingly imitating Nell's tone.

Nell wrinkled his nose at Snake over his Christian name, but shrugged it off, more concerned with the big blond man next to him astride his big black horse. The men had something of a pool going as to how the fuck Cain's gelding got that damn huge, and the current favorite theory was that the brute was actually still a stallion and its balls were just hiding out somewhere.

Cain offered no replies at this, but he'd been known to get a wry little smile on his face, almost laughing to himself, whenever they got to talking about it.

"Marn'n *Snake*," Nell muttered back, before giving Cain an expectant look. Cain narrowed his eyes.

"Those spare horses watchin' themselves right now, boy?" He said.

Nell positively wilted, shoulders curling in a little in either embarrassment or disappointment, Cain couldn't tell.

"Well, sir, I asked Buck if he could keep a quick eye on'em for a minute. Just wanted to see how y'all were goin'."

The poor kid was flushed and skittish as Snake's damn worthless horse, and Cain felt a little bad for him, but this wasn't a fucking leisure ride, and the kid had responsibilities, just like the rest of them. He sighed, and replied, "We're goin' fine. Now, buck up and get back to work. Dodge ain't more than a half a day out, you can



run your trap all ya want once these fleabags are shot, racked, and loaded on the train to Chicago."

Nell perked up a bit about that. "Reckon I could buy you a glass once we're in town?"

Snake made a thick cough into the crook of his arm that sounded unsubtly like a bark of laughter.

They just needed this kid out of his hair before Randy caught on the boy was dodging work and worked his young hide royally over. He sighed again, tired and exasperated.

"Reckon you might," Cain replied, keeping his stare hard, but the boy lit up, smiling ear to ear.

Snake did him a favor and cuffed the boy over the back of the head, with a smirk. "Git'on then, boy!"

Nell rubbed the back of his head, scowling at Snake, but led his pony off down the flank with a wave to Cain, in search of his errant herd of horses.

Snake cocked an eyebrow, and started to open his mouth, but Cain cut him off with a snarl, "You keep your trap *shut*."

Snake leered. "It'd be good for you, gettin' some tail, s'all I'm sayin.' Bet the scamp's tight."

Cain's eyes went wide and he stared at Snake in shock before it soured into anger. "Ah' would *never*—"

Another snort from Snake. "Everybody get's a little hungry out here, mate, 'sides it ain't like the kid ain't beggin' for it."

Cain snarled and grabbed Snake by the front of his shirt, nearly hauling him off his horse. "I would never touch him. Ain't like that, ain't *right*. You or any a' the other men lay a paw on him, neither, and I'll cut it off. We clear, Snake-eyes?"

Snake swallowed, letting his hands come up in surrender, but the placating expression of his face was just like his smile. Never reached his eyes, which instead narrowed in equal anger.

"Clear."

Cain let go of his shirtfront with a shove, and spurred his horse a little further up ahead, leaving Snake to stare at his back. It dawned on him slow, like a molasses spill in the back of his mind. *Ain't like that*, huh. Snake's lips split in a wide, mean grin. He'd suspected, but of all the men to be a mary, it'd be Cain, wouldn't it, the high and mighty sonuvabitch. Fuckin' *figured*.

He itched to let some of the other boys in on the gossip, it'd be a righteous laugh after all the bullshit they'd speculated about their tight lipped gunny, but as he rode on up ahead a bit, he caught sight of Cain's face out of the corner of his eye. Man looked like he'd seen a ghost, white-knuckle grip on the reigns, pale enough in the face he looked like he might be sick, slick with sweat as he stared hard at the line of the horizon almost in a daze.

Snake tsked under his breath.

Damn fucking conscience always snuck up on him at the shittiest damn times, he thought, couldn't chime in when he was spending his last dime on a no-good woman or a bad hand at poker, but it got all uptight about shit like this. He spat on the ground, shaking his head, and spurred his horse to properly catch up to Cain.

Cain didn't look at him, kept staring ahead, and Snake sighed. "Ain't gonna say nothin, ya sorry bastard." The blond whipped around to look him in the eyes, and somewhere down in his axle-grease core, Snake knew he'd made the right call. Because in the watery, gray blue of Cain's eyes there was a spark of fear, real deep animal fear. Snake felt sorry for him.

"Sides, ain't like Buck and Henry ain't makin' like rabbits half the nights anyhow." Snake replied in a jeering tone, smirking about as genuine as he got, and Cain made a choking noise, like he'd swallowed his spit wrong. Snake laughed then, smacking Cain a couple times on the back.

"Fuckin' prude," he muttered loud enough for Cain to hear, and tugged his horse around to make the rounds of the back of the herd.

Cain shook his head, still coughing, but the hand still left on the reigns had loosened.



By the time they made it to Dodge City, it was only a few hours off of sunset, but plenty of time to load the cattle into the stockyards well before dark. Randy, the drive boss, was pleased enough with being done earlier than anticipated, after two months on the trail, to call all the boys together and offer to by them a round or two at one of the saloons in town.

Cain's scowl deepened when unanimously, at the suggestion of Snake, the bastard, the men agreed that the place to go was the local cathouse at the end of the row.

Snake winked at him, and that smirk was dangerous.

The crowd of them were a few shades dirtier than most of the men on the streets, but the locals here were used to cowboys rolling in for the stockyards at the railhead. A new cattle train rolled in every week during peak season, bringing with it a dusty team of cowpokes with new paychecks burning a hole in their pocket, just itching for fresh food, whiskey, and a chance to paw some soft, sweet flesh.

Lottie's was the biggest calico house for round about a hundred miles in any direct, with at least a dozen girls about the place at any given time, but during peak season for cattle drives, that number swelled to sixteen or seventeen. It was commonly known that the resident lawmen looked the other way about the whole mess, for a cut of the House's profits, which these days were not insignificant.

Cain muttered something about needing to see to his horse, and Randy just waved a dismissive hand at him, telling him to come by when he was done, because the offer of free whiskey was apt to expire once he got liquored up enough by Lottie's ladies to get frisky.

Cain led his horse over to the stables a few establishments down from the cathouse, limp stronger now after a full day's ride, and handed the strung out looking stable boy a night's fare. His horse was nearly as sweaty as he was, the heat of the sun fading but the heat of the day baking back up into the air off the ground. The big brute was built along the lines of a Roman warhorse, thick in the muzzle, more densely muscled, darkly skinned and colored, and bigger boned than was entirely wise in a desert-crossing horse. But the damn thing had been his since he'd been thirteen and could scarcely even ride it, legs too short and the beast's barrel thick as a

stock-horse. It'd seen war alongside him, flanks marred with old scars, legs scored and crisscrossed as his own hide, and a Rebel brand seared into its left shoulder.

The ritual of caring for the brute eased away the stress of the day, the repetitive process of removing the bit and reigns, unbuckling the saddle and hoisting it off, shaking out the sodden saddle blanket, inspecting hoofs and shoes, and then rubbing the horse down. The men didn't know the horse's name, but he knew Snake would never imagine it, god-fearing man like Cain Bradshaw, riding a black horse he called *Lucifer*.

It was almost a private joke he kept between him and the horse, and possibly God and the specter of his mother, who he knew would've had a heart attack if she ever found out. Fortunately, there lay more than a thousand miles between her and the stockyard town of Dodge.

Dodge *City* had always felt a little presumptuous to him after having been in such cities as St. Louis, Charleston, and Birmingham. The endless sprawl of buildings and the seemingly countless thousands that bustled about, clad in bright colored clothes only a season or two out of fashion with Boston, everyone freshly bathed and laundered and talc powdered, buzzing with gossip, idle time and money.

Compared to that, Dodge "City" was a step or two larger than a Pony Express way-shack with an outhouse.

But he had never had any particular fondness for civilization and its needed trappings, or felt the want for a house, a real bed, a wife and children which chained a man down to a single spot his whole life. That was the life his mother would've had for him, the successor to the esteemed Bradshaw Plantation, a vast empire of cotton and tobacco and black flesh nestled in the lush green of the Alabama countryside, with enough wealth to its name that Mistress Helena Bradshaw had very nearly paid his way out of the draft with offers of supplies and shelter.

She would have succeeded, too, had he not packed his rucksack one night when he was scarcely older than Nell, and rode his horse to the Rebel encampment ten miles down the road, planted his feet on the ground in front of Lieutenant Larson, and offered his life, rifle, and horse to the service of the cause. The man had smiled wearily and shaken his hand, welcoming him into the fight.

Cain chuckled bitterly under his breath. He'd been so young, so *naïve*, he was sure his mother had called him a fool when she'd encountered his absence the next morning. He wondered if she'd even enquired after his body, to see if he'd died in the battles that followed, near and distant, if she'd shed a tear for her only son.

He doubted she had.

Lucifer nuzzled at him, snuffling at his sweaty shirt and pants on the hunt for a treat or two, and Cain smiled. He dug out a grain cake from the bucket next to the stall, and fed it to him, rubbing the brute's broad nose fondly.

"Well, better get on 'fore the boys come looking for me," he muttered.

He left his saddle on the fence that penned in the stall, trusting in the common knowledge that the only crime worse than stealing a man's saddle and tack was stealing his *horse*, either one of which not a judge or jury west of the Mississippi would convict him for gunning the unlucky bastard down. Besides he'd like to see a man try, with a horse like Luce. Damn thing had a hate for most people as black as its hide.

There was a rousing sprawl of music and lamp light spilling out of the calico house into the dusk of the warm evening, fiddle and a badly tuned piano clashing against the sound of men hooting and hollering, carousing and drinking, and the unfamiliar sound now of women's laughter.

It was jarringly loud compared to the sounds he'd become accustomed to on the trail, where there was only the low rolling thunder of the cattle, the hoof beats of horses and the occasional whip crack. The lower, smoke rough voices of men.

Cain straightened his shirt and vest, adjusted his hat, and stepped up onto the boardwalk, into the light of the bar. He drew in a long breath of the slightly perfumed air as he pushed open the swinging half doors and went inside. Immediately, his fellow cowboys on the drive team crowed and called over to him, his boss Randy already a little intoxicated, or at least enough to call for another round.

Cain scowled and parked himself down on a chair at their table, and ignoring the doe-eyes from the nearest bar maid as she winked at him and set down another round of whiskey for the dozen or so men on the team.

Randy laughed. "Whoa, missy, this man's a round behind, go on'n pour him a 'nother would'ja, darlin'?"

She giggled, giving Randy another saucy wink as she flounced back to the bar, and the big man suddenly felt exhausted. How could a man be expected to work all day, for months, and then have his reward be such noise and a few slugs of gut-rot.

Snake drew his glass up first, "Cheers, lads!"

The rest of the men answered him, a few glasses already precariously sloppy this early in the night as they brought them all to clink in the middle, and Cain wearily raised his as well. With a wet glass clack, the drinks all went back and Cain let the firewater slide over his tongue in one long pull. He didn't wince, but the taste and the foul burn made him want to. Lord knows Snake would never let him hear the end of it, otherwise.

The barmaid was back with another one just for him, and he threw it back without a pause, perhaps hoping the second slug of alcohol would dull the god-awful band and the jeers of the crowd, the cloying smell of the perfumed women mixed with the stench of working men. The warmth the whiskey left in his chest was at least dully comforting.

A few of the men broke off, in search of a bed or company or both, and Cain stood up to do the same elsewhere after the whiskey had settled in his gut, but Nell smiled shyly at him across the table. "Buy you a drink, Cain? You said I could."

Cain wanted to growl that the word he'd used was *might* not *could*, and that it turns out he might *not*, and just leave for a bed somewhere in a quieter part of town, but the look in the kid's eyes was like puppy love, and he couldn't quite find it in himself to just kick that hope to the dust.

"I suppose," he conceded.

Nell's smile spread wider, and he nodded his head towards the bar. Cain got out of his chair, gave the trail boss a nod of thanks for the drinks, and followed the kid over, knowing damn well that he was leaving Snake to sit at the table and snicker like a coot at the pair of them.

He pulled out a barstool and sat down, Nell taking the seat beside him, and the boy turned and looked eagerly over at him, eyes a little glassy with whiskey already,

and Cain was suddenly worried the fool kid would go and make a scene out of this. It was one thing to humor the kid, but god help him, otherwise.

"Whiskey?" Nell offered.

Cain shrugged, "Tequila."

The barkeeper, a stooped old man who looked older than most got be aged this far west, cracked a toothy grin at him, mouth missing more than a few. "Ain' no tay-keeler this far north, cowpuncher, watchoo been swillin' down with them bloody Mexicans? Got gin, rum, beer, n'whiskey. Take yer pick."

The blonde's mouth quirked up in a small smile. "Gin."

The barkeep smiled back, before a thick wheezing hack that sounded wet enough for medical concern sprung up in his throat, but there was likely nothing to be done for it. The man looked near seventy. "Gin it is. And you, boy?"

Nell bristled a little, frown screwing up his forehead, and he said, "I ain't no *boy*."

Cain shook his head, sipping a little of the gin the man had poured him. It wasn't half bad, and by that, he reckoned someone with a real copper still might've made it as opposed to somebody cooking in behind the house in a washtub. The second swallow made him suspect that was maybe a little too generous of a statement.

"Yer sixteen if yer a day, son." The old man replied, cocking an eyebrow back at the blonde, who shrugged and said, "He'll have a beer."

Nell looked over at Cain like he wanted to frown at him too, but didn't quite. "I can drink the hard stuff. I rode the trail with you and the rest just fine! I'm not some kid!"

The old man smiled, and got out a pint mug and topped it off with lukewarm, frothy beer off the tapped oak keg behind him, letting it froth over and scraping it clean. As he set the glass over in front of the kid, he leaned a bit over the bar and gestured for him to come closer. Nell leaned in, looking confused.

"Ah'll let ya' in on a little secret, sonny. You'll know when yer a man when nobody would look at'cha and *dare* call you a boy. Don't happen when *you* say you is, happens when everybody else says you is. And I'm sayin' that yer a boy, *boy*. So siddown, shuddup and drink yer beer."

Nell flushed with embarrassment, which quickly thickened into indignant anger, and Cain grabbed Nell's arm before his hand went down to his gun belt. "Cornelius Wright, you put a paw on that gun, every gun in this place's gonna be out." He warned, and jerked his head towards the barkeep.

"Including that one."

The old man grunted, and suddenly there was a double barrel shotgun, locked and loaded, propped up against the bar pointed straight at Nell. The wrangler blanched, and let his hand fall back on the bar-top.

"Tha'ssa way, sonny, hands off," The barkeep said, and tucked the shotgun back away. One of the girls, a busty, slightly older woman with rich brown hair, poked herself in between Nell and Cain and giggled. "Yeah, honey, don't you know you ain't supposed to draw a gun in a brothel? Mama Lottie'll blacklist you in a hot minute."

"An' then thay's no more pussy," The old man jeered in reply, grinning crookedly, and the girl laughed, nodding, "How's it going Gramps?"

"Not too shabby. Good crowd tonight, huh Missy?" he replied.

"You betcha. Now, who do we have here? Mister Chip-on-his-shoulder over here, an' lord, ain't you cute as a button!" She cried cheerfully, and Nell flushed crimson.

Cain hid his smile around the gin glass as the girl cornered Nell like wolf on a fat rabbit, and started to butter him up, cooing in a low voice at him. The boy'd probably never even seen that much of a woman's flesh all at once in his whole life, country boy like him. That, an' Miss *Missy* over there knew as damn well as Cain did that that kid had a fat wad of cash to his name, now that those cattle were loaded.

One of the other girls, dressed even looser than Missy with a riot of blond curls flooding off her shoulders from a red ribbon, nudged her way in beside her *sister*.

"And then his big friend over here, Mister..." The blond girl trailed off as she met Cain's eyes under the brim of his hat, looking a little flushed herself, and she fanned a bit of air at her face in a smoldering look that was most, if not all, show business.

"Ah'll *be*. How the hell has Mama not called dibs on *you* yet?"

Cain snorted. "Reckon cause I ain't in the market. Just havin' a drink, s'all, long day."



Her eyes raked over him, hungry like the male eyes that usually raked over her on a Friday night, and he suddenly felt just as cornered as Nell. "Honey, everybody west'a the Mississippi is in the market for Kitty Lovelace," she purred in his ear.

Cain shook his head. "I ain't interested in the wares. Ain't buying."

Her lips curled like he'd just thrown down the gauntlet.

"Oh sugar, ain't like I'd charge *you* much."

And of course, at that moment, Snake needed to rear his ugly mug up next to her. The man was nearly staggering drunk by now, Randy and a few of the boys left around playing faro, by the looks of it, all more than a few drinks in the hole.

"Oh *ho*, and how much is much, little lady, cause my friend Cain here's a tightfisted sonuvabitch." He said, winking at her like he was letting her in on a real secret. Cain glared back at his trail partner.

The blond girl looked at Cain positively predatory.

"I'd only charge ya Mama's share. Most guys, I'd charge five bucks a' night, but you, handsome, I reckon I'd charge you a dollar."

Snake wolf whistled loudly, enough to draw a few stares and a few laughs, and for Randy's head to perk up. "Wass'zis, Snake?"

"Miss Kitty Cat o'er here's only gonna charge Cain a dollar! Motherfuckin' cross-bearin' *Cain*."

Randy gave an echoing wolf whistle, and then raised a challenging eyebrow at Cain. "Well, why don't you go take Miss Kitty upstairs and say *thank you*, son?"

It was pitch dark outside and he needed a bed anyhow. That, and there was no excuse he could make in *hell* to turn down a pretty, fresh little thing like Kitty after two months without. Didn't matter what your religion or creed, pussy for a dollar was stealing. You couldn't even get it cheaper married.

Cain laid a coin on the bar for the drink Nell had 'bought' him, as well as Nell's, and let Kitty take his hand and lead him upstairs. He caught Snake's eyes across the room, and that mean-eyed damn smirk was back. He wouldn't need to tell the boys. Kitty would tell the whole damn town for him.

The girl's room was cooler than the bar, less bodies and a better cross breeze, but Cain still felt sweat pooling down his back, on his chest, and the alcohol was only

enough to soften the edges of the nerves he felt creeping up within him as Kitty let go of his hand.

She reached for his gun belt first, but her hands stopped short when Cain's eyes hardened, jaw tight enough to crack. He took his hat off and set it on the dresser, and then slowly unbuckled the gun belt. Kitty giggled, a little tipsy herself, "I know my way around a *belt*, hoss."

He frowned. "Doesn't mean I want your hands on it."

Kitty's leer was heavy as sin. "You s'gesting I dunno my way around a *gun*, neither, cowboy?"

Cain scowled, but a blush spilled across his cheeks under the already pink tinge of sun at the innuendo. Kitty reached out and tugged on his shirt, untucking it and starting to work on the buttons, pulling him into a kiss. If her eyes had been open, she'd've seen Cain's eyes go wide in surprise, before he flinched. After a few moments of unresponsiveness, she pulled away, leaving his shirt rucked up and half opened. "What, cat got your tongue, honey? Maybe you just need a little incenta'vizin'."

She pushed him back onto the bed, and then backed up, reaching behind her back to tug at the laces on her under-bust. Once that fell loose, a few quick shrugs had her dress off her shoulders, and then pooling in silken excess at her feet.

She was beautiful. He could give her that. Soft skin pale as milk in the lamplight, blond curls tracing her shoulders down her back, large well shaped breasts that no-doubt had sent many a man panting in her wake, soft padded hips and thick thighs. She looked down at him, same predatory look she'd had in the parlor, until the hand she traced down his bared chest reached the waist of his pants. Her confidence faltered when she groped him through the thick fabric and found him still soft.

She looked up at him in surprise, almost shock, and then had the audacity to look ruffled and offended.

"What, you need somethin' better than *me*?" She hissed, jerking a hand back at herself and squeezing him a bit vindictively hard.

Cain winced, looking away.

"Well Ah'll tell you, you bastard, you ain't gonna find nothing better than this for grabs nowhere!" She went on, letting him go to throw her hands up in the air in disgust.

"Ain't that," Cain muttered.

She crossed her arms, tits mashing together, face done up in a pout. "Well then what the hell is it? Ain't the damn whiskey, you're barely gone."

Cain knew it was just the gin and the whiskey that made him say, "Don't need better, just...different."

Kitty snorted, still pouting, "What, you need 'em taller? Shorter? Bigger tuckus? *Smaller* tits? You name it, I've heard it!"

Cain grimaced, pushing himself up off the bed and faced her, finally exasperated. "No, *different*."

Kitty went still, as the realization hit her. "What, like a m—"

He grabbed her by the shoulders and snarled "Don't *fucking* say it."

Her startled expression faded into a gentle look that might've been pity or empathy, and he couldn't take it. He let her go, feeling every ounce of wear and weariness, bad leg throbbing and starting to clench up, and let himself collapse down into the oaken chair sat facing the bed.

He jolted when he felt her hand run through the long overgrown hair at his temple, scritch along down behind his ear to his neck. It was slow motion, almost like one would touch a spooked horse.

She tsked under her breath. "Ain't like you're the only damn cowboy who'd only ride me from behind, drunk as a skunk."

The blush was back at her crude words, some long buried part of him terribly embarrassed to hear such words from the mouth of anyone, much less a *lady*. But then again, Kitty was no lady, and she laughed softly at the blush on his face.

With the haze of liquor and sleep thickening in his brain, Cain didn't trust himself to say anything in response, and she untangled her hand with a sigh. "Damn shame, is what it is. Handsome feller like you."

He blushed darker, and tried to scowl at her with enough force to regain his dignity, but then, that was probably a crapshoot at this point. "I'll head out."

She padded over to the wardrobe and dug out a nightgown, looking back at him thoughtfully. "You still got a dollar?"

Cain looked up, and raised an eyebrow.

Kitty smiled. "Well, don't look so surprised. Tell you what, for that one dollar, you and I can share that bed there, real civil like, and your team down stairs'd be none the wiser."

"Don't reckon a bed for the night *and* a lie only costs a dollar, ma'am." He replied.

She smirked wider. "I'll throw in the lie for free, but only if you sleep naked."

He froze, and his face must've been somethin', 'cause she started giggling in a fashion that descended well beyond ladylike or coquettish, and into snorts of real laughter. After that died down, she wiped her eyes, shook her head, and said "Naw, I'm jes' messin.' Not sayin' I wouldn't enjoy the view, mind, but you can sleep in yer smalls if you want. Just take all that dirt-crusted tackle off first."

And with that she hopped onto the bed, wiggled under the covers, and with a wink, turned down the lamp and appeared to fall asleep. Cain sat staring out over the near dark room, listening to her breathing until he could tell she was truly asleep, then eased himself a little deeper into the slung back chair and nodded off himself.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *A Jail Cell Full of Witches*

In the lone jail cell of Darlington, solitary outpost of Hodgeman County, there sat an absolute bear of a man. His impressive mass and terrific height made it seem as though he very nearly occupied the cell wall-to-wall and floor to ceiling, making his lone companion in the cell appear rail thin and bedraggled by comparison.

Presently, the bear-like man was leaning against the wall, long barrel legs flopped out where he sat, and he had his hat propped down to cover his eyes. Taken out of the local scenery, he looked a man at blissful ease, startlingly at odds with the iron bars caging him in, hardly distressed in the slightest over his present predicament. It was hard to tell if he was smiling, what for the ghastly scar that bisected the side of his face and lip, dragging his expression up into a grimacing perpetual snarl.

His companion, a rangy looking man of Indian descent, was sprawled out on the narrow cot, limbs akimbo, puffing on a cigarillo. The growing pile of ashes and spent paper stubs below his hand, flopped off the edge of the cot, gave sign to the man's captive boredom. The pair didn't speak, or even seem to acknowledge each other, or their greenhorn looking pair of guards who were presently staring at them in nervous curiosity from the guardhouse of the jail.

"Look, all Ah'm sayin', Bobby, is that it ain't *natural*, is all," One of the guards muttered, a straw haired fellow who looked in bad need of a wash.

"What ain't natural?" The other, a broad nosed man, with a moustache that seemed in danger of overtaking his entire face, seemed somewhat less perturbed than his flaxen haired partner, much more interested in scraping the crud out from under his nails with the jailbird Indian's confiscated boot knife.

"That!" Straw-hair hissed, jerking a thumb back at the occupied, smoke filled cell. "They ain't said nothing all day they been in there!! Tellin' ya, Bobby, ain't nothing good about it. Maybe they's somekinda witches."

Bobby put down the stolen knife to glare over from his chair at his partner. "Damn it, Maynard, yer mama drop you as a child? Ain't no such thing's s'witches. 'Sides, witches is women, ain't they?"

Maynard scowled. "I bet they is, too!"

"What, women?" Bobby replied, going back to picking at his nail beds.

"No, ya sonkey, not *wemin*. Witches! They don't look like *wemin* ta you, do they?" Maynard spat back.

The lazing Indian let out a soft chuckle around a smoke plume, and the two guards looked over at the cell in shock, and then back at each other.

Bobby snorted, and called over "Oy, you! You ain't a woman, are ya?"

The darker man's face curled in a grin, and pinching the cigarette in between his lips, he reached down, hooked a thumb under the top of his pants and let a hand slip under to give himself a squeeze. He let go of his pants and removed the cigarette with his free hand, exhaling smoke through his nose with a grin still on his face. "Reckon not."

Maynard stormed up the cell bars, chair falling back with a shriek and hollered "Git yer paw outta yer pants you damn crazy Injun!! The hell you doin', doin' that kinda thing in fron'na somebody else!?"

The Indian adjusted himself in his draws and retracted his hand. "No need ta get spun up, *Maynard*, the boys were just sittin' a little too high and left-like, gotta adjust 'em occasionally, let a little breeze in. You understand."

Bobby set his partner's chair back up and hauled him by the back of his shirt down into. "Siddown, idiot. An' you, quit rilin' him and have a little goddern *decency*."

The man just smirked, and his bearlike cellmate continued to nap. Or at least, he appeared to be napping.

"Now, see, Maynard. They ain't *women*, so they sure as fuck ain't witches, an' he talks jes' fine."

The straw haired guard scowled deeper, crossing his arms as he sunk into the chair. "Big one ain't said nothing."

"Big one *cayn't* say nothin'." The Indian drawled, tapping the ash off his quirley.

"Wuddya' mean, *cayn't*?" Bobby asked, neglecting the confiscated knife now in favor for examining the other confiscated possessions of the two rogues. Gunpowder, an uncomfortably large quantity of dynamite and extra rounds of ammunition, a couple matchbooks, a few hundred dollars in bank notes he'd bet good money were stolen, spare clothes, a total of three pistols and two rifles between the two of them, and an *eight gauge* brass-plated blunderbuss that looked like it could blow a hole clear through the engine block of a coal fired locomotive. The fat, fresh tobacco pouch had been somewhat reluctantly returned to the Indian once he'd been safely secured in the jail cell, on account of it being just cruel and unusual to keep a man all day in a cell without even letting him *smoke*.

"Cayn't say nothin' without no *tongue*, hoss." The Indian replied cheerfully, "Ain't that right, Kujo?"

The bearish man spat on the dusty mortared floor of the cell, bearing his teeth at them in an animal grin just wide enough to catch a glimpse of the carved out empty cavern of his mouth.

The guardsmen looked a little green at that, and Bobby whistled. "Shieet."

"Ain't like that kinda shit happens on accident!" Maybard whispered, "Wonder what the hell he did, you reckon, ta' get somebody mad enough ta do that? Ain't like he's some runaway slave."

The big man either didn't hear them, or didn't care, but the lanky Indian seemed to undertake his meaning when he made some kind of small movement with his hand, and passed him the half smoked quirley.

"Mind yer own, ain't the kinda story a man tells." Bobby muttered, shoving him back in his seat.

The Indian sputtered a laugh, and said, "S'one helluva sure fire way to make sure he don't, aint it?" He accepted the cigarette back from his bearish companion, the pair of them seeming to find his joke far funnier than the guards.

Bobby shook his head in disgust. "When'd the Sheriff say that one Marshal was comin' ta get these jokers?"

His partner shrugged. "Maybe tamarra? I don't know, Charlene said somethin' bout him comin' round today..."

Bobby grunted, hauling himself out of his seat and taming down his moustache a bit, and nodded. "I'll head over an' ask around, see if there's been another telegraph or news from Dodge. The Marshal seemed real hopped up over us catchin' these two in his message, must be somekinda bigshots. Now, so you keep yer eyes peeled for trouble, Maynard, I wouldn't wanna be the man's gotta tell Marshal King these two got loose on our watch, ya hear!"

Maynard nodded solemnly.

Bobby headed out the door, leaving it cocked to let a breeze through the smoky guardhouse, and an awkward silence descended once more upon the guard and his prisoners, who were still sharing the last of the smoke in casual, quiet companionship.

Maynard deliberated over it for some time, whether or not to attempt to strike up conversation with the men, well, *man*, he corrected himself, shuddering at the thought of the other man's missing tongue. He wondered at what all misfortune thus far in his short life had led him to become responsible for guarding the one jail cell in the whole county, particularly when it was occupied by, if Marshal King's telegraph was to be believed, two members of one of the most elusive gang of outlaws west of the Mississippi. The ringleader, one "Coyote," believed to be Apache Indian by way of at least one parent, Christian name and age unknown, wanted for theft, murder, and a rather lengthy laundry list of petty crimes including, but not limited to, arson, impersonating an officer of the law, evading capture, assault, illegal possession of firearms and explosives, gambling, bootlegging, lewd public behavior, suspected sodomy and the solicitation of prostitutes in near every county under King's jurisdiction, and in one particularly daring occasion, the bosom impersonation of a *calico girl*.



King mentioned that any other men, or *women*, found in his company, and Maynard didn't dare imagine what kind of brassy squaw would join ranks with a man like *that*, were liable to be just as wily, dangerous and depraved as the Indian. If he recalled correctly, those had been the man's exact words.

Maynard had just started to wonder if he could slip away down to Taylor's place for a beer and come back before Bobby'd returned from buttering up Miss Charlene, when there was a low fluttering bird whistle outside the door, like a sparrow, and the men in the cell plastered themselves face first against the cell in an instant. The Indian gave a shrieking caw, a raven's cry, and then all that the guard heard was the whistle-thump of a rifle followed by an explosion of white noise and pain and chaos. His vision went woozy and his hearing rung with a high-pitched whine.

In the smoke and rubble that had once been the front of the jailhouse, now smoldering and half blown apart, stepped a figure, rifle slung over their shoulder with all the brassy confidence of a man who could shoot the wings off a fly.

The foot falls and spurs seemed distant and pounding loud all at once, and the stranger crouched next to Maynard's prone form, an apologetic look in his eyes. His...wait, no, there was something off there. The brow line too soft, eyes bigger and eyelashes curly and lush, and the stranger's hair was as long as the Indian's but wildly loose with curls around their head. Hips wider than any man's, and once he caught sight of the stranger's chest, well, it was rather obvious. Despite her mannish clothing, this rifle-slung stranger was all woman, and a damn *fine* woman, some part of Maynard's shell-rattled brain laughed.

She snorted at the mess, and ruffled around his body for the keys. Once she had them in hand, she patted him on the cheek, "eh, you'll live, quit yer whinin." He realized with some belated embarrassment that part of that high-pitched noise had been his own whimpering.

"Mercy darlin', lovely ta see ya." Came the Indian's smoky drawl over the rubble, jail cell bars a little warped around the edges from the rifle-triggered dynamite, but still intact enough for the strange woman to get the key in and the door unlocked. Coyote was coated in plaster dust from the blast, but relatively unharmed, and she

strong-armed him out the cell door only to shake him like an errant kitten. "You sonuvabitch, that's the second time this month I've had ta' spring yer sorry ass!"

Coyote held his hands up in the air in mock surrender, but was all smiles. He shrugged.

The bear-like man, Kujo, stepped out of the cell and shrugged as well, and the woman shook her head, smiling in fond exasperation. "Get your gear, what little ain't fried, and let's go, blast like that'll be drawing a crowd."

The Indian found to his delight that his gun belt wasn't too singed, and strapped his twin pistols back on, along with one of the rifles and with a little smug satisfaction, wiped the dirty boot knife on Maynard's shirt before re-sheathing in his boot. The rucksack was a might crispy, but it'd do, and he shoved the rest of the gear into it and slung it over his shoulder. Kujo had shouldered the blunderbuss and the remaining weapons, and with that, they left the wrecked jailhouse and high-tailed it.

By the time they'd rescued the horses and started making tracks for the hills, the fine folk of Darlington had found Maynard, a little worse for wear, but alive, with a blue jay feather resting jauntily on the floor of the sprung jail cell.



## CHAPTER THREE

*A Bath and a Sack of Gold*

Cain woke with a crick in his neck from sleeping all night in a chair, which he had to admit, as he tried to undo the kinks and loosen the stiffness in his back and shoulders, had been a particularly harebrained idea. The girl'd offered him a bed, after all, no apparent strings attached, and more fool him for been too damn noble to take her up on it.

It was barely dawn, the light that filtered through the worn lace curtains was hazy, softly illuminating the swirls of dust which hung in the air. He watched the dust motes with a kind of weary fascination, muzzy and heavy eyed with sleep.

The girl was still sleeping, a low wheezy snore echoing the rise and fall of her chest, which in a way was somewhat endearing, her face still done up with smudged rouge from the night before. In the light of the morning, Cain had to admit that the girl was still quite beautiful. But young, terribly awfully young. He'd bet his bottom dollar she was no older than Nell, maybe even fifteen or sixteen. With the memory of her experienced, predatory eye in his mind, it was all the more disheartening to think how young she must've been when she'd joined the trade.

"You have a good night, sonny boy?" Came a high, smoke roughened voice from the doorway. The door must've stayed open that night, that or he'd been more out of it than he thought, because Cain hadn't heard the voice's owner come in, and it jolted him out of his thoughts.

"Ma'am?" He said, turning towards the voice. The older woman was plump, in a way that he knew spoke of plenty to eat, good business, and hinted at what would have been a very buxom figure some twenty or thirty years past. She was dressed in a cheerfully yellow dress, and despite her age, was still nearly spilling out of the top. She smiled at him, face crinkling warmly around the edges. "Call me Mama."

"Ah. Sure, Ma'am." Cain replied, trying to shake the sleep out of his head as he stood up.

She clucked her tongue at him, scolding, and carried over the washbasin of warm water she'd had propped up on her hip. "Now, this water's a might hot, just pulled it off the kettle, so you be careful you don't burn yourself, cowboy. There's some soap in the bureau along with a towel, and I *highly* suggest you use it. You might've burned out your nose snortin' trail dust, but the rest of us here in town get enough of a whiff of your type as it is. Lord knows Kitty'll probably need a scrub down," She jeered with a wink, and looked over at her girl, who was beginning to stir awake with a yawn fit to do her namesake proud.

"Marn'n Mama." She mumbled.

Mama smiled, ruffling the girl's hair. "You have a good night, girly?"

The girl's face split in a grin, and she leered over at Cain. "Oh just *wonderful*, Mama. You know how these bronc-busters are." As the girl stood up, Mama gave her a slap on the ass and with another wink, said "Oh you betcha, honey." With that, she left them alone.

Cain flushed with embarrassment as he looked over at the sleep-disheveled girl. She frowned down at the unrumpled side of the bed and then quirked an eyebrow in questioning. "You sleep all night in that chair?"

He nodded.

She rolled her eyes. "Stupid noble bastard."

He felt the corner of his mouth tip up, and she smiled back. "You should really wash. Mama wasn't kidd'n. Anyone with a nose could smell you and your boys coming from a mile off!"

Anxiety gripped him again like last night, and the girl, astute enough to catch the wariness in his body, sighed in exasperation. "I'll turn 'round, and I won't watch! You can even have first go."

The tension bled out. "Thanks," he muttered.

Kitty sat down on the bed and faced out the window away from the table the cathouse Mistress had set the water basin on. Unbeknownst to Cain, there was a small mirror sitting on her nightstand, and she propped it up in front of her under the guise of inspecting her rouge and sleep-mussed hair. She let it slowly tilt to the side until she could see the big cowboy standing beside the table.

"So, where you from, anyhow?" She asked, conversationally.

Cain had his vest off and draped over the chair back, and was busy unbuttoning his shirt. "South." He said.

"Where south? Texas? Reckon you ain't Mexican." She pried, chuckling a little at her own comment. Cain rolled his eyes, and she had to still herself not to make comment at that. He didn't need to know she saw that.

"South, as in *the* South." He corrected, shirt off and joining the vest on the chair back. He bent down to start on his mud-encrusted boots.

She narrowed her eyes in thought, and lowered the mirror. "You one of them Rebel boys?"

"Reckon that ain't your business, ma'am."

Kitty snorted. "I ain't near old 'nough to be ma'am ta' nobody. Call me Kitty."

"My apologies. Reckon it ain't none of your business, *Kitty*." He snapped back, and she laughed. "You've got a sense of humor buried somewhere under all that bluster, mister. You don' fool me!"

He ignored her, and kicked off his boots. Lord, he must've been tired last night to fall asleep in a chair still wearing his boots, which quickly joined the growing pile of gear on the chair and floor. Kitty held her hand mirror back up and started adjusting some rogue curls out of her face, spying on Cain again as he continued to undress. She had to hold in a gasp when she saw the grizzled, warped flesh of Cain's leg, the bullet that'd made it having left a deep dent of scar tissue in the middle of his thigh. No wonder he limped.

He dropped his smalls as well and turned his back to her to fish out a washcloth and the lye soap the Mistress had mentioned, and Kitty gasped when she saw it.

"Oh my *God*," she whispered.

Cain whipped back around and glared at her as she dropped the mirror down on the bed, turning to look at him plain.

"Not one word, Kitty," he growled, before wearily turning back around to start soaking the rag and soap. Kitty's eyes got wide, staring at his uncovered skin. Starting at the edges of his shoulders and neck and raking down to his waist were dozens of thick, slashing scars, crisscrossing horizontally and diagonally across his broad back.

"Shit, are those—?" She muttered.

"*Kitty*."

His voice was a deep, threatening snarl, and she shut her trap. She knew that tone of voice. Her pappy'd been known to make use of that tone right before he used the side of her face to dust some skin off his knuckles.

Cain washed thoroughly, more eager to be rid of the caked on trail dust than he was to be out of this place, and he could tell by the girl's ridged posture as she stared at the opposite wall that he'd spooked her. Probably served her right, she'd been far too anxious to pry for a girl who wasn't supposed to give a lick about a stranger's past.

The warm soapy water had turned a murky brown by the time he was finished, and in the quiet of the room, he could hear the building noise of the other girls, shrill laughs and giggles and taunts, and the lower voices of their overnight company as they gathered around downstairs for breakfast. He needed to leave.

But it had felt good to wash with real soap, and to shave. The feeling of bare skin on his throat and cheeks after a month of thick hair felt singularly like a welcome back to civilization.

"I can fetch some more water, if you wanna wash your hair?" Kitty offered, her voice cautious, barely above a whisper.

Cain had tugged his small clothes back on, and had shrugged on his shirt, when she said it. "No, thank you."

She looked back at him warily. "You sure? I could even give you a trim, if'n you want it? I gotta fetch new water fer myself, anyhow."

He tugged his jeans back on, and sighed. Suppose this was her way of apologizing.

"Alright."

She popped off the bed, instantly cheery again, and nodded as she ducked out the door.

It took a few minutes for her to come back with a new washbasin, and she set it beside the old one, wrinkling her nose at it. "What'd you do, wash yer horse in it first? Sheeit."

The new water was lukewarm, and she jerked her head towards the low chair by the end table. "Go sit over there, I'll sit with the washtub behind ya and you can just lean back. I've got a cup round here somewhere just for it."

Cain stilled. "I can do it myself, there's no need—"

She cut him off with a challenging look. "Look, I'm sorry I peeked on ya, ok. An' I'm sorry...that happened ta' you. My pappy beat me too. So m'sorry."

Cain sat down in the chair with a sigh. "Waren't my pa." He muttered.

Her eyes widened with curiosity, but she bit down the urge to pry, and he gave her a look of gratitude for that. "Alright, lean back for me. "

He tipped his head back, and she sat behind him, using a teacup from somewhere to pour the water over his head, her other hand keeping the water out of his eyes. It took a more th'n a few cupfulls to wet it down, it'd gotten long these days, long enough to brush his shoulders, and her hands on his scalp as she lathered in a little soap tempted him almost back into sleep.

He could remember one of their kitchen hands washing his hair like this, once. When he'd been young, maybe ten, and he'd gotten roped into helping his cousin Jasper dodge chores to help steal wild honey from the woods down by the Hagerty's place.

'Helping' had ended up being the one trying to catch the damn hive while Jasper tried to smoke the bees out with lit cigarette and then hit it down off the 8 foot high limb. The blasted thing, still swarming, had landed straight on his head, and he'd run faster than he ever had in his life, Jasper hot on his tail, for the whole two miles back home, chased more than half way by the enraged swarm.

He escaped with only a few dozen bee stings, his only consolation being that Jasper got a fair few more, but his hair and skin had been absolutely saturated with the sticky, sun-warmed honey by the time they lit on his doorstep.

His mother had taken one look at him, and sent him back out to the kitchens, and Stella, one of the younger house slaves, had tutted at him in exasperation, but scrubbed him down and washed the honey out of his hair all the same. Left to her own devices, his mother would've likely just shaved it all off and made him soak in the river till his teeth chattered.

Charming woman.

He startled awake at a rough scraping sound, eyes popping open, and Kitty spared him a sheepish glance. "Sorry, this drawer jes' gets squeaky."

Cain curled back forward out of the chair. "Sorry." He mumbled.

She was already changed into different clothes, routing around in the drawer for socks, and he realized he must've been asleep for a while. His hair felt a little damp, but was already drying, and she smiled.

"You outta clean up more offen', handsome." Kitty goaded with a wink, and he flushed a bit.

"Thanks for...this." He tried to say, not really knowing how to thank a 16 year old prostitute for not sleeping with him, and then being as strangely kind as she had been.

"No problem. You jes' let me know when you're back in town, alright? Everybody knows Miss Kitty Lovelace don't get no one-time only customers. They get a taste a' the sugar, they *always* come back." She joked, but the look in her eye was a little wry.

"Looks like we'll both be liars, then, huh?" He said, allowing a small smile himself.

She laughed. "Only fitting, really."

"Yes, ma'am." He replied, standing up, and strapping on the rest of his gear. Socks, boots, chaps, gun belt, vest, hat. He tucked his gloves under his belt, and headed back down stairs, Kitty following behind him.

The half-full barroom, more cheerful and less ominous in the light of day than it had been the night before, still sported a few faces from his crew, Randy, Snake, and Nell among them, and Snake threw up his hands and crowed when he saw them.



"Welll, lookee 'ere, Preacher Cain finally rises. You have trouble leaving the sheets this mornin'?" Snake taunted, knowing full well just what had probably happened, and he glanced behind his trail partner to give Kitty a look.

She gave it right back, and damned if she didn't faked a well-satisfied look like none-other. No wonder she only had repeat customers.

"Honey, you'll be lucky if ah' ever do ya' again, after gettin' a taste'a this stud right here, A' tell ya!" She drawled, smoke and sex in her voice, just like last night.

Snake's eyes widened in surprise, and then abruptly narrowed in suspicion, but Kitty didn't budge an inch, just kept on walking. "What, you think I'm kiddn'? He's hung like a gawdern stallion!"

The boys all let loose a pack of catcalls at that, a couple of jealous looks thrown his way, and Cain didn't quite no what to make of that, so he kept his eyes on the floor and tried in vain not to blush too hard. In that, at least, he supposed wryly, Kitty wasn't lying.

Snake didn't quite look convinced, but the rest of the men hadn't had a doubt in the first place, so without too much fuss, Cain was able to get his pay check off of a hung-over Randy and escape out of the cathouse and into the bright sun of the morning.

Kitty waved at him from the door. "I mean it, stranger. I better not hear 'bout you running off'n dying for I get to ride you again like the show pony you are!"

Cain flushed crimson under the brim of his hat, trying not to make eye contact with the handful of men and women milling about the town streets. Many of whom, particularly the women, were giving him a look of disdain and superior disgust. They call it a *city*, and all of a sudden they've got the right to get *uppity* about it. Like the whorehouse wasn't the chief money sink of every cowboy passing through, and like they an' the cattle they hauled in weren't the only reason the damn *city* was still alive.

He had to stop into the general store a few establishments down to ask after the bank, which was clear on the other end of town, its manager apparently having the good sense to keep a great deal of gold and cash away from gamblers, drunks, and the other bits of salty scum that hung round the cathouse. It was mostly empty when he stepped inside, save for the portly, rather beleaguered looking teller behind the

counter, and a dolled up young lady who seemed to be arguing with him over the arrival time of a Wells Fargo wagon bearing, apparently, a very important *house cat*.

The man behind the counter glanced up at him when the door's bell clacked at his entrance, and gave him a queer little smile that seemed entirely smarmy to Cain. "I'll be right with you sir!"

Cain said nothing, as he waited behind the woman.

"All Ah'm saying, Mr. Dunforth, is that that wagon was due here just over two *days* ago, and there's been word of stagecoach robbery just everywhere these days, and you know Ah just cayn't stop worryin' what with my poor kitten being on board! Cayn't you jus' imagine what the poor dear's been through, in a crate for all those days, and jus' ta even *think*, what if she's been kidnapped! You don't reckon they'd *ransom* her, do you?"

"Ma'am—" Mr. Dunforth began, looking rather like he wanted to reach across the counter and throttle the bird necked little woman, when all of a sudden the door behind Cain burst open, and three men, the lead of whom was carrying a shotgun with the barrel sawed clean half off, stumbled with an almost drunken belligerence into the teller's room.

"Hand's up!! We're knockin' this joint the hell over, you hear me, fatbody?! You, cowpuncher, hands up n' off'a that gun fore' I put a piece a lead 'tween yer eyes!" the lead one yelled, ragged end of the shot gun pressed up right in the teller's face and one of the other's had a gun pointed at Cain just as soon as looking at him.

Cain let his hands come up and off the handle of his pistol. His mind was racing through the odds now. Shotgun, a pistol on each of the others, teller looked liable to piss himself, so he doubted he was in reach of any kind of rifle under the counter.

At least none the man could be counted on to fire accurately.

One of the three had grabbed hold of the woman, and smacked a paw over her mouth before she could scream, knowing that that'd bring help and trouble real quick.

"Ol' man! Go back in'a that safe an' fill this 'ere sack with gold you got back there. I know yew do, so don' lie!" The man with the shotgun hissed.

Shaking with fear, Mr. Dunforth staggered back towards the safe, casting quick nervous glances every few seconds back over his shoulder at the gun barrel.

"Hurry it on up, now." The man jeered, adjusting his grip.

The men looked sweaty, and if he strained, Cain could hear the sound of horses milling around out in front. Hit'n run, but these boys didn't look old hand at it, the gleam in the other two's eyes was all desperate and high-strung. The lead man didn't look much that way at all; probably the ringleader. Man probably knew a short barrel shotgun like that would knock holes in the most people at once, smarter for a hit and run than the six-shooters his crew were carrying. But in a firefight, he wouldn't be able to reload quickly enough.

"Ah ah *ah*, hands *off*, cowpoke. Don't think I don't see your hand inchin' down for that gun. Don'tcha even *think* about it." The leader sneered back at him, gun still pointed on the teller who was digging around in the safe now. Cain stared back, eyes hard.

"And for godsakes, Earl, would you shut that bitch up!?" Ringleader hissed, and the man holding the young lady used the crook of his arm around her neck to start squeezing the air out. Her muffled shrieks under his hand died down, until she went limp.

The man let her drop like a ragdoll to the ground, and Cain was relieved when her lungs rose and fell in her chest, still breathing. Wasn't dead, at least not yet.

The bank teller appeared to be getting more and more nervous and spun up as he readied the sack and started to place gold bricks out of the safe into the leather sack the men had shoved at him, and Cain could tell by the twitch of his hands, *shit*, he *did* have a gun under that damn counter, and the fool was probably going to get himself shot before he even got it level with the ground.

Cain coughed into his shoulder, a loud enough sound to attract the attention of everyone standing, but he stared hard at the teller, willing him not to look away, and to ken his meaning. *Don't*. Don't if you want to live.

He shook his head, ever so slightly, and the teller looked down at his hands, still trembling, but he nodded a little back.

The sack wasn't overly large, yet another sign these boys knew what they were doing. Gold wasn't a quick getaway steal, unless you didn't get greedy, and the sight

of gold was usually enough to convince a man to risk taking more than he could carry, even on a horse.

The lead man grabbed the heavily laden sack from the bank teller when it was full, and said "Pleasure doin' business with ya, mister," with a mocking grin, and took off towards the door, "A real pleasure."

Cain's eyes went wide and he shouted "Get down!!" as a shotgun shell went off from the man's gun, just as they took off out the door. He'd felt the bite of shotgun pellets many a time before, and winced as the sting seared itself across his forearm. His ears ringing from the shot, he strained to hear the sound of horses spurred on, the men taking off, and he stumbled out the door and into the street.

People seemed to be largely oblivious to the theft, just noticing the scene as the riders erupted down the drawl, shotgun fire echoing in their wake. Cain stopped in the middle of the street, un-holstered his Colt, gun arm throbbing and bleed, but he kept it steady and leveling it with the rapidly disappearing figures of the bandits, fired once, twice, again.

Distantly he heard a woman's scream, and he saw the horses slow as their riders faltered and fell along the outer reach of the street, already growing watery with heat waves.

There was terrible quiet in the late morning air, then, no one sure entirely what had just happened, until the holler of a man rang out. "Drop that pistol and put your hands in the air!!"

Cain was still flying on the adrenalin and endorphins in his veins, blurry from pain and what hopefully wasn't blood loss, and it took him a second to realize that he'd just gunned down three men in the street, in the daylight and in cold blood, and it sure as hell wasn't obvious who was in the wrong out of the four of them.

"Hands up!" The blustering man roared, rifle in hand as he walked cautiously off the veranda of one of the stores across the street. Cain saw that pinned on the man's wool vest was the five-pointed star emblazoned with the title of sheriff.

Cain bent down slowly and set his gun on the ground, the barrel still hot from firing, and then stood up with his hands in the air. His right arm, he could see, was

badly gashed from the stray shot, blood pooling against his shirtsleeve and trickling, hot and sticky down his arm.

"I can explain," he said, and the Sheriff spat on the dust in front of him.

"Oh, and what, pray tell, kind'a explanation you got for gunning three men down inn'a streets'a my town, boy?!" The man bit out, grabbing Cain by the front of his shirt like he wanted to shake him, but the cowboy was a fair few sizes bigger and taller than the lawman and it failed to impress or budge him an inch.

"Sheriff!" Mr. Dunforth cried, emerging from the smoky bank, relatively unharmed. At least the twitchy bastard had had the sense to duck.

"What in the hell? Dunforth, cayn't you sees I'm busy with somethin' here?"

"Sheriff, that man saved my life, saved Ms. Littlefield's life, too! St-topped those men from killing me and stealing our town's money!" The portly man stuttered, but seemed to be attempting to stand his ground.

Cain just wondered how the hell this whole blasted thing had gotten snarled up in the first place. Was it so hard for a man to just roll into town, sleep a night, cash a check, and leave?

The Sheriff abruptly let his shirtfront go, other hand still tight on the gun pointed in Cain's face, and he narrowed his eyes. "That true, son?"

Cain figured it was easier to just nod. His arm, he noted, was going a little numb.

"You willing to swear on that, Dunforth?" The Sheriff asked, staring down at Mr. Dunforth through his bushy eyebrows.

"Of course, Sheriff. It wasn't for this young man here, I reckon those goons would've made clean away with at least ten pounds of gold bullion." He nodded, over eager. "That, and if it wasn't for his warning, Wade, that shotgun blast you heard would'a poked more than enough holes in me to make me a dead man."

The Sheriff lowered his gun with a sigh, released the safety, and re-holstered it, almost looking disappointed. "Go get the gold off'em, Dunforth, and *you*," he grunted at Cain, "I reckon you outta come back ta' the office and what say you an I get ta' the bottom of what happened, alright?"

Cain lowered his arms, biting back a hiss of pain when the blood flowed back into his arm, and accepted his Colt back when the Sheriff handed it, grip side out.

Dunforth, apparently interested enough in recovering his bank's gold before every soul in town was out on the streets to wonder after it, had hustled down to the end of the street, and after a few moments exclaimed in shock, and hollered "Sheriff!! You ain't gonna believe this!!"

The Sheriff cocked one of his bushy eyebrows in curiosity, and gestured for Cain to follow him. As they walked, the cowboy reached up behind his head to the nape of his neck to loosen his bandana, and gritting his teeth, wrapped and tied it around his gash, cinching it down with his available hand and his teeth to slow the sluggish dripping of blood off it. It wasn't bad, he'd certainly had worse, but it'd need stitches for the day was out.

A little out of it, now, Cain hazily wondered if Kitty did a decent enough cross-stitch to patch it up for him, or if he'd need to do it himself. No sense seeing a doctor over a little *embroidery work*, he thought, chuckling under his breath to himself.

The Sheriff whistled low under his breath when he saw what Dunforth was jawing on about. There, out from under the shadow of the brim of the dead man's hat, was the face of the one and only A. J. Skinner.

"I'll be damned." The sheriff muttered. "Cowboy, you' got what looks to be a real lucky streak on yer hands. The man you just shot happens to be one'a the most wanted thieves I got a bill for. Wanted dead or alive for armed robbery on about six, well, now *seven* counts, two counts of murder, and about twelve counts of bushwhackin'."

The Sheriff shook his head, and then grinned up at Cain, and said, "That's a three hun'nerd dollar bounty for just his head alone, son." He pointed down at Skinner, and continued, "Ain't even counting these two, who if memory serves, are Earl Macomb and Montgomery Hayes. Wanted dead or alive for robbery, armed robbery, an' bushwhackin', no murder, but I reckon their handbill's are up around a hun'nerd now, too. That means you just shot yourself a five hun'nerd dollar paycheck, son."

Cain's eyes went wide, and he swallowed. "Sir?"

"Well, if'n you reckon you want it?" The Sheriff jeered. "Sometimes we get a young buck like yourself, do-good'n little shit who won't take public money fer what he figures is a public service, but I'm gonna make you a suggestion, son. Take the money. Hell, I'm gonna make you an offer. Now I know what you boys make on the

trail. Ain't much, is it? But you just shot three men, dead, on *horseback*, what'cha reckon, Dunforth, forty yards? With a *pistol*."

Dunforth squinted. "Fifty. Maybe sixty."

"Let's say fifty. Fifty yard shot. Now that ain't a talent you see every day, sonny. Ain't like they need a shot as sharp as you herding cattle, so here's what I'm offerin.' There's a big ol' brass star in the county office we ain't yet found a man with the *cahones* to wear for very long. These territories could use a man like you, man of action, good shot. Whatever you're makin' now, I kin' guarantee you'll make double. An' that ain't counting the bounties." The sheriff said.

Cain wanted to shake his head, and say no. Say he'd seen enough blood and hammered enough lead between the eyes of good and bad men alike to last a life time, and that he didn't care much for societies' law and order. But the fact remained that the ripple of recoil down his arm, the feel of the solid pull back of the trigger had sent the familiar thrill thrumming in his blood, and he hadn't even hesitated.

A good man, he supposed, would have.

But Lord knows the Sheriff had probably sent out many a *good* man wearing just the very star sitting now in some one's desk drawer, only to have them come back dead or not at all.

"Pay's no matter, sir. You got work you need doing?" Cain heard himself say.

The Sheriff grinned widely, his wild furry mustache crowding up around his nose, and replied, "Out here, sonny? *Always*."



## CHAPTER FOUR

*Brass Star*

The office of the county Judge, the Honorable Mr. Ephraim Sutherland, was on the second floor of a building that appeared to serve as the courthouse, if the benches and ramshackle judge's chair in the downstairs were any indication. Outside the man's window, sitting just behind his paper littered desk, one could overlook the gallows built up right there in the courthouse square.

The Honorable Judge, Ephraim Sutherland, was presently doing just that, gazing out the windowpane down that the wooden structure, lost in thought.

The Sheriff wrapped his knuckles a couple times on the open door, and Sutherland jumped in his skin.

"Ah, Booth, my lad! Come in, come in! You arrest whatever ruffians set off their firearms this morning?"

The sheriff grinned in an almost wincing fashion, as though he very much wished to be grimacing instead, but thought better of it for some reason.

"A'm afraid not, sir, I—" Booth started, and the Judge, whose girth was great enough about the middle that his previous window gazing had sent him sweating, glared at him over his folded hands on the desk.

"Booth, I believe *I*, and the good people of this city of Dodge, pay you to do precisely that. Now, why isn't that *thug*, whoever he might be, shackled and coolin' his heels in my county jail?" Sutherland tutted.



Sheriff Booth was half way to choking on his efforts to restrain his irritation and embarrassment. "Sir, as I was just about to say, I ain't arrested the man 'cause there weren't no need fer it. *Sir*."

Sutherland raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Oh?"

The Sheriff gestured for Cain to come in, and the cowhand stood as tall and straight as he could in the available spot on the hardwood next to the lawman. "Yer Honor, sir, this here is the man who shot and killed one A.J. Skinner, one Earl Macomb, and one Montgomery Hayes. Just this morning, the three'uvem on horseback headed hot outta town carrying around ten *pounds* of gold they sticky-fingered outta our bank. So, rather than a set a' shackles, yer Honor, sir, I reckon the U.S. Gov'ment owes this man here around five hun'nerd dollars."

Sutherland's eyes got saucer wide, and then narrowed cynically. "You've got a witness back's up his story?"

"Yes, yer honor. Bank teller, Mr. Dunforth, says he saw the whole thing plain as day. Skinner and his boys bust in'na the bank 'round eleven this mornin', and Dunforth said he was helpin' Ms. Littlefield wit' sumthin', dunno what, e'said it weren't important, and Mr. Cain here was standing after her wait'n ta get his pay check from haulin' cattle, J. Hancock's brand, right son?"

Cain nodded, and the Sheriff blustered on, building up steam as he went, "An' then! When these boys get done shovin' their weight 'round ta get Dunforth ta open the safe and such, and make out with the ten pounds a' gold, well, they reckon on killing the witnesses so's nobody knows it was them, I'd say. But! Cowboy here saw'm raise 'iz shotgun, and he hollers for Dunforth ta' duck, and he does. Saved his life, sir! An' got clipped in the arm fer the trouble. Then, he booked it out in'na the street, drew his gun and BAM!"

The Sheriff cracked his hands together, causing Sutherland to jump a little in his chair, awful twitchy for such a portly man, who then glared at the sheriff.

The Sheriff grinned at his theatric effectiveness.

"Shot 'em all! Shot'em all dead, sir, one a'ffer another, one shot a piece right outta their saddles, reckon he was out maybe fifty, sixty yards. With jes' an old Peacemaker! Told'm he might be jes' the man fer the job, yer Honor."

Cain had his gaze fixed straight out the window over the Judge's shoulder, a thousand yard stare like the kind he'd needed with Lieutenant-Colonel Morris back in the cavalry, when the man got spun up to get their ranks real orderly and was just looking to catch someone out of rank enough to scream the daylight's out of.

Man couldn't smile, but couldn't frown, and god help you if you blinked while he was breathing in your face.

Judge Sutherland's surprised expression slowly eased into a greasy smile out from under his over-styled moustache. He reached a hand into his drawer, and with a thud, tossed a heavy brass badge down onto the tabletop.

"You think you're up for the job, cowboy? You'll be the fourth unlucky bastard I've hired just this year, even if you say you are."

Cain almost unconsciously stood up straighter, at attention, head up proudly and didn't meet the sitting Judge's eyes. "Yes, sir."

"And just *why* do you think that, son? Just what makes you up for the job of a U.S. Marshal? It's a lotta mean territory out there, son, lotta miles, lotta Indians who don't take much kindly to our kind on '*their*' land, lotta outlaws and bandits, gangs of thugs who'd bushwhack a man just'soon as lookin' at him! You sure you're up for it?" Sutherland challenged.

There was a long expectant silence, and Cain swallowed. "Served two and a half years in the war, sir. Under Lieutenant Larson, in the fifty-ninth outta Alabama. Infantry division, 'fore me and my horse were transferred in '63 to the cavalry, out in east Texas. Promoted me to First Sergeant."

Sutherland's eyes narrowed. "Then?"

Cain's face twitched, trying to keep the snarl off his face. He very badly wanted to tell this man how little of his fucking business it was, but seeing the situation he'd got himself into, Cain reckoned he ought to not offend the man. At least none too badly.

"Took a fifty cal' to the thigh, broke the bone clean in half. Bone fever nearly killed me, they sent me out to a mission in West Texas, on wounded leave. By the time I could walk and ride again, we'd got word of the surrender. *Sir*."

Cain met Sutherland's eyes, and the Judge at least seemed to catch the inflection in his tone, daring him to say a single blame thing about the matter, and the other man turned away.

"Well, that certainly provides the credentials. I'll need a name, for the, uh, necessary documents for your pay. And for your authorization, of course, Mister..." the man muttered.

"Bradshaw," Cain answered.

Sutherland muttered at that, but nonetheless scribbled his own name in sprawling cursive on the dotted line of the paperwork he'd dug out.

"Very well, Mr. Bradshaw. Place your mark here."

Cain took the pen in his heavily calloused hand, and let the pen-tip scrape across the paper, *A. C. Bradshaw*. Tight, neat cursive that his mother and tutors had drilled into him since childhood. He told himself it was out of dignity and pride, as a reading and writing educated man, but if he was honest, it was a little out of spite. *His mark*, indeed.

Beside the elaborate looping signature of the Honorable Judge Ephraim Sutherland, his own hand looked like hard angled slashes of ink, despite his education, he'd had little use for it in years.

Sutherland glared at him when he accepted the pen and signed paper back, and as he busied himself with several other forms, Cain's gaze drifted off the window and across the far wall that was very nearly wallpapered with bounty notices and wanted posters.

The Sheriff tutted, and said, "Seems like there's a new one everyday, looking ta get rich quick, snub his fellow workin' man, or worse, kill'em. The highest one's still on Coyote and his gang? What's it at now, twelve hun'nerd?"

The Judge scowled up at him from his desk. "Try a thousand an' *five* hundred now, just got word yesterday morning from Hodgeman's in Darlington that they'd apprehended the lead man himself, along with the big mute, caught *making breakfast* near by a pack of lucky buffalo trappers who just happened to notice them. The bitch and the twins must've run before the town Sheriff got there, they weren't found. We had about seven hun'nerd and fifty dollars worth of soon-to-be *carcass* for the

government sitting high n' tight in that jail cell. Sent King out ta' book'em and he gets there not an hour past when those two rats slipped the coop."

The Sheriff scratched at his stubble, shaking his head, almost amused. "How you figure they dun it this time?"

Judge Sutherland gave a dramatic sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation before standing up to face his wall of paper warrants. "King said from the guard's testimony and a few eye witnesses, one of the un-captured gang members just up'n strolled to the jail, and used a rifle from across the street to trigger a bundle of dynamite the damn fool greehorns just left laying on the table with the rest of their junk. Blew the front'a the building clean off, and apparently, they broke free in the chaos. Left another one of those blasted feathers for King again, too."

The Sheriff coughed, trying not to laugh, "Reckon he could make a right perty headdress by now."

Sutherland glared at him sternly. "And maybe if he made one, Coyote would just come waltzing in'na my office and ask him for a dance! Now if you're *quite* finished, Sheriff. I can take it from here."

Booth coughed again into the fist, and clicking his heels with a nod, he turned and left the office.

Sutherland yanked a jay-feathered dart out of the poster plastered wall, idly twirling it between his meaty finger tips before tapping it's steel point against the largest poster, smack dab in the center of the wall.

It looked freshly printed, and pillowed up around its tacks as though there were several more posters underneath it, older, more yellowed posters that spoke of a lengthy history of crime

There was a large, well-done etching in the middle of that particular poster, of a darkly tanned young man, face built hard and lean in ways that spoke of his Indian heritage, a jaunty striped hawk feather stuck behind his ear, tied into his long dark hair.

To his left was a larger skulled man drawn with a brutish sneer, a scar bisecting his lip tugging up and a handkerchief snugged around his thick neck. To the Indian's right, a figure wearing a wide brimmed hat and a paisley scarf over their nose and

mouth, haloed by a riot of inky curls and a rather comically menacing look in their dark eyes, the artist clearly a little caught up in the idea of danger there.

Below the larger three portraits, there were two identical looking men, although by Cain's eye they looked almost boys, freckled and tawny of hair, he'd guess they were immigrants from the continent. Likely Irish, maybe out of Boston or the north.

Wanted, Dead or Alive: Coyote Walker and the Mad Dog Gang. Reward one thousand and five hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars a head for each member of gang captured or killed, seven hundred for gang leader.

The list of grievances and offenses was in a rather fine print after the bolded words "*Murder*" and "*Grand Theft*", and continued a fair few lines down the page. He couldn't quite even make all the words out.

"Bradshaw. I want you to come up here and take a good hard look at this poster here. These five have given every territory west of here something ta' riot about. You name it, I've heard it said about 'em, they've been around for years, an' you bet by now, they've got to thinkin' ain't no jail or hangline's gonna stop 'em. But I'll tell you, Bradshaw. If it's the last damn thing I do on this earth, it's gonna be seeing all five of these *dogs* swinging in my gallows down right there in that street. I'm gonna watch it from my window, with a big glass a' brandy in one hand an'a cigar in the other, and the sound of their necks snapping's gonna make such sweet music, well, I just might up'n dance."

Cain's eyes got a little wide at that, hearing the bared pure hatred in the man's voice. He stared at the poster, unsettled, like he could almost feel the presence of all of the eyes of all the wanted men on that wall staring down at him in hate just as strong as the hate in Sutherland's voice. The eyes of the feather wearing Indian in particular seemed almost mocking.

"So I need you to understand me, *boy*," Sutherland spat, turning sharply around to face Cain and waving the dart in his face.

"You see any one of these men out on the trail, in a saloon, in a cathouse, on the side of a mountain, in a cave, in a mine, on a stage coach, or a train, or floatin' on a goddamn fishing boat in a goddamn harbor on the Pacific Ocean...*anywhere*! You will not so much as *blink* before you clap irons on that sonuvabitch and haul their

sorry carcass to the nearest law office. You will telegraph me, and then you will make it your one god given duty on this earth to keep 'im locked up till that bastard's hanging outside my window. Do we understand each other, *Marshal?*"

Cain swallowed. "Don't shoot 'em first, sir?"

Sutherland gave him a condescending smile that sent chills up his spine. "I find out you shot any of 'em before I got the pleasure of hangin' 'em, you'll hang *with* the *rest* of 'em, boy."

Cain grit his teeth and gave a tense nod. "Understood, sir."

"Excellent!" Sutherland jeered, clapping his hands together and looking almost spontaneously cheerful, and it set the former-cowboy's stomach a little green. "Now, this—" the judge said with a flourish, "Is a note for the bank, telling Dunforth to transfer your bounty money in'ta your name, and ta keep it for ya. I'd reckon you outta pull out some of it and get yourself some new duds, new hat, and new tack if you need. Spiff up a bit, you ain't a cattlepoke anymore, son. Note also has words ta set up your reg'lar pay, 'round a hundred dollars a month, you can pick up all you've earned as often as you can get back here, it'll hold. I'll give you till this tomarra' to come by to pick up your papers, by then I'll have your first orders straightened out, and you should be able to git yerself resupplied. I'll expect you ta head out in the morning. Ought'a leave you with enough time to break with Hancock and his boys, tend ta any affairs you might have here in Dodge."

Cain nodded, accepted the papers, and turned towards the door, wondering if he might be going a little insane. Yesterday it was just horses, cattle, the clothes on his back, food and water, and now he'd shot three men dead in the street, and was a fair site richer for it than he'd been in all his adult life, not to mention he'd 'slept' with a whore and signed up to go do it all over again.

As he started out the door, he sighed. That's all it takes, huh, Cain? A fat paycheck and you're up for shooting and killing? But he had to be honest with himself, and there were simple truths in his life that would never go away for all that they were hard to swallow. Man needed a horse, needed to eat. Drink. Horse needed to eat and drink. Needed to protect himself. And to do any one of those things, a man needed money.

Hancock might of kept him on for another season, but he'd be out of work for far too long till it was time again, and switching brands just to keep yourself in work was a quick way for there to be no work at all. And until this morning, he was sitting on a neat sum of a hundred and eighty dollars. Enough to last till the next drive, he supposed, but there had to be more to life than that.

"Oh, and Marshal?" The Judge called as he was about to disappear down the stairs, "You'd best see the Doc about that graze. It's barely half past noon, by my time, so he probably ain't drunk enough yet to sew it up *too* crooked." The man smiled that greasy, arrogant smile he'd had from before.

Cain wanted to tell him off and say he didn't need it, but clenching his hand, he could tell the grip strength was weak and shaky, and the bandana was soaked even if the flow had mostly stopped. "Yessir," he replied with a small nod, and continued down the stairwell. The brass badge felt heavy in his other hand.

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He decided he ought to go see Kitty about the shot wound, because when he went by Sitwell's Apothecary, the lone occupant, whom he presumed to be the doctor, was passed out in a precarious looking rocking chair with a bottle of green bootleg absinthe mostly finished laying on his lap. The man had his mouth wide open, snoring, and was gathering flies.

When he stepped back inside the whorehouse, Kitty just happened to be festooned over the lap of a particularly burly cowhand who Cain didn't recognize, but when she saw him, she gasped, and sat up so quick she almost fell off her perch.

"Lan'sakes, Cain, what the hell happened to ya!?" She screeched.

He looked down a little sheepishly at his makeshift bandaged hand, and shrugged. "A few men tried ta' knock over the bank while I was pickin' up my pay."

Her eyes got saucer wide. "Oh my *god*, that fella we heard that shot down those bandits in the street this mornin' was *you*?!"

Kitty's enthusiasm appeared to be drawing undue attention, so he just scowled down at her, hauled her off the other man's lap with an iron grip around her arm and hissed in her ear, "I'll pay ya' whatever you feel like chargin' ta shut yer trap, *right* now, and help me stitch this up, alright?"

She nodded, and blew a kiss back at the man whose lap she'd just vacated, promising to return in a bit. When the door was shut behind them, she tsked at him in bemused exasperation, and set about fishing out supplies.

"You just sit tight. I'll fetch my darnin' kit and some spirits."

Cain plopped down in the chair and untied the damp handkerchief, glad for the fact that it was red, at least. Blood was a bitch to get out of cotton after it'd had time to dry.

Say what you will about the weaker sex, but Kitty Lovelace could in fact cross-stitch the most neat and straight stitches Cain had ever worn. Now, her technique left something to be desired, in that she cinched the string tight enough he was half sure every time she tugged that she was going to rip the thread clear through his skin, and the needle had a tendency to dig a little deeper than was strictly necessary for a cut this shallow, but by time she was done stitching it, he hadn't throttled her and it looked as good as any battle field surgeon's stitches.

Felt a bit tight, but at least the skin there on his forearm wasn't apt to get stretched or jerked around too much, so he might could keep from tearing it long enough for it to heal. The quick wash of spirits stung like a motherfucker.

She protested when he set a five dollar bill on the dresser for her efforts, but he wouldn't budge.

"*Ms.* Lovelace. I just made fiver hun'nerd dollars this morning. Ah'll pay you whatever Ah' *wanna* pay you, alright?"

She smiled wryly, before stuffing the bill somewhere down in her blouse no doubt where even the most greedy hands wouldn't find, and patted him on the shoulder.

"You keep this up, an' you'll make a Christian woman ought'a me yet, Cain."

It occurred to him then, that he figured he was already over due to leave town, what with the little bits of fondness already clinging to her in his head like cobwebs. He wondered for a moment, just for one shallow moment there in the stairwell of Dodge's only whorehouse, if she would marry him if he asked her to, even knowing what she did about him, if they could get along the rest of their lives just pretending, if they were fond enough of each other.

He shook his head as if to clear the thought out.



Wouldn't be fair to her. Living her whole life a lie like that. He didn't think he could do it. And Lord knows it would've been a bigger sin to tie down a woman like that, as pretty and sweet as she was. She ought to have a man who'd love her sun up to sun down, all night and everyday, give her good land and a home, kids. Happiness. He'd given up on that kind of happiness a long time ago.



The general store was somewhat busy at this time of day, and for the first time in a long time, Cain found himself standing around new clothes and new leathers with more than enough money in his pocket to afford them. Even the idea of buying a new shirt or a new saddle blanket had seemed a luxury, in the past several years, and he could tell by the strange look the store's manager was giving that it probably showed.

It resembled greatly his mother's look that she reserved almost especially for the poor white folk they'd see in the backwoods, along the roads when they went into town, a look that said *you're beneath me, beneath even my slaves, and it's a disgusting disgrace.*

Granted, the owner of the only general store in Dodge had much room to talk.

"Can I help you find somethin' honey?"

Cain steeled himself against startling too visibly as the woman, presumably the storeowner's wife, who spoke loudly and cheerfully right next to him.

"Uh," he said, and then swallowed.

"Uhm, yes ma'am. Judge Sutherland said I should come by, and pick up some better duds, and I'll need dried provisions for two or three weeks on the open trail, for one man. I'll also need around a case of a'hundred rounds for a Winchester '71 carbine, forty four caliber, and around four cases of twenty five rounds for a forty five caliber Colt revolver."

She stared wide-eyed at him. "Suppose he's hired ye' on as the new Marshal then, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am." Cain replied.

"Anything else?" She asked, looking perhaps a tad miffed at his directness.

"Ah, I'll need to refill my makins, so a double pouch of long cut."

She rolled her eyes. "I won't even bother ta' ask ya what brand. Probably haven't even seen nothing *with* a brand 'cept the backside of a *cow* yer whole life. Yer welcome to ask after the sizin' on shirts or pants, we'll be around."

He didn't say anything to that, and left her and her husband to gather the supplies he'd requested, wandering aimlessly through the store. By the time her husband had returned with a full ruck sack, he'd managed to find a pair of new pants his general size so dark a coal grey they almost seemed pitch black compared to the thread bare, saddle worn tan of the one's he had on, and a new button down shirt in a shade of crisp white he was sure would last all of about two days before it'd be grey brown on the trail.

At least it'd start clean.

New vest in the same dark grey wool, his boots he figured were fine, soles had another year in them at least, but he got a pair of new socks, and on a whim, a new bandana to replace the bloodstained old one. He had the light grey wool jacket from his service days in his saddle bags he hadn't yet had need for in months, out in the desert, but it was there if he did and it'd suit him just fine.

His old, black, sun-faded Stetson he admitted a certain quantity of emotional attachment to, however unreasonable, and was willing to indulge himself in holding on to it for the sake of sentimentality. He'd had it since Texas.

The balding man at the counter coughed.

"Alright, that'll be two bucks'n fifty cents for each case'a a hun'nerd for the rifle rounds, fifty cents a case'a a'hunnerd for the colt rounds, ten cents a pound for pemmican and five cents a pound for hard tack, three weeks ration's'll bring that all 'round to ten dollars for all that. Then le's seen, pants'll be two, vest's one, shirt's one, socks, handkerchief... I'd say that'll run ya around five fifty for all that...Liz'beth! Ain't socks ten cents a pair?" He hollered back, and when he received an inarticulate confirmation he shrugged and said, "so, that'll be five dollars n'fifty cents for the clothes, and let's call it ten dollars for the food and shot, eh, Marshall? Oh, and fifty cents for the tobacco."

Cain nodded, and handed the man his money, added the clothes to the rucksack, and headed for the stables. Just sat down on the bench next to the stall his horse was in, and started what needed doing: oiling his saddle, oiling the rest of the leather tack, greasing his chaps and boots, although those needed the crud scraped out of them first. Polishing any brass or steel that could use it.

Cleaned and dressed once more in the new clothes, he pinned the star on the front of his vest, and looked his horse in the eye. The damn beast didn't even look impressed, tossing his big head and ruffled his overgrown mane as if to say, *look at me, I'm still prettier than you*. He snorted, echoing his horse, and smiled.



CHAPTER FIVE  
*The Nature of a Gentleman*

Cain was fairly sure that at this point he was unequivocally, irrevocably, undeniably losing his mind.

The sky was weaving in a miasma of colors it definitely didn't come in naturally, and the ground was swimming with heat waves that had descended into a rolling boil of sage greens and dust browns and flashes of sunspots in his tired eyes. His mouth and throat felt so dry he was afraid if he tried to talk, something inside might crack open and bleed inside.

He knew he was far gone, because some part of his brain seemed convinced that at least the blood would be moisture, and that was good, right?



The first job had been easy. A simple warrant for a petty criminal, a reed thin weasel of a man by the name of Joe Maccabee, with all the patchy chin whiskers of an aging mule, who was wanted by the law for the dodging of taxes, and for taking pot-shots at any tax-collector that'd been sent to his home, originally just north of Abilene. According to the Judge, the man was some twenty-three years remiss in his taxes, owing the government some seven hundred and fifty-five dollars and eighteen cents, and he had run somewhere south when the tax collectors had been replaced with a county Sheriff.

Cain had that star on his chest, and a small wad of bills in his pocket along with a warrant, signed and notarized by the Honorable Judge, His Honor Ephraim Sutherland, for the arrest and capture of Jonathan Maccabee, when he'd hit the trail the next morning. He hadn't said good bye to Kitty, or to anyone from the drive team, save Randy, whom he'd given notice of his change of employment, the man didn't seem surprised, and to Snake, who'd seen him on his way out of town by happenstance.

The blasted man had just grinned that wolfish grin and spit in his hand, in order to apply a 'little polish ta' that big brassy star right there!' in that way of his that was at once abrasive and condescending, and yet somehow slightly fond. He didn't seem too put out by the idea that they'd never meet again, in all likelihood, and truth be told, neither was Cain.

On the outskirts of town, once he and Luce had passed the last buildings and started down the wagon road that he knew by midday would rapidly become a trail barely a horse wide, he crossed paths with another lone rider, clad as he was in the makeshift uniform of a territory Marshal. Skin like shoe leather that stretched, weather beaten, across a hawk-boned face that reminded Cain closely of such a predator, razor beaked and with sharp eyes that were far too keen and dark. The man looked by his wear and his state to have been not on the trail more than a few days, dirty but mostly surface dust and sweat, and his eyes narrowed at the sight of Cain and his badge, bringing his horse to a stop, blocking Cain's path.

"You get that from Sutherland?" He barked, voice as grizzled and imposing as his appearance.

Cain nodded, "Just yesterday."

"Who's he got ya' after, then?"

"Joe Macabee. Tax evasion." The former cowboy replied, and the taller, hawk-like man sneered, and said, "Well ain't that nice. He tell you 'bout them Mad Dog boys I'm trackin'?"

Cain tipped his head again in reply. "Yeah, bout jawed my ear off about it."

The darker man scowled, and held up a threatening finger, pointed at his face. "See 'em, an' I don't care what *Suth'land* told you, you put a bullet in some part'a their

leg or you cut their fucking heel string and hobble'em, and *then* you telegraph *me*, you understand? Cause if I find out they run off on your watch like they done before, I'll make sure you live ta regret it. Jail don't cut it with these motherfuckers."

"Sutherland said—" Cain started, only to be cut off by an almost manic look of rage, a similar kind of wild ferocity to Sutherland's itself, but this kind was blacker. Sutherland wanted to see these outlaws hung. Whoever this Marshal was, he wanted them to *suffer*.

Cain knew better than to ask why. "Ah. Yes, sir."

"What's your name, boy?" The Marshal snapped.

"Bradshaw."

"King. At least, that's what folk's round here call me. Now you pick up that slick-cat taxman of yours, and you come back, you play by the rules, and we'll get along jus' fine. I find out you been out there lazin' around on the job, gambling or boozin', they won't find enough of you left to bury. Don't *cross me*, boy."

And with that the man left, back into town as empty handed as he'd left three days earlier, leaving Cain to scowl at his receding figure in vain. So that was the infamous Marshal King he'd heard tell about in town. Word was he and Sutherland had a beef going over what some said was an over-heavy number of shot-dead to hung-dead fulfilled warrants in Dodge's county, and that that made the Judge real mad and made the Marshal real smug and that sooner or later, a *federal* lawman sent from *Washington* might find reason to be suspicious.

From that moment on, to the time he cornered his query the town of Waterfall, New Mexico, he crossed the path of one band of Indian buffalo hunters who'd simply nodded and passed along by, three homesteads and hamlet farms, and a curious wagon load of eastern-dressed folks looking rather bedraggled and yet strangely, enthusiastically, full of cheer and radiant hope. They claimed they were off to the Promised Land.

A city made out of *salt*, if their over-talkative five year old son was to be believed.

The husband, who had a great long beard and an ever-lit pipe, regaled him loudly around said pipe for several hours along the trail with tales from his days as a 'Wall

Street' man in New York, and how refreshing it was to be at last out in the land God Intended.

The man had a way of speaking in proper nouns for half the things he said, and Cain only caught bits and pieces of understanding it, grunting in affirmation occasionally around his own smoke, finding the man's colorful accent and strange, polite way of speaking a novelty, if not an entertainment, after years of the hard talking ways of cattlemen and soldiers.

His wife, who was knitting furiously beside him on the front seat of the wagon, while her husband gabbed and drove the oxen, nodded almost at every other word he said, as though her head was too loose on her shoulders, occasionally murmuring her agreement aloud but offering little in the way of words. The three daughters weaseled out of the back of the wagon and tried to get Lucifer to wear a dashing, blossoming crown of wildflowers they'd made.

By the time they reached the fork which parted their trails, the wagon of them going north to the Utah territory, he was convinced that they were all *insane* and yet couldn't fault the happiness they seemed to possess, despite it all, and he wished them genuinely the best of it.

The whole bizarre encounter left him wearing a smile of his own, for some reason, and he tried to shake it off but it was stuck for half the afternoon. Left him stuck far more cheerful than any man in his position had a right to be, really.

Lucifer, who had a lone, persevering, sunny-faced daisy still stuck in his mane after shaking off the flower crown, seemed quite unsettled by it all. The horse had eaten the wildflower crown, chewing nastily out of spite, as soon as the wagon was out of sight, but out of his own good humor, Cain did not attempt to remove the flower from the horse's head, enjoying the sight.

Waterfall, of the New Mexico Territories, in fact was near no waterfall at all, barely even in possession of a decent well, really. The dust that cloaked the town was that fluffy, silt-soft kind that made a horse from a distance appear as though in a fog with all the dust in the air, rising up in great, thick, cloying plumes like ash, and the land, like so much of this dreadful southern land, was barren as ever of rain.

It had been a five day ride out from Dodge, and Cain had been right about his damn white shirt.

Hardly surprising.

He'd watered his horse, and spit-shined some dust off his badge so it was at least visible, clapped off some of the dust and headed into the only watering hole in town. A question and a name, and he had himself an easy aim pointed across the taproom, looking down the barrel at a frankly terrified man by the name of Maccabee. Joe Maccabee himself, as luck would have it.

"Joe Maccabee, you are under arrest. I have a warrant for your capture and delivery back to Judge Sutherland, in Dodge. Stand up, put your hands behind your back, and this'll all go nice an easy, nobody least wise shot or dead, alright?"

The man took off running, of course, and Cain followed, the air he inhaled gritty on his tongue as he ran after the wanted man, tackling him to the ground. Once the shackles were clacked tight around his wrists, Maccabee went limp as a fish, stopped fighting and started blubbering, and it was in that very same condition that the newly minted Marshal Bradshaw deposited his captive along with his respective, now filled warrant in the local one-room jail up the road from Waterfall a few miles.

It was all very anticlimactic, really.

He returned around a week later to Dodge with the now-trail-worn warrant, which bore a reward of fifteen dollars, signed by the local sheriff he'd deposited the man with, had a cup of gin in Ms. Lovelace's company, and retired to her quarters above the whore house where Kitty cajoled into actually sleeping in the bed.

He had to concede to her wisdom, and perhaps to the power of the drink. The comfort of the plush bed far outweighed any stubborn embarrassment he heretofore possessed, it was enough to make a man soft and lazy as a house cat, sleeping in a bed like that. Kitty later told him he'd passed out the second hit the sheets, and that if he were a real client, she'd have charged him extra for the hassle of it all.

And so, it began. There were always new warrants, some small rewards and others respectably larger, but the salary itself was plenty for Cain's sparse needs. He did his best to keep the Judge happy with him, and to stay out of King's way, though



it seemed as if now that there were two of them under Sutherland's thumb, that King's sole duty now was tracking down the Mad Dogs.

As Cain kept on, so did his growing reputation, into the fall, and on through the winter. He took on a larger hunt in King's stead after the man disappeared for two solid months during the snow-season, and he swore that that four-week tracking nightmare through the foothills of the Rockies had stolen some of the feeling permanently from his toes.

But he'd nailed the bastards, a group of men wanted back in Arizona for stagecoach robbery, who'd thought holing up in the snow would keep back any one the government sent after them until the spring, by which time the trail would've gone far too cold and they'd be long gone. Cain found two of them dead in an iced over cave, and then other two squabbling over whether to eat the dead ones or not.

When one of the yet living men had seen him, he'd begged Cain to just shoot them.

So he did, and he sang Amazing Grace, what all he could remember of it, with a hoarse throat and breath clouding out into the slurry cold air, along with a prayer to the Virgin, and then spoiled the good gesture by hauling their frozen corpses back to the Jackson Outpost, in order to turn them over for a profit.

Hardly the deed of a good man. He tried to tell himself they were bad men, wanted by the law, and reckoned if he told himself that enough times he might actually believe it. The strange old man living at the outpost over the winter made him a cup of hot "tea", along with one for himself, and at the ratio of amber mystery liquid involved, it was really more like warm, tea flavored *whiskey*, but it was hot in his mouth and warm in his belly, and while the storm howled, it was perfect.

The old man passed out on the one single bed and Cain curled up in all the clothes he had on and all the spare blankets he could scrounge, on his bedroll on the floor, grateful just to be out of the snow, and tried not to imagine being cold enough and hungry enough, desperate enough, to eat a man. Much less a man he *knew*.

By the time he had trudged back into town on Lucifer, who looked almost furry as a fox in his winter coat, towing four still ice-solid corpses behind him on a sledge, Dodge was still defrosting itself and neck-deep in mud and ice.

The Judge had begun to reckon that they ought to at least give the two missing Marshals a hymn and a service over an empty grave, when Cain had shown up, wind-chapped and furry as his horse. Sonuvabitch King had wandered back into town the next day with a big piece of his ear missing, and had said nothing to Sutherland save to toss a fistful of exuberantly blue jay's feathers onto the man's desk with a snarl of murderous exhaustion.

And with that, Marshal Bradshaw began his ascent into local legend, relentlessly in pursuit of justice even in the face of Mother Nature herself! King seemed content to begrudgingly let a strange truce lie between them now, neither friends nor enemies, neither one eager to upset the balance.

Kitty had taken it as her personal duty to herald his praises, proclaiming to all who would listen of the man's bed prowess and strength and *size*, not to mention his daring feats of Marshal bravery, which must surely require of him the most brass pair in all the territories.

Cain didn't know at what point it stopped being embarrassing and simply became fondly exasperating. It was certainly a perfect shield against the questions he didn't want to answer.

Namely why he wasn't married, or why he hadn't a sweetheart in some town.

It soon became common knowledge that the one and only Kitty Lovelace was smitten with him, and if the ladies and men about town took his blushes and occasional blusters of embarrassment as signs of his own smitten nature, well, that was just fine by him. He paid her a right share for a night as though paying rent, no matter her protestations, and they shared a bed the handful of nights a year he was in town. He felt somehow more comfortable with this odd way than any other he'd had thus far. Kitty was good company, and she was good to him, for all that she had every right not to be.

But then he got in his hand the warrant for one C.J. Wyatt Skinner, and when his eyes went up to the Judge in askance, the man had nodded grimly. Marshal King laughed from the darkened corner of the room he'd been waiting in for his own orders, and said, sounding terribly amused, "You shot his older brother not much

more'n a year ago out on that very street, an' he's wanted near as bad as his brother was. Only this time, *Marshal*, you probably ain't gonna get so lucky right off."



Despite the terrible scraping pain it caused leaving his throat, remembering King's taunting words sent him laughing. Humorless and crazed and black, but a laugh all the same. He'd gotten off his horse miles and hours ago to save Luce, who needed more water he did by far and had had scarcely more than his rider, the extra strain. It'd be death for the poor beast with little effort, now.

Cain was walking, stumbling blind of exposure at this point from the sun and the pain and exhaustion, and he could feel the smooth leather of the reigns loosely in his hand whenever the stallion moved forward and he didn't follow, tugging, or when he staggered too hard to the side. The horse hadn't stopped, and so somehow, neither had Cain, one hand gripping the wound in his side, hand tacky with blood, the other on the reigns. His eyes stung him, from the grit and what he imagined was sheer dehydration making them shrivel up in his skull. He kept catching himself with his eyes closed as he started to drift off whatever path Luce was guiding him and into unconsciousness, even as he kept walking.

He saw the shadows on the ground, weaving and circling them, the mark of vultures circling high in the sky. The damn creatures knew he was a dead man walking.



Of course, King had been right. Mr. C.J. Wyatt Skinner, or as his full Christian name happened to be, Cipher Josiah Wyatt Skinner, was a righteous piece of work. It had taken weeks to even track down somebody who'd admit to knowin' the man, much less rat him out, but there'd been a barkeeper in Phoenix who had an open tab for one Mr. Skinner, and had admitted he would much rather that tab get paid off than not, and that the man was a shady customer if there ever was one.

Cain offered to fill the tab off of some of the bounty, if his information could lead to the man's capture, and that'd loosened the man's tongue.

Word was, Skinner and a few of his boys were hanging around all over in the Arizona territories, bushwhacking and making themselves a menace on the roads, and the barman had had him get out his map, and fished out a lump of lead.

"Right there." He marked a small, dark smudge on the map, somewhere deep in canyon country to the north of the territory. "You sure?"

"Positive. That right there's a little offshoot canyon they call Bernadette, just choke right full of bandit hidey-holes, and that's where I've heard some say Skinner is bunked down when he ain't in town. The whole place's is rife wit'em, but Bernadette, Whickaridge, Rapidos, and Laughingwater," he pointed them all out with his finger as he spoke, an X in lead following it, "are your best best for nabbing any kinda sly fox you reckon catchin', so if'n he ain't up in the 'Dette, you can try one'a those. Hell, you might get double lucky, there's even been tell lately that them four-legged coyotes ain't the only dogs howlin' up in those canyons, yeah?"

Cain looked at the map, and then scowled at the man curiously. The bar man shook his head and motioned him closer, whispering conspiratorially in his ear, "Them Mad Dogs is up in those canyons too, Hoss. Kye'ote'ee, n'that big scarred fucker, that *puta* tha's always with'm an' them boys. You be careful, hear?"

He knew right then down to the soles of his boots that this was a very bad idea. That the thing to do then was to head down the road to the telegraph station and send word to King about this and to wash his hands of finding Skinner the younger till King took care of his business.

But he also knew that if King got here too late and found out Cain could'a been prowling these canyons ahead of him with a full three weeks head start, but he hadn't and now they're gone, there'd be hell to pay even worse.

So he thanked the barkeep by paying an extra penny for the beer, and then slipped out and saddled back up. On the way out of town, he sunk the rest of his spare change into more ammunition, and hoped he wouldn't need it, but figured if some hare-brained would-be bushwhackers got to thinking of robbing him, at least he'd have less money and more firepower.

It took a long, sun-up till sun-down ride to get north to the foothills of the canyons, and he spent the night to the west of Flagstaff under the warm summer stars, shirt unbuttoned to soak up the cool breeze as he lay on the top of his bedroll. The ground underneath him was still giving back up the radiant heat of the sun, warm at his back.

He woke up in the middle of the night and needed to take a piss, and as he was heading back to his makeshift camp, he froze.

There, piercing the cool night air like the wail of a ghost, ethereal and joyful was the cry of a coyote echoing through the canyons. It was percolated by the yips and howls of other dogs, and grew in fervor as more voices joined in the song, wild and high, shrieking and bellowing and yowling and *singing*, and it was glorious and terrible all at once.

It was a sound of pure, wild abandon. Of freedom.

And in that moment, Cain was unsure if it mattered what, or whose, throat it came from, because the power of the song was there all the same. In a fit of almost childish wonder, he abandoned sleep for a while and sat on his bedroll under the stars with his big black brute, and listened to the music.



The next few days were a chaotic spiraling of endless, empty caverns, difficult to navigate canyons, strange wind-swept rock formations, bright little creeks and an eerie lack of movement in the land, aside from the faint breezes in the air. There were tracks, occasionally, a few rogue bullet casings or scorch marks in the rock that marked a gun fight, but nothing to tell how recent. He'd made his way almost entirely through the Bernadette fork of the canyon when there was a small, growing noise, like a rock tumbling down the side, picking up speed, and he startled when the small wash of rocks landed behind him.

As he turned around, pistol drawn, he heard the unmistakable metallic ka-click of a pistol's hammer cocking just inches behind his head. He whipped back around only to be staring down the bore of a gun not unlike his own, while his gun pointed at the

man, holding it in a standstill, but then there were noises all around, from guns and rifles and he knew then his mistake.

The canyon was fair to bristling with men, at least 15 or 16, all heavily armed, and the first man, whose face graced the front of the handbill in Cain's pocket at that very moment, grinned, and said, "Put the gun down, Marshal."

Even a peripheral glance out of the corner of his eye was enough to know if he fired first, he'd certainly never leave this canyon alive, so he slowly, not breaking eye contact with Skinner, lowered his hand down, released the hammer and then dropped the gun to the ground. There were some laughs now, mean and rough chuckles, like wild dogs who'd cornered their nervous prey.

Shit.

Well the barkeep hadn't been *lying*, strictly speaking. But he knew a set up when he saw one.

"Now, Marshal. The rest a' these men, they don't like you on account'a that shiny badge you got, but me? Aw, you know why I don't like *you*, Marshal."

Skinner sneered, pushing his gun muzzle up into the soft underbelly of Cain's jaw hard enough to make him flinch, and grabbed him by the hair. His breath stank like chew and whiskey, but up close, it smelled like maybe he'd had a tooth go rotten on him all the way down.

"So, why don' you tell all these *fine, upstanding* gentleman here, just *why* I don't like you, Marshal. Sing it out loud now, wouldn't want to make you repeat yourself."

Cain cleared his throat, and leveled his tone best he could with a gun pressed under his jaw and said, "I shot your brother."

"What was that Marshal?" Skinner snapped, shaking him like a dog and throwing him down onto the ground in disgust, and then men laughed when Skinner spat on his face.

Cain winced, getting back up and wiping it off. "I said, *I shot your fucking brother!*" He roared back, not taking his eyes off of Skinner' for a second.

The crowd went quiet then, his shout reverberating off the canyon walls.

Skinner seemed unfazed, tone still mockingly casual. "Oh, right, *that's* right, I'm recollectin' it now. You say you shot my brother. You know what you did, Marshal?"

Skinner pulled his hand back with an ugly snarl on his mug, and slammed the butt of the gun across Cain's face, knocking him back to the ground.

"You gunned my brother, my *brother*, down in the street like a rabid *dog*!! In cold fuckin' blood, too, I asked around, people said you ain't even fired a warnin' shot, called out 'er nothin' 'fore you shot 'im in the back like the coward you are! Now at first, I tell's myself that tha's just what I'm gunna do to you. But then I get ta' hearing all about all these other, fine, upstanding gentlemen like these I got here you been arresting. That that goddamn *hijodeputa* judge, Sutherland, s'been hanging. And the boys convince me, I gotta make you die, real mean like, ya see? And I get ta' thinkin', ya know, that there ain't nothing mean like the desert is mean to us white boys out here."

The left half of Cain's head was a throbbing mass of pain, his skull felt cracked and he was lucky the gun had missed his jaw or nose. Or at least, lucky as long as his head didn't kill him first. His stumbling attempts to stand were met with catcalls and laughter, then, and Skinner abandoned his gun to take his thick knuckled fists to the unsteady Marshal every time he tried. Cain grunted in pain when fists turned to a boot, colliding with his ribcage so hard he swore he could remember *hearing* it snap in a few places.

Skinner lost steam, once Cain stopped coming back up, the Marshal just laying there, panting ragged in the dust.

"So here's how this works, Marshal. Since I'm a gentleman, and I ain't a coward, I'm gonna leave your gun and I'm gonna leave your horse. Except I'm gonna do you a favor and I'm gonna leave one round in the chamber, so long as you promise you think of me when you put that gun in your mouth and pull the trigger, ok *sweetness*?" Skinner dragged him up off the floor of the canyon and played at fixing up his clothes, like they'd just had a regular bar fight over cards and now they were friends again.

Cain could hear over the pounding in his head and the blood rush the sound of Luce's enraged whinnies and bellows, stomps and kicks and what he knew to be a royal thrashing fit. Skinner made some dismissive sound when one of the guys asked if they really needed all the junk in the saddlebags.

"Oh, and Marshal. Before you go dance with the Apache, I almost forgot to give your parting gift!"

Cain choked, eyes blown wide as the pain in his side suddenly went white hot with all the force of a bull stomp to the chest. He couldn't breath around the size of it, mouth open but not a sound coming out.

Skinner patted him mockingly on the cheek, yanked out the knife, and it took everything left in Cain not to cry out in that moment.

"You take care now, Marshal." Skinner jeered, and motioned for the men to help muscle the big lawman up onto his Cayuse. Luce fretted and tried to shy away, but the second his master's weight hit his back, he didn't dare buck or kick, even when Cain, bleary but upright in the saddle, was secured. Cain heard a crack as someone brought a hard palm down on Luce's rear, and the beast spurred forward.

Cain passed out a minute later from the jarring rhythm of Luce's gait, slumped over the neck of his faithful horse.



It had been more than a day, maybe two days since then, but time had gone all sideways. His head, ringing and throbbing incessantly inside, like a blacksmith's anvil ringing under the hammer, would've driven a healthy man mad, but even it faded compared to the agony in his side. With dehydration, sun exposure, and exhaustion, soon it all paled to the simple agony of attempting to continue to be *alive*.

His lucid periods were coming and going, but there was no water in sight, what he'd had, he'd drunk and given to Luce, and at some point he'd had the presence of mind to get off of Luce and try and walk, which had ended with him face down in the dirt as soon as he'd swung off.

Once he eventually got upright, the brunt of the nausea hit him so hard it was staggering, leaving him only to retch up the remaining contents of his stomach on an unfortunate shrub nearby.

His lips and tongue felt cracked, almost fried and dry as starched cotton, and after he caught the taste of blood trying to wet them with already too-thick saliva he



stopped trying to. He reckoned he'd stopped sweating too long ago, probably yesterday, if the vultures were any indication. He kept on walking, the only thing conceivable in his mind becoming the immediate next step to take, following Luce by feel and his graying vision.

The tenth or eleventh time he *consciously* thought about using the bullet Skinner had left in his gun, he was laughing, crazed and lost and dying, and he wondered if that was a better way to go than this, if it would even *hurt* compared to trying to stay alive now. Dying like this was gonna hurt.

He'd never thought to kill himself before, but when he tried to, it stirred in him an animal fear that let him know it was a hollow hope, because he'd never let himself do it. He also wondered, then, if it would be kinder to put the bullet in Luce's skull instead. If a proper *gentleman* would've left him a bullet to do both.

He knew if he'd had the water left inside his body for it, he'd have cried, then, dry choking sobs rattling through him, useless and wretched.

The ropes slackened in his grip, and he slumped against his horse before jerkily collapsing to the ground, and he registered somehow that the horse left then, after snuffling at his aching head and in his hair for a moment, and for some great or short length of time he lay there in the sand watching the shadowy birds spin overhead, the glare of the sun relentless as it always was. Before he passed out, he wondered if God would indulge him in a little irony and send some rain once he was dead.



The horse looked exhausted, run properly ragged and dry, and then run even harder still, black coat stained with salt, gone chalky with no sign of fresh sweat to match its heavy breathing. The beast panted like a steam engine, legs clumsy and weak with trembles, but its build spoke of strength and power, when healthy. It'd been healthy not long prior, that much was obvious in the lack of visible ribs or sagging back under the saddle.

Kujo looked up from the fire in amazement when the creature just stopped there at the edge of their makeshift camp, rider-less, saddle and bags intact, hell, there was

even a recent model Winchester repeater slung over the saddle still in its sheath. It was a beautiful animal, worthy of the lineage of the steeds of the Romans, or the German barbarians, built for war and endless endurance.

But no endurance was endless of any earthen creature without *water*.

The bucket he'd filled at the stream in the hidden spring close by was drained in minutes, along with the second, the horse sucking it down eagerly. When he'd allowed the horse to drain the most convenient water sources, he slowly approached him, blowing air through his teeth in a close noise to a 'shh', gentling and trying not to spook it.

"Any reason all our freshly hauled water bucket's're empty, Kujo?" Coyote teased from behind him. Kujo made a silencing sign, jerking his head in the direction of the horse. Coyote's eyes went wide.

"Reckon his rider got bushwhacked riding through Bernadette?" he whispered back.

Kujo nodded gravely, although he seemed a little unsure, only to hiss in warning when Coyote just walked forward, grabbed the reins and swung on.

The black stallion bucked like he had a death wish, and he was certain *Coyote* did, but exhaustion and dehydration slowed it down fast. Horse wheezing but unmoving underneath him, Coyote breathed a sigh of relief and patted it on the shoulder, dismounted, and looked it straight in the eye. The beast seemed possessed of something urgent, frantic.

"It knows somethin', Kujo. I can feel it. Something right important." He whispered.

The horse whinnied, and took off, walking along with a tired, shaky gait as it moved off through the sage and shrubs. When it looked back to see if the two men it'd found were following, Coyote grinned and shared his humor with Kujo. "Toldja, he *knows* something. And he's gonna show me!"

Kujo snapped his jaw, clicking his teeth like an irritated wolf at an arrogant puppy, which Coyote knew to take as a kind of *yeah, yeah, you little shit*, placating and mocking all at once. Coyote wondered, not for the first time, that he read too much into Kujo's silent way of 'speaking'.

The way grew flatter as they eased out of the small ravine they'd made camp in, and when the men spotted the circling buzzards, they shared a grimace. "Reckon that ain't a good sign."

Kujo made the hunting sign for *horse* and *master*, and pointed to the onward leading horse and then the pair of buzzards. He polished it off with a good-natured shove in the right direction, and Coyote laughed. It didn't take them long to find the center of the small twister of vultures, a man strewn out on the ground, crumpled awkwardly as though he'd fallen dead from standing and never moved.

"Shit, is he dead?" Coyote hissed.

The horse nudged at the man's blond head, over and over, in an eager gesture that spoke of single-minded devotion and loyalty, trying to stir his master awake even in death.

Except, the dead man gave a low groan, and attempted to move, only to issue a guttural sob of pain for his efforts. Coyote walked around to help, but then saw it on the man's blood stained vest. The blasted piece of metal that would haunt him to the ends of the earth.

The five-pointed star engraved with the words "U.S. Marshal."

His head snapped up and he gave Kujo a look every bit as conflicted as he suddenly felt. Although the man's face was dirty and bloody, his hair was blond, and his build stocky and heavier than King's, so this wasn't their nemesis. But he could easily have been so, couldn't he? Could easily *become* so, when he woke to find who had saved his sorry hide.

"Just...fuck. What'd we do, Kujo?"

The battered man's voice was so raspy that Coyote barely caught it, but when the horse's tongue scraped along his bloodied face, a smile lingered, and the man stared up almost blindly at Coyote with pleading, tired baby blue eyes, and said "Hey, mister...think y'could...water my horse...ees'a good horse."

Kujo clasped him on the shoulder and the look in his eyes told him that he agreed.

Any man dying of thirst himself in the desert whose first thought was water for his horse, well, ain't a bad man in the lot.



## CHAPTER SIX

*Rabbits and a Red Hot Knife*

Mercedes Luciana Josephina Alvarez had been on the road with Coyote since they'd both been fourteen, and had been friends with the crazed Injun for about since they could walk, and in that time, she reckoned she'd *forgotten* more of the crazy shit he'd done than most men could ever get up to in a life time.

So when she rode back into camp that afternoon with a thrush of wild hares, she wished she'd been surprised to find a bloody, bruised and half naked man sprawled out on Coyote's cot, along with a massive black stallion sleeping on its feet nearby.

The crazy Indian himself was sitting innocent as a jay bird next to the cot and the dwindling lunch fire, occasionally reaching over to stir the pot of coffee hanging over it, but mostly just smoking his quirley, watching the smoke rise and mingle above with the cook fire. Just as he was about to roll himself another, the limp, furry carcass of a desert hare collided with his face.

"Aw, Jesus, Mercy!" he howled, indignantly rubbing hands down his face to shake off the loose fur and only really succeeding in smearing the blood splatter from the shot-gunned rabbit across it.

Mercy retrieved the hare from his lap, and set it alongside the three others, and glared at him, "You little *shit*."

"What?" He muttered. There was definitely a tuft of rabbit fur stuck to his *tongue*, and there was not going to be a dignified way to remove it.

"I leave for a fuckin' *second*! Cayn't you even *try* and stay outta trouble?" She swore, "Who the fuck's this?!"

"Er, uh, some guy we found. Ya know." He mumbled, delicately trying to scrape that piece of fur off his tongue without contorting his face too comically.

"Some guy. Some guy you *found*, what is this, St. Coyote's wayward home for stray cowboys?" She hissed.

He shrugged. Mercy looked across the fire ring at Kujo in askance, and the big man smiled and shook his head, tossing her a small metal object. She caught it, and then her eyes grew wide. "Madre de *Dios*, Coyote, are you out of yer goddern *mind*?! A U.S. *Marshal*?!"

Coyote chuckled, and teased, "Oh, hush up, Mercy."

"Don't you tell me ta hush up, boy, why I outta roast that damn brass star over the coals and *brand* your stupid ass with it. Now," She grabbed him by his loose hair and yanked his head back until she could whisper in his ear. "Why the *fuck* is there a U.S. Territories Marshal passed out on your cot? I ain't even gonna ask where his damn *shirt* went."

Coyote swallowed, and said, "Found 'im in the desert, he'd been bushwhacked, probably out wandering for days, surprisin' he was alive."

"Doesn't explain what he's doing here." Mercy snapped, shoving Coyote forward as she released him.

Kujo grunted at her, grabbing her attention and motioned to the sleeping horse, and then to the water buckets. She screwed up her face in confusion. "His horse was thirsty?"

Coyote shook his head. "Merc, when we found him, bleedin' out and half dead himself, he asked us if we'd water his horse, 'fore he passed out. Now, what kinda' man, delirious and outta his mind, asks after water for his horse before himself, huh?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose, eyes narrowed tight in frustration. "Probably someone who's *delirious and outta his goddamn mind*!"

Coyote smiled, and shrugged again. "Maybe. Maybe he ain't bad, just in need of a little help, s'all."

"An' you didn't even stop for a *second* and think what kinda' heat this is gonna bring down on us? This ain't the kinda man who goes missin' and ain't nobody comes lookin.' There's gonna be law all over these hills in weeks!"

The Indian scowled, he was unwilling to admit it was a pout, and Mercedes scowled back. She tossed the brace of rabbits down onto the ground with a sigh, and he shot her a smile.

She shook her head, but he could see she was fighting an exasperated smile of her own.

"Oh hush up and help me dress these damn rabbits. 'Fore I skin *you*, you no good little shit." She grumbled.

He grinned. "You know you love me."

Mercy smiled a little and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and trouble loves you, but would it kill ya' ta not start wootin' it back so awful hard?" Coyote chuckled, and fished his own knife out of its sheath at the small of his back. "Man's gotta have a little somethin' ta keep him warm at night, sugar." Mercy looked up at the sky, and muttered something under her breath, before meeting his eyes, honey-brown fierce as a fire in an open field.

"I want 'im cuffed to something," she said, "Wouldn't want him to wake up and get any ideas, *ain't bad* or not, ain't no way in hell a Marshal in these parts ain't heard of us."

The half-Indian mock saluted, and started, "So, good hunt today? Where're the twins?"

She nodded, and replied, "Out for more water. So, how bad'a shape's *he* in?" She jerked her head in the direction of the stranger on the cot.

The wound in the man's side had gone tacky around the edges before they'd even peeled his shirt off it, tugging any clots off with it, and it was ugly, bleeding sluggishly through the thin bandages even still. Pallor in the man's cheeks spoke to blood loss, and moving him back to camp this morning probably had torn the wound afresh even before the shirt had.

"Bad. I'm startin' ta thinkin' this'll need cauterized. Ya think, Kujo? We've been keepin' an eye on it since this mornin' when we found 'im."

The big man peered around Coyote, and nodded. Mercy winced and muttered, "Poor bastard."

Coyote agreed. He himself had been on the red end of a poker after taking a lucky graze to the thigh from King's rifle, wielded by Mercy's steady, unmerciful hand.

He'd squealed a might louder than there was really any dignity in.

Kujo lumbered over and sat down behind the cot, ready to brace his knees on the man's pale shoulders, and Coyote sighed. His boot knife took a while to heat up, but they need to heat water too anyhow, and so Coyote turned back to skinning his rabbit before Mercy could decide he needed a piece of his ear taken off if'n he wasn't using 'em to listen ta the things she was saying.

"Oy, boss, iz'zat supper?" Micah's voice called, and where one twin was, the other wasn't far behind, Gabe flanking his brassier twin with a sheepish look the poor lad couldn't seem to be rid of.

Coyote had always found it ironic that despite the fact that *both* of them had been named after angels of the Lord, one of them was a sweetheart and the other one was a devil. He felt a grin split his face.

"Michael, dear, I don't reckon I ever taught you ta' field dress a rabbit, had I?"

Micah wrinkled up his nose, and shrugged. "No, but ain't you doin' it already?"

Coyote scoffed. "An' I spose you just 'spect me ta let this pour fella o'er here bleed out will I'm fix'n *stew*, huh?"

The boy muttered something, and Coyote snorted. "Gabe, darlin' I know Mercy already sent you fer water, but we're gonna need a skoch more, and I reckon Micah here could learn a thing or two."

Gabe, God help him, looked like he wanted to pout. "Cayn't you teach me how to skin a rabbit, too?"

Micah groaned. "Jay'sus. See, ya got a *volunteer*, cayn't we just switch jobs 'er something?"

"Yeah, *or something*." Mercedes snapped. "I don't recall you havin' any sayin' so when comes ta' the peckin' order 'round here, buster, so you know what happens when the boss man says do it?"

The kid glared at her, and muttered, "Ya' do it."

She nodded, and then chucked a rabbit at him too, wiping the stupid pout off his face. He scowled at her and snarled something unflattering under his breath. He winced when she coughed, pointedly.

"Mercy, doll, you keep throwin' animals at people, I'm gonna start thinkin' somethin's wrong upstairs with you." Coyote teased.

She beamed at him with all the venomous cheer of a rattlesnake, "Oh, hush up."

Coyote cheerfully patted the spot beside him around the fire. "Micah, siddown. Gabe, skeedaddle. Now, boy, here's what ya' do." He held up the limp hare, and spread it across his legs.

Kujo pulled his knife out of the fire and inspected the color, and then stuffed it back into the red-hot bed of coals.

"So, you make one nice cut right there crossways along 'is gut, like so, all the way round. Careful ya' don't poke clean through the gut there, if ya' pop the damn thing's spleen 'er something it makes a goddawful mess. Then stick yer fingers in there and pull the skin loose, 'round the cut, an' start ta pull it back. Once ya' got it inside out enough ta' grab on, the real trick's ta git 'holt of it and give it one good...snap."

Coyote stood up and whip-cracked the poor rabbit, tearing the skin loose and inside out around its ankles in one shot. This method also had the fortuitous side effect of flecking a little bit of revenge blood across the fire onto Mercy's face.

She glared at him, un-amused but unfazed, over her second rabbit, the already dressed first laying on its skin on the ground beside her.

Coyote smirked, and gave her a wink. "Then ya do the same with the other side, like so." He gave the rabbit a snap in the other direction.

Mercy just so happened to be bent over inspecting something in her pack.

"Ah, well, one for two. Anyhow, now, ya get rid of the head'n feet, not enogh meat worth botherin' in those, throw the pelt off, and ya slit it down the belly from chin ta ass, and yank it's guts out. If ya' dont pop the bad ones all over the *good* ones, we'll throw the good ones in with the stew. Go give 'er a quick shake down in the creek, and she's ready for the pot."



Micah gave him a withering glare of disgust, glancing between the dressed rabbit in Coyote's hands and the boss-man's slightly unhinged grin.

"You're an asshole." Micah muttered.

Coyote gave him a slap on the back, and crowed, "Why, that I am. You have fun with these, son. I've got a patient ta' be tending to."

Mercedes scoffed over her work.

Kujo situated himself behind the unconscious man, massive hands holding him down, and Coyote grimaced when he squirmed a little underneath the grip, a small whimper of pain, maybe of a nightmare. He just hoped the poor fucking sod stayed blacked out for this next bit.

"Kuj', get his jaw open for me, don' want 'im crackin' any teeth, he ain't as out of it as he should be."

Coyote held out the roll of cowhide, and Kujo dug his thumb and forefinger into the vulnerable flesh of the man's neck, forcing his jaw open. At first the man's teeth barely ghosted along the surface, slack with unconsciousness, but almost reflexively, like a bear trap, his jaw squeezed shut.

Kujo's hand retreated back to the shoulder, and Coyote patted the side of the man's face in approval. "Thassa'way, now. Now this," he paused as he withdrew the now red-hot knife from the fire, handle wrapped in a couple of bandanas to keep from burning his own hand, "Is gonna hurt like a *motherfucker*."

Using his left hand to put pressure on the man's chest, to keep him from squirming, Coyote brought his right hand and the knife to the wound and pressed. The marshal screamed through the bit, chest bucking up against the rough hands holding him down, breath sobbing in and out of his ribcage as he gasped for air, harsh through his nostrils and around the bit. His eyelids flew open in shock, and dear God, the blue of the man's eyes was unreal.

The stranger wasn't particularly pretty of face, but then, very few in the desert aside from his girl Mercy really were. Broad, hard chiseled features, wider and more angle-boned than the Indians, or the Mexicans or the Spanish. But fuck, those blue eyes were like a cold drink of water on an Arizona afternoon.

"Easy...easy, shhh." Coyote soothed, stroking the man's sides like a spooked horse after he'd wedged the knife back down into the rocks beside the fire, out of the way. The poor fucker was trembling, shaking, but his breathing gradually slowed down, till the man sagged back down onto the cot, eyes closed but still conscious. Off to the side, he heard Micah mutter "Jay'sus" under his breath, and Coyote had to agree. That muffled scream was still ringing in his ears too.

Kujo pulled the man up against his chest to sit up a bit, and dug out his flask to hand to Coyote.

The Indian quirked an eyebrow. "This whiskey or izz't the *Kujo Especial*?"

The mute shot him smirk, or at least what passed for a smirk on his ugly mug, and made the ok sign. Coyote shook his head and smiled, "Yeah, spose he'd need it."

Pulling the man's jaw open again, the first trickled ran down the wrong pipe, causing the man to cough weakly, a wet gurgling sound as he choked, but the next swallow went down right, and so Coyote let it pour back stronger till he had at least a cup or two in him.

Kujo stayed his hand after that. Wouldn't want to poison the poor guy.

A quick pass with a rag soaked in the boiled water from the pot drew a hiss from the man, but revealed that the knife had done its work. The bleeding had stopped. Coyote was wrapping bandages around the man's torso to at least attempt to keep the wound clean, when the man's eyes opened again, staring up at him, hazy with confusion and watery with pain. Coyote smiled at him as reassuringly as possible, and chuckled when the eyelids began to droop again in resistant flutters. "That laudanum makin' ya sleepy yet, Marshal?"

The man mumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "Ah'fuck'n hate laud'num."

Coyote laughed, sitting back on his heels, and said "Well, too fuckin' bad. Yer two drops and a few slugs a' whiskey in the hole already, so close those baby blues and say hi to the sandman, darlin'."

"Now then, Micah, how's that rabbit comin'?" He crowed, turning brightly back to the petulant boy sitting by Mercedes. The boy appeared to have not only popped the

organs he wasn't supposed to, but also failed to sever the head. The whole little carcass was a rather gruesome mess.

He looked up at Coyote with a snarl on his face. "Gee, boss, how the *fuck'sit* look like it's goin'?"

"Jay'sus, Mary'n Joseph! Michael Horatio Jepson, the Devil'd that poor rabbit do ta you?!" Gabe shrieked, green eyes wide as he stared across the late afternoon fire at his brother elbow deep in the critter.

Micah wrinkled his nose at his brother. "Would'ja pipe down, princess, reckon there's somebody in *Texas* that ain't hear'd ya."

Gabe sat next to Coyote with a pout on his freckle-splattered face. "Aw, Micah! Why you gotta be like that?"

Micah sneered over at him, before depositing the thoroughly-dead rabbit on Mercedes' immaculate pile. "*Aw, Gabby, why you gotta be like that?* It's just a dead fuckin' rabbit."

Coyote was fighting a chuckle that he knew Mercy was smuggling somewhere under that constipated look of irritation, and Kujo gave Micah a swift smack on the head as he walked by. The level look in his eyes shut the kid up.

Gabe, poor daisy-hearted Gabe, had a hand wrapped around himself like a sad, one man hug, and Mercy sighed, and ruffled his curls. "Cheer up, sweetheart."

"Oh fine, he gets a *cheer up, sweetheart*, an' I get rabbit guts and a smack? Cuz' that's fuckin' fair!" Micah snapped, and Coyote let his gaze roll skyward in exasperation. These boys, dear *Lord*. That had been one the many troublesome decisions he'd lived to regret thoroughly, especially now that he was all *attached* ta' the damn urchins. He shared a look with Mercedes, and the fond look in her eyes said she knew just what he was thinking.

"Aww, cheer up sugar-pie!" Coyote drawled, reaching over to mess Micah's hair. The kid sat stock still while the Indian's hand ruffled through his short red bristles, eyes wide and his face increasingly livid till he just screamed through his teeth out of frustration, and stormed off to go rinse off in the creek.

Coyote felt the laugh bubbling up inside his chest, till it spilled out into the air, and he knew he heard Mercy chuckling under her breath. Gabe was struggling not to,

probably out of some misconstrued need to not make fun of his brother, but it didn't take too long for him to descend into giggles.

The Indian grinned and got up, dusting himself off, and whistled off to Kujo, who was tending to the horses, the Marshal's included. "Tie 'im up and get the stew a'goin' wouldja, Kujo? Mercy an' I've got business needs discussing!"

Kujo waved a hand in acknowledgement, snorting. *Business.*

"Now, Mercy, doll, if I could borrow your attention for a while, you an' I outta hit the tent n' talk *business*."

Even Gabe didn't buy that, giving him a thoroughly unimpressed look at his attempted subtlety. Mercy chuckled, ruffling his hair again, before getting up to join her partner.

"Mmhhh, real important. I wouldn't reckon you'd understand. Them's *adult* business." Mercy teased him with a wink. "Be sure n' help Kuj' with the stew and yer' brother, alright, hon?"

The pair made their way to the canvas tent they'd erected at the edge of camp, alongside the shallow canyon wall. Nothing too spacious or really all that much *cooler*, but a little shade and a little shelter were really all a body needed.

Coyote flopped out down onto their bedrolls, hands behind his head, and grinned up at his second in command.

She narrowed her eyes as she followed him in, although the black of her pupils had already swallowed more of the honey brown surrounding it. "You said somethin' about talkin' business?"

"Mm, oh, right. Business. I was thinkin'..." Coyote drawled, pulling himself up and dragging her down onto the cot on top of him.

Mercy exhaled, breath catching. "Oh? S'a dangerous occupation fer you, boy."

Coyote chuckled. "Me n' danger are real good pals." He sunk his hands into her curls, clenching just tight enough to tug her down even closer, the two of them almost the same height. He mouthed at her ear and started down her neck.

She smirked. "That you are. I'm waitin'..."

"What'dya think'a ol' Skinner?" He pulled back. Mercy cocked an eyebrow at him and propped herself back up. "I thought we were talk'n business, here?"

"Ain't you always tellin' me business come's 'fore *business*, Thistle?" He teased, and she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. What about 'im? He's a crook, snake oil out his ass, but we already knew that. Why else'd we have him in on the job?"

Coyote looked back up at her, teasing his fingers through her hair and trailing them down behind her ears and playfully along her neck and shoulders, satisfied when he saw her shiver. "Yeah, well there's crooked 'nough ta try robbin' a train, an' there's crooked enough ta think have the stupid-ass *cahones* ta try and *double cross* the man robbin' the train, after the fact. Now what kind you reckon he is?"

She frowned at that. "If I was a gamblin' type I'd bet on the latter."

Coyote let his hands snake down her back and teased them along the edge of her trousers. "Mercy-baby, I *am* a gamblin' man. So you *know* where my money is."

"So he's dirty." She said.

"An' I wanna know what's up his sleeve."

Her face wrinkled into disgust. "He's such a fuck'n sleeze, Coyote."

"I know, darlin.' I'll make it up to ya." He purred, hands slinking even further down. Her eyes narrowed, but she was smiling when she pressed a kiss to his mouth, "Yeah, you'd better, boy. In fact, I reckon," She hooked her legs around his and reversed their positions, pushing his head down in the direction of the front of her pants. "You'd best start grovel'n *now*."

Coyote grinned up at her. "I live ta' serve."

She rolled her eyes.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Cool Water*

*See 'em, an' I don't care what Suth'land told you, you put a bullet in some part'a their leg or you cut their fucking heel string and hobble'em, and then you telegraph me, you understand? Cause if I find out they run off on your watch like they done before, I'll make sure you live ta regret it.*

Cain woke up with a jolt, reflex spasms of a memory, the edge of a fight, his lungs panting as though he'd been running in his dreams, something chasing him. Hunting him. God, he'd slept awful, he felt sluggish with it, but something tense in his bones made him restless, like his body remembered tossing and turning even if he only remembered glimpses of it. The stalking, relentless tar-black hatred in King's eyes that lurked in the shadows, the greedy money-green of Sutherland's and a mischievous, arrogant brown.

Brown, he recalled, like the grey-brown clay mud at the bottom of a river, framed by a tan face lined with laughter, a scar through the eyebrow and a feather in his hair, striped hawk and dipped in red. A hint of brazen gold teeth at the back of his smile.

Cain's eyes flew open. Oh, *fuck*.

Whatever sleep had laid claim to his body was gone in that one moment, instantly tensing for a fight that his body was keen to alert him it was in no shape to be in. As he tried to move and sit up, the knife wound in his side made itself known in a hot flair of pain, accompanied by a lingering burn, and nausea hit him like a brick wall.

He rolled off the bedroll, aired his paunch onto the dry ground, then rolled back and settled onto the cot with a groan. His mouth felt like rotted cotton and tasted of whiskey and the bitter, pervasive alkali he recognized from the surgeon's tent as laudanum. It'd made him loose his guts then, too, although it'd been unclear at the time whether it'd been from the opiate itself, or the pain of a shell-shattered femur that'd given them cause to dose him in the first place.

Cain's stomach cramped like a vice after that, he probably hadn't eaten, certainly he couldn't *remember* eating, in days, all that'd come up was fluid and bile. But he felt lucid, now, the edges on everything sharp, and the pain had eased some even as the opiate was out of his system.

So he quietly began taking stock of his injuries, flexing his hands and feet, then his arms and legs, stiff with sleep. His bad leg was near-to seized up from lack of movement, thigh muscle tight as a drum, and there was a knot of coarse rope tied around the bare ankle of his opposite foot.

Cain's eyes cracked open to glare at it. *Of course*. It appeared to be tethering him to a gnarled tree beside him, not unlike how one might tether a mule.

He swore, and tried to haul himself up again, slower and more careful, but it hardly helped, pain lancing through his side as he righted himself. His sore muscles protested sitting up straight, but it was better than pinching his ribs and side wound by hunching over.

He cleared his throat, spat, and sat back up, beginning to take stock of his surroundings. The light in the small ravine was dulling into night, nearly dark, and he could see light from a fire nearby. A tent, other bedrolls, horses roaming and grazing in between him and the little camp. Among them, a familiar black behemoth munching happily away at the foraging along the canyon floor.

So he was alive, and so was his horse. His gear, boots, and the rest of his clothes were another matter, as was the location of the five wanted criminals who appear to have leashed him to a tree like a wild pony and left.

He could remember, now, that the brown-eyed Indian had been the same one who had found him in the desert, the infamous Coyote, but that told him neither where he was, why, or how many days had passed since then.

After Skinner had whacked him, time had gone a little sideways.

Cain closed his eyes, and felt the corner of his mouth tip up in a small smile imagining what his cousin Jasper would'a had to say about it all. He could picture his dimpled cheeky face, the freckles and the sun burn, gap in his front teeth he liked to whistle out of when he was real' impressed. *Well, shieet, Bree, this's a real shit'fire ol' mess you's got yerself in to!*

Greenhorn enough for him to get bushwhacked by the very man he'd been hunting, but to nearly die in the desert only to get captured by the most wanted bandits in the west country... If he got out of this mess alive, Sutherland might be in a mood to let him stay that way just so he could chew his ass out for the rest of his days.

Cain brought a hand up to his mouth, and using his thumb and forefinger, let loose a quick whistle, holding stock still after to try and hear any movement or, more importantly, voices. There was a soft thudding of four steel-shod hooves, but no human sounds; in the dark of twilight it was tough to tell if anything was even moving, shapes black on darkening grey.

Lucifer came trotting up to his master looking entirely too pleased with himself, uninjured and absent even his loose tack, bare as the day he'd been foaled save his shoes, which meant someone, likely the outlaws, had taken it along with his saddle, blankets and gear. "Good boy," Cain murmured. He held out a hand and stroked it along his loyal steed's muzzle, the horse snuffling into his hand for treats, licking at the salt there on his desert-strained skin. "Comere, boy," he whispered, and took a large inhale, before threading his fingers through the horse's mane and pulling himself up to standing.

He nearly collapsed back onto the ground as all the blood rushed to his feet and his bad leg gave out from under him. Face contorting into a wince, he clung to Luce by an arm around the horse's neck, hand still clutched desperately in its mane. After a few deep, panting breaths later, his vision greyed back into color.

"Well." He muttered.

Lucifer snorted at him.

Cain grunted back, and then found himself smiling.



And to think there had been days in his life where that had passed as a real conversation.

Now, if he could get out of here with his hide intact, that'd be a real trick. His injuries were rough, but not life threatening, not anymore, but without water, a saddle, or a gun, he was apt not to get real far. He couldn't have made it far from the Bernadette gulch after the run in with Skinner, maybe ten or fifteen miles at best, but he certainly couldn't recollect the direction, much less where he'd been picked up by the dread Indian and his men.

Or how far they'd taken him. The nearest supply town could be a few hours or a few *days*.

Lucifer seemed to be steadier on his feet now, coat dry but not chalky with salt, and he didn't seem agitated, or even thirsty for that matter. At least that made one of them. If he could find whatever water Luce had, he could maybe get full up enough to make one run for it, just him and the horse, and try and find a place to hide out and heal, before scouting out a way back Flagstaff. Without gear or food, though, he really needed to find his gun or rifle if he was going to have a real chance at surviving for long.

Which he had a chance in fucking *hell* of finding in a dangerous outlaw's camp in the fucking dark.

"Shit, Luce. Think you remember where they watered you?" Cain whispered. The horse's ears flicked, and the beast whinnied softly, only to be shushed as fast as his master could manage. Last thing he needed was the blasted horse giving away his position. Now, to get out of here.

The first few tugs on the rope around his ankle held fast, but when the fourth slipped a bit, Cain smiled. These boys might be good at shooting and robbing banks but it looks like they couldn't tie a good knot. Ain't cowboys, that's for sure.

Reaching down with a grimace as his ribcage contorted painfully, he was able to loosen the knot with his fingers and free his foot. It was then that he realized, standing there in the desert sand, still warm from the sun despite the darkness, that his toes were free to burrow into the dust and grit and thorns. The bastards had even liberated his damn boots.

That took his odds down from slim to scarce.

Folding the bed roll in half, he flopped it out onto Luce's back, and limped around the area to try and see if they'd left any of his other gear recklessly around, but that search yielded nothing but his greying-brown white shirt, stained with blood, and *a* sock. Not even one of his, not that it'd do him any good.

He pulled the shirt over his own back, loose in the breeze but better than nothing.

"Right. Fuck, Luce, hold on, this is gonna be rough."

The animal, of course, didn't reply.

Cain anchored his left hand in the horse's mane and the right over his back, and with gritted teeth and as much push-off as his good leg would give him, hauled himself up onto the brute's back and hoisted his left leg over astride. The pain in his chest and side hit him like a punch and his breath left him in a stuttering cough, what little still left in his stomach besides bile coming back up with the vertigo. He cleared his throat and wiped his mouth, breathing hard as he slumped forward against Luce's neck. Fuck his guns or his saddle or his damn badge, he just needed to get the hell out of here before he caught a bullet in the brain.

Cain nudged the horse forward, sitting as loose and steady on Luce's back as he could manage, and let him lead away from the camp, slow but hopefully quiet enough. No sign of the Indian or his men, but Cain wasn't exactly optimistic he'd escaped notice.

Lucifer stumbled down the canyon in the dark, tentative but unafraid, like he'd followed the winding little path before, and before long Cain heard the laughing-water of a small creek. Under the light of the half moon, that little stream of water was a sight for tired eyes. Half dismounting, half falling, it was a wonder he didn't get off his horse and fall headfirst into the water, but he managed to hit on his knees and lean over the water to cup it in his dry hands.

It was surprisingly cold, given the lingering heat of the day, and Cain drank so much, so fast, he almost forgot to breathe, water dripping down his chin and chest. Lucifer bowed his head and drank as well, while his master sat back on his heels and panted for air.

Cain almost felt sick with the glut of it, but he couldn't stop. His body seemed sure it'd be thirsty till he drank the creek dry, but after a few long minutes, his stomach gave a twinge of discomfort and he forced himself to stop, sitting back to catch his breath again.

He cupped a handful of water in his palms and splashed it up onto his face and scalp, savoring the blessed feeling of *water* and being alive as it flooded down his hair and chin and wet his shirt, for once damp with something other than sweat.

Cain went to take another handful to repeat the same action when he heard the hammer cock on a pistol. *Shit.*

He let his hands drift up beside his head, and froze. Goddamnit, he was getting tired of hearing that sound before he saw where it was coming from.

"Oye! You twitch, an' I'll blow yer brain's clean out. Kujo, you got rope? Well, don't jes' stand there, tie'im the fuck up!" The voice was higher pitched, but male, halfway in between a kid and a man, and it reminded Cain slightly of Nell's. Except Nell had never had the mouth on him that this kid seemed to.

A huge paw like hand encircled his neck from behind, bit into his flesh hard like a rattler and a knee to the middle of his back brought him down onto the ground with a jarring thud. Cain couldn't even help the yelp that woofed out his throat at the pressure on his ribs.

The bigger man grabbed his hands together behind his back, and tied his wrists together quick as wrangling a calf. Must not have been him that "tied" him to that damn tree, because even before he tested the bonds, he knew they weren't going to budge an inch.

The other figure slipped a tether around Luce's neck, and spat on the ground beside Cain's head where his face was crushed into the dirt. "That hurt, Marshal? Boss said you's got some broken ribs, reckon that pinched a little, huh? You fuckin' deserve it, lucky ol' Skinner got to you first, I'da just killed ya dead right off, I tell ya!"

The man behind him dragged him up by his shirt and his wrists, planting him none too delicately back on his bare feet, and Cain grit his teeth, determined not to make a sound. The kid lit a match on his boot heel with a flash of phosphorus, and

brought the little flame up to re-light the lantern in his other hand. Soft yellow light flickered out from it into the pitch black of the canyon, illuminating the kid's freckled face twisted in a hard scowl.

"The hell if I know why the Boss saved yer sorry ass in the first place." The boy said.

A glance behind him yielded that the man holding his wrists and the back of his neck was not a hair under six foot *eight* or a pound under two hundred. Built like a fucking Grizzly, and by the look of his ugly mug, just as mean.

Well, that clinched any remaining suspicions as to his captors. The Indian, his pet *brute*, and one of the twins from the poster.

Cain bit back a startled shout when the big man picked him clean off the ground and hoisted him over his shoulder, before flopping him astride the back of Lucifer. He winced in pain, but the man was quick to then drag him around to sit back up.

The brute nodded to his companion, and the kid wrinkled his nose and spat again. "Whatever. We're hauling you back now. Takin' you back ta' the boss. Maybe he'll clip yer heel so's you can't run again, huh, stupid? What'cha think a' that?"

Cain focused his stare up off the horizon at the rising moon, though he shivered at the thought, he didn't reply.

The boy seemed aggravated by his silence, and started to sneer, but before he could speak, the brute smacked him over the back of the head, with a hard grunt. "Ow! What the fuck, Kujo!"

The brute, Kujo, just shook his head, and saddled his own horse, a black and white paint that had to be about as sturdy as a cow by Cain's reckoning. The poor mare didn't even flinch, just started out with a trot, uncaring of the dark trail back to camp. The boy saddled his bay, and kicked Luce as he passed by. "Git on!"

Lucifer froze stock still, and the boy kicked his hindquarters again.

The little fucker was trying to get Cain's horse to buck him. Cain hid his tiny smirk and gently squeezed his legs twice, springing Lucifer forward as easy as could be. He heard the boy curse behind him, but the light stayed at his heels the whole way back, a few minutes. Cain's stomach was churning with all the water he'd drunk, but he'd be damned if he coughed any of it back up now.

Beside the bright orange light of the fire pit lined with stones and bed rolls sat the boy's mirror image, cheerfully fussing with whatever hung in the pot over the coals, and he smiled and waved at the brute as he approached camp. The boy's eyes went wide when he saw Cain, hands tied and barefooted astride his black horse.

"Oh, crap." The kid muttered.

The other boy behind Cain swung around and hopped off his horse, looking about ready to punch the daylights outta his brother. "Yeah, *oh*, you fuckin' dolt! Your little princess fairy-knot back there couldn't've held a fifty year old mule!"

The kid flushed with embarrassment, and the two took off arguing like a pair of alley cats, while the big man grabbed Cain by the arms and shirt collar again, and pulled him back off the horse. Tapping his shoulder with the end of his gun, and holy *fuck* was that a *blunderbuss*? Kujo grunted and pushed him in the direction of the lone tent nestled against the side of the canyon wall. It was lit with lamp light, illuminating dark figures inside it, who looked to be arguing or tussling around. It was easy enough to guess the identity of the pair, only two left from the warrant: the Indian and the masked right hand man.

Cain swallowed hard and winced. *Fuck*.

He startled when he heard that exact sentiment shouted hoarsely from the tent, followed by a groaning noise, almost like a beast in pain. Cain scowled in confusion. The hell?

It almost sounded like, whoever the pair in the tent were, they were fighting, the slaps and thuds of flesh hitting flesh echoed by cries and shouts and grunts. He stopped in his tracks only to feel the cold press of the blunderbuss between his shoulder blades again, forcing him to keep limping forward.

The brute pushed him through the tent flaps and then positioned himself like a loyal guard dog immediately outside it, and as Cain caught his balance, he barely helped himself from falling dead on top of the pair in the middle of the tent. The sounds of them filled the tent, and Cain looked up to see, there, sprawled out on a bed of wool saddle blankets, bedrolls, and furs, lay the West's most wanted outlaw, Coyote Walker, straddled by a dark haired woman who was presently riding his cock like she might win a Kansas City Rodeo prize for her efforts.

The Indian's eyes widened at the sight of their intruder, and he froze for a moment, stock-still. The woman on top of him, however, facing away from the tent flap, continued to roll her hips, and Coyote bit back a groan. He laid hands on her hips and tried to slow her down. "Jesus, Mercy! Uh...fuck, darlin', you might wanna stop'n turn 'round."

The woman had her hand on a pistol under one of the furs, cocked and aimed, over her shoulder in a split second, straight back at Cain. "Ah've got it all under control, *Coyote*," She purred, leaning down to bite at some part of the man's ear, by the looks of it, gun point never wavering. The way she said his name rolled with her accent like vibrato, a softness to the word that was foreign and romantic.

Cain hardly noticed.

Her words, or the gun.

His eyes were fairly glued to the sight of their bodies, buck naked in the lingering heat of the day and the warm lamplight, tanned and supple and sweat slick, and to the writhing motion the pair seemed unable to be still, even holding a gun.

His initial blanché had spilled into a crimson blush, and God, he felt hot all over, his skin felt tight, and he almost subconsciously backed up. When he hit the solid force of the beast guarding their door, he froze again, unable to run, unable to look away.

The Indian's hands clawed down her back, sinking into the softer flesh of her hips, leaving dimples under his fingertips, Apache brown against Spanish gold. *Christ*, it was so easy to follow them down as they grabbed at the ample flesh of the girl's ass and spread her wide enough for him to see the actual place their bodies were joined, if only for a moment. She kept the gun on him even as she cried out, a high shout halfway in between an animal cry and a human moan, and the man beneath her was quick to topple her over onto her back and planted a hand above her to stabilize himself as he started thrusting harder. Hard enough to make the woman's body rock forward with each one, and sweat was dripping off of him, hair soaked, forearms taut and the veins swollen.

Cain stifled a gasp when the man looked up at him, not even slowing, and met his eyes. The same river-clay brown that stalked his dreams. Nightmares. It was hard to tell which.

He watched bliss spill over the man's face, his mouth falling open, eyes closing, the groan spilling straight out of his throat and lungs like a speechless animal, contorting his face as it left him. Sin incarnate.

The silence that settled between the three of them in the muggy tent was nearly palpable, and Cain couldn't run, couldn't break the silence, hell, he couldn't even look away. The sound of all of their breathing seemed too loud.

The Indian man slumped on top of the woman, who promptly clocked him upside the head none-too-delicately with the butt of her pistol, still lying in her hand, and he just laughed, rolling off of her.

Still buck-naked, Coyote curled up and sat on the bed, fished out a tobacco pouch from beside it, and with lightening quick fingers began fixing a quirley. Cain swallowed, unable to shake the image those fingers had made digging into flesh out of his head.

The woman appeared slightly more modest, tugging some scrap of clothing over herself as she sat up, and accepted the extended cigarette from her partner. A few moments later, the Indian coughed.

Cain met his eyes again, positive his face was still stained with the fierce blush of shame and arousal that has spread over it before.

"Smoke, Marshal?" He asked.

Cain numbly shook his head, unable to help but follow the line of the drifting smoke down to the Indian's hand as the man stood up, down his arm and chest and God, he was naked as the day he was born with nothing but that damn feather still stuck in his raven hair, poured off his head like an ink spill.

The man grinned as he lit the smoke hanging from his own lips with a match.

"Well, no skin off my back." Coyote took a long drag from the quirley, and blew it out his nose. The woman snorted softly, smoke billowing out her mouth and nose in puffs. Her gun lay casually on the bed between them, as though to mock him with how little threat he was to these naked, strange people.

The Indian cocked an eyebrow, an unspoken challenge, and drawled, "You know, Marshal, if you wanted a drink'a water, all's you had to do was ask."

He chuckled when Cain stiffened and glared at the wall behind him.

The woman walked over to him, and snapped her teeth at him like a wolf, naked except for the unbuttoned shirt she was holding over her chest. She flicked her spent quirkley out of the tent flap behind him, and she walked back to the bed to start recollecting her clothes.

"You headin' out, darlin'?" Coyote asked her. She nodded, and said something in Spanish that made the Indian choke on a laugh. "Mmhmm, Ah'll jes' bet." She rolled her eyes as she pulled the shirt on and stepped into a pair of pants. If Cain's damn mind hadn't been stuck running circles around the sinful display he'd just witnessed, he reckoned the sight of a lady in a pair of trousers might've shocked him. It would've been *disturbing*, back in Dodge. As it was, the trousers and the gun she tucked bare into the back of them didn't seem really much to fuss about.

"Give us a kiss, huh, Mercy?" Coyote teased, and she glared at him, but complied, planting a soft kiss on his already kiss-red mouth, and a not-so soft smack to the back of the head.

"You take care!" the Indian called after her, and she laughed, and flipped him off as she left the tent. The silence between him and the outlaw was almost a physical thing, the trills of whatever insects crawled in this godforsaken place layered onto the hoots and yips of the occasional wild animal outside the tent. Long minutes passed between them in the lamplight, and while Cain stood still, determined not to give in to the cramps in his leg and the pain in his side, staring at the wall of the tent beyond Coyote's head like if he tried he could see a thousand yards past it.

The Indian just stared at *him*.

A cough, clearing his throat, followed by a sigh, and the man said "Well, Marshal. Spose it's come ta yer attention just whose fine hospitality yer enjoyin' tonight. See, that puts me at a bit of a social disadvantage. Yer knowin' my name, but I ain't knowin' yers."

Cain forced himself to meet the man's eyes, and said, "Cain."



"Cain." Coyote said, slow, like he was tasting the word in his mouth with the smoke as he said it. "I don't reckon I've ever met a man called *Cain* before. Now, man called *King*, I have. In fact I got a bullet on my gun belt with his name on it. Now jus' between you an' me, Cain, I ain't too awful fond'a doin' that sort a wet work, but man's gotta do what he's got to, you understand. So tell me, I gonna have to make one for you, too?"

Cain's heart tripped, and caught itself, and he forced the spark of fear into anger. Anger he could use in a fight, if it came to it. "Don't see how I have a say in it." He muttered. The Indian's smile grew wider, the slight hint of gold winking at him from the man's molars.

"Why, Marshal, you got all the say in the world. See, I found you just the day before yesterday out gatherin' a posse a' vultures in the wilderness few miles out from here, and I could'a put a bullet in yer brain jus' then. But, I ain't that sorta man. When the Mother deals a man a hand full a' numbers an then all'a sudden an ace a'spades, it ain't fer no reason, and I reckon I ain't the kinda' man ta bed it down 'fore the games played out. So, I take you back here and I fix you right up, and now," the Indian leaned forward and grinned, positively predatory, "I *own* you. Kinda like a stray dog, 'cept you ain't as cute and twice as likely ta bite my damn hand off."

The man laughed at his own joke, smoky and rough and taunting, and Cain just grit his teeth, fists clenched at his sides.

"Look at me, Marshal," the man barked, and Cain's eyes flew to him at the sudden vacuum of humor in their space now. The Indian's mouth was smiling, but his eyes were hard. "I ain't gonna kill ya. Yet. Got better things ta do, places to be, than dumpin' yer sorry carcass in a shallow grave. You stay tied, and ya' stay in our sight, follow my orders, and maybe you an' I can figure out a way ta' *absolve* this here life debt we got goin'."

"Go ta' hell." Cain spat on the floor.

Coyote was suddenly in motion, moving so fast, Cain barely saw him twitch before he'd tackled him and sent the pair of them flying out the tent door. The man's hand was like iron around his throat, and the other had a knife pressed to his jugular,

and Cain's heartbeat was racing to try and catch up with how the fuck the man had grounded him so damn quick.

The Indian's face was barely an inch from his, breath smoky and cut with whiskey, and he snarled, a jackal's smile. "Why, Marshal, I'm afraid we're already there."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Union Pacific Rail, Engine no. 9*

The goddamn bastard hadn't been kidding.

As Cain trudged forward through the endless dust, billowing up off the desert floor and into the air, he let out an exhausted dry laugh. Life on the trail was hard, no matter what, but it was harder still an outlaw's prisoner than as an outlaw's *hunter*. At least then, he'd had his gear, his intact clothes, and his guns. His freedom.

Now all he had was the mean-edged humor of pack of thieves for traveling companions, and what felt like a blister for every square inch of each foot, rubbed raw and pounded bone deep inside his boots which his captors had so *graciously* deigned to return.

The brat, Micah, had threatened to take them away and make him walk barefoot at least a half a dozen times by now, but Cain knew the little shit was full of hot air on that. Bad enough to be slowed by a man walking on sore feet, with a gimp leg, but a barefoot hike in the desert didn't end sore, it ended dead. Between the rocks, the heat, the spiny plants and weeds and poisonous snakes, he'd have made it maybe a handful of miles unshod.

They'd been on the trail for a few days, most of which Cain had spent walking beside his horse with a rope around his wrists, sure as the one around Luce's muzzle, towing them both along behind Coyote's paint, eating dust and stumbling.

Anytime he got to be dehydrated or heat-touched enough for the vertigo or his injuries to flair up, one of the men, usually the brute, would flood water down his

throat until he couldn't swallow fast enough and got some in his windpipe, and after he finished hacking up a lung, they'd hog tie him back onto his horse for a few hours to 'rest'.

It was still unclear where they were going, besides *north*, and a so-called 'place' Coyote seemed intent on insisting was actually called None of Your Fucking Business. It was also unclear if the damn Injun was actually serious, out of his mind, or just trying to fuck with Cain's, probably all of the above.

The landscape and what little passed for vegetation in the region, small shriveled trees and spiny plants, eventually gave way to sagebrush, suggesting they were passing up through the Basin of Nevada. Cain reckoned, since they'd been travelling sun up to sun down consistently for three or four days now, even if he'd been unconscious or delusional for swatches of it, that by now they could easily be as far north as the top edge of the Nevada territory. Hundreds of miles gone from the canyons of Arizona land.

Why he was being quite literally roped into following this demented pack of human jackals wasn't anything they deemed to tell him. Not that he'd asked. The first time he'd tried to open his mouth to say anything at all, the Indian had offered to gag him with a spare horse bit.

Cain was drawn out of his thoughts as his foot, clumsy with sores and exhaustion, hooked on some loose rock and caused him to stumble forward. As he caught himself, he looked up barely in time to avoid running smack into Coyote's horse's ass. They had stopped.

Cain had to keep his feet from continuing onward with out him, despite how tired he was, it was as though his body existed only to keep walking, one foot after the other, regardless of the path or focus. It felt bizarre to stand still.

Once the noise of their horses had died down, Cain realized he could hear a small running creek, although how the Indian had heard it otherwise was beyond him, and the man declared a break for food, and to water the horses. So far they seemed uninterested in letting him starve, despite their lack of care for his feet or sanity, and so when Gabe was dolling out beans and hardtack, Cain received a cheerful smile and his portion of each. The pork fat in the beans was a little rancid, but he forced it

down, using the canning liquid left from the beans to soak the hardtack enough to actually chew it. Coyote appeared to be using a slug of what was probably whiskey to do the same.

The twins were appallingly talkative. Made Cain wonder how in the hell the Indian hadn't shot them, or how the hell they'd survived so long out here. Most men didn't take so kind to the kind of lip the kid, Micah, gave, even to his superiors, or take pity on a boy so soft-hearted as Gabe. Ol' Snake-eyes might've had something unscrupulous to say about what kinda man *would*, but as yet, Cain hadn't seen either of the older men lay hand on the boys, not even for the honest beating Micah honestly had coming to him. God help his lily-white hide if Cain ever got loose, a man could only tolerate so many threats to his person from a punk half his size 'fore he had something to prove for the sake of his own dignity.

The woman from that first night in the tent had been conspicuously absent, she'd left that night and Cain hadn't seen her since. If he hadn't seen the mettle in her eyes, he might've been inclined to dismiss her as some prostitute the Indian had wooed out along for the ride, but she had had far too much fire, too much feist in her smile and too steady a gun-hand to be anything but the masked demon from the right of Coyote on that damn poster.

Of course, the brute had said nothing at all. Not to Cain, to the boys, or his boss, which was all together strange, but the rest of the gang seemed to think nothing of it.

The whole fucking mess was beginning to become surreal.

Cain heard the crunch of gravel and grit behind him, the faint clink of spurs. None of their party were even standing. He didn't move from where he was sitting, holding himself still, and as the sound of boots on the ground grew louder, he heard them stop just behind him, and felt the dank warmth of the stranger's breath against the back of his neck and ear as the man squatted down.

"Why, sweetness, looks like you didn't eat that bullet after all. What a *fuckin'* shame." The voice drawled, before the man behind Cain stood back up.

Cain's eyes went wide, the oiled voice churning his stomach even as his body reluctantly turned around. There in the flesh, same rotted smell on his breath and sneer on his face, was the one and only C.J. Wyatt Skinner.

The warrant was still in Cain's back pocket, too, and the faded, bloodstained tear was still brown on his shirt over the bandages on his side.

"Skinner! You dog, ain't I told you I don't like to be kept waiting? What'n the hell took you so long?" Coyote crowed, wicked smile on his face as he stood up. Skinner's face split into a grin of his own, and he adjusted himself suggestively in his pants before jerking a thumb back towards the posse that was already gathering behind him.

"You know damn well what took me so long, Injun. Some of the finer things'n life have got to be savored!" Skinner laughed, and the Indian joined him, but some part of the humor didn't quite reach his eyes.

Behind Skinner, dressed in tight pants and a too-loose shirt, smug as a cat in cream, was the damn *woman*. Coyote, whatever his attachment to her was, appeared not surprised or bothered in the least, and he held out a hand for her before pulling her into a hug, swinging her around, plopping her back down with a smacking kiss. "Mmmm, welcome back, Miss Mercedes."

The woman laughed fondly, but as Coyote turned around to offer her some food, she was quick to throw Skinner a wink. The man's bent up smile turned wicked at that. Cain grimaced in disgust. Bad enough that she seemed to have all the manner of a whore, but to make that a *cheating* whore, well. The damn Indian probably deserved it.

Skinner glared down at Cain, and spat on his cheek.

Trail worn be damned, Cain lit up as fast as he could and got right into Skinner's face, snarling. Despite Cain's tied hands, Skinner flinched back in surprise, but quickly drew his gun and waved it in the man's face.

"Whoa, boy, settle down!" He teased, a little spooked, and he must've looked ready to clock Cain a good one, because Coyote's hand came down and gripped Skinner's gun hand like iron, stopping it midair and yanking it back till the gun was pointed uselessly upwards.

"I don't take so kindly ta' folks messing with what's mine, *boy*." Coyote hissed. "Hate each other on yer own damn time, but you've taken yer pound'a flesh outta that man's hide, and now he's mine, so lay the hell off. I need him in one piece."

Skinner scoffed under his breath, scowling back at the Indian and attempting to dislodge his grip, becoming frustrated when the man didn't let go. When Skinner couldn't *make* him let go, he paled a little.

"Are we *un'nerstand'n* one another, Skinner?" Coyote asked, same rattlesnake smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah, yes, Jesus Christ, would'ja leave off?! Fuck, you crazy Injun, what'dya want with his sorry carcass anyway? He's just one a' them small fry lawmen."

Coyote released him with a shove, and chuckled. "Seein' as how *I'm* the one who found his sorry carcass in the desert after you near killed it, that makes it none a'yer business, Skinner. Besides, you lyin' fuck, ain't nothin' bout a U.S. Marshal that's *small fry*."

Skinner narrowed his eyes, Cain could tell he was pissed Coyote knew that, probably would've tried to pull the wool over the man's eyes and claim Cain was nothing that need's worrying about so he could get him to give Cain back over. Granted, Cain didn't really have reason to trust either of the outlaws, but between the two of them, at least Coyote seemed to have a little self-control.

Might've pulled a knife on him too, but he hadn't *used* it. That was something.

Cain waited until the two seemed to have ended their standoff, and as Skinner turned away, Cain hooked his ankle and planted it right around Skinner's, causing the man to trip and flail, and land face down in the dust. He didn't even feel all that petty clearing his throat, hacking up a wad of spit, and planting it square in the bandit's eye.

Coyote muffled a snort of laughter behind a cough of his own. "Now, now, chill'un, play nice."

Skinner tore up off the ground, furiously dusting himself off and wiping his face before sticking a finger straight into Coyote's face. "You sayin' he's yours, Injun?"

"Yessiree." Coyote drawled.

"Then keep yer fuckin' dog in line!" Skinner hollered.

Coyote chuckled, "Aww, Skin, ain't even a proper 'Dog yet, look at 'im! He's just a poor wittle puppy, ain't he? All that shaggy fur, cute little pout, he ain't even done growin' I'd bet, jus' look at the size'a his paws!" Coyote mocked, voice all innocent, and Skinner sneered.

Mercedes curled a hand over Skinner's shoulder and squeezed, before giving his cheek a little condescending pat. "Skinner, honey, just leave it be. Now, boys, if you could all tuck it *back* in'na yer pants and quit the pissin' contest, us real outlaw's have work to do."

Some of Skinner's boys laughed at that, and Coyote rolled his eyes. "Micah! Gabe! How's about you make sure our prisoner sits real tight here while me and Skinner make sure we're all square on the plan. Mercy, darlin', if you'd join us?"

Skinner nodded to his boys, and one of the other men shouted orders for them to break for lunch while Skinner sat down around the fire opposite Coyote. Micah and Gabe popped up on either side of Cain, Micah half tugging, half throwing him down onto the rock he'd been sitting on.

Coyote rolled himself a smoke, but didn't offer one to Skinner. He leaned back and smiled over at Mercedes.

"Mercy, the map, if you could be so kind. Thanks, doll." Coyote said, taking the battered vellum map from her hand and unfolding it across his lap, gesturing for Skinner to come closer.

"Alright, so here's Gatlin-Lovett Mining Company headquarters," he put his finger down and tapped the map in the north-western corner of the Nevada territory, then trailed his finger across eastward, "and all along here's the Union Pacific Rail. Eastbound trains out of San Francisco pass north and make a stop at Gatlin-Lovett for'ta pick up shipments, mostly raw silver ore. We're not much interested in that. Too heavy, and most of it's unrefined, so it's worth less than its weight in coal at the moment. Once they've stopped off there and loaded up, they won't stop again till they get to the railhead in Winnemucca. Commercial stop, passengers can get off, further east-bounders can get on, that sort."

Skinner glared at the map in concentration.

"If'n you've got a fuckin' point with this whole *map* lesson, you reckon you gonna get'ta it?" Skinner snapped.

Coyote grinned. "Patience! Now, this is where we plant our man on the inside. Trouble is, yer ugly mug's plastered all over that station, same as mine, my boys, and some of yours. We wouldn't stand a chance'n hell'a getting on that train unnoticed,



and the damn thing's bristlin' with guards at the stops, cause these boy's've been robbed before. They've wised up, ain't like the old days."

Mercedes chuckled. "That's where I come in." She purred, before resting a hand on Micah and Gabe's shoulders where they sat flanking their prisoner. "Guards might be looking for Coyote, and you, Skinner, but they won't be looking for three *delicate, little ladies* on their way home to Boston from visitin' relatives in the West."

Gabe blushed crimson, and Micah gradually did the same, albeit accompanied by a fierce scowl.

Skinner's face wrinkled in confusion. "Alright, ya lost me."

Coyote smirked. "Mercedes, dressed to the nines in petticoats and lace, will board the eastbound train in Winnemucca, accompanied by her darling *nieces, Michelle,*" he pointed over to Micah with his smoke, and then over to Gabe, "and *Gabrielle.* Also in petticoats and lace. Ain't an armed man on that line that'd think to question three *harmless* ladies, Skinner."

The delayed realization spread across the outlaw's face with a broad grin. "Goddamn that's clever."

"Oh, I know," Coyote puffed, amused.

"And under all three'a them petticoats will be a couple of revolvers. Mercy and the twin's sit tight for about ten or twenty miles down the line, till they get ta'be approachin' Hells Gap. The visibility round that bend gets shit-fire awful, and that's where you and me an' Kujo, and all yer fine men'll wait."

"So, what, we run up'n jump on?" Skinner asked.

Coyote rolled his eyes. "Goddamnit man, we're *profesh 'nals*. That's some straight up penny-novel shit. Naw, that's where Mercy comes inta' play. She get's up ta find the *facilities*, and liberates those pistols, sneaks her way up to the engine with Gabe playin' second fiddle. The two've 'em put a gun to the head's each a' them engineers, and ya' know what happens then, when that train starts comin' around the Hell's Gap bend? Why, look at that, Skinner, ol' boy! The train's just rollin' right to a stop!"

Skinner snickered. "So she stops the train. Then what?"

"Then, my good man, is when *we* board the train. Kujo and I'll head for the express car, where the safe is, Micah'll be waiting for us there. You and your boys'll

start strong arm'n yer way through the passenger cars, as per our deal, whatever you boys find is yers for keeps. We take the safe. Half a' you start on this side'a the express car n'work yer way up to the engine, other half at the caboose, work your way up the express car. Covers the whole train, real quick like, while we bust the safe."

Skinner's smile was slick as an oil spill. "You take yer's, I take mine, we go our separate ways."

"*Exactly.*" There was something mean and keen in Coyote's eye when he extended his hand, and in that precise moment, Cain knew that if there was a trick up Skinner's sleeve, there were a dozen up the Indian's.

"What'd we do with *him*?" Skinner spat, jerking his head in Cain's direction.

Coyote grinned. "Why, I reckon he could keep a few of yer boys company outta harms way for an hour or two."

Skinner grinned back, crooked teeth a dull yellow-brown. "Oh, I reckon he could."

"So's long as he stays in one piece."

"Lot could be done still keepin' him such." Skinner jeered.

Coyote tutted, face amused but his eyes threatening, he said, "Alive, one piece, nothin' that can't heal in a day or two. I don't want him gimped back up, I just patched his damn hide."

"Fine, fine. We agreed?" Skinner said.

"Agreed." Coyote replied.

They shook hands.



"I just want it on god's record that I think this is a fuck'all plan." Micah muttered under his breath as he readjusted his petticoat from where it'd gotten rucked up riding into town. Unlike his simpering mary of a brother, he refused to ride sidesaddle, and that was fucking *that*. Coyote had about laughed himself sick at the sight of Micah in the green gingham dress Mercy'd stolen for him, complete with fresh white cotton ruffles and a bonnet of the same, big enough to conceal his short ginger hair.

Gabe had tried in vain to soften the blow to his brother's dignity by assuring him he looked darling in green. The pair of them matched down to the little white gloves Coyote had insisted that any self-respecting lady must wear, in between his guffawing and wheezing with laughter. Mercy had agreed, more pragmatically allowing that the callouses on the boys' hands would be a dead giveaway.

Mercy herself had found a dress of silken cotton dyed red as an opium poppy, trimmed in black lace and silk ribbon. While the corset only accented her figure, and Micah had to admit she was gorgeous regardless, he was quick to reassure her she looked like a cheap, ugly whore.

"Jealousy is unbecoming of a lady of your stature, Michelle." She had demurred wickedly, before smacking him on the back of the hand with her fan.

The gun tucked into the deep hidden pocket in his skirt was hardly reassuring as they stepped out of the shadow of the storefront and into the Winnemucca main street, just in time to hear the wailing shriek of the train chugging into the station.

"Alright, girls, you keep your traps *shut* until we get to our seats." She hissed, before taking one of each of their gloved hands. "Now, at least *pretend* you like me. I'm supposed to be yer fucking Aunt."

The station platform was as dusty and ill kept as the rest of the town, hardly more than a few other passengers getting on or off the train, and the man running the door into the open passenger car was staring at them in disbelief.

"Well, shoo-oot, if you ain't the prettiest bunch I ever seen on this rail," he called, and Mercy smiled warmly, letting him take her gloved hand and give it a kiss.

"Oh, hardly, my good sir!" She tutted, and hiding his face from the rail-man with the side of his bonnet, Micah gave his brother a gagging face. Gabe bit back a giggle. Mercy sounded ridiculous faking a hoity-toity accent like that, but the man didn't seem to notice, or care.

"Nonsense, Mizz..." He led.

"Davenport. Philomena Davenport." Mercedes purred, giving him a curtsy, and then taking back up fanning herself. "And these are my lovely maiden nieces, by marriage, you understand, Miss Michelle and Gabrielle Wessleton."

"Well, now, what's three lovely ladies such's yerselves doin' in this here town?" The man asked, and God, Micah wanted to curl up and die, but the man was practically slobbering all over them, eyes raking up and down over them like hot coals. No wonder Mercy got so touchy with that knife of hers whenever they went to a bar.

"Oh, it was just *horrible* business! My poor darling sister married a man, he moved their whole family out west so he could pan gold in California. Never made a cent he didn't drink away, and I told Margret, I said, *Margie*, that man's trouble! But no, she didn't listen to little old me, and...and..." Mercy gave a sniffle, and pulled a dainty handkerchief out of her bosom and dabbed at her eyes, "And, well, when I got word poor Margie had died giving birth to their third child, why, I couldn't leave these poor dears with that awful man! So told my husband, we live in Chicago, you see, that I'd fetch them, and he didn't want me to go alone, but travel's so *expensive* these days, and so here we are. Needs must, God willing, we'll make it safely home!"

The man looked a little overwhelmed with Mercy's histrionics, torn between what Micah was pretty sure was pity, confusion, and his cock, and the rail-man patted her placating on the hand. Mercy had a hand clasped against her bosom that hid not an inch of the cleavage available, the little lying tart.

"Why Miz Davenport, that's mighty brave an' noble of you, doin' all that." He reassured. "You ladies are awful lucky, havin' such a kind-hearted Auntie, ta' come all that that way to help you."

Micah hoped the look on his face matched the cherubic look on his brother's, which for all the world looked delighted and innocent. How the cotton-headed idiot was still next to him, worth two hundred dollars on the damn wanted poster with him, he had no idea.

The rail-man beamed at them, and when he heard the punching wail of the whistle, clapped his hands together. "Welp', ladies, I'd reckon you'd best board the train 'fore it leaves with out ya!"

He offered them each a hand up the one-foot step into the passenger cabin, and Micah fought not to roll his eyes, accepting it as obliging and cheerful as possible. "You take care now, ladies!"

The besotted man hadn't even asked them for tickets or boarding stamps.

As the three of them sat towards the back of the mostly empty cabin, staking out two benches, Gabe smiled and said "What a sweet man."

"Oh, for the love'a Jay'sus, you flaming idiot!" Micah hissed back.

"What? He seemed really nice!" Gabe whispered back.

"Nice?! Yeah, sure, because he was taking all our clothes off with his fuckin' eyeballs and starin' at the tits neither of us actually have!"

Gabe sat back with a pout on his face. "You don't know that, Mikey. Maybe he's just a real gentleman, an' he was just bein' polite."

Mercy turned around in the bench in front of them and gave Gabe a look. "Honey, I'm pretty sure Micah's right on this one. A *hound dog* don't even pant that hard."

"You're all jus' *jaded*." Gabe retorted with a hrmph, as the train lurched forward with a hiss of steam and began building speed.

"And you're just naïve as shit, *Gabrielle*." Micah spat back.

"Alright, *ladies*, that's enough. Wouldn't want anyone to over hear you, talkin' like that, would you now?" Mercedes said.

The two boys shifted as far away from one another as the bench would allow and stared at opposite sides of the car. Soon the scenery became a high-speed blur as the train reached maximum speed, and Mercy hid her smile when the twins both overcame their differences in order to share the window between them, little awed looks on their faces as they watched the land turn to what seemed a lightning streak of tan, grey, green and blue. Like the train was a goddamn magic carpet made of steel.

Mercy fished the pocket watch out of her other dress pocket. 11:14 am. The train had reached Winnemucca at 10:45 sharp, right on time, and had left the station at 11:00, much the same way.

At their current speed, they had to be nearing eight or nine miles out.

"Girls, would one of you mind accompanying me to the washroom? I'm afraid I really ought to powder my nose," Mercy drawled, and Micah stood up to let Gabe rustle out to follow at her heels like a puppy.

They were the third car on the line, with only two passenger cars between them and the engine. That put the express car, with the safe, one car behind them, and the

ore and coal freighters behind that. The washroom, conveniently enough, was just at the front of the first passenger car, and so with a few precarious inter-car crossings, they worked their way innocently to the front, all smiles and apologies, the older men and women on the train cooing over Gabriel, happy to help "point them in the right direction."

Mercy led Gabe into the cramped end compartment first, and then shut the door behind herself as she wiggled in with him. "Alright, Merc', now what?" Gabe whispered, "This is the end of the car."

"There's a door right behind you, darling."

Gabe spun around. "Oh. Oh right. Doors, yeah, that makes sense."

He grabbed the long handled door lever and giving it a solid hop's downward thrust, the door burst open into the howling wind of the outside of the car. Gabe pin wheeled and had a split second moment where the blurred ground that was the train tracks was coming at him fast, but he felt Mercy yank on the back of his dress and haul him back up. He gave her a quick smile of gratitude.

"NOW WHAT?" He hollered over the wind.

"JUMP ACROSS!!" She yelled back.

The engine was only about three feet removed from their car, with the locking haul mechanism in between, but it seemed too far for comfort. Gabe closed his eyes for a moment, and tried to steel himself, imagining his brother's voice in his head, taunting him for being afraid of something so *stupid*.

Mercy got tired of waiting for that *not* to work, threw the skinny boy over her shoulder, and leapt herself. Gabe clung to her for dear life as she climbed one handed up the straight ladder to the top of the coal storage. She ducked down and let Gabe roll off and duck beside her, and giving him a nod, the two began to sneak forward through the coal pile.

Gabe was pretty sure he heard Mercy mutter "And ta' think I actually *like* this dress."

The white and green gingham of Gabe's maidenly frock was well and truly blackened as well by the time they reached the engine room itself, along with his face

and hands, and his bonnet had unfurled itself and gone sailing off into the wind at some point, leaving his shorn ginger hair bare.

Mercy pulled him close enough so he could hear her and shouted, "Alright, now on my mark, grab hold of the side and swing 'round through the window."

Gabe paled and shook his head a little in fear.

Mercy pulled out her gun, and glared at him. "So help me fucking *god*, Gabe, if you don't find your *cahones* right *fucking* now, I will yank'em off! Now GO!"

Gabe reached out, grabbed onto the lip of the top of the engine room's window, and squeezing his eyes shut for a moment, cursing himself, he jumped off the side of the car and swung down into the black of the stoker's room.

He was still fumbling out his gun when Mercy gracefully swung in after him, and pulled out her second gun.

Both cocked, and despite the sweltering heat and endless grinding noise of the steam engine, the sound seemed to echo loud through the room.

The three engineers looked up wide-eyed in shock from their work instantaneously.

"Alright, gentleman, this is a fucking holdup! Nobody move or I'll put a bullet in yer skull!" Mercy shouted.

The men all let their hands come up in surrender.

Gabe finally got his gun out and aimed at the last engineer. "Yeah! That!" He added, and Mercy glared at him, thoroughly unimpressed.

"Where's the break on this damn machine?!" She demanded. One of the men was shaking with fear, but he pointed to the large lever in the center of the room.

"Stop the train." She ordered.

None of the engineers moved.

"I said, STOP THE *fucking* TRAIN!!" She roared. The three of them instantly scrambled to the lever, it took all three to finally throw it back, but god, the whole train *screamed*. It was unearthly, too high and sustained and brutally metallic to have been the sound of any of God's creations.

The engine slowed in jerks and squeals as the rest of the train's momentum kept plowing into the brake, and for one split, terrifying second, Gabe was fairly sure the

train was going to derail, but it didn't. It eventually, in great heaving lurches and puffs rolled to a gradual stop. Mercy grinned.

"Thank you gentlemen, it's been a pleasure doin' business with you all. Gabe, switch me guns."

Gabe handed her his bulky pistol with a confused frown. "Why?"

"Because yours is loaded with flare rounds, sweetheart." She replied, and after a few moments it dawned on him just exactly what that meant.

"Jay'sus, Mercy, you made me go in first!!"

"I was right behind you," she placated, one gun pointed at one of the terrified enginemen, Gabe covering the other, unsure if he should attempt to cover both by switching back and forth between them or not.

Mercy held Gabe's gun out the window, pointed it straight up into the sky, and with howl to do a coyote proud, let loose the flare round.

It burst like a brilliant red firework with a cracking boom, echoing in the empty plain over the dead quiet that was the still train.

"Your move, *Coyote*." She said, with a smirk.



The steam engine train itself was an infernal creation. Loud, cutting the air with the squalling screams of steel on steel, the sparking black plume like the breath of the devil hanging over the rest of the cars, lingering greasy and thick against the innocent blue of the sky for miles.

It sent rumbles through the ground a man could feel from miles off, once it was wrapped up full throttle, a rhythmic thrumming through the core of the earth, like the thundering of a herd of bison under the soles of his boots, and he, like the hunter closing in on his prey, dared a smirk.

Coyote stood back up from his crouch, and gave Kujo a wink. The brute snorted.

"The hell is that damn train?" Skinner spat, the tobacco cud in his mouth staining it brown.



Coyote tsked under his breath. "Patience, Skinner, *patience*. Ain't you never heard that phrase 'good things come ta' those who wait?'"

Skinner rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, I *been* waitin' and now I'm tired of it. How the hell we know they even left the station? Maybe they had problems 'er something, maybe the damn thing derailed itself! Maybe it beat us the fuck here while's you was playing Injun Hunter trying to find it in the first place! Fer all we know, the damn thing could be east of us twenty miles by now."

"Skinner, if there's one thing you've left ta' learn in life, and trust me, you got more'n one, it's that ain't nobody or *nothin'* can stop Mercedes Luciana Josefina Alvarez."

Kujo grunted, and pointed straight across from their hilltop perch. There, hanging in the air, clear as day, was the red pyrotechnic bloom of a flare, echoed by what sounded like the far-off howl of coyote.

"Showtime." Coyote said, mile wide grin on his face, and spurred his paint off the hill and blazing down the trail into the shallow valley just past Hell's Gap. Kujo flanked right of him in an instant, and Skinner pulled up on the left, and behind them like the pack of devils they were came the thundering roll of dozens of hoof beats across the desert hillside towards the stranded train.

When they reached the base, Coyote whistled and gave Skinner a nod. Skinner gave one back, and rallied his boys around, half around the front of the train to the other side and half to the side facing them, and god, they swarmed 'em. Micah was hanging lazily off the back end of one of the 'passenger' cars, grinning, gingham dress mostly torn off with just scraps and tufts hanging around off his waist to his knees, petticoat gone along with the dress' puffy sleeves.

Coyote smirked as he slowed his horse to a stop.

"Aw, kid, but you just looked so—" He teased

Micah let the tip of his pistol tip suggestively downwards until it was square with Coyote's chest. "Fuckin' say it and I'll kill you."

Coyote shot Kujo a commiserating look, sighing with a shrug, and unsaddling. "Boy cayn't even take a compliment! You know, I really did try an' raise 'em right, Kuj'."

Kujo nodded solemnly, dismounting as well, his eyes smirking for him.

Elsewhere they could hear the hoots and hollers of Skinner's men as they laid siege to the rest of the passenger cars, and inside the express car Coyote could hear the harried voices of the men guarding it.

"What's the plan, boss?" Micah asked, as he swung down off the side of the car.

"Well—" Coyote started, only to be cut off by the stinging hiss of a bullet whizzing between them and hitting the dirt.

"Boss?!" Micah called.

Coyote un-holstered his twin pistols and barked, "Return fire!"

Gunfire and smoke and dirt brought the car's surroundings into chaos as the express-men caught onto the fact that their assailants were just outside the car.

"Remember, shoot to wound! We don't know which one has the safe combination!" he hollered over the din. He heard Micah swear, and heard the deafening bark of Kujo's blunderbuss tear through the air, followed by the screams of more than one man.

God bless that speechless, crazy bastard, but that was a handy gun to have around. It might run on black powder rounds and have the reload time of a small cannon, but it packed a punch just like one.

There were two men with rifles slumped over the side of the open windows, and one more clutching a bloody shoulder on the car's side end railing.

"Dammnit, Kujo, I toldja we need'm alive!" Coyote hollered, and then with a grunt of frustration, swung up onto the opposite end of the train and pried open the door. He narrowly missed taking a round to the chest as he slipped sideways through the door, and with guns blazing and a war cry, opened fire on the remaining three express-men in the car.

One of them clipped the skin off his shoulder and took a bullet to the foot for his trouble, the second one to his gun hand, and third Coyote just downed with a well-placed kick. The daft bastard had been out of ammo, and was still waving the gun around like Coyote was stupid enough to not be counting.

Silence fell over the express car, punctuated by lingering groans from the downed men. Coyote jauntily popped his head out of the train car's window and grinned down

at his protégé and brutish compatriot. "Gentlemen, if you could join me for tea in the dining car. The enemy's been dispatched."

Micah cackled, and disappeared around the side and up into the express car, surveying the damage. He gave a low whistle. "That was quick, boss."

Coyote holstered his guns with a double spin around each forefinger and a flourish, giving Micah a showman's bow.

Kujo dumped the man from the other balcony onto the floor and gave his boss a few slow claps, which made Coyote chuckle.

"Now, which one of you sorry ass bastards knows the combination to my safe?"

Micah opened his mouth to say something, and then paused, a blush spilling indignantly over his cheekbones. "Um. I do?"

Coyote whipped around to stare at him in surprise. "How the hell do you know the safe combo?"

Micah grimaced, flushed positively crimson with embarrassment. "I *don't*, I just know who knows it."

"And just *how* do you know that?" Coyote prodded, one eyebrow cocked, but his face was growing amused as the boy squirmed in discomfort.

"I *asked*." Micah spat, glaring out the window, arms tightly crossed.

"You asked." Coyote repeated.

"Yeah." Micah said.

"Didja ask with yer tits, *Michelle*?" Coyote teased.

Micah put a hand over his face and groaned. "I don't have tits you asshole!"

Coyote pointed a finger at Micah, and smiled at Kujo. "Notice the lack a' denial a' my question, there."

Kujo gave a sage nod, and made a rude gesture with his hand that had Coyote laughing.

The Indian walked over and gave Micah a pat on the head. "See, I did raise him right, after all."

"You *asshole*." Micah hissed vehemently, still blushing and cursing his Irish heritage, "It's that one."

He pointed across the room to the paunchy looking man who Coyote had shot in the foot not two minutes prior. Kujo hauled him up to sit against the sidewall of the car, and Coyote crouched down to eyelevel with the whimpering man.

"Kujo, if you would." He said cheerfully.

Kujo pulled a triangular pouch out of his pocket, ripped the top off with his teeth, brought the blunderbuss to half cock and poured it in, fast and smooth in a way that nearly looked leisurely but spoke of thousands of repetitions. Coyote had a feeling that if the man had a tongue, he'd be whistling a show tune. Kujo shut the chamber, and tossed the cartridge down the barrel, ramming it in with the rod in one single efficient stroke, before bringing the gun back up.

The poor express-man on the floor was watching this process with wide eyes, sweating and making tiny aborted movements like he was trying to scurry further back but there was no where to go. Kujo let the flared, brass coated barrel, thick as a man's fist at the end, come to rest gently half an inch off the man's skull, right between his eyes, and cocked the hammer all the way back.

"You know what kinda' blast zone these puppies've got, Mr. Expressman?" Coyote started conversationally, getting up to pace in wide-arching, jaunty steps behind Kujo. The man's eyes darted to look at him, and then nervously darted back to the end of the blunderbuss.

"They say, that if a man's over fifteen yards away from a target, he cayn't hit *shit* with one'a these bad boys. Maybe tha's true. But! They also say, that *un'ner* fifteen yards, a man cayn't *miss*." Coyote drawled.

"And from where I am, I'd definitely say that the distance between yer skull and the bore is un'ner fifteen yards. Wouldn't you say, Kujo?"

Kujo's scarred lip curled up in a blood-curdling, slow smile.

The man looked like he was hyperventilating now, a rabbit with his foot caught in a trap, lungs going a mile a minute but his feet goin' nowhere.

"Black powder, lead rounds like that, why, I reckon there wouldn't be nothing solid left of yer whole head, if my man squeezed the trigger. She may be an old gun, but I seen him clean it, fix'er up right. She fires *hard*."

Micah snorted, "Kicks the man firing like a goddamn mule, too."

"Labor of love, boy, labor of love." Coyote crooned, before giving the degenerating man on the floor a pitying look.

Coyote knelt down beside him and purred in his ear, "You tell us the code to get in'na that safe there in the corner, and I'll give you, oh, maybe thirty seconds ta clear that fifteen yards I was talkin' bout. You don't...well, Kujo'll make it rain right here on a clear bluebird day inside'a this car. I don't like that sort'a thing. But I won't hesitate, if you don't give me what I want, Mr. Express-man."

"Thirty-four eighty-five twenty-two. T-twice, ya' enter it twice," the man stuttered.

Coyote held a hand out to stay Kujo's, and spun the number carefully into the safe. A soft metallic ka-clik echoed through the room as the safe's lock clicked off, and the door sprung open. Coyote grinned in glee.

Kujo tossed the man out of the door, watching him limp like a madman down the line away from the express car, and just because, let the round go off a few feet above the man's head *after* he was out of range. Fuckin' chickenshit dropped to the ground for cover with a panicked scream.

"Uh, boss." Micah asked, looking over his shoulder. "What exactly's in there that we're robbing this train fer, anyhow?"

Coyote stopped rifling through the thick stack of papers in the safe, and tossed a diminutive little burlap sack over his head. Micah caught it, the contents of the bag jangling like a sack of glass beads. He tugged the strings loose and stared in it for a moment, before reaching in a grabbing one of the small little stones, rough and murky-white clear, out of the bag.

"So...are these little pieces a'shitty glass valuable or something?" Micah asked, perplexed.

Coyote started to chuckle, and then laugh, almost hysterical. "Jesus, you farm boys are a hoot."

"What?! Are they or ain't they?" Micah snapped.

Coyote's laugh died down, and he motioned for Micah to hand the bag and the little rock back to him. Coyote pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and held

it up into the ray of sunshine spilling over the window behind him. The light refracted, almost glowing and sparkling in the cabin like it had a life of its own.

"Just this one *little piece of shitty glass* is worth about a hun'nerd dollars ta' the right buyer in the right town, and it's worth two hun'nerd on a lady's finger in Boston."

Micah's eyes went saucer wide. "There must'a been atleast a couple *hundred* a' the damn things in that bag! What the hell are they?"

"*Diamonds*," Skinner's voice snarled over the still air in the express car.

Half a dozen of Skinner's boys followed into the car after him, pistols drawn, and half a dozen more out the other side. Coyote sighed. "Ain't you ever been told not ta' mess with me, Skinner?"

"Oh, I sure have." Skinner said, spitting on the wood floor. "In fact, yer girlie told me that too. Buttered me up with pussy like Ah' was some kind'a *stupid*, an' told me some cock'n'bull story on how you jus' *knew* I was gonna double cross you, an' 'ooh, *he'll never catch you if ya trick'im like this*." Skinner let his voice slip up into a whiney tenor that was nowhere near the feminine purr of the Spanish woman's, and Coyote felt a chill run through his blood.

"I know *all'bout* that shit. I may not be a real *bright* man, Injun, but I ain't dum'nuff ta think your girl's runnin' round on you *that* bad. She may be a whore, but she's loyal. Ain't she boys?" Skinner called back.

A couple of men dragged Mercy kicking and screaming through a cloth gag in rage, hands tied behind her back. A pale and terrified Gabe was tossed to the floor beside her, just as tied up with none of the fight.

Coyote bit off a curse under his breath in Apache.

Skinner's grin curled real big, then.

"Hand over the diamonds, Coyote."

Coyote set a hand on the pommel of his right pistol. Skinner wouldn't just take the diamonds and leave, that much was for certain. Oh no, man like Skinner would be looking to tell every drunk idiot west of the Mississippi how it was *him*, the *one an' only C. J. Wyatt Skinner*, that shot that Devil-Dog, Coyote Walker himself. Shot him

dead, and robbed him blind, and Coyote had to admit, it'd be a hell of a story. But that wasn't the way he was gonna end his story, if he had any goddamn say in the matter.

He gracefully hoisted himself up, and tucked the small bag of rocks into his back pocket. Left hand hit the pearl pommel of the second gun. "Well? Come an' get 'em."



"Hey Earl. How pretty you think our prisoner here is?" The man to Cain's left drawled, spitting on the ground off the side of his horse.

The other man rolled his eyes. "He ain't perty. He's a man, men ain't perty, an' you're a real piece, Butch. Why ain't someone shot you yet?"

"Maybe *I'm* too pretty." Butch teased back, before getting down off his horse. "You think I'm pretty, prisoner?"

Cain continued to stare a thousand yards out over Butch's shoulder, and if he gritted his teeth any harder, he was gonna crack a molar.

It'd been at least twenty, maybe thirty minutes since Skinner and Coyote and the whole rest of the gang had left, and the two damn greenhorns they'd left guarding him had been swapping jokes like they were at a poker hall instead of on top of a hill watching fifteen odd men, two boys, and one crazy bitch rob the Union Pacific Rail Road.

Butch swung down off his horse, passing the tin canteen, of which by the smell of his breath was whiskey, back to his partner. "Ah said, you think I'm pretty, boy?"

Cain had been angrier than this a time or two in his life. There'd been moments in his childhood, before he'd learned to control his temper, and moments on the battlefield when he'd unlearned that same control in order to stay alive. There'd been moments he couldn't remember the rest of, save the single pure feeling of rage coiling in his body like a rabid dog ready to strike.

He'd been threatened with bodily harm a dozen times, had guns waved in his face near every waking hour of the day since the damn day he'd stumbled down the fucking canyon. He'd been spit on more than once, stabbed, beaten, and witnessed two depraved outlaws fucking in a tent like rabbits. His feet felt liable to fall off, his

blisters had blisters, it hurt to stay standing and his dry abused lungs hurt to breathe the very air around him, and in that moment, his hatred of the West and every person he'd met in it was so great it felt like a force of nature.

The second Butch's face was up in his, sharing breath, Cain pulled back his head and whipped forward, letting the solid crown of his head slam against Butch's temple with a meaty crack. His own head was pounding, but he couldn't even find it in him to care.

Butch fell in a slow, staggering falter, before collapsing limp onto the dirt. Hands still tied in front of him, Cain yanked the other man down off his horse, threw him onto the ground, and brought the heel of his boot as hard as he could bring it down onto the man's face. Twice.

Neither got up.

Cain just stood there breathing for a few long seconds, overwhelmed by the intensity of how fucking angry he still was. His commander had once jokingly told him after one such battle that the Union was going to write songs about the horror that was the Wolf of the Fifty-Ninth on the field. One particularly well versed lieutenant from Charleston, terrible with a gun but poetry every time he said anything, had cheerfully told him he'd've made a right proper Viking berserker, done his ancestors in Valhalla proud. Whatever the hell that meant. Just cause Cain could write his own name, and maybe write a proper letter if he was pressed don't mean he was *educated*.

The memory of the discomfort and tinge of fear on his comrades' faces after that battle snapped him out of it, way they'd looked at him out the corner of their eyes like if they didn't, he might up'n maul them too.

"Christ," Cain muttered to himself, and felt around in the first man's pockets for the folding knife he'd seen him showing Earl. The damn thing was duller than an old hatchet, but eventually Cain got the rope binding his hands to fray loose.

He knelt down and pressed a hand to Butch, and then Earl's necks. Both still alive, for now.

They'd left Lucifer tethered to a tree with a few of the spare horses back at camp, so for now, one of the fallen men's Cayuses would have to do. The rifle on Earl's horse seemed reasonably serviced, as did the pistol, and so he collected the gun belt



and guns off of both men, strapping one angled across his left hip and the other across his right. Some spare ammunition, but not much. No water, no food, but there'd be plenty of that back at the outlaw's camp, which was presently guarded by a single greenhorn former plowboy.

Easy pickings.

Hell, that was as clean a get-away as a man could ask for. There hadn't even been any fatalities. But off in the distance, he could hear the sounds of gunfire and shouting, the slight screech of some woman over the din of the fighting.

That noble part of Cain, that he was starting to wish would just crawl under a rock and *die*, for all the trouble it caused him, was quick to inform him that no escape stained with the blood of a train full'a people was without fault. Maybe no one would ever know he'd even been there to do one thing or another about it, but *he'd* know. He'd know and it'd be just one more thing to add to the list of sins he'd yet to find the right kinda preacher to tell to.

"Goddamnit," he hissed.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder, and saddled Earl's horse, a bay roan that looked a little squirrely, but a hand or two bigger and sturdier than Butch's dun, so it'd do.

As he took off the down the hill he could hear the sounds of guns grow infrequent, and then peter off entirely till the basin was quiet. When the train came into full view, Cain slowed the horse down to a trot, and then a gentle walk, till the sound didn't seem to carry, and then drew the rifle and stared down the barrel.

An old Yellow-Boy rifle like this one shot forty-four rimfire rounds, true to aim inside maybe a hundred yards, at the most. Bullet'd arch too much to get it any farther reliably, Cain knew that much from pinging old bean cans back on the plantation with Jeb's uncle's one of the same model.

He lowered the rifle and eased the horse forward till he figured he could squint and get a clean shot, and sighted the rifle again. There were a few men of Skinner's in the further aft passenger cars, but nearly a dozen rounded up around just the one, fourth car down the line, skirting the walls along the inside around the pair in the middle, two men in the center of the car.

Skinner and Coyote.

Skinner had a gun drawn on the Indian, and Coyote looked bowstring taut with tension, both hands on the pommels of his pistols.

Cain wasn't sure what possessed him to it, but he let his gun lean left just enough and fired. Clipped Skinner dead in the stomach, not a clean kill but good enough to get the job done, and as the cabin of the express car exploded into action, Cain kicked the horse into a full run, and started taking pot shots at whoever he could sight long enough to aim for.

Cavalry-trained his ass.

He'd hit maybe one or two of the men along the windows, before gunfire started back up from inside the car. Two more before he made it to the base of the train. The last gunshot echoed into silence as Cain dismounted, and drawing his right hand pistol, pulled himself up over the bannister at the end of the car and into the cabin. The Indian was standing, grinning like a loon, surrounded by a circle of Skinner's men lying dead on the floor in the center of the car. Guns still smoking, he and Cain just stood there for a second staring at each other before Skinner gave a burbling moan.

Coyote had a gun pointed on him in an instant, but Cain's was on Coyote just as fast.

"He's *mine*." Cain said.

Coyote looked up, surprise coloring his features, but stepped aside, and let Cain approach the half-dead outlaw, instead busying himself untying the livid woman lying on the floor under the corpse of one of Skinner's goons. One of the twins' dresses looked like it'd been through a Kansas combine, and the other's front was streaked coal black but otherwise whole.

He heard the woman and Coyote talking in hushed, rapid Spanish, her voice strained and angry, and his, a softened version of the same.

Skinner had blood burbling out of his mouth and down his chin, coughing and wheezing and clutching his stomach. Cain had been right, it wasn't a clean shot.

"Torn up gut wound like that, Skinner, tha's a *mean* way to die, ain't it?" Cain said.

Skinner's laugh was borderline hysterical, manic and wet. "Wha? Ya wan' *revenge*, M-marshal?"

Revenge. Cain had never killed a man out of that before. Out of survival, desperation, instinct, and maybe a misguided sense of duty, he'd killed plenty, but never revenge. He narrowed his eyes down at the bloodied man, and reached into his pocket; there, many-times folded from being pressed between him and the saddle, for lord knows how many days now, was the warrant. Cain said nothing as he slowly unfurled it.

"Cyprus Josiah 'C.J.' Wyatt Skinner. Wanted on five counts armed robbery, two counts horse theft, and three counts for murder. Half a dozen counts of petty theft, and the destruction of the Mayville county court house by way of arson. Convicted in full on all counts, notarized and signed by the Honorable Judge, His Honor Ephraim Sutherland. Wanted. Dead or alive." Cain read off out loud.

Skinner swallowed, and coughed, wretched and thick with fluid. Cain could see he was shaking now, shock setting in from the blood loss, he wouldn't make it long now anyway.

Cain folded the warrant back up and into his pocket, and said, "Ain't revenge, Skinner. Out here, we call it *justice*."

The pistol kicked back in his hand with a bang though he didn't let it waver, and Cain barely got his eyes shut quick enough to keep the blood spatter out of them.

He just stood there with his eyes closed in the silence for a long moment, smelling the smoke coming off the barrel.

His damn feet still hurt like *hell*.

"Well. Looks like yer just full of surprises, Marshal." Coyote said quietly.

Cain looked across the wrecked car at him where he was sitting against the open safe.

"You claim you saved my life, Injun, well, I'm claim'n I jes' saved yours. That makes us square." Cain said.

The Indian got up, but his guns were holstered, and he smiled. "Oh yeah?"

"I don't care if it's *all* squared, signed, sealed an' blessed by the *goddamn Virgin*, ain't no way in hell we let you go an' you don't squeal on us like the fuckin' pig you are. Ain't a lawman in the world that wouldn't," Mercy hissed, glaring at him.

Cain felt his face contort in a snarl.

"What the hell's there to tell, woman? If the Judge finds out Ah's picked up half-dead in the desert by you lot, close enough to breath the same air and see y'all by name an' face, and *lived* to *tell* him about it without bringing you lot back hobbled and hog-tied, Ah'll hang just as sure as you will!"

He wiped his sweaty and blood stained face, and winced against the throbbing headache between his temples before blustering on, willing the words out of his mouth with as much force and authority as he could muster.

"Now Ah've had a shit week, and for that matter a shit month, Ah'm tired a'being thirsty, Ah'm tired of walkin, tired a' this godforsaken place, and god *fuckin* damnit, all Ah' want is my horse and my guns back, and to never see any of you crazy *fuck*s again in my life."

Coyote's eyes went wide for a second in surprise, before his face creased into genuine laughter.

"I like you, Marshal. You're a real crazy sum'bitch yerself, I'd bet."

Cain was ready to spit the words right back at him, to put to words the kind of hate he had stored up in his gut for this cocky, arrogant son of a bitch, but he when he reached for it, the raw animal rage that'd been so strong before was gone. He found he couldn't say it, not when he was looking this crazy man dead in those river-clay eyes.

"I'll give my word, on the forfeiture of my own life, and before god, that I won't tell a soul I've seen you. Today, the day you found me, what happened with Skinner? All that's just between you, me, your gang, and dead men, now. I ain't got a reason in hell to tell *nobody*."

Coyote seemed to mull this over for a while, and he shook his head when Mercy hissed something in Spanish to him.

Coyote took a hand off his belt and extended it between them. "I hate to be a man collectin' or hold'n debt, really. I'd say we're even, Marshal."

"Coyote!" Mercy snarled, and he snarled something back at her that sounded harsh, made her indignant rage go quieter and simmering.

"We even, Marshal?" Coyote said again.

Coyote's hand was dry and startlingly warm against his hand, as though Cain had on some level expected that the man have blood as cool as a lizard's. Leathered skin as tough as cowhide, thumb and forefinger calloused from the hammer and the trigger, brown against the paler tan of his own. Muscles gripped like iron, that he remembered from the feel of them against his throat that night, felt altogether different in his hand.

"Even." Cain said.



## CHAPTER NINE

*Gut Rot Blues*

Cain was so dust-caked and trail-worn when he rolled into Dodge, he reckoned he looked like a mirage coming off the desert, same color as the sand and just about as prickly as a sagebrush. Hadn't shaved in weeks, and he'd had the delight of catching, not one, but four, solid days of dust storms on the trail after he'd ridden off the pass and back onto the plains.

Lucifer was barely a pale shade of grey under all the chalky dust, caked on where he'd sweated into a darker muck, and he was just as hurting as Cain for bath and a little piece of civilization. It was well into dark by the time he reached the edges of town, having pressed on later than he'd normally make camp, knowing he was close.

"Hoo'ee, Marshal, that you?" The Sheriff called from the dimly lit porch railing in front of his office, leaning over it smoking a fat stub of a cigar. How the man managed to smoke it down that short without lighting his overgrown bush of a mustache on fire, Cain had no idea.

He slowed Luce, swung him up to the bannister and pulled off his own damp, sandy bandana off his face, giving the man a weary nod. "Yessir."

The Sheriff smiled broadly. "Ah'll be. We figured you fer' vulture food by now, boy!"

Cain snorted, "Came close."

He dismounted, wincing as the rest of his weight settled fully onto his leg, and left Luce's reigns loose on the post, trusting the horse to stay where he left it.

The sheriff had a wily look in his eye of curiosity, but he knew this town and all its gossipy hags and tittering young ladies, admiring young men and cynical old bastards, and he knew no matter if Cain didn't loose his lip to any but one person, by noon tomorrow the whole town would be buzzing with the story. He'd find out soon enough.

"See yer' riding in empty handed." He said, eyebrow raised in askance.

Cain shook his head. "Don't mean I ain't got him."

"He feedin' the vultures, too, sonny?" The Sheriff asked, smirking.

Cain didn't say anything, but kept his small smirk to himself.

"You gonna run' long and see's if you kin' rouse Sutherland? He's bound ta' be on his second nightcap, might be more agreeable fer your report." The Sheriff said, with a wink.

"Reckon not," Cain muttered, "Caught that dust storm outta' Mary's Pass and didn't lose it for days. I'm fit for a bed, lyin' down, an' nothin' else."

The Sheriff snorted, nodding. "You got stuck in that? Poor bastard. Betcha that aired ya out, it blew here near' about yesterday, we just swept up. An' it ain't just *any* bed, is it, Marsh? Lil' Miss Kitty's been busying struttin' 'round like a pussycat in heat with out you ta'tuck her in, if'n yer ketch'n my meanin'."

He laughed, and gave Cain another wink, and crushed out the last half inch of his cigar. "Well, go on, now, I won't keep ya, Ah' kin see yer anxious for 'er. You give'er a kiss hullo for me, son!"

Cain grimaced as a slight blush colored his cheeks. That girl was gonna be the death of a man's honest reputation.

Horse in tow, Cain limped his way on down the street, towards the cat house on the other end of the street, and god was it strange that the warmly lit bar front windows, the raucous music, and the giggles of the girls had come to mean getting clean and a good night's rest in his mind.

Most men here aimed to get dirty and not sleep a wink.

He led Luce around to the stables and dressed him down, first with the wirey beater brush to shuck most of the dirt off and loosed the mud, gave him a second pass with the finer one, and slung his saddle bags over the stall door alongside the saddle, heading up onto the boardwalk front.

Mama was patrolling the open saloon like a fat hen in her yard, all but clucking and pecking as she went around, pouring drinks and no doubt collecting gossip like a sponge. Her eyes lit up warmly when she saw him standing in the doorway.

"Landsakes, Cain, what'dya do, wrestle a dust devil? I oughta' take the rug beaters to ya on the porch 'fore I even let you in!" She called, and some of the men laughed, already drunk despite the early hour of the evening. Cain barely recognized any of their faces even from a month ago, drifters and cowhands the lot of 'em. The boys from his former brand were probably long gone back to Texas and off rollin' cattle somewhere else.

Cain smiled wearily back. "I reckon I wouldn't blame you, ma'am."

She grabbed his cheek viciously and tweaked it. "Ain't I told you near a hun'nerd times to call me Mama?"

He nodded, schooling his face as seriously as he could, but her fond glare saw straight through it.

"Alright, you devil, there's a wash basin in the laundry room, I'll have Bernie bring back a kettle in a minute."

"Much obliged, ma'am." He drawled, stepping past her towards the back rooms. She snorted, and muttered after him, "Why I outta smack yer tuckus like the brat you are."

He chuckled under his breath as he walked away, though his humor quickly sobered at the sounds echoing through the floorboards above his head and down the walls into the cramped washroom, shrieks and moans, a gasping voice too high to be a man's, punctuated by lower groans and grunts. Ordinarily, all it did was leave a bad taste and irritation, a test of something to ignore, but after a few moments, he was fairly sure the girl was Kitty. Her room was straight up from the backroom, window facing the backside of the place.



Easy enough to forget, with all the alcohol and the smiling faces in parlor, the laughter and cards and music, that this establishment still sold flesh and dealt lust, Kitty being no exception.

He tried to drown out the sounds and the thoughts as he started pumping water into the washbasin, the copper tub stained chalky white-green around the bottom and sides from water, air, and use over the years. The water itself pumped out a little orange with rust at first, like always, but after a few flushes cleared up. He jammed the plug into the bottom of the basin, and started pumping at the lever to draw clean water into the basin. Cain had about got it full enough when Bernie, Mama's tap-girl, came in with a steaming kettle. "M-Mister Marshal, sir?" She called.

The room was starting to get true dark along with the world, but the light from the parlor was enough to see alright. Mama had often told him, conspiratorially over a glass of sugared gin, that poor Bernie was far too ugly for the business, and she had to draw the price line somewhere or she'd be selling for free, so she'd done the girl the small mercy of only hiring her on as part of the bar staff. Mama had tutted, looking dismayed. "Poor dear's never even been asked for a night, you know? Not even by a man who'd keel over an' die if he drank another drop."

The girl was also painfully shy to a fault.

In the spill of light from the barroom, she blushed crimson all the way to her ears when she realized Cain had his shirt off and was already using the cold tap water to scrub some trail dust off his face and arms.

"Oh goddness, I...I'm real sorry Mister, Mama j-just ask't if I'd run drop this off fer you an' I dinn't mean ta' intrude on yer privacy or nothing an' I—" She stammered, and Cain had to jolt forward to secure a hand on the handle of the kettle when the girl nearly spilled it all over herself in her haste to put it down and flee.

He nodded as patiently as he could. "Thank you, Bernie. Run along, now."

Her eyes were wide and she nodded back furiously. "Of course, mister!"

How the fool girl managed to help tend a bar with out spilling half the things she touched, he didn't know.

The piping hot water topped off the basin, leaving it gently warm and far more pleasant than the chill of the well water, but compared to no water at all and the heat and dust of the previous days, anything was a luxury.

Cain left his pants folded next to his gun belt, along with his socks and boots, and standing on the slatted wooden floorboards, began to scrub the dirt off with a washrag. By the time the soap got involved, he felt like a new man, skin stinging raw from the lye, but clean as it ever got.

He was just wringing the excess water out of his hair and wiping it off his face when Kitty popped her head around the half-height swinging doors, and pushed her way in with a smirk and a wolf-whistle. He froze, subconsciously reaching for his guns before he recognized her.

He stared at her for a moment, stock still, the two of them both acutely aware of the fact that he was wearing his skin and nothing else, before she smiled and tossed him the folded over length of terry cloth she had on her arm.

"I was jus' hopin' I'd catch you," she drawled cheerfully.

Cain hid his flushed face in the cloth, and didn't reply, instead busying himself with drying off. He must've looked a little harried, because Kitty just laughed. "Oh, pish, it's nothing I ain't seen before, stud."

Cain glared at her and wrapped the towel around his waist. "Ain't the point. If'n yer so eager to stare, how's about you go ask one a them gentlemen in the parlor ta' show you his."

Kitty wrinkled her nose and giggled. "But I like yers better."

He scowled as the blush deepened. "An' I could give a rat's ass!"

She sighed, and diligently turned around. "You can't blame a girl for lookin', honey. Ain't ever heard of a man near as look-shy as you." Cain started back to work with the threadbare terry cloth, still grumbling, and cast the occasional glare in her direction. If she was sneaking glances, she was quick enough he never caught her.

"So," she started, and though her tone was bored, he knew she was fishing for gossip with just as much interest as her Mama. "What's this I hear about you killin' ol' C.J. Skinner?"

"The devil'd you get to hearin' bout that?" Cain snapped. As far as he knew that'd been between him and the Sheriff. Gossipy old coot.

"Oh I have my little birdies. So, tell me!" She teased, and he could hear her grin.

"Caught me out in a dry gulch in Arizona Territory, got the jump on me. I patched myself up, caught him in Nevada, an' got the jump on him back." Cain said.

Kitty whipped around, eyes wide, just as Cain had ditched the towel in order to yank on his pants.

"Kitty!" He snapped. She bit her lip around a giggle, and whipped around again. "Sorry! Jeezus, what're you, my maiden aunt?"

"Why, she itchin' ta beat yer hide everytime you open yer mouth, like I am?" Cain grumbled under his breath, pulling his pants all the way back on.

Kitty laughed. Cain swore and fussed with his belt, then stared at the grey-brown carcass of his once-white shirt. "You decent yet?"

"I suppose." Cain said. The shirt, he dunked in the washbasin and started scrubbing. The bloodstains he knew for certain couldn't be helped, but the dirt and sweat, and the hole in the side, maybe. It'd at least feel a little cleaner. She still had trouble keeping her eyes off his back, but these days she knew better than to ask.

She frowned. "Yer hurt."

"Nothin' slips by you, Miss Kitty." He replied, droll.

Her frown got edged with annoyance, then. "Either you want my help or you quit yer mouthin'! Lord, Cain, that look's really bad!"

He shrugged, and rolled his shoulders. "Been worse. It'll heal."

Kitty bit her lip, and put her hand on Cain's ribs to pull gently at the edges of the wound. The charred scab held, albeit not without drawing a stung wince out of Cain. "Nothin' doin' for it, Kitty."

She sighed, and nodded in agreement. "It'll scar real bad, won't it?"

Cain couldn't help the humorless laugh. "I dunno if you've had a look at my hide, Kitty, but that ain't the worst a' my problems."

She snorted, "Yeah. Sorry. That shirt, on the other hand...nothin' doin' for that either."

Cain looked down at the soapy, soaking wet shirt with a grimace. "If it weren't so damn hot, I'd wear black." He muttered. He wrung it out, rinsed it with a few fresh draws of water, and wrung it again.

It had remained a faded grey-brown, darker in places, but the sweat-stains and the bloody hole in the side were at least less noticeable. He'd have to stitch it, or maybe get Kitty to. She wrinkled her nose at it, and said, "I'll fetch ya' a spare?"

He laid the damp shirt across the washroom counter, and nodded.

God, what a day. What a *month*. Fuck he needed a drink. Drinks, actually, he had a feeling this called for a bottle.

As Lieutenant Larson had been fond of saying, "Best not to think too hard over an empty glass, son, think on a full one, and if'n yer gonna keep thinkin', keep fillin' it." Then, the dear lieutenant hadn't been much for thinking, over any sort of glass, just for drinking.

Kitty swung back around the corner carrying a faded, powder blue shirt that looked like it'd seen better days, but when he brought it to his face, it smelled of soap and linens, so it was laundered, at least.

"Don't worry where I got it. Now, you gonna buy your girly a drink? Because I could use a drink, yer my fourth customer today!" She declared, grinning, but Cain saw it slip a little off her face awkwardly into a wince. Cain pulled his arms through the sleeves and buttoned up the shirt, giving her a small nod.

"Could use a drink, myself." He replied.

Kitty elbowed her way up to the bar through the double doors, calling off something to ol' Henry behind the bar, looking twice as rickety and just as frisky as usual. "Bottle'a the good stuff for me an' my beau, here, Gramps!"

Cain felt a little like crossing himself as he stepped into the bar room after her, wearing another man's shirt. The crowd was at full steam, now, given it was around dinner, and each one of the girls had about four or five men crowding her like ticks on a dog. He heard Mama's voice off somewhere, but he couldn't see her.

"Hard day, Marsh?" The old man jeered, pouring him a few fingers into the greasy glass he'd set on the bar top, not spilling a drop, despite the palsy in his hands. Cain just tipped it back and swallowed more than once, slug after slug till it was

empty. He had to resist the urge to shake himself like a wet dog after it was gone, and grimaced.

The barkeep slapped a hand on his shoulder, surprisingly solid for all that he was made of skin and bones. "Atta'boy! Ain't like they call's it Coffin Varnish for nothin'! Keep drinkin', it'll pull in yer chest hair." He poured Kitty a smaller glass, and left the bottle on bar.

"Ah already got enough damn chest hair." Cain muttered to himself, and then asked Kitty, loud enough for her to hear over the din of the saloon, "That's the *good* stuff?"

She laughed, grinning broadly enough he could see the gap tooth she usually hid behind a cuter, smaller smile, and replied, "Well we got Sawtooth Springs, J.J. Magonal's down from Bakersfield, and whatever swill Phil Calhoun's cookin' back behind the coal shed these days, ain't really whiskey, but it comes in in a barrel twice a week and you can light the fumes on fire sure as lookin' at it. Gotta pick yer poison, hon." She raised her own glass with a flourish, and threw back down her throat with a polished grace.

He still caught the bare hint a wrinkle of disgust around her nose, and for some reason, it stirred that bit of fondness he had for her, somewhere in the back of his heart.

"So. What's the occasion?" She asked, leaning over a little off her stool and onto his shoulder.

He looked down at her and raised his eyebrow. "Ain't none'a yer business, Kitty."

Kitty rolled her eyes. "Fine. Be thatta'way. I can go drink my glass with somebody else, ya know. Somebody who *appreciates* me."

Cain glared at her, un-amused, but it slowly against his will caved into fondness. "I do."

"Aww, really? I always knew you'd come 'round on me." She teased, batting her eyelashes at him as she perked up. The arch in her back was a curve he reckoned she'd practiced in front of a mirror. He steadfastly stared over the bar back at the bottles and barrels.

"No, Kitty." He said.

She laughed. "Fine. So, if you do appreciate me, and you won't tell me what'cher drinking for, the hell're we doin'? We could be *sleepin*!" She tipped her head and gave him a wink.

"Can't do that, m'still drinkin.'" Cain replied, throwing back another couple swallows. He'd been holding onto a little hope in the back of his mind that enough of his damn taste buds had died on the first glass that it'd go down a little smoother this time, but that was unfortunately not the case.

Kitty sighed, and slumped down to rest her chin on the bar.

"Boo, hiss. You bore." She grumbled. Cain coughed to hide his chuckle.

She stewed over in her stool for a while, and as Cain worked on his third too-tall glass, eventually, the alcohol really started to settle in.

As the lines blurred and the edges on his vision softened, Cain started to wonder why the hell this was supposed to help anything. What the hell was he doing? Not two weeks ago, he'd been standing in a shot-out train, breathing the same air as the most wanted man he knew of. Man worth *fifteen hundred dollars*, enough to call a fortune, and fuck, he'd shaken his hand and promised he wouldn't tell a soul. King would skin him alive if he knew. Sutherland had already promised he'd *hang* him.

Could only stand to trust Sutherland about as far as he could throw him, but it ain't like he could trust the damn Indian, neither. King, he'd trust like he'd trust a rattlesnake sleeping in his boot not ta' bite him. That man was out for *blood*, and it didn't look like it much mattered whose.

Some how, all those thoughts lazily trickled down to the startling realization that, for whatever the reason being, he trusted *Kitty*. She knew him, better than anyone else he knew out here, from after the war, hell she knew some things that in the wrong hands might cost him his freedom, or his life. But she'd never said a word.

"Yer kinda my only friend." He mumbled into her hair, as she leaned against his shoulder. He figured she might've been asleep, but she startled and looked up at him. "Really?"

He winced, blushing, but didn't deny it. She beamed drunkenly up at him. "Aw. That's real sweet'a you ta' say."

Cain snorted, and polished off the rest of his glass. "M'tired."

Kitty giggled, and pressed a kiss to his neck, rubbing her face against the crook of his neck very much like her namesake. "Oh?"

"Yeah." Fuck, he was drunk. The room hadn't been quite so woozy an hour ago.



Kitty took him patiently by the hand, stumbling more than a little herself, and led him up the stairs. Distantly, Cain realized that her room reeked of sex, she hadn't aired it out after her last customer, and it must've shown on his face, because she staggered over to open the window. "Sorry 'bout that." She muttered, nose wrinkled.

"He treat you alright?" Cain heard himself asking.

Kitty looked downright shocked, before it blended into a giggly happiness. "Gawd, yer a sweetheart. *You* won't even treat me right, honey."

Cain flushed with embarrassment, wondering if he'd said the wrong words or if he'd thought them wrong. "I said *alright*, not *right*." He doubted that was really a very sensitive question to ask, but then, his mama never taught him just how a man went about asking a whore, with appropriate class and discretion, if her clients *beat* her, or worse.

She smiled at him bitter-sweetly. "They all are a little, but then, most'vem are alright. S'part a' the business, Marshal. Cayn't be helped, ya know."

He nodded, and slumped down onto the bed. He felt Kitty yank his boots off for him, before she climbed into bed next to him.

Even with the window cracked, the room was still a little damp, humid and thick with musk and the stench of sex, the heat of the day lingering. Cain really hadn't noticed it before, but Kitty's room normally smelled at least a little like this, but now...God, the Indian's damn tent had smelled just like it, too, heavy on the air like some mix of sweat and animal perfume. He couldn't forget it, just like those hands digging into flesh, the sounds, and *Christ* the look in his eyes when he'd...

"Well. Never thought I'd ever see *that* in my bed," Kitty's teasing voice called, startling him out of his reverie.

"Huh?" He mumbled, drunk enough it took him a few moments to catch up. Oh, *goddamnit*.

She grinned at him, and her hands were quick to trail down his borrowed shirt and grope him through his pants.

"Fuck, Kitty, don't—" He hissed, grabbing her wrist and yanking her hand off.

She pouted at him, but her face was slowly twisting into that predatory look she'd worn that first night, before he'd slept beside her bed in the chair by the wall.

"Come on, I'll be good. Ya know I never get any complaints, an' I know better than ta' think it's *all* for me, but come on, that can't be comfor—" She purred, and Cain grimaced, "Kitty, no."

She slipped her wrist out of his grip with a coy smile, and this time when she touched him, he just froze.

"Jesus, relax, ain't even like I really touched you yet." She reassured, but her other hand was already working on the buttons. "Shh, tha'sa'way, sugar." She murmured, and let her hand slip under his pants and draws, and the second her skin touched him, he gasped.

He heard her giggle in his ear. "Come on, you'd think ya' didn't even help yerself out."

Cain couldn't even think to answer her question as her hand wrapped around his cock and gave it a few teasing strokes. The skin of her palm was damp from wet glasses and soft, but for a moment, his traitorous mind wondered what that gun-calloused hand would feel like it in it's place. Hard muscled over that iron-strength grip, and just as greedy and wily as the man it was attached to. His hips bucked under her hand at the thought.

"Fuck," he groaned, "stop, I don't, fuck—"

Kitty's tongue was trailing along his hipbone, and he heard her snicker. "Well, we could do that too," she teased.

That snapped him clean out of it.

She yelped when he yanked her hand out of his pants and pushed her off, nearly throwing her off the bed. "Jesus, Cain!"



He lay there catching his breath for a second, room still spinning a little as his drunken brain drove itself in circles trying to catch up. Kitty was sitting up, scowling down at him, and he couldn't even look her in the eye.

"What the devil's wrong with you?!" She hissed, pride no doubt stinging, and Cain heard himself laugh, a little hysterical, panicked.

"Ah'm a fuckin' *sodomite*, that's the devil's fuckin' wrong with me, Kitty."

Her indignant look faded quickly at that. "Aw, Cain, that ain't—"

He might've had to balance himself against the wall and the bed to stand back up, but he managed, and started staggering over to the foot of the bed to root around for his boots. Fuck, he was *drunk*, he thought as he re-buttoned his pants, wincing at the pressure.

"Cain!" She hissed again.

"M'sorry, Kitty." He muttered as he tugged his boots on. It kind of felt like they were on the wrong feet, but Cain just need to get the hell out of here. "Sorry." He heard himself say again.

She grabbed him by the shirtsleeve, eyes a little wide with something. "Naw, honey, *I'm* sorry. Where're you goin', Cain, it's near midnight, stay, ok, I'm sorry. I wont...won't do nothin', okay?"

He shook his head. "Cayn't, Kitty. Ah'll be back, later. Jus... gotta clear ma' head. Drank too much."

Kitty looked torn, a frown on her face. "Shit, Cain, I said I was sorry!"

"Ain't yer fault, Kitty. Ah' know you are. Ah am too. S'alright." He mumbled, and he could hear his accent thickened with the whiskey in his blood, but it was all he could do to get the words out into the air around the panicked tightness in his chest and his liquored tongue.

The look in her eyes softened to worry. "I won't touch ya again, you kin' stay, I wont." She said.

He kept shaking his head, which wasn't helping his balance. His gun belt was hanging heavy in his hand. "Cayn't. Ah'm sorry."

He started stumbling down the stairs, accidentally taking a couple at a time, once or twice, and nearly heading down the rest headfirst. Mama looked up from where she

was re-arranging chairs and sweeping a bit of, from the smell of it, vomit-sodden sawdust, off the floor.

"Cain, hon, are you ok?" She asked, and he felt himself shake his head, but kept walking till he was out on the porch. He heard her call after him again, voice a little louder, but he couldn't answer her, he just needed to find Luce. Get out of town.

It took him an embarrassingly long while to find the stables, and he heard a few other drunkards calling out to him, catcalling or whistling, but that didn't seem to draw the attention of anyone else. Not that his drunken wandering wouldn't be the talk of the town in the morning.

He eventually found them, and he smiled for a second when he saw Luce, black shape on darkness, rustling around in his stall anxious and curious. "Hey, boy." He said.

He staggered a little and collapsed against Luce's broad flank, resting his head against the brute's neck. The horse's hair was coarse and oily from too long without a wash, blood hot under the skin, warming his face. The smell of animal and hay and salt. "Fuckin' hell, Luce." He muttered, choked up as whatever had been building up since he'd thrown Kitty off, since a long time coming, spilled over, a heavy ache in the back of his throat that he knew would break his voice if he spoke. God, he was drunk. His boots were definitely on the wrong feet.

The beast didn't say anything, but tried to nose at him, warm damp breath puffing out of his nostrils as he snuffled at Cain's face and in his hair. "Just...cayn't Luce."

He wished like hell he could. Kitty was a sweet girl, funny, well formed and well enough to talk to. Man couldn't ask for more than that, but he couldn't do it. Even with her warm hands on him, whispering in his ear, stroking him, he'd only been hard thinking of a man. An *Indian* man, for fucks'sakes, if anyone in this town knew, he'd've been strung up by the neck like the godless heathen he was. How Kitty even put up with him, he had no idea.

Cain's pants were still too tight, as he sank down to sit against his horse's stall, and he winced, but was unwilling to do anything about it. Even drunk, the idea of allowing himself to get off in the back of a public livery was shameful, and more than

that, he was unwilling to let Coyote linger in his mind again. Bad enough that it'd happened to begin with.

He slumped against the wooden wall of the stall, and curled down onto the hay-strewn floor, too drunk now to think about getting up, or trying to go back and apologize to Kitty, as the walls spun nauseously around him. Had he already done that?

Cain blacked out.



## CHAPTER TEN

*Cottonwood*

Cain woke up in the dark with a bladder fit to pop, and his horse entertaining itself eating hay directly over his head, dropping little bits of it all over him. The ground didn't seem to be as unsteady as it was before, when he sat up, leaning heavily against the stall wall, but his head was starting to throb royally.

Locking his jaw and breathing in huffs through his nose, he tried to force down the nausea, but at the first flush of bile up his throat, he barely made it staggering up past his horse and out the stable doors before he lost it. Stood there, bent over, braced against the wall, retching and coughing, eyes watering as his stomach twisted on emptiness. At least there wasn't much of substance to come back up, but damned if it didn't feel wretched all the same.

He felt marginally more human once he'd puked up all the alcohol left in his stomach, but the vertigo was still swimming around his head like a fog.

Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, Cain sagged exhausted against the side of the wall, head against his arm as he breathed, focusing on the sounds. The distant bustle of wagons, horses, chickens, the town waking up and starting to go about its business. He knew if he could manage to get himself back to Mama's, she'd likely have pity on him and dredge him up something simple for breakfast, maybe a hot cup of watery coffee or some porridge, but Cain's stomach, still writhing angrily, wanted nothing to do with the idea.

The crunch of gravel grew louder, someone walking closer to the stables, slowly stopping.

Cain hacked, clearing his throat and spitting onto the ground before wiping his mouth again and shakily rising up off the wall, stable hoss was probably standing there wondering what in the hell one of the town's Marshal's was doing airing his paunch out by the livery at a respectable hour of the morning. That is, if this gossip damn town hadn't managed to repaint him from hero to drunkard in one night.

He looked up, eyes still bleary with sleep, to see the black on black of King's whipcord frame, flanked by three, four...almost seven men. The hair on the back of Cain's neck bristled.

King's eyes were shadowed under the brim of his hat in the early morning sun, but his snarl was plain, as he spit, before he smiled that rattlesnake smile and drawled, "Mornin,' sunshine!"

A couple of the boys behind him snickered.

"King." Cain said, pushing himself the rest of the way off the wall, only to weave a little in his boots, almost stumbling over into the far wall. God, he didn't feel anything but hung-over, how the hell was he *still* drunk?

King laughed, then, walking up to him in slow, deliberate steps, mocking in his every gesture. "Heard you had a rough night, cowboy. Heard you an' *Miss Kitty* got yerself's all lickered up an' had a *catfight*."

Cain grimaced, and blinked against the growing sunlight and his pounding head.

"Ain't seein' how's that's your business, King."

King was up inside Cain's space in a heartbeat, cud of tobacco dark on his breath and his hand like viper clenched around Cain's shirtfront. "Oh, maybe it ain't. But Ah'll tell you what is, boy," he dragged Cain down hard to hiss in his ear, "I *told* you. Remember what Ah' told you? First time I saws ya."

Cain felt the blood leave his face in a cold rush, a hint of understanding crossing his alcohol muddled mind, before King's fist slammed across his face, and pain exploded across the bridge of his nose and across his cheek.

It hit with a sick crack that seemed to reverberate through his whole skull, felt the hot rush of his own blood spilling down his chin as he stumbled back against the wall. His breathing sounded harsh in his ears as he panted, open-mouthed, in the dead quiet

before the second, third, fourth punch fell, hard and quick and relentless, till he fell to knees.

King's hand fastened around his neck like a vice, rough edged finger nails digging into the soft flesh of his gullet, and Cain felt his hands clawing at it uselessly, weak and sluggish as his brain slowly started to panic. "Remember? Huh, *Marsh?*" King spat. "I told you not ta' cross me, boy."

Pain crushed across the side of Cain's head, as the world went black.



The first time Cain had been punched in the face, he'd been six, his cousin Jasper had been seven, and his left eye had been blacked shut for nearly a week, bruised for almost a month. Jasper had gotten all fired up about some trick his papi taught him, said he'd told him just how to punch a man and send him down in one strike, and Lord above and thank heaven, Cain had overcome the naïvety that he'd possessed in his younger years, because he'd *allowed* his cousin to talk him into being the test subject of this alleged beat-all punch.

He could remember it, although it was fuzzy around the edges, the way the pain had exploded across his brow and spread with a throbbing fireworks display inside his skull and behind his eye. The nauseous spiraling of the world as it'd rushed up to greet him through his swimming vision, wet with tears of shock and pain. He couldn't remember even hitting the ground, just the way it'd felt in those few staggering seconds when he'd reeled back, the stunned look of panic on Jasper's face when he'd met his cousin's eyes and they both realized just what a *goddawful stupid* idea that'd been.

When he'd woken up the next day, headache to beat all, Jasper had been laying face down on the cot beside him, wearing a pained, chagrined grimace of his own. His papi'd striped his ass good, and the both of them had been out of commission for a week or two after that. Driven the maid staff *crazy*.

In the twenty odd years since, Cain had lost track of the number of the times he'd gotten his head clocked. Bare knuckles, gloved hands, chairs, bottles, and the butts of

guns all blurred together after awhile. It's a wonder all his sense hadn't bled out his ears by now. His mama might've said it had way back with the first time.

During the war, he'd taken a rifle stock swung full around to the face that'd cracked his jaw, cheekbone, and nearly torn his nose clean off. The gunnery sergeant stuck patching him up hadn't set it right, the damn thing still had a kink in it up high on the bridge, permanent now, scarred over and bent into the cartilage like a knot on an oak tree. But the sarge had told him that he ought to take it in pride, like a badge of honor, cause there ain't no sense in trusting a man with a straight nose to watch yer back in a fight, cause he ain't never been in no *real* one.

At the time Cain couldn't have given a shit how trustworthy his uglified-up mug was, he was too busy thinking about how much hurt to break bones in his *face*. He'd broken it again running break-neck through a battlefield on a slap-dash retreat he'd barely heard sounded through his cannon-deafened ears. Got tangled in a dead man's rifle and bashed his face against the rocks. That one, a medic had set, but he stopped counting after maybe the fifth or the sixth time, after he'd learned to set it himself, sawbones said something about how once a thing broke a few times, it got broke and unbroken easier, or something.

So when Cain woke up with the familiar ache between his eyes and panting thickly through his mouth with a wet, heavy feeling inside his skull and a salted-penny taste at the back of his mouth, he knew exactly what happened.

Couldn't even tell if he was still hung-over, under the pain of the cracked bone currently in between his eyes, and it was all he could do to just lay there and breathe through his mouth on the sun-warm dirt floor. Dirt floor, wood walls, iron bars. Shit.

King was sitting on a stool off on the other side of the sheriff's lone holding cell, scraping crud off his boots with a knife in slow strokes. Cain blinked that the dust floating in the air, before struggling to push himself up onto all fours and then sagging back onto his ass and leaning against the wall.

King didn't so much as look at him, but the Sheriff was glaring at him with heavy suspicion from the other side of the office. He stared at him for a long while, watching Cain pant slow and deliberately through his mouth around his clotted up,

swollen and bloodied bent nose, staring back into the wall behind him. The blood on his upper lip was still tacky, clotted into the hair there and starting to itch.

The Sheriff rocked back onto both feet and turned to King, scratched at his overgrown mustache, and said, “Well, Marshal, I’d reckon you’d best call the Judge, now that he’s back in the land’a the living.”

King sneered, but wiped his knife against the edge of his sole and stowed it in his boot. “He gets out, an’ Ah’ll skin you alive. Badge’r no badge, un’nerstand me, Sheriff?”

The Sheriff raised one of his bushy grey eyebrows, and nodded. The Marshal spared Cain’s slumped form one last glare, before storming out. Sheriff gave a heavy sigh, shaking his head before he sank down into the seat King had vacated, and ran his handkerchief over his already damp brow. Then he looked at Cain, and shook his head again to himself. “Son, the hell you got yerself into?”

Cain wanted to laugh. “Trouble.”

“Yeah, well, ain’t that the truth. I had ta’ haul King bodily off yer damn carcass this morning, spitting like a rattlesnake, an’ I ain’t heard heads ‘er tails’a why. Makes a man suspicious. Mebbe it ain’t my business, but jes’ what the hell happened?”

“Dunno.” Cain muttered, wincing at the vibration talking sent through his jaw and face, one of his eyes was nearly blacked shut, if his hazy left field of vision was anything to judge by. He kept his right on the Sheriff’s boots. The Sheriff sighed again, when Cain didn’t continue, and left it be.

Cain knew the longer he waited to set his nose, the worse the swelling would make it and the longer it’d take to heal, and he knew that as hung-over as he was now, he couldn’t afford to be walking around with a snapped nose on top of whatever else. He choked on a bitter laugh, realizing he’d been there so many times that he could do it himself by feel, no mirror, chalky fingers running feather light around the puffy skin surrounding the edges of the break.

Wasn’t as bad as it had been.

The Sheriff was still looking at him, this time in curiosity. “Doc’s sure to be up, if the Judge’ll let him in?”



Cain numbly shook his head. "S'fine," he mumbled, and wedged himself harder into the corner of the cell, bracing himself. Before he had time to think better of it, he pinched the swollen bridge bone of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and jerked back into place.

His other fist slammed into the wooden wall behind him, legs kicking out reflexively, as he let out a grunt of pain through his teeth. A freshet of blood slicked his upper lip over the caked on older, down his chin, adding to the tacky mess of his beard. He spat out the blood that rushed down the back of his throat and forced himself to breathe, let it level out.

The Sheriff's eyes were wide, and he shook his head again before letting loose a low whistle. "Rebels teach you that, son?"

Cain found an inch of pride left to force a little smile, bloodied and pinched, as he said nothing.

The shirt was already ruined, so he dabbed at his face with the sleeve for a while, until the blood flow slowed to nothing and the pain had dulled to a manageable ache. Aches on throbs on a hangover, Lord. Should'a just bunked down at Kitty's, his pride be damned.

The pair of men sat in silence, as the noise outside the sheriff's office was steadily growing, angry, hushed voices, jeers, worried murmurs and the creaks of boots on the boardwalk outside.

The Sheriff stood up just as the door slammed back open, and King thundered back in, flanked by Sutherland, ham fist clutched around a crumpled piece of paper.

The man's eyes widened at the sight of the blond Marshal sprawled out in the corner of the Sheriff's cell, black-eyed and bloodied, dirty and still a little drunk, but they quickly narrowed. He motioned for the Sheriff to move to the side, and closed the door.

Sutherland seemed to take a long moment, as if to smooth his ruffled feathers back down, and King sat straddling his recently vacated chair backwards, seething quietly. The judge flattened out the paper in his hand, and looked at Cain expectantly.

"You know what this is?" He asked.

Cain squinted at it, brow wrinkled in confusion. The Judge got a ratty little smirk on his face.

“It’s a telegraph. Came just a few days ago, from the depot in Denver. Reckon you know what it says.”

The Marshal felt his confusion deepen for a moment, anger stirring, “Th’hell’d Ah’ know wha—”

“It says you robbed *the goddamn Union Pacific!!*” Sutherland roared, throwing the folded paper to the table with a slap that had Cain flinching, mind ground to a halt, anger scared clean out of him, then.

King snarled, “What, nothin’ ta say, boy?”

Cain couldn’t even wrap his mind around the sheer weight of terror that threatened to spill over inside him, because if they knew he’d been there, there was no way in hell they didn’t know who else had been. Men on the train must’ve seen him, must’ve seen the rest of them, god.

“Ain’t,” he said, voice cracking around his dry throat before he swallowed, “Ain’t a man s’posed ta get a trial, being accused of a thing like that?”

Sutherland’s smile widened. “Why but of course. That’s what this is, Marshal. Sheriff’s here, Judge’s here, hell, boy, we even got us a witness. So you’d best tell me what I want to hear.”

King bared his teeth in a hard grin, before it soured and he snapped, “We know you was there, Bradshaw, an’ we know *them* Dogs was there too, so cut the fucking shit. How much’d they pay you off, for a job like that? Huh, boy?”

Cain shut his eyes and forced his lungs to work, swallowing hard but his throat was hoarse with dust and bile.

“Ain’t payed me nothin’, the man saved my life, found me near dead in the badlands, said Ah’ owed him, an’ outlaw or no, life debts a debt.” He said, and leveled the judge with a stare, desperately willing him to hear the truth in his words, to understand what Cain himself didn’t even understand, why he’d really done it. Wasn’t for money, that was for damn certain.

“Ah’ ain’t done nothing ta’ help that fucking Injun rob that train, Ah’ swear. Ah jus...he saved my life, so’s Ah let him go.”

Sutherland shook his head again, tutting under his breath. “Oh, Marshal. Marshal, Marshal, Marshal. I was afraid you’d say that. I know you didn’t. I believe you.”

Cain forehead puckered in confusion. “You do?”

“Of course. You’re an honorable man, Mr. Bradshaw. You did the honorable thing.” The judge said, a small smile rife with false sympathy on his face, the picture of pity and understanding. Voice placating, like he was speaking to a child, and it made Cain’s temper itch, even under the sinking weight of fear.

“Most times, son, that’s just fine. You do the Christian thing by your fellow man, an’ he does the same back to you, that’s rightly the foundation of our here modern society. Mighty noble of you, ta’ think that of just anyone, but, see, that’s just your problem. Mad Dog Coyote Walker ain’t an honorable man.”

“He played you like a fuck’n fiddle,” King growled out, “You noble, stupid *fuck*. He had you stumblin’ after him like a beat dog, you think that’s all it was? You think he found yer sorry carcass out in the wilds with that fuck’n *badge* on yer chest, and up’n grew a conscience?!” The Marshal stood up and slammed his fist on the table.

“Ain’t a scrap of *honor* in that red-skinned bastard’s whole body! The only reason he ain’t put a bullet between yer eyes sure as lookin’ at ya s’cuz he’s *smart*. Cause he knows how ta’ play ‘em. Played you straight’inna letting him rob that train of five thousand dollars, and it worked, you stupid sunovabitch!!” King shook the bars of Cain’s cell hard enough to rattle.

Sutherland coughed into his fist, and King turned his snarl on the portly man before reining it in, forcing himself to sit back down.

“It’s a right shame, but you had to know what would happen. You made your decision. I don’t reckon I can understand just why you done it, but it don’t matter now. Because they ain’t here, and you are. People talk. Talkin’ right now.”

Sutherland sighed, and his face was set with remorse that didn’t reach his eyes. “An’ the fact’a the matter is, I’ve got a warrant in my pocket right now, and son? It says whatever I say it does. An right now, it’s got your name on it, under which there’s the words ‘conspiracy to commit grand theft’ and ‘suspected murder,’ along with ‘treason against the United States Government’ and ‘impersonation of an officer of the Law.’”

Cain's blood ran cold. "No," he said. "Cayn't. No, Ah' didn't do none'a that!" He tried to haul himself blearily off the floor, staggering to the tiny cell's barred door till his fingers could wrap white-knuckle tight around the bars. "You *know* Ah' didn't!" He hollered.

Sutherland smiled, "But those men out there, *Marshal*? Don't be naïve. Your word, in this town, against a U.S. Government appointed Judge? You know who's gonna win that fight, son."

"Ain't yer fucking son." Cain spat, catching the Judge's pant leg, seething mad over the animal fear in his gut. It was a shallow comfort to watch the man grimace in disgust, before he extracted another piece of paper from his pocket. This one was neatly folded in thirds, crisp and heavy, and already covered in neat lines of the Judge's eastern scrawl of cursive. The room was quiet, save for the sounds of Cain's heavy breathing through his open mouth. He watched helplessly as the Judge sat down on the only other chair in the Sheriff's office, and carefully extracted the pieces of his fountain pen. A puff of air to clean out the bore, quick practiced flicks screwing the brass tip to the body, tipping a dollop of ink into the pen from a small glass bottle from his left pocket, movements light as he secured it and tested the pen against the scrapped telegraph, before placing it down onto the piece of paper on which Cain's death warrant was written.

The scrape of the brass tip, flitting and scritchling along the surface of the paper was deafening in the stillness of the office, the footsteps outside on the boardwalk quiet as the men outside strained to hear what was going on inside. With a final satisfied flourish, the Judge signed his name at the bottom, and leisurely blew on the ink to dry it.

"Now, Sheriff, if you could open the cell door and assist Marshal King in cuffing the accused."

The Sheriff heaved himself off the wall with a heavy sigh, and shook his head as he fumbled at his belt for the keys. "Now, Judge..." He started.

"Shut yer maw, Sheriff," King hissed.

The Sheriff grimaced, but managed to jimmy the key into the rusty lock. Cain stepped back, numb and barely able to keep himself upright. The Sheriff's hand on

his shoulder, squeezing, drew his eyes up off the ground in a startle. The old coot's eyes were starting to get a little rheumy, but the regret in them was clear. "Don't deserve this." He muttered, low enough for Cain to catch.

The iron of the shackles clamped down around on his wrists with hard clack, tight enough to pinch, now way of picking out.

"Cayn't cuff yer ankles, gotta be able to ride yer horse one last time, huh, boy." Cain startled, staring at King in shock.

"What, you thought we'd hang you in the stocks?" King laughed, mean grin on his face. "Not that I wouldn't jus' love ta watch Little Miss Kitty-cat bawl'n her cute little eyes out, out in Market square watchin' you dance on the end'a my line like a fucking fish, but Sutherland says ain't no need for air'n our dirty laundry out'n town. Kinda' thing might raise questions. Don't worry none, though, Cain, we'll find you a mighty nice tree." King's hands around his neck squeezed tight before dripping down his chest and up to roughly cup his jaw, almost mockingly intimate before the man shoved Cain away in disgust and out of the cell, stumbling out into the office.

A few frog-marched steps had him out the Sheriff's door, and *god* the noise that descended, whoops and hollers and threats, spit and cud and muck from all sides as the Sheriff and Marshal pushed him through the crowd. Cain's pain dizzy mind was flitting from face to face in the mob, but she wasn't there.

Part of him was glad. Not that her last memory of him would be fond, but anything was a damn site better than watching your alleged lover cuffed and dragged through the muck on his way to a hanging tree.

"Alright pipe down, QUIET!" The Judge bellowed. It took a few tries before the hot-blooded men simmered down enough for him to get their attention, but when he did, it was plain anyone on the street had stopped their business as well.

Cain barely had the fight left to struggle against the arms holding him upright, desperate to do anything by stand there while men waited to lynch him, but it was all he could do not to vomit and keel over.

The Judge coughed loudly, clearing his throat, before unfolding the fresh warrant and beginning to read.

“The man A.C. Bradshaw, formerly known as Marshal of the U.S. Territories, is hereby stripped of all rank and privilege thereof, on grounds of the following criminal accusations: wrongful impersonation as a U.S. Marshal, consorting with known criminals, conspiracy to commit grand theft, conspiracy to commit murder, and treasonous acts against the government of the Kansas Territory. By the judicial power invested in me, Judge Ephraim Sutherland, in agreement the witnesses of the State, Marshal Bose Solomon and Sheriff Wade Booth, Cain Bradshaw has been found guilty of all crimes, and is sentenced to be hung by the neck until dead.”

The small mob roared its approval, appetite whet for blood now.

The Judge refolded the warrant, securing it in the inside pocket of his coat, and turned to King. “Take him out by the gulch, and bring a posse just in case. I want this loose end *gone* and buried by noon, you hear me, Bose?”

The Marshal grinned. “Oh, Judge, it’ll be my pleasure.”

Sutherland nodded, and turned to leave.

“Judge wants him hung, boys, I’mma need a few good men to help me do some justice!” King hollered.

Cain closed his eyes as men who scarcely knew him shouted and bartered, volunteering rope and guns and eager hands.

“The hell’s goin’ on?!”

Cain’s eyes opened to find Kitty shoving her way futilely around the dirty mass of men ringing him, until she squeezed through and tumbled to the dirt in the empty center. She sprung back up, dusting herself off as the men around her started to laugh, and her brown eyes blew wide when she saw the state of Cain.

“Lord in Heaven, Cain! Are you alright?! What the hell happened!” She yelped, darting forward to start fussing over him, but the Sheriff’s arm fell over her chest and kept her at arm’s length. “Miss Kitty, you’d best go on home, now. Back to Mama’s, you hear. This here’s men’s business.”

She scowled indignantly.

“Not till someone tells me what the fuck’s going on! What’s he even been accused of?” Kitty shouted.

“Murder. Robbin’ a train. Lotta’ stuff. Now, iff’n you don’t stick yer nose outta it, I’ll be happy to cut it the fuck off, you uppity little bitch.” King hissed, pushing her to the ground hard. The men laughed a little, catcalling as she scrambled back up.

“Kitty.” Cain said. She went stiff and stared at him, pleading and fear and confusion in her eyes. “Kitty, don’t.”

“But—“ She cried.

King grew impatient. “Say yer goodbyes, woman. He’ll be dead by noon.”

Tears started up in her eyes, then, shocked, spilling down her face, and she covered her mouth in horror. “No!”

“Judge’s orders!” King hollered back.

“You can’t!! I don’t care what that old fat bastard says he’s done, he ain’t done it! Cain’s a good man! Sheriff, please,” Kitty whimpered.

The Sheriff just shook his head.

Cain winced as Kitty launched herself at him, huddling into his side and sobbing, before King tore her away. The Marshal laughed, and said, “Boy, you sure must have a big fuckin’ cock, Cain, I reckon Miss Kitty-Cat’s a might heartbroken.” The boys joined in, and he pushed her out of the way and gave Cain’s shoulder a tug towards the stables, down the street to the outskirts of town.

Cain pulled back hard, and found Kitty’s eyes again. He said, “I’m sorry,” desperate for her to hear it, hear how sorry he was she was even crying over a man like him. Sorry he couldn’t love her. All of the fucking times she’d done right by him, a kindness he could never return.

Her face crumpled in a tiny, heart sore little smile, pained and tired and sorry herself, and she shook her head. “Honey, I told you, you ain’t got nothing to be sorry for.”

Cain swallowed around the lump in his throat. King’s rough paw on his shoulder tugged harder, disgust on his face, and then Kitty’s sad eyes were lost in the crowd.



Luce's back was bare under his pant legs, hide still powdered with dust. Made Cain's heart fond enough near to tears when the damn horse wouldn't budge an inch without him astride, the boys had tried to drag Cain along walking, the stallion beside him, but Luce had bucked and squealed and stamped, before digging his heels in so hard even the three of the hands tugging on him couldn't shift him.

He hoped they'd have the sense to shoot the damn beast and bury it along side his master.

Their party stopped once they'd dipped down the dry gulch not a quarter mile outside of town, at a gnarled old cottonwood near about fifty feet tall. Thick and hunched over, strong roots and tall branches, clearly on its way to dead as well, dry as the river bed.

King nodded in approval and took the proffered rope from one of the younger men. The same kind of heavy-woven, waxed rope Cain himself had slung too many times to count. The Marshal's hands were quick and steady as they wound it around, knots and ties with practiced ease, till he held a hangman's noose in his grip, and tossed it high up over a thick branch. The noose fell down into the air with a bouncing snap, and King grabbed both ends of the rope in his hands, holding himself up, and hopped off his horse, hanging in the air for a moment before he was satisfied the branch wouldn't break.

The marshal smiled at him, oily and black, noose in one hand and the other resting on the pommel of his gun, and asked, "Well, *Cain*. Any last words?"

The men around them stilled on their horses, tense as they listened, but Cain just shook his head.

He wanted to scream and he wanted to sob and beg, wanted to crawl, plead, pray, do anything to stop it and anything to get it over with, unable to stand the feeling of waiting for it to come and helpless to stop it coming.

The Sheriff frowned, and said, "We'll bury you here, say a few words over it. Do at least some piece of this right."

Cain shook his head. "Could I ask you a favor?"

The older man nodded, tense glance at King, but now that the noose was in the cutthroat's hand, he was graciously patient.



“Bury me somewhere it rains.” Cain said.

The Sheriff scoffed, a chuckle startling its way out of his throat, and he nodded. “I s’pose I could do that.”

Cain sighed, and closed his eyes.

King’s eager hands fitted the rope over his head and snugged it tight, and he heard the boys scuffling around as they staked down the loose end, felt the rope pull up as it tensioned. Lucifer stirred nervously under him, making weary noises.

“The hell’er we gonna get this fucking pig ta’ kick, Marshal?”

King laughed. “Oh I’ve got a few ideas. I figg’er it’s time somebody gelded this beast, ain’t it?”

Cain tensed his thighs twice, quick and light, and Luce went stock still under him, a halt strong enough to ignore his every instinct to buck or run, not from cannon fire or nothing.

He tore his eyelids open at the sound of rapid hoof beats coming over the ridge, full gallop, dust trail kicked up high behind him. “Fire!” The boy in the saddle hollered.

“Jesus H. Christ, kid, the hell you talkin’ bout?!” The Sheriff hollered back, and the boy skidded his panting bay to a halt, the both of them wheezing. “FIRE!!” The kid yelled, “God almighty, Sheriff, dunno how the hell it got started, but near about half the damn town’s on fire!!” King swore, and the men stirred on their horses. He held out a staying hand. “We ain’t finished here.” King said.

The boy shook his head, eyes panicked and his hands trembling. “Judge said it’ll wait til half’a market street ain’t kindling!”

King’s eyes narrowed, and he opened his mouth to argue, but the Sheriffs’ hand gripped his shoulder. “Son, we ain’t about stand around and let the damn town burn down over yer petty hang’n.”

“Judge said he hangs, he hangs.” King growled, and kicked Cain off the back of his horse.

The Sheriff and the other men watched him flail for a few moments, before they took off, scrambling, King lingering longer, waiting til he stopped, and then followed.

Animal panic was all that was left in Cain now, and there wasn't a thing that could bring air inside him, rope burning hot and cutting into him. His limp body bumped into Luce's flank, warm and bristled. His vision was fading on the edges, blackening even as he tried to fight it, and the last thing he heard was a woman's hard voice.

"I knew you'd be a pain in our fuck'n asses."

The noose cut free with a snap.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*To Call a Bluff*

“Boy *howdy*, ol’ King did you a good one, ain’ee, Marsh?”

Cain jolted awake and stared up, blinking at the voice, a freckle splattered face standing above him in the fading sunlight of a pink sky.

An identical face shoved its way into Cain’s muzzy vision, brown flecked nose scrunched up in disgust. “Sumbitch probably had it comin.”

The first squawked at that, and the pair pulled away, bickering like alley cats.

Cain’s head was spinning, the bridge of his nose throbbed like hell, and the muscles of his throat were sore and burning as he swallowed, but god damned if he wasn’t achingly, brilliantly alive. He coughed around a startled laugh that spilled out of him before he could stop it, singular relief and joy fluttering in his belly.

And then it hit him just where he’d seen those mirrored, freckled faces before.

“You!” Cain called after them. It took an embarrassing amount of effort to right himself, but he sat up, and glared at the now silent boys.

“Me?” The first boy asked, pointing to himself. The other rolled his eyes, and turned back to the fire, apparently deciding that the former marshal had meant his brother.

Cain scowled as he tried to remember. “You...you’re that boy. You raised a false alarm?”

The kid smiled sheepishly.

There was a crunch of gravel under boots as someone came up behind him, and a familiar voice drawled in his ear, “Oh, it weren’t no false alarm, Marshal.”

Cain’s eyes bugged out, and he whipped around, batting at the air next to his ear but the Indian and stood back up, smirking down at him.

“You lit the fucking *town* on fire?!” Cain yelped.

“Sure.” Coyote replied with a shrug, as he plopped down next the former lawman.

The goddamn madman lit Dodge on fire, and here he was talking about it like it was sneaking the last roll at Sunday supper.

“Now hush an’ let me see that,” the Indian said, and his leathery hands grabbed Cain by the jaw. Tilted his head up steep enough that the muscles there fairly screamed at him, sore and torn.

Cain swallowed, and tried to jerk away, but the man tsked at him, and had the gall to smack him upside the head. Cain went stock still from actual dumbstruck surprise. The Indian smirked, and placed his palms back against Cain’s furred cheeks, thumbs digging into the soft underbelly of his jaw to tilt his head back up. The skin on his neck stung and pulled with the stretch, and a niggling, animal part of his mind squirmed at baring his throat to a man who could snap his neck clean with just a deft twist of the grip he already had on Cain’s head.

The Indian tsked again, and let go.

“Not too bad. Could’a been worse.” He muttered, and rifled through his pack for something he didn’t find, leaving him muttering something in indignant Spanish at the woman. She rolled her eyes, and pointed to one of their spare horses.

“Worse?” Cain said to himself. The ginger haired boy nodded. “Oh yeah. Bossman saved Kujo over there from a similar fate down in Mexico, Lordy that was bad’un. Said it almost popped his head clean off! Cause they did it proper like, high up gallows n’ sandbags n’ everythin, surprisin’ it didn’t snap his neck!”

Cain raised an eyebrow, and the Indian crowed a laugh. “Man’s got a neck like a buffalo, should’a used a bigger weight!”

The giant gave him a smile, or at least, he thought it was a smile, and tugged down the weathered bandana he wore around his neck to reveal the thick line of a keloid scar, puffy and flushed an ugly purple against the paler skin, near about as

thick as Cain's thumb. The bandana fell back in place, followed by a low whistle from Cain.

The giant's smile curled wider, scars on his chin and lower lip, bisecting the upper, distorting it into a grimace. The other boy looked up from rustling the coals and snickered, "Then again, he ain't got no tongue, so that's kinda the least'a his worries."

Cain swore. "Christ."

"An' ya know for the life'a him, the damn bastard won't tell me the story'a how it happened?" Coyote said, chuckling to himself, as he sat back down carrying some bandage and a tin of salve. Cain stared at him.

"Spirits, Marsh, ain't you never heard a joke before?" The Indian teased. "Now this is gonna sting. But we'd hate ta' ugly up yer lilly neck like ol' Kujo's, so pucker up."

"Ah' kin do it myself." Cain snapped.

The Indian snorted, but chucked the tin at his chest all the same. "Suit yerself, Marsh."

"Ain't no marshal, now, Coyote." The woman called, lip curled in a smug smile, and Coyote chuckled.

"Just Cain, was it?" He asked.

Cain didn't bother to reply.

The metal tin in his hands was bent and battered, likely an old chew or shoe polish tin that'd been repurposed and worn clean of paint over years of use. The greasy salve was thick, and the smell of mint was heady enough Cain could fairly taste it even around his clotted nose, along with something else he didn't recognize, but it didn't figure that a bunch of outlaws would go to the trouble of setting a bonfire or saving his neck just to poison him. The Indian's eyes watched him hesitate with humor, as though reading his mind.

Cain winced at the sting as his fingers smeared it into the rope burned gash on his neck, but the damage didn't seem too deep. It'd scab over in the night, easy. When he'd finished, he tossed the resealed tin back to the Indian, who caught it viper quick with one hand.

The camp was quiet, save for the rustling of the horses and the small fire, dark enough now that the smoke couldn't easily be tracked, not that Cain had any idea where they were. Couldn't be more than ten or fifteen miles from Dodge, but the Indian had done good finding camp, good enough vantage they'd see a party coming far enough out to run. Wait, the horses!

Cain's eyes darted around the camp for the familiar black-on-darkness of his horse, only to find it saddled and tacked, happy as a show pony snuffling and munching at the dry tufts of grass near their camp. Hell, even his rifle and gun belt were slung on the saddlebags.

The action in the small camp seemed to blur around him as he sat there, aching and trying to wrap his mind around the reality set before him. Trying to figure out what the damn Indian's angle was this time. He still couldn't quite reckon why he'd done it before, but now it wasn't just happenstance. Hadn't just found him belly up in the desert and figured on patching up his hide, maybe for a small favor, no, this time the crazy bastard had stared a fire in broad daylight and slipped his head out of a noose, and for what?

"Yer thinkin' too hard." The man called, smirking, and gestured to a spot near the fire. "Siddown."

Cain staggered up, taking a moment to steady himself at the blood rush, before walking slowly over to the ring. One of the boys thrust a tin cup of beans at him with a scowl, and Cain accepted it as he took a seat.

Coyote finished dragging his spoon out of his mouth leisurely, and chewed for a moment, before he swallowed and said, "Reckon yer wonderin' why we saved your neck, ain'tcha?"

"Might'a crossed my mind." Cain muttered. The spoon stuck out of his own cup was finely engraved, and when he turned it over, he was startled to find a small "sterling" embossment. Fitting, eating beans, and from the taste and chew of it, what had to be boiled buffalo meat, in an outlaw camp with stolen silver.

The Indian smiled for a moment, but it quickly waned to something hard. "Don't figure Suth'land told you jes' what it was we done, ta get to be wanted like we are.

Sure, he got that high'n mighty poster'a his, prob'ly told you what all *he'd* got written on it." He paused and took another bite.

"Then, figure he's got you one jes' like it now. You know what it says. An' what it says don't match what you done."

Cain paused, and scowled. "Ah' seen you rob a train, injun, don't tell me you were *framed*, I ain't stupid."

Coyote laughed. "Just sayin,' that there ain't no sense in runnin' round fearin' for your skin 'cause of a bounty on yer head, an' not botherin' to pick up any of the perks, so to speak."

The woman sat down beside her partner, and glared at Cain, "We were framed for a killing, long time ago," she started, "an' we ain't done it. Don't matter if you believe it." Her voice was spitting mean, eyes challenging. "But like I reckon you'd know, Sutherland like's a hangin' and done trial a fair sight more than the truth, if'n it'll be hard to choke down or look bad on him. Like's to think he's the Judge'a the whole damn territories, like's to be able to tell his bosses back in St. Louis what a bang up job he's doin', rounding up the riff raff, doin' God's justice out here in the wilds."

She spat, shaking her dark head, before turning to her own food in disgust.

Cain mulled that over for a while, before he said, "Don't explain why you cut me loose. Lotta trouble, for a man you don't owe nothing."

Coyote set aside his empty cup and fished out a small flask that smelled stiff enough from where Cain was sitting to varnish cedar. The Indian took a swallow, looking for all the world like he was sipping milk, and tipped it in his direction, but Cain shook his head.

Whiskey hadn't been doing a very good job of solving his problems of late. Coyote shrugged, taking another swallow, before screwing the lid back on it and tucking it away.

The woman snorted. "We followed you back to Dodge from the tracks. On account of it being hare-brained, shit-fire plan ta' believe a U.S. Marshal when he says he ain't gonna turn on a pack of outlaws." She directed this at her partner, who

looked altogether unfazed and far too smug. The man replied, "I'm an excellent judge'a character, Miss Mercedes."

"Uh-huh." She drawled.

"I am!" Coyote drawled back, acting offended, and he sputtered a laugh when the giant sitting across from him mimed something Cain was certain was completely indecent with his hands.

"I get no respect from you lot." The Indian muttered, but his eyes were fond, before he turned back to Cain, and said, "Let's just say, I ain't a fan of an honest man hangin' in the wind on my account."

"So now Ah' owe you. Again." Cain said.

Coyote's grin widened, and those eyes danced with mischief.

"Coyote." Mercedes snarled, slapping him on the arm before he could open his mouth.

"What do you *want*?" Cain growled, temper stirring in building frustration.

The Indian muttered something in Spanish under his breath that made Mercedes groan in similar frustration. "Nothing. I'd say we're even." Coyote replied, raising his voice in English.

Cain blinked in disbelief. "The hell we are. You saved me from a lynching!"

Coyote's small smirk broadened, wicked, baring his gold teeth in a grin to suit his namesake. "You didn't see the look on King's face when he found out we'd slipped you right out from under him. We're even."

Mercy smiled too, over the lip of Coyote's stolen flask. "Worth all the hassle in the world, *Marshal*, to watch Sutherland watch his gallows burn down, too.

*Graciosísimo*." Coyote cackled.

"Y'all'd just let me go?" Cain asked.

"Well. Yes." Coyote started, "But I've got another proposition for you." He rustled around in the saddlebag by his feet and dug out his makins, rolling himself a quirley, and this time when he offered, Cain accepted.

The taste of the smoke was strange, laced with something sweeter Cain couldn't recognize, but after a few draws, his lungs eased and his throat started to numb, the



smoke soothing. The bridge of his nose still ached, and it probably wasn't wise to smoke with clotted up sinuses, but he'd manage.

"These hills'll be crawling with law come sunup, so we're headed southwest for San Francisco, to do some business." Coyote said, puffing on his own quirley, and pointed at Cain, "An' yer plumb outta' yer mind if ya think Sutherland won't have yer face plastered over every town for fifty miles by evenin' tomorra. Ol' St. Francis's the kinda place any man can disappear in, if ya take my meaning, men out there come from all over, come in off the sea and they ain't take too kindly to Easterners and their lawmen tellin' 'em what's law and what ain't." The Indian let the smoke in his lungs drift out of his mouth, sluggish and crawling up, before becoming bored and letting the rest go in a huff.

"May not have done nothing wrong, but you're a wanted man, now, hoss. Wanted by Judge Sutherland, n' Marshal King, an' that ain't the kinda wanted that get's paid off or goes away if you stay outta sight, not if you stay here. Them sumbitches've hunted me'n Mercy for near's about a decade, an' every year that price jus' goes up. An you? Why, they're gonna want you just about as bad, now." Coyote sighed.

"So what exactly are you suggestin' I do about it?" Cain asked, frown pinched tight around his smoke.

The corner of Coyote's mouth tipped up. "Well. You're already an outlaw on paper, an' your a damn good shot. I'm offering you a spot in the pack, as it were, till we get to California."

That got the attention of the rest of the gang, the boys and Mercede's eyes going wide, and the woman swore, heavy rolling sounds of Spanish that had the Indian wincing slightly, a cringe he shook off.

"Ain't up for discussin', Merce." He snapped, and her eyes flared dangerously. Cain knew better than to brush off a woman with that look in her eye, Lord, he couldn't even remember how many times he'd seen it riding hot behind his mama's icy blue eyes. If he was lucky all it'd mean was a beating.

"It sure as fuck is, Coyote!" She snapped back.

The twins were both busy looking elsewhere, grimacing nervously, as their ferocious leaders descended into a hissing fit in Spanish and something else, quiet enough to not carry in the still night.

“I won’t take it.” Cain interrupted.

The two of them froze, and stared at him.

“Ain’t fit for bein’ a thief. Or an’ outlaw. I’ll ride with y’all for a day or two, til Ah’m fit, but I don’t want no part’a this. I’m tired, fuck,” Cain muttered, closing his eyes with a wince. “I’m tired ‘a this place, and I’m already tired of riding, and now I’m gonna be runnin’ till it kills me or they catch me, but I don’t want nothin’ to do with being one of yer dogs, Coyote.”

Mercy’s eyes narrowed, but she nodded. “Good. You don’t belong here.”

Coyote glared at her out the corner of his eye. “Fine. But if you’re ridin’ with us, you’ll listen to *me*, or you’re leavin,’ and maybe not in one piece. I got enough mutiny and trouble on my hands as it is. Now’ve we got ourselves a deal, Cain?”

The Indian held out his hand.

Cain shook it.



That night, his dreams were full for the first time in a long while of the cotton fields of home, the heady ripe smell of wet tobacco and black dirt so close he could nearly taste it in the back of his throat when he woke up, sharp and gasping.

Cain lay there on the hard ground staring up at the warming grey of the early dawn sky imagining he could taste rain coming on in the air, that the grey was the roiling bottom of thunderclouds heavy with a rainstorm ready to pour down any second.

It was comforting for the short while he indulged in clinging to the lingering sleep in his head, but the illusion faded fast into the dry scents of dust and brush, acrid with burning cow pie and smoke. Smells not unfamiliar to the former cowboy, he’d known them now for nearly a decade, but it was uncomfortable after dreaming of home.

He sat up with a slow groan, and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. His neck was stiff, but the skin pulled with the feeling of rope abrasions puckered over fast into blistered scabs, but that meant he was apt not to have to fight off infection. The skin was still faintly greasy with salve, but he'd have to ask after more, lest the scab dry out and crack.

The camp was asleep still, save for the large frame of Kujo, who was hunched over a small bed of dim coals, stirring a pot of coffee nestled down into the fire occasionally. The man had spared him a glance, when he'd woken suddenly, but seemed to be uninterested, and Cain chuckled a little under his breath at the relief that filled him at the realization that at least the mute wouldn't ask after his sleep.

The boys on the cattle trails tended to ask after it, young enough to let their curiosity get the better of them.

Cain rubbed down his bad leg, thumbs digging quick and hard into the muscle to wring out the tightness that always clamped into it as he slept, before dragging himself up to stand. The cramps loosened after he took a few limping steps, and gradually eased into his usual stiff-legged gait of the morning, before he'd had enough blood pumped free to loosen the rust that built up around the old injury.

Kujo watched all this from his fire with a look on his face that told Cain the two of them were not unlike in this fashion; maybe the bearish man had his own old war wounds or weaknesses, but he recognized the familiarity of Cain's rituals.

Lucifer was grazing lazily nearby with the gang's horses, a motley pack of two leggy, butter-furred duns, the giant's cow-patched paint, what looked to be a Spanish mustang, dark socks and muzzle belying it's black skin under the tan coat, and a large white and red mare, which looked like it had been splashed up the front with a bloody auburn, soaking the muzzle and chest of the beast out to the sloop of it's back and down its forelegs, flecked in spots and drips across the white of the rest of it. The blue feather in the horse's mane gave it away for Coyote's in an instant, but the animal was so ridiculously conspicuous it could belong to no other.

His horse pricked up ears at him when he approached, and the other horses followed, suddenly alert, but Lucifer was far enough off to the side that the animals went back to ignoring him quickly. Cain had tied him to a tree off from the others,

knowing his temperament would end bloody if he was allowed to mingle with the rest, particularly the mustang gelding.

Cain gave the stallion pat on the flank, looking the horse over for any sign of injury or weakness from the escape. He had no idea how the Indian's gang had coaxed the beast into coming with them, he'd blacked out after the woman had cut him lose from the tree, but if the animal had been maltreated, he showed no signs of it. If anything, he looked healthy, bright eyed and the dust in his coat not the caked in dust he'd had from the storms coming into Dodge, but fresh from the trail out. Someone must've looked after him, before Cain had woken.

Luce snorted and whuffled his way through Cain's clothes, looking for treats, but Cain just chuckled, giving him another pat, and letting him get back to his hunt for non-existent dewy grass.

He limped back, gaining strength and limberness as the muscles were forced back into action, and the leg hinged smoother when he got back to camp, like the sluggish lurching pistons of steam engine wheels building up speed as their grease warmed up.

Cain bent over to dig out his tin cup from his saddlebags, and sat down on a rock near the small fire. Kujo nodded in greeting, and held out a hand for Cain's cup, filling it with a few ladles of pitch-black coffee, and handing it back. Cain accepted it with a nod back, grateful for the warmth that spread quickly through the metal into his cold hands. The damp steam of the coffee in the crispness of the morning was heavenly, and Cain couldn't help the noise of pleasure at the surprisingly rich taste of brew, just hot enough to drink slowly, and it stayed warm in his throat and chest as it went down. Unlike the usually large chunks of grits that settled quickly to the bottom, the liquid in Cain's cup seemed to be thick with them, almost as though they'd been powdered, and it gave the drink a comforting thickness, almost like cream, but richly bitter.

Cain smiled a little, and raised his mug in a small salute. "Good coffee."

Kujo's scarred face tipped in a grin, and he gestured to a flask next to the fire.

Apparently making it a little Irish helped it.

"Oh, spirits, *coffee*." Came Coyote's emphatic groan as he roused himself from a nearby bedroll.

Kujo's aged face wrinkled with a warm smile in the Indian's exclamation, and he ladled out the Indian some as well with a breathy chuckle. Must've made the whole pot Irish, because Cain didn't see Kujo add any whiskey to the cup before handing it over, as the Indian sat down with a sprawl.

Coyote took a sip, and groaned happily again. "Yer a god among men, Kujo."

Kujo made a gesture, as though doffing his hat, and Coyote laughed at that.

The noise gradual set the rest of the camp stirring awake, although the twins grumbled and clung to their blankets greedily, as though they could avoid waking simply by ignoring the rising sun. Cain remembered being that age. One of the house slaves, Martha, had been fond enough of him that on mornings when there wasn't going to be company and he hadn't had scads of chores, or when his mother had left early to head to Mobile on business, she'd let him laze in bed till the sun was half way up to noon, before she hollered up at him with breakfast to bribe his eyes open. The feeling of sun-warmed cotton sheets and a soft bed, dragging a body to wallow in sleep happy as a pig in mud.

Nice thing about sleeping on the ground on a bedroll, it made a man eager for the sunrise.

"Morn'n Cain." Coyote said, inclining his head.

Cain grunted in response, absorbing himself in his cup of coffee.

The Indian seemed to take this in stride, and brushed it off, striking up a conversation with Kujo, who replied in animated gestures that must've translated somehow to words that Coyote could follow, as he would occasionally laugh, responding half in gestures himself.

Mercedes had awoken and busied herself terrorizing the boys into waking, ripping the wool blankets off them and barking sternly, before going about to tend to the horses, whom she greeted much more cheerfully, crooning lovingly at the mustang in Spanish. The animals seemed to be completely in thrall with her, all nosing up eager for petting and treats, and she extracted a few sugar cubes from a pocket of her pants.

Lucifer's ears had perked up at this, and he shuffled on his feet anxiously when she turned and looked at him. Cain read the intent in her body, as she walked over closer and held out a long sugar cube towards the black stallion.

“Oy! Don’t, he’ll—!” Cain shouted at her.

Any anger at her recklessness, approaching another man’s horse, let alone visions of Luce biting her hand clear in half vanished as the beast nickered happily and gently bit the sugar cube off her hand, before whuffling into it, eager for more.

She laughed, and Cain had to admit she was beautiful when she smiled like that, before she scritchd the huge animal under the chin, petting him as she had the others.

She cocked an eyebrow at Cain, and called, “Somethin’ the matter, *Marshal*?”

Cain scowled, thunderous and a little embarrassed for calling attention to himself.

Lucifer, the damn traitor, snickered and butted his head in open playfulness at his newfound friend.

The Indian laughed. “Don’t take it personal, she’s got a magic touch with animals. That black brute of yours nearly bit my damn hand off, an’ he was dry and wrung out as a beast can be at the time. Bucked like a sunovabitch, too.”

Cain shook his head, and said, “He hates people.”

Mercedes returned from the horses and snorted, sitting beside Coyote. “*I am not people*,” she said smugly.

“Aye, Miss Mercedes Luciana Josephina Alvarez is not *people*, for she is a goddess, descended from the heavens!” The Indian pronounced, leaned over, and hooking an arm around her waist, drawing her straight into his lap, carefully holding his coffee away in the air. She squawked, and glared at him in fond exasperation.

“Mmm, good morning, m’lady.” He drawled into her ear, burying his face in her wild black curls and nipping at her ear, before withdrawing and placing a smacking kiss on her cheek. She rolled her eyes and shoved her way out of his grasp, stealing his coffee cup.

“Oy!” He yelped, and she returned it with a smirk.

“Boys!” She snapped, turning her attention back to the lumps still lying in their bedrolls. “Git the hell up before I drag you up!”

This was answered with a chorus of groans and grumbles, but evidently, she’d made good on this threat before, because there was movement as well.

Silence fell on the camp as the sun rose, Cain suddenly feeling acutely out of place in the strange domesticity of it all.

“So. *Ex-Marshal* Cain. How’s that hangman’s scar treating you?” Coyote drawled, cutting through the awkward quiet as if he couldn’t sense it.

“S’alright.” Cain muttered, and winced, remember he’d need more of that salve, but reluctant to ask. Coyote seemed to read that in the silence that followed, and dug around his pack for the tin, and tossed it at him. Cain barely caught it, but nodded in thanks.

“We’ll need to break camp soon,” Mercedes said to her partner, ignoring Cain, and the Indian nodded. “King’s apt not to be far.”

“King’s never far.” Coyote remarked, chuckling. The woman didn’t find this as amusing.

“Y’all headed north or south?” Cain asked, raising his voice enough to carry.

“South.” Coyote said.

South was where any body with sense would reckon a gang of outlaws would go, full of canyons and caves, Indians and the Spanish, all of which would easily conceal or give distraction to someone on the tail of wanted men. It was also first place a seasoned tracker like King would expect them to go.

His thoughts must’ve shown on his face, because Coyote smiled, the easy grin apparently his default expression. Already, Cain had found that the smiles took many shapes and tones, hard and mean grins, happy smiles, satisfied smirks and mocking ones all crossing that expressive face, it was hard to tell when he was genuine, but it creased the smile lines of his face all the same. Cain knew from the small mirror Kitty’d had hanging in her room that his own face was creased with frown lines and weathered from too much sun. Kitty had echoed every maid and maiden aunt who’d ever laughed at his scowling face, and remarked that if he kept frowning like that, the wind would change directions and it’d get stuck like that. By now, it nearly was.

The Indian’s face was of an age with Cain’s, equally weathered but somehow the change in lines and the gift of his heritage left him strangely less touched by the years and the land.

“Don’t look so worried, man.” Coyote replied. “He’s gonna go after us to the north.”

“North.” Cain said flatly in disbelief.

Coyote finished his coffee with a satisfied exhale, and started to roll himself a quirley. The man smoked like a chimney.

“North.” Coyote agreed. “Ain’t the first time I’ve lit outta’ town with the infamous *Marshal King* on my tail, hoss. South’s a smart idea, plenty a places to lie low, n’ he knows it’s our territory. But he also knows *we* know he’d expect us to go south. So he’ll get it in his head to get ahead of us’n go *north*, because if we knew he knew we’d be goin’ south, we’d go north, yeah?”

Cain shook his head.

The Indian laughed. “S’all mind games. Like poker. ‘Cept King’s trouble is, he’s always thinkin’ he’s playin’ somebody he’s better than, so’s he thinks he’s the man pulling strings the whole game. He’s sitting there, thinkin’ he can read my hand just cause he’s played a few rounds with me before, think’s he can call my bluff.”

Cain gradually caught up with what he was saying, and nodded slowly. “So you don’t bluff, and leave him thinking you did.”

“Exactly.” Coyote nodded back in agreement, tapping the ash off his smoke.

“So what’s stoppin’ him from knowin’ you ain’t bluffin’?” Cain asked.

The other man barked a laugh. “Hoss, he just ain’t that smart.”

Cain noticed the woman’s face was screwed up in a scowl, but she didn’t speak her mind, and her partner didn’t seem to notice.

The twins had dragged themselves out of bed, and were greeted with obnoxious hazing by their leader, but offered coffee, and after a short while, the camp descended quickly into a frenzy of packing up and getting ready to ride out. Cain once more felt ill at ease, hanging to the fringes and taking care of himself, unwilling to attempt to attribute to the lively discussion that developed among the group, afraid he’d say the wrong thing or draw unnecessary attention to himself. Mercedes’ occasional glares reminded him that while he may be a free man in their company this time, his presence was not a welcome one.

Coyote seemed either oblivious to her ire, or too reckless to care, and often tried to draw Cain into talking with him, but Cain found he had little to say. Part of him was angry, snappish and tired, eager to spurn the Indian’s attempts, but the other was traitorously interested. He’d realized that Coyote’s attentions only buttoned his lip,



not out of fear or anger, but rather for much the same reason he'd always been quiet as a boy around the gentlemen his mother called for business to the estate, ones who'd talked to him like he'd been a man, leaving him desperate to impress and afraid to stumble over his tongue. Now his coltishness grated on his own nerves, stubbornly angry with himself anytime the desire to impress well up inside him.

The man, for all his outward cavalier attitude, sat alert in the saddle, and was a keen hand at the reigns. Their trails were seemingly nonexistent, but Coyote followed them like lines in his own palm, and even as he joked with the twins or Kujo, and flirted like a drunken cowhand with Mercedes, his eyes stayed sharp on their horizon, watching for wagons and riders of any kind.

They crossed a small creek around noon, and on an apparent whim, Coyote ordered them to follow it, leading his horse slow and sure, straight down the middle of the water. Lucifer balked momentarily at this, but eventually found his footing, and Cain followed behind with wide eyes, confused but hesitantly willing to trust Coyote to not have completely lost his mind.

They carried on wading through the creek, horses in up to their knees at the deepest places, through the smooth river rocks and flat stones, for nearly an hour before the indian steered his horse back up onto the left bank from which they'd come, and continued on south.

Cain was somewhat relieved to see that this confused all but Mercedes, but after a while longer, it came to him that perhaps the Indian was crazed and clever in equal measures; for all he claimed with confidence that King would be tracking them to the north, he was doing a damn good job covering his tracks getting south.

Although the boys complained of boredom, Cain could tell they were good riders, whether by Coyote's teaching or another's, though they rode similarly to what he'd seen working on the cattle drives among men who'd come from farmlands, perfunctory and graceless, a kind of style that came out of a man simply buying a horse and tack, getting on the thing and riding around till he was passable, and leaving it at that.

Cain himself had had that beaten out of him, first by the liveryman, Darius, and again by the cavalry command. The boys on the drives used to joke that he rode so

stiff in the back, he had to have a broomstick up his ass, and while he'd gradually lost the hard edges of military bearing, he hadn't lost the posture, even in the saddle. Years of hard riding had loosened it in his lower back and hips, a concession to long hours, and he could ride with the best, but the way Coyote could ride made him look like a greenhorn.

Effortless and graceful, his horse moved as though an extension of his body, all without him seeming to exert even the slightest amount of will, hands barely on the reins. The woman rode nearly the same. Cain knew enough to know she'd been riding long enough that there was no way Coyote had taught her, so it must've been someone they'd both known young, but where that knowledge had come from was anyone's guess.

Cain hadn't had much exposure to Indians, too young to have seen them when the very land they traveled now had all been theirs, and by virtue of his occupations, had always cut a wide swatch around them in his later years.

Despite the Spanish spoken often between the pair, they rode like none of the Spanish he'd met, either.

Cain allowed himself to be a little envious of their grace, though he knew that his own horse was far too obstinate to ever be taught to behave as theirs did. Lucifer demanded a strong hand if only out stubborn pride. By the late afternoon, as the sun was hanging low, Mercedes tired of the twins bickering and ordered them off to hunt for some hares to supplement dinner, tossing them the rifle she carried. She exchanged a glance with her partner, which left his face slowly curling in a smile, and he winked at her.

"Cain," Coyote said, catching his attention. "Go with them."

Cain bristled at the command, but the look in his eyes brooked no argument, edged in the steel it'd had weeks and hundreds of miles ago in that humid tent when he'd held a knife whisper-close to Cain's throat. Cain extracted his own rifle from its saddle sheath, and nodded tersely.

When he turned to face the twin boys, one of them looked near-to overflowing with eagerness, glaring at Cain in bravado like the man might be intimidated by a runt

over a decade his junior showing him up in this imagined contest. The other seemed meekly nervous. "I'll scout for water?" He asked.

Coyote tsked, "No. Kujo'll do that. Mercy'n I'll scout for camp."

"So I gotta shoot rabbits?" Gabe asked.

"What else'r ya gonna do, make friends with 'em?" His brother muttered, cuffing him on the shoulder, and Gabe just seemed resigned. Cain had no idea how the boy hadn't starved or been shot yet, no doubt he would have if it weren't for the gang and his surly brother, but that kind of mercy was a weakness. He reminded Cain faintly of Nell, though if Gabe had been in Nell's place, he had no doubt the other men, Snake in particular, would've eaten him alive.

Cain sighed, and led Luce off to follow the boys, spying Coyote's arm snaking down around Mercy's waste and grimacing in disgust. Scout for camp, his ass.

"You any good with that Winchester?" Micah asked, coming up beside him as the rode laterally away from the others.

"I'm alright." Cain replied.

Gabe hung back behind his brother, looking dejected and tired.

Micah scoffed. "Well we'll see. Ever been hunting for jackrabbits?"

Cain had hunted squirrel back home, but never rabbit. Ducks, geese, quail, a few deer, had all been his and Jeb's prey at one point or another, a chance for a trophy, a reward for their practice pinging cans along the fences and lying patient in the mud for hours, but since he'd passed the age of Micah himself, he'd had more occasion to a hunter of men than any other animal.

"No." He muttered.

The boy's face lit with excitement, clearly seeing his opportunity to rub the ex-Marshal's face in the dirt.

"Ain't like huntin' them bigger varmits. Jackrabbits are fuckin' quick." Micah crowed, arm slung around the rifle. Cain resisted the instinct to bark at the boy to shut his mouth 'fore he had it washed out with soap. Boy had an ass-whopping coming his way, but no sense in making dust with Coyote over givin' it to him when he'd be gone soon enough.

"Reckon it ain't bad." Cain replied.

“Betch’ya cayn’t even shoot *one*.” The boy taunted.

Cain’s hackles rose, but though the tone was meaner, it was a familiar conversation he’d had hundreds of times with his cousin, the throwing down of a gauntlet, followed by a jab to the pride to goad him into accepting. It reminded him suddenly how young Micah was.

“How much?” Cain asked. The boy snorted, caught off guard.

“Betcha a half dollar.”

“Yer on, kid.”

Micah scowled, and fished a fifty-cent coin out of his pocket, holding it out in Gabe’s direction but glaring firmly at Cain till he did the same. Gabe reluctantly collected the money.

The other boy brought the rifle round and hopped off his horse, scanning the area before starting off for a better vantage, and Cain reluctantly did the same, trailing after him. Cain let his eyes rake over the landscape, browns on tans, splotches of green. The occasional rustle of motion on the ground far off that he reckoned had to be their quarry.

Micah seemed to find a place up ten or twenty feet along a small ridge, looking back over the area where his brother still sat on his horse. The dashed idiot saw him, and waved cheerfully. God help him.

Cain crouched down beside the kid, staring in the same direction as the boy scanned down the sight of the rifle, panning slowly before halting, back tracking slowly, and freezing. Cain saw a small darker tan object down range, raising his own rifle but not sighting it, and the kid cursed when his shot went wide, missing it by maybe a foot. The hare took off fast, running past Gabe further out of range, but Cain brought the Winchester up level, squinting as he watched the thing dart and start to book it straight.

“Oy, don’t bother, it’s too far o—”

Cain squeezed the trigger, and the rabbit leapt with the impact of the shot, before landing to the ground and not getting up.

Micah’s mouth dropped open. “Shit.”

“That’s one.” Cain couldn’t help replying.

The boy blushed, and tried to scowl, but seemed to be quick to bluster. “The hell you never been hunting rabbits before!”

“Ain’t,” Cain said, shrugging. “Don’t mean I ain’t *hunted*.”

“Do it again.” Micah demanded.

Cain held his crouch and let his breath leave him in a slow trickle, movement bleeding out of him until he was stiff as dead, and let his eyes take in the patch of brush around Gabe. The moments dragged on, slow and quiet, and he could feel more than he could hear Micah’s restless twitches as he watched and waited next to him.

Cain saw the rustle of movement of a startled rabbit, and started to track it’s movement in his sights for moment before he saw the black object off to the edges of his vision that’d startled the animal in the first place. “The devil you lettin’ it go for, git it!” Micah hissed.

Cain whipped his gun around and swore when he refocused on the objects that’d caught his eye.

There, not hardly fifty yards off from Gabe and their horses, was a posse of half a dozen men.

At the lead, the devil in black, was Marshal King himself.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Comin' Down Like Rain*

"Is that?" Micah whispered, and Cain could here the thrum of fear in his voice.

"King."

Micah swore as well, and went to stand up, but Cain grabbed him by the shoulder, forcing him to stay down. That posse would sure as hell heard the two shots they'd fired earlier, and they'd be looking for the ones that fired them. So far, they hadn't gotten close enough to spot Gabe, not that the kid saw them or knew to hide.

Micah was fairly vibrating under Cain's grip, death grip on his rifle, all the cockiness bled clean out of him. He saw the kid swallow, attempting to force it back down. "What'd we do?"

"Too many ta' pick off, we're too close, they'll see the smoke," Cain replied, keeping his voice low. "Double back'n find Coyote."

Micah's eyes narrowed, "We cayn't leave Gabe out there!"

"Hush up, boy, Ah *know*." Cain hissed back, and gritted his teeth, mind running fast, "I'll go git him, see if we can find cover before King spots us."

Micah paused at that, looked surprised, but he spared his brother's distant form a glance, before looking to Cain and nodding. "You get him killed, Cain, an' I'll kill you soon's look at you."

Cain nodded back, accepting the threat, although he knew full well the muscle behind it wasn't the boy, but Coyote and Mercedes. He didn't know their reasons for

keeping the weaker boy in tow, but if they'd kept him alive till now, they probably had a similar feeling on the matter.

Micah seemed to accept this, and took off down the other side of the ridge, aiming south for the dry creek the gang leader had followed to find camp.

Cain looked back down his rifle, and swore when he heard the startled call of one of King's men, raising the alarm, and saw Gabe nearly jump out of his skin, seeing the posse crown the hill off the side across from Cain's position. They were surrounding the kid in a heartbeat, pouring into the shallow valley and cornering him, while he sat on his horse stiff and pale, and the next thing Cain knew, he'd slung the rifle back around his shoulder, and started off running down the ridge. The worn leather soles of his boots scrambling for purchase in the chalky gravel as he tore down towards the valley, uncaring of the noise, and he knew it was a hare-brained plan but he had to do *something*.

He saw one of the men startle, hearing him come up, and Cain burst through their circle of horses gasping, but had his rifle swung around and on King before the man even drew his pistol. The Marshal's face twisted in surprise for a moment, before he laughed, dark and oily. "Well well, nice'a you to join the party, Bradshaw."

All the other men had guns on Cain in seconds, but Cain kept his on King, lungs rabbiting in his chest as he tried to catch his breath. Behind him, he heard Gabe whimper.

"Y'alright, kid?" Cain asked, not looking back.

"Y-yeah. I guess." Gabe stuttered, and god, the hell was this kid doing robbing trains with *Coyote*, he sounded liable to piss himself.

"Boy, put the gun down." King snapped. "We've got you numbered, everyone'a these boys'll rip you full'a holes 'fore you so much's hit the ground."

"Maybe. You'll still be dead." Cain snarled.

King's eyes were hard. "Don't be stupid, th'hell's that get ya?"

"You bein' dead." Cain replied drily, scowling up from under the shade of his hat. "Ain't that enough, after what you done ta' me?"

"You'd still be dead too, boy," one of the other men, Cain recognized him from the lynching party, grunted.

“Maybe that’s worth it.” Cain threatened.

King spat on the ground, and sneered, “What’dya want, Bradshaw? A pardon?”

Cain stilled as the words registered, and King grinned like he’d won something, kept on, saying, “I know them Mad Dogs is out here, probably real close, if they let their little lamb out ta’ pasture.” He gestured derisively to where Gabe was cowering behind Cain, shivering in the saddle.

“Tell me where they are, n’I might jes’ have some things that say to Sutherland fer you.”

It’d be a tempting offer, if he couldn’t smell the snake oil in King’s voice easy as shit.

“Don’t fuck with me!” Cain growled, “Yer a lyin’ sunovabitch if you ever breathed, King.” King chuckled, and turned to the man to his left and muttered, “Well, at least he got wise.”

Cain tightened his grip on the rifle, hands slick with sweat even in the cooling air of the settling dusk. “Let the boy go.”

“What?” King said.

“Let. The boy. Go.” Cain gritted out. “Let him go, I’ll give up my guns’n y’all can take me back in.”

He heard the surprise ripple through the posse, and even King looked surprised for a second, before his face contorted into a violent snarl. “You sneaky fuck, you were actually in on it!” He exclaimed.

Cain’s blood ran cold when he realized just what dots King thought he’d connected. Mad Dogs had rescued him, and here he was risking his own neck back to help one of them, no use denying it.

“Well?” Cain demanded, leveling his voice best he could.

King was seething, spitting mad now, in a black rage thinking Cain had pulled a fast one on him, and Cain had to admit, if he *had*, he’d have been a damn good actor.

“Fine.” King snapped.

Cain kept his gun up, and called back to Gabe, “Git, kid.”

Gabe was still for a moment before he found his mettle and took off, hoof beats thundering.



King raised an eyebrow at Cain's rifle barrel. "Anytime now, Bradshaw."

He hesitated, straining to hear till he figured Gabe was out of range, and then lowered it, tossing it to the ground and hand flying to his gun belt. King had his own out for he could draw, and he almost looked amused that Cain had bothered to try. "Ah, none'a that now. Butch, Taggart, go after the boy. The rest a y'all spread out. They're close enough I can smell 'em!"

The men hesitated to leave King alone, but after he told them off, they dispersed. Cain prayed Gabe rode that horse hard.

"I oughta' kill you dead, right here." King spat, cocking the hammer back. "But as a matter'a fact, I ain't got a proper warrant. Sutherland won't make trouble, but ya know I take it personal when I put a noose around a man's head and he don't end up fuck'n dead!"

Cain opened his mouth, only to hear the far off crack of gunfire. "Sonuvabitch." King swore. Cain could see the doubt in King's face, even as he pasted on a sneer. "Hope they didn't kill that little bitch."

The gun cracked again, louder this time, followed by a strange thundering sound Cain would've bet was a *small cannon* by the bellow, if he hadn't been standing in the middle of the desert hundreds of miles from the nearest fort.

"The hell?" King muttered.

One, two, three, four, shots rang out, too quick to be a rifle, and too many to be a single gun, or even the guns of several chasing after Gabe. The Mad Dogs had been found.

Whether they were winning, Cain couldn't tell.

The belch of the blunderbuss again, followed by more gunfire, and King began to grow uneasy. "Ah, ta' hell with this, Sutherland can fuckin' deal—" he started, and brought his gun up level with Cain's head.

Cain had a split second staring down the bore before a gun went off, whole body flinching hard and his eyes squeezed shut. He heard King scream, and his eyes flew back open in shock to find King howling in pain, clutching his gun hand, mangled and soaked with blood, ripped up by the pinpoint shot that'd blown his gun right out

of his hand. The shrill yowling cry of a coyote pierced the air, growing closer and joined by higher tones, other dogs joining the call.

“Coyote.” King hissed darkly under his breath.

*Coyote.*

The man himself and his pack descended like wildfire around them, yipping and howling gleefully, part war cry, part animal on the hunt, and Cain recovered his bearing enough to draw his pistol and kick King’s away from where it’d fallen.

“Yee’ah!!” Coyote gave a final breathless cry, and laughed down at Cain from his horse. “Howdy, Cain. Damn, good shot, Mercy.” He whistled when he saw King’s hand.

Cain’s eyes widened in disbelief, and he looked back at her. She had the rifle she’d recollected from Micah leaned against her shoulder and she grinned at him. “No need to say yer welcome,” she teased.

“*Damn* good shot.” Cain muttered under his breath, tight in his stomach with the idea of owing *anything* to the woman, but undeniably impressed. She must’ve heard him, because her grin richened into a smug smile. While it wasn’t the dimpled and rouged ivory face of Kitty Lovelace, he could understand why the Indian was all over her, the girl had a righteous smile.

Micah had a gun of his own out, and had hopped up in the saddle in front of Gabe, who was pale but looked whole, and was clinging to his brother for dear life.

“That posse went down so easy I’m almost insulted, King,” Coyote drawled. “Giddown.”

King was glaring at the Indian like if he tried hard enough, he could light the man on fire, but he managed to dismount with out falling on his face. His bloodied hand hung limp at his side.

“Now. There any others?” Coyote demanded.

“Yer fucked in the head if ya think I’d tell you.” King snapped. His breathing was getting thready, and Cain could see the man was shaking with the effort of suppressing the pain that had to be screaming through his hand. Any other man, and Cain might feel sympathetic.

Cain chuckled at that, but it grew mean quick, and those river clay eyes were cold as iron as he glared down at the seething Marshal. “Any last words then?” Coyote asked, casual words though his voice was anything but.

King snarled in rage, “God the shit I wouldn’t do to bring you down, you fucking crazy Injun bastard. You know what I’d do, if I was you an’ you were me, right now? Huh? I’d fire a round through both of your kneecaps, make you watch while I fucked that arrogant *puta* of spanish whore you call a *partner*. I hear the sounds she’d make in my dreams!” King laughed, manic and terrible, his eyes wide. “How she’d *scream* for me, Dog, I’d make her beg for it. Bet she’s never even had a taste’va real man’s cock, stuck with your pathetic d—“

Coyote’s gun hit the desert floor and there was knife in his hand like lightning as he tackled the marshal to the ground. The knife dug deep enough to almost cut into his neck, though it didn’t wet with blood, and the Indian was nearly vibrating with a white hot rage that made the hair on the back of Cain’s neck stand up. Like being in arm’s reach of a deadly predator, some wild unpredictable thing that could rip you flesh from bones, and there wasn’t a fiber of the Indian’s usual demeanor left in black of his eyes, dilated in fury.

“Coyote.” Mercy called, startlingly gentle.

“*Coyote*.” She said again, more forcefully, and came up behind him to put a hand on his shoulder. Coyote spooked like an animal, twitching violently away from her with a snarl that faded as soon as her presence registered. He panted heavily through his mouth, and when her hand returned again, dragging at his shoulder insistently, he let the knife pull away from King’s pale throat, disappearing as quickly as it’d came.

In the stunned silence, the rest of them watched as he moved, slowly and deliberately, picked up his gun and placed the barrel between the eye’s of King’s horse. The animal collapsed with a squeal of short-lived pain, falling half onto its master’s body, and King yelped at the weight as it pinned his legs.

With the same deliberate slowness, Coyote stood over King’s head, and hay-makered him across the head with the butt of his pistol. King went limp in an instant.

In the stunned silence, Cain heard Gabe’s trembling voice ask “Is he dead?”

Coyote shook his head numbly, and holstered his gun. Mercedes' expression was soft as she reached for him, hands reaching to cup his face, but he batted her hands away, still breathing shaky with anger and he didn't look her in the eyes as he brushed past her and the others, storming off on foot.

She checked King's pulse, and scowled but sighed, finding it still beating. "We'll make camp in a few miles, once it's dark. No sign of any others, and in the shape he's in, King may as well be feeding vultures before he even wakes up." Mercedes met Kujo's eyes, and gestured to the fallen horse. "Take his ammunition, and any rations he brought. Leave his water."

"We want him to *live*?" Micah hissed in disbelief.

Mercedes' head snapped in his direction and she glared at him hard. "A life taken in defense's one thing. Ain't gonna kill a man when he's already down."

"It *would* be self defense!" Micah hollered, throwing a hand in King's direction "He manages to walk outta this, you know he'll never stop!"

"This ain't up for debate, Michael." She hissed. "Now get your horse. We're riding outta' here till the horses cayn't see, and then we're sleeping in shifts."

"What 'bout Coyote?" Gabe asked.

She frowned a little then. "Let me handle him. He's just...He'll be fine."

Cain met her eyes, and she held out a hand, "You saved my boy's lives today, Cain."

He must've looked surprised, because she laughed, and for once, it was genuine and lacked the rough edges he'd become accustomed to hearing in it. He accepted her handshake, hand smaller boned and graceful enough he felt like his was some kind of awkward paw, but her grip was strong. "You saved mine. Was a hell of a shot."

She scoffed. "Hell of a well *timed* shot. Easy 'nough to make."

Cain's respect for her grew at the genuine modesty. "All the same."

Mercedes nodded, evidently pleased with his answer, and withdrew her hand.

Micah rallied his horse, lashing it to the horn on Gabe's saddle, and stayed with his brother as they rode out into the fading daylight, heading south, and Mercy lashed Coyote's mare to her own saddle horn, leading the way. She peeled off after a while

with the mare in tow, giving Kujo a nod to take the lead, and reappeared after awhile with a surly, prickly Coyote trailing after her.

By nightfall, they'd made it a few miles from where they'd left King, maybe more, and as Kujo came back from scouting to lead them to a sheltered, deep washout of a dry old creek bed, deep enough that they'd be able to pass unnoticed from the horizon.

The giant made a small fire again, warming a pot of water and pemmican into a viscous stew, of a sort, adding a little of different powders and leaves from a leather pouch he pulled from his bags. Cain watched him wearily in the firelight, before deciding to get out his tobacco and smoke while he waited. Kujo must've been able to taste it some how, because he kept bringing tidbits back on the spoon, making faces occasionally at the taste and re-doctoring it until it was steaming and flavored well enough to suit him.

The Indian and Mercedes had disappeared down further in the ravine, tucked almost out of site, but they made their own small fire, and he reckoned they wouldn't be joining them tonight. The boys looked a little jarred and pale.

Cain licked his fingertips and pinched out the end of his half-gone cigarette, tucked it behind his ear, accepting a steaming cup of stew from Kujo gratefully. Considering it was mix of what was probably buffalo and tallow, with a few withered bits of berries and just enough water to soften it to a paste, the man'd made it taste *fantastic*. A good chuck man was worth his weight in gold. Not that the Indian didn't have other reasons to keep a near three hundred pound, seven foot tall freak of nature on hand.

Kujo made a gesture like a carriage hand, bowing as though to say *you're welcome* at Cain's unexpected noise of pleasure, and Cain chuckled. "This ain't bad. Just pemmican?" The man made another gesture Cain couldn't infer, but Gabe giggled, and blushed, before he leaned over and told Cain he didn't want to know.

Cain decided that he didn't, if it was gonna put him off the stuff, and tucked in hungrily.

Kujo ladled out seconds after a while, pleased to see Cain's cup extended eagerly. The boys wrinkled their noses, and finished their firsts slowly. He and Kujo

eventually cleaned out the pot, leaving Cain with an almost too-full stomach for the first time he could remember in a long while. He told Kujo as much, and the man smiled graciously. With the scars pulling at his lip, it looked not unlike some attempting to put on a strong front through a pained grimace, but he'd seen it enough by now to know it for what it was.

Gabe gave a put upon sight, staring up at the cloudy dark sky, before slumping tiredly onto his brother's shoulder, and while Micah scowled down at his head, he didn't shrug him off. "Where'd you learn ta shoot like that?" Micah asked him.

Cain must've mellowed with his full stomach, and with the smoke he'd started back to finishing, because he felt no instinctive bristling at the question. Heard himself say, "Alabama."

Micah's eyes widened in surprise, and his face lit with curiosity he was too young to know to smother. "*Alabama?*" he gasped.

"Wow," Gabe whispered and sat up. "That's so far! We've never been east a' west Texas."

Micah rolled his eyes. "Coyote always says the East is full'a nasty, noise, and too many people. Ain't worth goin'." He unknowingly echoed the similar tone Cain had known many a lady and gent out of Birmingham to effect of the precise location they were camped in, for the opposite reasons.

Cain scoffed, exhaling smoke in a cough. "Coyote ain't knowin' everything."

The boys both blinked at him at that, as though the thought had never occurred to them, and Cain belatedly realized he'd opened a whole can of worms now. The chance at eager, curious ears made him feel like he had something important to say, even though he didn't figure he did.

"What's it like?" Gabe asked.

He sighed as the memories flooded his senses, remembering. "Green. God, it's all green, everywhere. Grass and trees and ivy hanging off the houses like carpets."

Micah's face screwed up in confusion for a moment, and he muttered, "How's the hell it all grow?"

Cain laughed, open and loose in his chest with smoke. "Fool boy, it *rains*. Lord, how it rains." He said with a sigh, eyes falling closed nearly imagining the feeling of

it pounding on his face and against his eyelids, into his mouth and down his clothes. When he opened them, he found the boys staring at him in equal looks of fascination, so he continued.

“Rains all the damn time, so much the rivers swell up with it and flood the fields, nearly every year. One year, the river came up over the bank so high, me and my cousin Jeb had’ta built boats to get around to each other’s houses, flooded the cellar clear up to...” Cain paused, realizing just how much he’d loosened his tongue. Too sober to not start to feel embarrassed. “Ah, doesn’t matter.”

Gabe nearly pouted. “Course it does! Come on, Mr. Cain, tell us a story about *Alabama*.” He said it like Cain remembered talking about the *West* with Jeb, like it was some wonderland fit only for the imagination. And much like Cain’s experience with the reality of the West when he’d arrived, gimp leg and bone tired, looking for a scrap of peace, the South was no wonderland either. But it had been his home, and there was no judgment in those twin green eyes, looking across the fire at him in curiosity.

“Well.” Cain started awkwardly, fumbling and lighting another smoke. “My cousin Jeb always had a head for trouble. I was probably thirteen, maybe twelve, an’ it was summer. You wouldn’t believe the heat in the summer in Alabam,’ Lord, like you could cut through it with a butter knife, the air’s so thick with water.”

“There’s water in the *air*?!” Micah squawked, and Cain startled, and chuckled. “S’ *humid*. Like if you imagine some...big cloud you can see through, full’a rain that ain’t fallen yet, just hangin’ round, like steam. And its hot water too, an’ yer just stuck walking through it.”

The boy’s mouth’s were open in disbelief. “Yer havin’ us on. Kujo! He’s making fun’ of us, right?” Micah exclaimed. The man shook his head, grinning.

“No way.” Gabe breathed in awe.

Cain found himself grinning back, caught up in their childish wonder. “Yea’ *huh*. Anyways, was hot as the dickens and *humid*, an’ my cousin got the all-fired idea to help sneak me outta’ lessons. Climbed up the side a’ the house on the rose trellis and hauled me outta the second story window, ‘bout killed the both of us but we landed in the bushes.”

The twins listened, enraptured, as the former marshal's smoke-rough voice softened around the edges, accent dripping into a thicker drawl like the flow of warming honey as he continued his story, enthusiasm and a strange joy finding him as the memories came back to him. God the trouble they'd found that summer, last summer they'd had before talk of a war started.

When he'd finished telling how he and Jeb had spectacularly crashed the local debutante's fourteenth birthday party by loosing a hen house full of chickens into the tea-room and dyeing her hair blue with fountain pen ink, how it'd stayed that color half the summer, Gabe innocently asked, "What happened after that?"

Cain opened his mouth to tell him, before he realized that what came next in the story was his mother's rage and the foreman's belt, enough lashes he'd bled and cried, begged him to stop. More lashes than he'd ever gotten, Lord he remembered bawling like a baby, snot and tears all down his face, whimpering and sniveling, and how the foreman had *taunted* him. Resolve crystallizing inside him, like if he wanted it bad enough, nothing could make him cry ever again.

"Ain't a good story." Cain said, the honeyed drawl of home falling flat out of his voice.

Gabe frowned, about to pout, but Micah's hand clenched around his shoulder, and he shook his head. "Ain't s'posed ta' pry." Micah said.

At least Coyote had been teaching the boys *some* manners. Cain shook his head, offering them a tired smile. "S'Fine. Just ain't a story anyone wants ta' hear."



Mercedes had known Coyote since he was a boy so young he hadn't even earned his name, just an urchin with scraped knees and mixed blood, a dead Apache mother, and a white father who could barely be arsed to name his bastard son before he'd left him at the border town's mission. At the church, the padre had recorded his Christian name in the roll as *Silas Walker*, but they called him many other names, then, and before she'd even met him when he was the ripe age of eight, he'd been called so many horrible things he didn't care anymore.



She'd asked what to call him, and he shrugged. He didn't like to be called *Silas*.

He reminded her of the scruffy, too-skinny not-wolves that the hands used to shoot at on her father's ranch in Mexico to keep them away from the sheep, animals the men called *coyotes*, and she'd called him her *poco coyote*, her little coyote. Being a few years her senior, he'd taken this begrudgingly, until the crippled old Apache who worked the padre's gardens at the time had overheard this, and filled her *poco coyote's* mind with stories of *the Coyote*, *Ba'cho*, the great trickster spirit of all the many tribes, who went by many names and took many forms. Coyote had been instantly enraptured, and had then insisted that everyone he met call him Coyote, and when they muttered their insulting now under their breath, it seemed only to fuel the fire in his eyes, justify his choice of name. Coyote was not a beloved spirit, nor was he hated, and so too was her little Coyote.

But while Coyote's skin was thick to the ugly words men found to call him, it was thin and fragile as china lace to the ugly words men found for her. Even as children, Coyote had taken more than his share of beatings for the sake of her, until he was strong enough to learn to be every inch the trickster who's name he claimed and beat them back instead.

"Oh, Coyote." She muttered under her breath, catching up to him along the trail slowly. If he heard her, he didn't turn around, but after a while ignoring her following him, he stopped and turned around. She slipped out of the saddle and stood in front of him as he opened his mouth to speak, before crumbling and refusing to, angrily jerking away in disgust with himself before turning back and trying again.

When he spoke, it was in Spanish, hushed and furious. "Why didn't you let me kill him?"

"You know why." She replied.

His eyes flashed as he looked up at her. "The *hell* I do! I wouldn't've regretted it!"

"You would!" She snapped back. "Coyote, listen to me." She reached out and put her hands on the sides of his head, refusing to let him jerk away from her or duck his head. "I know you, *brother-of-my-heart*, and I know that it is not in your nature to kill in anger, or in cold blood. You would have regretted it."

The anger seemed to leak through him like a sieve, evaporating into nothing in an instant, leaving him limp and haggard. “No one talks about my girl that way.”

“All the better King live’s to regret it.” She whispered, drawing a weak laugh.

“He’ll live to be trouble and you know it.” He muttered back, allowing her to pull him close, and buried his face in her curls, breathing in the familiar scent of spiced perfume she still wore.

He’d bought her a vial of it at the market in Juarez when they’d been barely teenagers, after listening to her wax poetic about the whiff she’d caught of it in the tent-shop it for days, cost him every scrap of coin he could claim to his name, and it’d been worth it. He refused to ever steal it, buying her some every year they managed to get that far south.

It made her smell like wild honey and cloves, sweet and spiced like the cakes the sisters at the mission would bake sometimes on summer afternoons, the heated scent filling the air thick enough to taste.

She wrapped him in her arms, squeezing him tight, and her fingers tangled into his hair, scratching him lazily like a cat along his scalp, and he would’ve given a contented purr instead of a sigh if he could manage.

“What’d I do to deserve you huh?” He mumbled.

Mercedes chuckled, and kissed him on the cheek. “God himself wonders. Now, quit pouting and saddle up. Our men need their fearless leader back, and they need him not to be brooding like a barn cat with a trodden tail.”

He barked a laugh at that, and shook his head.



Cain woke up to the massive, bellowing roar of thunder, rumbling deep and low directly over his head, and he opened his eyes to find it still dark, barely able to see until lightening arched across the sky so thick and blinding he bolted backwards into the ravine wall on instinct.

“Jesus *Christ*.” He swore, and the thunder echoed him.

Barely a second in between the two, the storm was nearly straight on top of them.

Kujo had been sitting watch, and he met Cain's eyes, before looking back up out and out, down the ravine, at the roiling black mess of clouds above. He heard the boys waking up, bleary eyed and startled, before Cain heard a familiar hissing, pattering pound off in the distance, slowly building in speed and volume.

Coyote was suddenly right amongst them, saddle over his shoulder, Mercedes and their horses right behind him, and his eyes were wide with *fear*. "Grab your shit, we gotta move, *now!*" He roared, dragging the boys up straight off the ground, violently, and Micah started to bitch but when he heard the noise he went ghost white, and started scrambling.

"The devil?" Cain balked.

Mercedes had already coaxed their spooked horses up the steep edge of the ravine, and hollered something at Coyote.

"*Now*, Cain!!" Coyote hollered, his voice growing panicked when he saw trickles of water starting to hit the soles of his boots, flowing quicker and thickening.

Cain didn't even hesitate for a split second, that wasn't a tone a trained soldier ignored. That was the "do what I say or you *will* die" tone of command, the kind of way a man hollered "Git down!" right before a cannon ball hit the air your head used to be occupying, and its sound was engraved like muscle memory for obedience in Cain's head.

He had never scrambled his kit and saddle so fast in his life, found himself on Luce's bare back holding onto his saddle, bags and flopped out bedroll slung over his shoulder. The twins were coaxing their terrified horses up after him, and they refused to budge until Coyote planted a muddy boot hard into the ass of each of them, leaving them bucking and squealing but charging up the banks all the same, and he barely managed to grab Gabe by the back of his shirt and haul him up the bank as a veritable *river* came roaring down the once dry ravine, churning and frothy with muck and sand, running fast and deep enough to knock down and drown a horse in *seconds*.

They all stood there on the banks in stunned silence, catching their breath, as Coyote took survey of the people, followed by the horses and the gear, and he breathed a sigh of relief realizing they'd managed to get at least everything that couldn't be lived without.

That hissing, pounding sound grew sound thunderously loud, nearly deafened the flooded ravine, and Cain barely had time to look in its direction before the wave of pouring rain hit them like an upturned bucket full, soaking to the bone in an instant, jarringly cold and crisp in the still warm fall air of the early morning.

Cain gasped, as the water poured down around him, hard enough to rebound off the hard-packed dirt and puddle around his boots, and he felt himself smile as he tipped his head up into the downpour. God, the *rain*.

The laughter bubbled up inside him, startlingly light, and he dropped his already sodden bedroll and saddle to the ground, spreading his hands out like he could take the storm into himself, rain soaking every stitch he had on him, hair plastered to his head, strands clinging to his beard and his eyelashes stuck together.

Coyote's voice was muffled over the roar of the rain, and he was standing next to Cain with his saddle over his head, gazing at him with wild, wide eyes. "Are you crazy?" The Indian hollered.

Cain laughed harder, and grinned at him.

"It's *raining*," Cain hollered back, manic glee vibrating through him, and the Indian's eyes got wider.

"Yer crazy!" He shouted.

Cain suddenly felt as though he was a man from out of the bible, a crippled sinner whose legs had straightened, who knew now the joy of the Lord once more, and here Coyote was, still a sinner, so blind to the joy and the grace around him.

"It's *raining*!"



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Fifty-Three Card Deck*

Coyote spent the next morning skulking around like some kind of sodden cat, whining about the damp and the puddles fast drying up on the parched ground, and glaring at Cain in suspicion, as though he were some kind of weather god in disguise, and the whole mess last night was his fault.

Cain was still too high on the unbridled joy of the rain to care.

Their gear was hopelessly soaked through, though the sky had cleared quickly after the downpour, the sun bringing at least a passing chance that everything but their bedrolls would dry out before nightfall. Coyote had also had a glare for Kujo, having been the unfortunate selector of their previous night's camp, but the man had shrugged it off with practiced ease.

Once Coyote had been placated with that thick brewed coffee and grits heavy with bacon grease, he'd turned the brunt of his ire back to Cain. Coyote's brow screwed up for a moment, looking away like he was trying to recall something, and then he laughed, and exclaimed something in what Cain had to assume was some Indian tongue, for it sounded like nothing Cain's mouth or head could wrap around, and he had at least a passing ability to butcher a few words in Spanish.

"Huh?" Cain asked.

Coyote laughed, and repeated the word, or words, he wasn't sure. Cain shook his head. "That hunk's a jibberish s'posed ta mean something?"

"*Stormcloud*." Coyote said, smiling suddenly, "It means *stormcloud*."

Cain scowled. "Uh huh."

“It suits you.”

“Huh?” Cain asked again, confused.

Mercedes snorted, and said that word again at him, slow and overly drawn out, emphasizing each syllable, as if expecting it to make sense somehow now that she’d done it. She scoffed in disgust when Cain attempted to blunder his way through repeating after her.

“White men are shit at language. Cayn’t even speak your own.” She muttered.

Cain bristled. “Well it ain’t like I need to say whatever the hell that is.”

“It’s a good name for you.” Mercedes placated, smiling broadly in condescension and patting him on the shoulder as she walked around them to see to the horses.

Cain scowled at her retreating back, and Coyote laughed, apparently now in good humor once more, nodding.

“It is. You walk ‘round, all dark and heavy, think’n too much, well it up inside, but then when it rains, yer *happy*. Get ta let all them dark thought flood out. Fucking crazy bastard —” and then he said the word again. It sounded to Cain’s untaught ear not unlike someone speaking some opium-twisted mish mash of the throatiness of German and the melody of French, all the while attempting to chew a full mouthful of cool molasses. Simultaneously, the most fascinating words he’d ever heard, and a collection of sounds that seemed entirely unlike actual *speaking*. Like listening to the yips and yowls of wild dogs, knowing that they were communicating, but failing to understand *how*.

“Only happy when everyone else’s miserable!” Mercy shouted back at them.

Cain stood there mulling that over for a while, but that only made the Indian more smug. “See, yer doin’ it again. Thinkin’ n’ scowlin.’ Too much rain in your head, Cain!”

“Well scuse me for not bein’ fuck’n cheerful for bein’ wanted by the goddamn law!”

“Relax.” Coyote drawled, spreading his arms wide, gesturing to the rain swept wide open plains behind him. “You were fuck’n cheerful over nearly drownin’ in the goddamn rain. What’s a little law compared to that?”



And so, without any great fuss or further thought, Cain found himself in the continued company of wanted men. Life on the trail with Coyote's Dogs was better the second time around, albeit still rife with the occasional tension, near-miss brushes with the law and with settlers and the equally dangerous sparking of tempers among Coyote's strange posse over Cain's presence among them. Micah seemed to regard him with feigned disinterest that slowly warmed to a grudging respect, and an open fascination, bordering on adoration, on the part of Gabe.

Half drunk over the fire one night, he'd found himself continuing to tell tales of him and his cousin Jeb's summer exploits, cavorting along the overrun creeks on makeshift rafts, climbing trees, and chewing fresh tobacco, lazing in the shade, imagining trouble they ought to get into to pass the time.

The memories had left Cain smiling, and left the boys enraptured, Gabe hounding him half the nights for stories from the South, and Micah listening keen, while he pretended not to be. Captivated by the idea of rolling green hills, dense trees filled with vines, and the heavy, lushness of the rainy seasons. Mansions of winding staircases, hidden passage ways, vast tracks of land exploding with cotton and tobacco, and the ever present damp and the richness of life.

Must've seemed a pretty picture, to boys who'd only known the hard life of plains settlers and outlaws, and Cain sometimes caught himself missing it fiercely, lump in his throat as he spoke, equally caught up in the daydream. The South to them held no images of cannon smoke and no lingering screams of horses and men, none of the fire and devastation Cain knew had laid waste to the lands of his childhood. Blackened and split open like the rotted out husk it had become, cracking under the weight of too much black flesh and stubborn rebel pride.

He learned they were barely sixteen, and it horrified him to think what they'd seen and done, to be as grown as they were in the company of seasoned outlaws, but then, he and Jeb had been not much older, when they'd joined the war. Jeb hadn't been more than seventeen when he died, with a Union man's bayonet through his gut, choking on his own blood. Cain had killed so many that day, some with his bare

hands and his boot knife when his ammunition ran dry, he barely remembered how long he'd fought before a few of the men who'd remained of the company had hauled him bodily off the field, screaming for the only brother he'd ever known. God, he'd aged what seemed like a decade that day.

None of the men had called him *boy*, even in jest, ever again.

Kujo continued to passively tolerate him, as far as Cain could tell, content to withhold judgment, and was an easy enough man to get along with. Then again, it was somewhat less awkward to make awkwardly sparse conversation with a man who couldn't talk, although he got along with his hands alright, not that Cain could figure it out.

Coyote had them on watch together most nights, Mercedes still being vocally opposed to the idea of the ex-Marshall on watch alone. He wasn't sure if it was because she didn't trust him to keep his eyes sharp, or if she didn't trust him not to try and kill them all in their sleep, even after sticking his neck out for Gabe, but whatever her trust was, it was a fickle and hard thing Cain didn't have the interest or patience to acquire.

Kujo seemed to find this all in good humor, and Cain found it easy to settle into comfortable silence with him through the long dark hours of the watch. On a particularly dull early morning before dawn, over too much cigarette ash and coffee, he'd asked the man how he'd come to be called Kujo, unsure how this could be explained by a mute, but bored enough not to care. The giant had smiled, extracting a weathered, many-years folded copy of a birth certificate dated January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1837, from the London Infirmary, of all places. There on the line next to "name of offspring" was the name Calpurnius Ulysses Jameson O'Shaughnessy. *CUJO*.

Cain started to laugh, and the mute joined him, tucking the certificate away. Strange thing to have among a man's effects, but then, with a name like that, and a *birth certificate* of all the newfangled things to have, Cain reckoned there was a sight more to the man than even Coyote probably realized.

Mercedes continued to hold him at a mild cold war, unleashing the better part of her wicked tongue at him on every standing opportunity, and was gleeful for the chance to make woman-shy Cain trip over his own words in frustration. Her



resentment occasionally simmered long enough to sprout wings, spurred on by Cain's own growing anger and misspoken words.

He hadn't meant to kick up dust with the woman, but she was so aggressively unlike any woman he'd ever met that it seemed like everything she did or said caused him shock or disgust, which in turn ruffled her feathers, which opened her cursed mouth and started the cycle all over again.

Gradually, painfully slow, his respect for her grew enough that he endeavored to keep his mouth shut, but she knew all the right places to jab, and her words often left him surly and uncomfortable at best.

Coyote himself seemed to be cheerfully ignoring the quarrels of his flock and his woman, and had made it his personal agenda to now convince Cain of the merits of the outlaw's life, which he suspected was another part of why Mercedes' grudge with him remained strong.

Cain had to wonder how his life had come to this. Many times, he'd had the thought when they'd come to a split in the trail that he could just veer off and cut his own, head for the Montana territory, or the Wyoming, find a sleepy enough town that no one'd be the wiser. Cut his hair, shave his beard and disappear from the world, from these crazy people.

But while he was loath to admit it, his fascination with Coyote had only grown the longer he spent in the Indian's company. He'd expected whatever cursed spark there'd been would fade with time and exposure, that he'd find the outlaw impossible to stand, that at some point his admiration, his growing obsession, would collapse and sour in the face of the reality that was Coyote.

But it'd only grown, deepened as he found new facets to the man to admire. He caught himself far too often watching him on the trail, the grace in the lines as he rode and his wicked tongue as he joked with the twins or Mercedes and Kujo, razor sharp wit and a ready smile that took over his whole face and creased it with comfortable lines.

The conflicting knowledge that under it all was a man with a core of iron, how he'd looked tensed to the quick with rage, the wide breathlessness in those grey brown eyes when he'd faced down a storm.

When he'd been eight, Cain remembered seeing a red fox in the woods when he'd been chasing after Jeb hunting squirrels, how he'd frozen and so had it, the two of them staring at each other, and he'd been stuck in a paradoxical desire to do everything he could to keep that beautiful creature wild, keep anyone from trapping it, and wanting nothing more than to have it butt up against his head like a loyal hound, brought to heel at his beck and call.

There was a terrible, joyful, animal wildness to Coyote that made something in Cain ache in the same admiration and the same selfish desire.

Whenever he caught himself, his hands tightened on the reins and he forced his mind elsewhere. It was all folly, anyhow, the Indian's love for the woman at his side ran deep, his affections plain.

Cain forced himself to imagine the Indian's face twisting in hatred and disgust at the thoughts which occupied Cain's mind, but even the knowledge that the man would strike him, maybe even kill him for his terrible admirations, did little to shake his obsession.

So, he'd stuck with them.

They'd cut straight south for Texas, first, but their trail was erratic once they'd neared the border, crisscrossing rivers and up ridgelines, through the bowels of canyons. Cain had come to the more firm realization that there was no sober way to follow the Indian's train of thought, but he'd seen hide nor hair of the Marshal or any other law since their first violent encounter, so even if the man was crazy, it was working.

Mercedes had cheerfully brought him a fresh paper copy of his own wanted poster, when they passed around Lubbock and she went in for supplies. He hadn't had a good look in a creek or mirror in a while, but the hastily printed sketch under the words, "Wanted: A.C. Bradshaw" painted him a gruesome thug, heavy brow shadowing his eyes, knotted nose, with wild long hair and a heavy beard like some kind of mountain man. Coyote had laughed at the scowl Cain made down at it, mirroring the one on the poster to a T, and had remarked that they'd done his face justice.

They kept low to the south, skirting all but the largest border towns to keep the law as in the dark as they could while staying fresh in bullets and their larder. Coyote had all but crowed in smug satisfaction on catching hearsay out of Las Cruces and Fort Yuma that them Mad Dogs had tucked tail and headed for them hills after a brush with King in the plains, probably up way'nuff north to be speakin' French and trapping beaver by now.

From there, they started north through the California territory, air turning cooler even as the fall started to settle into the land, and Cain felt like he could taste more rain on the air, some days, and the thought filled him with an unshakeable scrap of hope. The land crept into shades of green as they ate up miles of trail up the continent, and the sight of verdant leafy plants and the evergreen of woods and forests coating the hillsides, even if it was dry with the season, was a sight for wretched sore eyes.

It seemed to set Coyote's teeth on edge to be out of the desert, and his blood grew agitated the further north they got, eyes and body restless for the wide-open spaces of the plains. Or rather, for a cathouse and a card table, if Mercy's increasingly insulting comments were any indication.

Eventually, need for supplies brought them to the former gold rush town of Eltopia, which Coyote jokingly claimed was originally called "Hell to Pay" but had been shortened for the sake of Christian sensibility. Once swollen with hundreds of men eager to make their fortune, the place had collapsed into a frothing cesspool of crime and dust occupied only by those with no where else to go. Still, it had bootleg liquor, a few ladies of the line, and little enough contact with the outside world that Coyote reckoned they could stop in for while. Mercedes had laughed, and demanded the Indian hand over his billfold, before grabbing the boys and heading for whatever passed as a general store in the place.

They must've passed through the town before, because Coyote made a beeline for an old building sagging its way back into the dust on the east end of town, a good sized hall that looked like it might've done roaring business years ago, surrounded by other out-buildings which had become completely abandoned.

The saloon was quiet, but then the whole town was quiet, not enough bodies about to be making much noise, a standing ghost town left only to the vagrants and the handful of folks still trying to pan the streams, or to eek out a living farming the hard, rocky soil.

The place was built with obvious haste, numerous sloppy refittings, the weather-worn wood of cheap quality to start, worse out on the deck, creaking with the wind and saturated with dust, ate out with mites. Inside, just a few tables remained and a lone bar, occupied by a few salty looking drifters, and a small group of locals and hands scrunched in around a table playing poker.

They all looked up Cain and Coyote's entrance, before quickly looking back to their business, a testament to just how much of a godforsaken hellhole this joint was in, and Coyote gave Cain a wink before sidling his way up to the poker table.

"You boys playin' poker?" He heard Coyote ask, wolfish grin as he hauled over a spare chair to join them.

The local men seemed wary of his obvious good humor, but dealt him in all the same, perhaps hoping that the fresh stranger would have a sight more money, and less sense, than the regulars. A few of the men were old enough to be Cain's father, worn down and crippled young from labor, likely forty-niners who'd never left even when the gold dried up, never struck it rich but made well enough they never got fed up and got out.

A couple younger men, farmers by the clothes, and a black-clad drifter who looked to be in the process of fleecing the rest of them, by the distribution of bills and coins on the table. The man gave Coyote a slow up-down look of recognition, and his mouth curled in a greasy smirk. He reminded Cain of a raven, too alert and sharp to be easy on the nerves

"Why, if it ain't *Bacho* himself." He drawled, and Coyote's grin went wide in return, evidently the two were mutually acquainted, which Cain figured meant the other man was wanted enough to not draw attention to either of them in a bar full of strangers. "Ain't played a game with you in a long while."

Coyote accepted his cards, fanning them out, and *winked* at the man. "You ain't had the cash to play with wily ol' me and you know it."

Cain just sat down at the bar and adjusted his gun belt, leaving the holster catch unsnapped, just in case.

"What'll you want, then?" The man at the bar asked.

Cain ordered a slug of gin, and the first sip confirmed that whatever it was, it sure as hell *wasn't* gin, but he resigned himself to working through the rest while Coyote played cards in the background. The occasional muffled curse, rustling of cards and clank of coins and glasses, as the tired old game started to pick up interest from the other men with a fresh player.

The rounds started to pass by, building up fervor as the Indian started cleaning up, pile of bills and change in front of his spot at the table growing.

He heard Coyote's smug voice, drawl, "I wouldn'n do that if I was you, hoss."

Cain turned enough to keep a closer eye on the table from his seat at the bar.

"Oh izzat right? Well you ain't me, an' I know you's full a shit, bluffin' me like you gotta' ace flush. Fuck off, jack." The big drifter across from him jeered, and the Indian laughed, scratching the side of his nose, never breaking eye contact with the other. The men gathered around the table jeered and hollered at that, banging on the table, goading the remaining pair left yet to fold on. The barkeep was glaring at Cain like he was some how to blame for it all.

"Th' name ain't Jack, *Jack*, and you still gotta bet." Coyote replied, chuckling. "Ante up or fold. If'n ya wanna take my advice, and I'd *highly* suggest you do, ya'd best bow out now with yer dignity still in tact. I'd feel mighty bad, cleaning every man at this table, yerself too, plumb down ta' yer last dollar."

Jack grinned back, a real mean-eyed twisted smile. "An' I wouldn't feel bad in the slightest sweep'n yer sorry red-skinned ass. I'm still in." He dropped another bill on the pile in the center of the table.

Coyote shook his head, smirking ear to ear, that lone blue jay feather riding jaunty just behind his ear, a brazen slash of color against the washed out blur of the saloon and the coal black of the man's long hair. He licked his lips, chuckling. "Jack, Jack, Jack, ya' never learn."

Jack's eyes narrowed, and then widened when the Indian placed a single folded note on the pile, with a flourish.

Some of the other men went quiet. "Shheeeet, boy, izzat a—"

"Bank note for a few pasos? Oh yes it is." The Indian teased. Cain wondered where he'd hid that from Mercy, let alone whatever else he'd put down to start with.

Jack peered over the table and used his finger to pry open the folded note, and wolf-whistled. Coyote smiled. "Well, Jack? Either you pony up or you fold, your call."

"The hell, you fucker, ain't nobody 'round here got that kinda money ta lay on *cards*." One of the other boys muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. Either the stranger was flat out crazy or he was *dangerous*. Maybe both.

Nobody sane or safe laid that kind of money down on the table with a deck of cards. Especially not in this beat old town. The drifter glanced at Coyote, shaking his head again, and laughed, "Still crazy ain'tcha, you sum'bitch."

"Plum' outta my mind in fact." The Indian replied, completely unperturbed.

Cain watched, turned full around in his seat now, as Jack took a throaty swallow of warm whiskey out of his glass, and folded, setting his cards face down on the table.

The Indian set his cards face up, each card making a soft slap against the greasy table as he fanned them out, one after the other, revealing a full, royal spade flush. The grin on his face was wide enough to flash a hint of the gold fillings in the right side of his mouth.

"I tol'ja ya didn't wanna try'n game me, *Jack*."

One of the older men in the circle, filthy and probably more flea ridden than most, crowed a laugh, and hooted, "Sonuvabitch."

There was a chorus of disbelieving groans, curses, and a few wolf-whistles. Jack scowled in deep thought, or at least what passed for deep thought in his likely over-smoked, over-liquored brain. "Now jus' hang on a damn minute."

He flipped his own cards back over, revealing a straight flush of diamonds; a good hand, good enough most games to win clean and even, but not enough to beat a royal spade flush. Nothing was.

"Y'all flip your cards over, Ah' dunno if I believe this crock."

The Indian shrugged, throwing his arms up and folding his hands behind his head, leaning back in his chair.

Jack reached over, flipping over the other's hands and puzzling over them, looking for the cheat card he knew had to be there. There was just no fucking way.

"They's all there, hoss," one of the boys replied, shaking his head. "He just skunked us."

"Fuckin' oily rat-bastard." Jack snarled, sinking back in his chair in disgust with himself more than Coyote. The Indian grinned, and offered, "Anyone up for another round?"

The drifter shook his head, grin creeping back in as his hand fell on the pommel of his gun, and he drawled, "How's about you take what buck you put down, and nothing else, Injun, and then you leave with a few less holes. Ah know'd you cheated."

The bar fell dead quiet just as soon as his hand hit the pommel. Coyote's left hand hit his sidearm in an instant, and a stalemate fell. The other boys were all looking uneasily at Jack and the Indian, a few looking back to eyeball Cain, but the barkeep wasn't, wiping the greasy glasses down with an already dirty rag, more interested in the bits of soup fat still left on his moustache than the men in his saloon.

The flea-ridden old hand was staring down at his cards curiously.

"Wait, ain't that—" he reached down and loosened a card, sticky with drying ale, pinned to the back of the two of spades in his hand.

His neighbor whistled. "Ah'll be damned," The old man said, chuckling rapidly descending into a wheezing rheumatic laugh, because right there in his hand, where it'd been all along, was the real ace of spades.

Jack stared down at the card, and Cain nearly groaned like an animal in pain. Coyote just smirked.

"Oops."

"Sonuvabitch!!" Jack hollered, drawing his gun at the same time as Coyote, quick draw like lightening, and the stood there facing each other, the Indian with those two pearl-handled guns cocked and the other with what looked by Cain's eyes to be a *forty five*, Jesus, aimed straight at the Indian's head with a mirrored grin.

The barkeep leveled a shotgun, glaring at the pair and hollered, “Dammit, Ah’ tol’jew before, Jack, you take it the fuck outside! Ain’t havin’ no shoot out in the damn bar!”

Coyote looked back at Cain for a moment, spotting his ready hand on his own gun, but his opponent spotted it too, and narrowed his eyes at Cain. “Ah, hold it right there. You stay outta’ this, blondie. Ain’tcher fight.” He pointed a thumb outside and motioned for Coyote to lead the way.

Apparently reaching some kind of accord, both holstered their pistols, and disappeared off the boardwalk.

Cain swore under his breath, drawing his gun and hopped over the bar top and out the back door, scrambling behind the saloon and ducking into the cover of an abandoned stable off to the right.

He strained to hear any sounds of fists or shots, Coyote’s drawl or the other man’s jeering, but he couldn’t see them till the pair of them rounded the corner, startled to find neither with guns drawn now, standing too close for a shoot out. Coyote’s eyes were sparking with interest, and Jack’s grin was ripe with smug satisfaction.

Coyote took both hands off his pistols, holding them placatingly out to his sides, and Cain heard the other man say, “What’s say you do me a *favor*, an’I forget all about this, huh? Like old times?”

Cain half expected the Indian to pull out his billfold, stolen back from Mercedes, and pay the man off, but when he didn’t so much as smile wider, he knew he hadn’t. What kind of damn fool plays crooked poker with out money or a gun?

Coyote kept his hands up in an almost cavalier surrender, and said, “No sense’n settling something in cash or bullets, when there’s a civil way ta’ go about it.”

The man, Jack, looked victorious. “Ah’ thought you might say that.”

He pulled his own hand away from his gun, and waved a hand towards the shaded inside of the abandoned storefront behind them, spare hand nudging Coyote forward and up the cracked back steps next to the saloon.

Cain adjusted his grip on his own gun, pressing himself tighter into the shade of the porch front to keep out of sight, and crouched up just high enough to get a sight over the railing before the pair were gone inside. Coyote caught side of the flash of



sun of his iron, and shook his head slightly in Cain's direction. The devil did that crazy Injun think he was gonna do, re-holster and go around town whistling, looking for his woman to tell her he'd lost the boss? Let him get killed?

Cain swore under his breath, and hopped over the railing, hitting the gravel with a crunch and following the pair up onto the former shop steps. The windows were broken-clear of any glass, now, and there were ceiling beams broken and sagged into the floor in places, spilling blotches of sunlight straight into the dust filled room. The few residents of Eltopia with enough money or gumption to be out and about had apparently had the good sense to clear the streets, because Cain couldn't see or hear a soul.

Blasted place was halfway to a ghost town when they'd come in and now it was just eerie, the men from the bar evidently finding better things to do, unconcerned with the outcome of the fight.

The former Marshal crouched low on the porch, and caught sight of the pair around the collapsed center beam. Jack smiled at Coyote, who was backed up against the wall looking characteristically predatory, humming with energy, and Cain felt his breath leave him in a startled gasp when the Indian sagged gracefully to his knees on the rotted wood floor, and looked back up at the man standing above him with a grin.

Jack snickered, and his hands fumbled with the buttons on his pants before reaching out to shove two rough-calloused fingers into Coyote's mouth and yank his jaw open, digging dangerously against his teeth and raking over his tongue.

Cain watched in growing disbelief as the man palmed his cock, stroking it hard and then fed it over his fingers into the Indian's mouth in one long thrust that left Coyote gagging. Saw him pull back with a choke instinctively, only to lunge forward, forcing himself to take it deeper into his throat.

Jack's hands fastened white-knuckle tight into Coyote's loosened black hair and forced his head to stay still when he finally came flush with the man's body.

The Indian's hands scratched against the man's pants, clawing and grabbing, one hand on his hip and the other around his thigh, and in one terrible, crystal moment, Cain realized he wasn't trying to fight the man off, he was tugging him *closer*.

He must've been breathing, but Cain couldn't see how, as Jack rocked his hips forward, hard and fast, hands going lax in the Indian's hair. Cain's aim trembled in shock as he froze, unable to move or fire or look away, the room filled with Jack's grunting and the obscene wet noise of Coyote's mouth.

One of Coyote's hands drifted down, and adjusted himself in his pants, holy *fuck*, the man was just as hard, and the noise of his mouth grew sloppier, heady groans vibrating out of his throat that made the man above him speed up.

Cain flinched as he felt his own cock stir at the sight, grimacing and forcing his eyes away from it even as the sounds grew louder. He heard Jack swear, breathless, before he slumped forward over Coyote, and Cain futilely tried to steady his aim again, looking back. He heard the man say something, mocking and low under his breath, before he saw Coyote stagger up and throw a punch that knocked clear on his ass, limp and unconscious.

He made a thick hawking noise in the back of his throat before spitting up a wad of gunk on the man's face, and then he wiped his mouth and let his hand settle back down to his pants, rubbing himself through the fabric before he bit his lip and undid them.

Cain couldn't move, couldn't breath, watching with wide eyes as Coyote took himself in hand and came in few hurried strokes, noisy, messily spilling over his fist with a groan. Stood there panting against the wall before Cain heard him laugh, and he wiped his hand on Jack's shirtsleeve before tucking himself back into his pants. Cain tore his eyes away, heartbeat thundering in his ears, and he panicked for a split second as he realized that the Indian was walking his way.

Cain bolted, uncaring if the wood creaked slightly as he threw himself off the deck and scrambled around the back for the bar, ducking into the shade between the buildings. He heard Coyote laugh again, and the creaking rhythm of boots as he trotted on sluggish legs down the steps of the storefront and into the blinding sunlight, grimacing up at it. He seemed to think over something like returning to the bar, but thought better of it, and turned, disappearing out of sight down the street, heading for Mercedes, maybe.

Cain let out a massive gasping breath when his lungs realized he'd been holding his breath in too long as he hid, and he came down from the adrenalin rush of the past handful of minutes shaking and panting, sweat pooling down his spine even as he shivered.

"Fuck." He muttered as he caught his breath. God. Cain was not naïve to the act, he'd heard the whispers and tale of it in the army and on the trail, mostly talk of favors extracted from whores too jaded to care if it was sodomy or not. Intrinsicly, he'd known it was possible for a man to carry out the act as well, but to see it performed in front of his eyes in broad daylight set his mind reeling, stumbling blindly behind his body.

It should have curdled Cain's gut in disgust to see the Indian so debased on his knees, to catch the glassy lust in his eyes as he'd stroked himself after the fact, clearly depraved enough to have enjoyed being so defiled, but it left him breathless with arousal instead.

His thoughts veered briefly to imagining how it would feel, to have Coyote that way on his knees, to tangle his hands in the Indian's thick mane of black hair and feel the heated wet of the Indian's wicked mouth on him, gagging down so hard and fast like he was hungry for it.

His cock throbbed in his too-tight pants at that, and in disgust, he tried to banish the image from his mind, strangle his arousal. Even as he barely managed that, his mind treacherously turned to imagining himself in the Indian's place. The very thought left shudders wracking him, shocked and appalled and suddenly more turned on than he'd ever been in his life, for there couldn't be a thing more vile and depraved than imagining the weight of a man's cock on his tongue.

Coyote's steely hands gripping his skull by the roots of his hair, forcing him to choke and gag, oh *god*.

Cain was overwhelmed, and for a brief moment instinct let his hand reach down and run over the surface of his pants, and he groaned at the pleasure that rolled down his spine with the sweat as he slumped against the wall of the saloon, rubbing at his cock, desperate and overcome with scrambling need. The noise shocked him out of it like a bucket of icy creek water, and his hand flew off like he'd been stung.

He could have wept from it, flesh hard and aching even as his mind was full of shame and terror, horrified by the trail his thoughts had taken, that he'd had so little self-control as to even think to take himself in hand, let alone to imagine the things which had filled his mind out of nowhere. Torn between revulsion and an animal envy that gradually soured in frustrated anger.

Cain clung to that thread of anger like a drowning man on a rope to shore and let waves of self-hatred curdle and burst outwards into a black rage at everything else. Rage at the man, Jack, and most of all at Coyote, for placing the seeds of Cain's distress in his mind, for the allowances he gave his body which Cain in his fear had never allowed of himself.

That writhing anger was all that was left by the time he made his way back into the saloon, dark with it like the storm cloud the damn Indian called him, and as he slammed down onto the bar stool, the barman poured him a healthy slug of the same not-gin from before. Cain's mind snarled with the thought that if the Indian had thought him a storm cloud before, he'd quickly find he'd only been standing in the brief peaceful eye of the hurricane that was Cain.

The burn of the clear firewater in the glass grated against his throat, and he embraced it, disgust only adding to the pile. When Coyote deigned to return to the bar to collect their errant ex-Marshall, Cain had had more than enough that a smaller man would be stumbling, desperate for anything to drown out the chaos and the want and the hate in his head.

He knocked back one more while the Indian stared at him, face a little puckered in confusion, and brushed past him hard enough to knock shoulders with the man, scowl set deep in his face.

The mind-numbing sink of the alcohol was all that let him sleep that night.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Sleeping Dogs Lie*

Mercedes had been called a great number of unsavory things in her life, but never let it be said that *stupid* was among them. So when she came around the pathetic excuse for a saloon that barely remained standing on the edge of Eltopia, only to find their ex-Marshall near to humming he was so pent up in rage, and Coyote looking smug with a wrung-out look of animal satisfaction in his eyes, she knew something had gone down and it might've been ugly. That or it'd get that way in a hurry. The things her mind jumped to right off were quickly dismissed, as Coyote was missing the requisite bullet holes, but there were a great number of alternatives which could still spell trouble.

Cain's breath smelled so ripe as he passed her she could've lit the fumes off with a match, but he managed to saddle his horse, riding out ahead of the rest of them as they headed out of town. Gabe retreated from attempting to strike up talk with the man, with his tail between his legs like a kicked puppy, leaving Kujo frowning, and Micah glaring holes in the former Marshall's back.

The notion that maybe the man was just a mean drunk went down sourly, she'd known, and been known, to have killed her fair share of them, but that alone wouldn't explain Coyote's opposing cheerfulness.

Cleaning up gambling didn't set the man light in the saddle anywhere near like getting laid. A whore, maybe, in town. She'd seen them leaning around like wilted flowers on the porch of the makeshift cat-house, and they were old and haggard enough she wished she could dismiss the idea out of hand.

God knows what kind of sickness they could have festering between their legs.

No, Coyote was smart enough to know when to play with *that* fire.

They made camp later that night, Cain tossing his bedroll out a ways from the fire, passing out as the alcohol in his blood hit him hard, and when Kujo cocked an eyebrow at her in askance, she didn't have an answer for him. God only knew what drove men like that to drink.



“What’d you do to the poor fucker?” Mercy snapped, jerking a thumb in the direction of Cain’s motionless form.

Coyote looked genuinely confused for a moment, brow wrinkled. “Cain? Nothin.”

“Nothin’ don’t explain why yer chipper as spring robin and the Marshal over there looks like he drank his weight in moonshine!” She hissed back, glaring over at him in the dark.

“Ah.” Coyote drawled.

“Yeah.” She said. “So spill.”

“Dunno what’s got him lit up, Merce. Honest.” He placated, hands greedily finding the curves of her hip and hooking behind to scoop her forward, bringing their bodies flush into the middle of their combined bedrolls. She latched onto his diversion in a well-practiced instant, and smacked at his hand.

“Who’d you find in town? And don’t tell me it was one’a them poor *putas* on the line, you could’a smelled the syph’ on ‘em for a mile.”

Mercy saw his nose wrinkle even as he laughed. “Aww, Merce.”

“Who. Was. It.” She hissed, jabbing him in the ribs, and trying not to smirk as he yelped and retreated, the little cuss.

“Uh. Well. Jack was playin’ poker, an—“

Her eyes flared wide and she snarled, “You fucked *Black Jack Taylor?! Coyote!*”

Coyote winced. “I didn’t *fuck* him,” he started, only to be cut off as Mercy sat up, forcing him off her entirely and crossing her arms in an all-too-familiar indignant fury.

“Don’t go splitting hairs with me, *Ba’cho*.” She spit.

The name made Coyote flinch.

“It was just a bit of fun, Merce, you know that.” He said back, any smugness bleeding out of him now.

“That ain’t what’s got me pissed, an’ *you* know it.”

Coyote sighed, sitting up himself, wool blankets pooling at his waist and the air cool on his bare chest. The silence grew heavy under the weight of her glare. “Dunno what you want me ta’ say, Thistle.”

She bristled at the childhood nickname, eyes narrowing. “Sorry’d be nice.”

He snorted, air puffing out his nose. “Please. I ain’t apologizin’ for shit. I give you grief over your men? Huh? Yer women?”

Mercy growled in frustration, and descended into rapid-fire Spanish, “No, you don’t, and it ain’t *about* that! Man’s a fuckin’ sleeze, Coyote. Maybe it’s sprung yer mind since yer thinkin’ with yer dick, like fuckin’ always, but I remember the way that *pendejo* used to look at the boys when you brought them ‘round the bars. When they were *fourteen*.” Her hands were moving faster and more expansive as her anger stirred.

Coyote winced deeply, looking away. “I...yeah I ain’t got an excuse for that one.”

“Reckoned you don’t.” She muttered darkly.

“Look, Merce, he was around, and I just...needed ta let off a little steam. You know how it goes. Don’t mean nothing.” He offered, and with a tired roll of her eyes, Mercedes ire began to soften. “Mhmm. I know. But next time, find a different prick ta—” She paused for a moment, and they shared a grin at the innuendo.

Coyote descended into cackles of laughter as she rolled her eyes again and slapped him on the side. “You know what I meant.”

He just giggled, and flopped back onto the bedroll, sprawling out like some big lazy cat.

“Let’s say I make it up to you darlin’, huh, whatcha want?” He asked, snaking a hand up her thigh and squeezing, devil’s smile, not looking nearly as contrite as he aught.

Mercedes smiled back. “You gotta ask?”

Coyote laughed, and tackled her in a pounce, burying his face in the crook of her neck as his hands found the buttons of her pants with practiced ease in the low dark. She lifted her hips to help him tug them off, and when he started to paw and kiss his way downwards, she chuckled. “Huh’uh.” She breathed, digging her hand into his hair and tugging.

His brow creased and he looked up at her in mild confusion. “You don’t want—“

Mercedes smirk grew wide like a cat in cream. “Oh, I do,” she purred. With all the saddle-worn strength of a seasoned rider, she locked ankles around his torso like she was holding down a calf for roping, clenched and twisted, swinging herself above him to sit on his chest. The air left his chest in a huff, and he winced at the pressure until she unhooked her feet and sprawled her legs out on either side of him.

She was naked save for the worn button down still hanging, half buttoned and too-big over her shoulders, and Coyote’s hands immediately went for her hips, squeezing and stroking, curling down to cup her ass and up to the small of her back.

Mercy pulled her knees forward until she could hook them around Coyote’s sun-blackened shoulders, and teased her thumb along his lower lip, cupping his chin. She felt more than saw the shudder of arousal thrum through him as she toyed with him, catching up to her thinking. “Merce—” He started, and she slipped her thumb in to catch it on his teeth, tugging his mouth further open and chasing it with two fingers she dug into his tongue, hard enough she felt him gag.

“Such a filthy fucking mouth on you, huh, Coyote.” She whispered.

He bucked up against her, and groaned around her fingers, tongue going pliant and sloppy, licking eagerly, trying to tease her back. When she pulled them out he followed them, and she could see enough of his face even in the grey-dark of the tent that his pupils were blown.

“That silver tongue’a yers always gets you into trouble.” She teased, and he chuckled. “Gets me outta’ trouble, too.”



“Oh?” Mercedes said, light with false curiosity. The little devil winked at her.

“Prove it.” She taunted, and rocked forward, pulling her hips up and kneeling above his head, just high enough. Coyote groaned, and stretched his head up, tugging her hips down as he buried his mouth in her sex, licking and sucking. She followed his eager tongue down and ground into his face, forcing him to comply to her own rhythm, which was punishingly fast and hard.

Mercedes barely gave him leave to breath, enjoying how he writhed under her, desperate for his own release and yet so eager to please. When she lifted up off him to give him some air, even as he gasped heavily for it, he rubbed his face against her thigh, chasing after her.

She indulged him, and rode him mouth until both of them were a sloppy mess of her slick and his spit, and she came with a quiet shudder. His tongue immediately gentled, lazy wet strokes that kept her shaking for long moments, until she was content to pull away. Mercy’s thighs shivered with loose-limbed exertion, and she loosened her grip in his hair to a petting scratch.

The sight of him down between her knees, pupils so black they swallowed the grey-brown of his eyes, lips and chin red from friction and pressure, she felt impossibly fond.

“Good boy.” She purred, and chuckled when he shuddered with pleasure at the praise. She knew he had to be hard to the point of near pain, with how out of it he was, and his hips were bucking for friction against the open air.

Mercedes slung her knee around to sit to the side, still shivery and weak from orgasm, and she batted his hand away when it reached for his cock, bare under the blankets. For all the foolishness of it, save in the dead of winter, Coyote couldn’t be bothered to sleep clothed as long as they’d managed to sling up a lean-to for shelter, and he looked the most at ease bare of a single stitch, like some kind of wild animal.

She traced the scars and long, softened black lines of tattoos, intimately familiar with every pale scratch, mark and blemish of his body. She’d been around for many of them. The geometric, heavy handed ink that crawled down his side, he’d gotten from an old medicine man in Comanche territory, in exchange for a bottle of bootleg

absinthe, which he claimed were a blessing for luck in Sioux. Mercy'd sworn it meant "foolish jackass," and he'd never be the wiser.

The puckered penny-sized purpled scar under his bottom rib, countless tiny knife scars and the occasional powder burn. A deep rending dent of pale scar tissue which cut through his outer right thigh, a graze courtesy of King when Coyote'd been younger and even more cocksure than today.

He shivered under her hands, but made no move to hurry her along, even as his hips flexed helplessly. She shushed him, like gentling a spooked horse, and when she finally took him in hand he gave a strangled groan. "*Dios, Mercy, please.*" He whimpered.

She smiled, and whispered, "Oh hush."

Coyote knew better than to expect her to be quick, not when she smiled like that, high on the control and power she took and kept over him. He surrendered as gracefully as he could managed, squirming and panting under her grip, frustrated as she held him so close to the edge, but the both of them knowing it was sweeter to draw it out.

And just as there was a place for quick, furious fucks in dark alleys, passionate tumbles in fields and times they'd screwed so frantic and desperate with the adrenalin of barely escaping death alive, there was also a place for the gentle agony they only trusted one another to provide.

She curled up beside him, holding him close and whispering the most filthy trash in his ear while she stroked him, teasing and light and barely enough to bring him close, pulling her hand free when she felt him building to it until he was cursing her, losing track of whether he was speaking Spanish or English, or if the sounds out of his mouth were even finding a coherent enough shape to tell her anything but how much he *needed*.

For a while, he vaguely wondered if she'd even give it to him, or if that was her punishment for sucking of Jack. His frustration melted into a straining kind of purely physical panic, and he could've wept with relief when her hand finally, *finally* snugged its grip, and she eased pressure off his hips to let him thrust freely into her fist. He came so hard he nearly passed out, mouth falling open in a silent cry, and

when awareness slowly bled back into his shaking body, Mercy was spooned around him, hands petting his shuddering frame in lazy satisfaction.

His voice was rough and cracked when he found words. “You *bitch*.” He muttered emphatically, fondness saturating his voice as he shivered through the aftershocks, and he felt her canary eating grin crease against his neck. She nipped him, and he knew he’d have dark enough love bites littering his neck to last for days.

“Yeah. But you love it.” She murmured.

He chuckled, burrowing into her side and promptly passed the fuck out.



Cain had woken with the taste of bile and bad liquor entrenched in his mouth, a splitting headache throbbing between his eyes, a cool, drying stickiness in his pants, and the sun searing into his eyes from over the horizon.

His day had not improved since then.

Coyote was his usual mischievous self, chatting happily with the boys and all fond smiles for Mercy, flirting and all but wagging his tail, tongue lolling like a loyal hound at her side, and it filled Cain with a bitter disgust as they rode.

He’d probably bedded her last night, and it wouldn’t have been anything unusual, for the pair didn’t seem to possess any shame in fucking like rabbits, but it turned Cain’s stomach now. Not that he cared a wit for Mercedes, but she didn’t deserve to have Coyote running around on her like that, let alone with a *man*.

Every happy grin or wink that passed between them set Cain’s blood boiling, watching him play her like a fiddle, utterly smug with himself, and Cain kept his jaw clenched so tight it hurt his teeth to keep from snarling at either of them.

As Cain’s mother had always told him, he was not a man to keep his feelings in where they belonged, locked in his chest; he wore them plain upon his face for all the world to see. She’d tried, and failed, many a time to beat it out of him, for a proper gentleman never let it show that he was mad, lest he frighten those in his presence, and he never spoke in anger or in fear, face eternally a mask of polite tolerance and mild interest, genuine or not.

And while Cain had not been a particularly surly child, he'd never found the sense in being more than civil to those who he disliked, so never learned not to wear that sentiment in a scowl when it arose.

Mercedes read the anger clear as the printed word across his face, and Cain could feel her amusement growing. God, had there ever been a more infuriatingly *insolent* creature than Mercedes Alvarez, spiteful and far too smart for her own good, tongue like the fucking devil.

Cain had half a mind to slap that devil clean out of her, but knew for all his brooding hatred of her, he couldn't do it. His mother had made a great many mistakes bringing him up with out a father, but she most certainly had not raised the kind of man who'd strike a woman. No matter how wicked a thing she was.

Her barbed tongue jabbed at him often, cutting comments meant for him even while they were said to others, mocking him for being so weak as to drink himself stupid the night before, goading him for his anger as though he were a pouty child! Cain's blood hadn't ridden this hot since that day in Nevada, a mile off the train tracks, bloody-footed and fed up. His attempts to choke it down and keep from talking back only fanned the flames as the day went on.

The air was tepid with low heat and just enough moisture to sweat buckets, and as he carried on, plastered to his saddle and hung-over, he wondered if this was his punishment for the black sin of his thoughts yesterday in town, for his moment of weakness.

Irrationally, he felt it unfair that he was so afflicted while the Indian, the one who'd *given in* and reveled in his own sin like the goddamn heathen he was, was entirely unaffected, if not down right cheerful. Deeper down, Cain knew that the anger was only growing because he fed it, afraid of what he'd feel if he let it go, so he picked at stray annoyances, sounds and light and voices, words and people to occupy his anger to keep it burning hot, and it was working.

At least, it had worked until Gabe, poor, lily-hearted Gabe, had had the misfortune of attempting inquire if Cain was feeling alright.

"Mind yer own fuck'n head, boy," Cain growled.

Gabe jolted like Cain had slapped him, and shrunk back, kicked dog expression on his face. If there was a flare of guilt in Cain, it was quickly smothered. Mercedes' eyes flashed, and she scowled, bringing her horse around and blocking Luce in an instant.

"Alright, I've had it! You got a burr in yer saddle blanket, Cain, you work it out, but you don't take it out on other people! *Dios*, it's like you were raised by wolves, ain't yer mama ever taught you how ta' be decent?"

Cain rage was white hot now, and he lunged off Luce in an instant. Mercy was sneering down at him, at least until he grabbed her by the belt and tore her out of the saddle, and she squawked indignantly, tumbling down until he hauled her up by the shirtfront. He heard the cocking of pistols behind him, knew Coyote had guns drawn on him in a heartbeat, but self-preservation was far from his mind as he got in Mercedes' paled face.

A minor consolation to his battered ego that the woman half a foot shorter and half the weight of him was *afraid* of him, he could sense the moment it crossed her mind just what kind of predator she'd made occupation of goading.

"Shut the fuck up." Cain snarled.

He might've hated his mother, but nobody but him got ta say she hadn't been a good one. What kind of trumped up bitch insults a man's *mother*?

"You—" The cold press of a pistol barrel jammed hard between his shoulder blades, and he welcomed it, pushing Mercy to the ground and out of his face to whip around and meet Coyote's eyes. The man wore his own fury cold behind his eyes, lethal and sharp, and Cain's inner animal rejoiced at the promise of an adversary he could *hurt*.

Coyote's eyes widened a little in shock at the rage on Cain's face, and irritation and confusion colored his voice when he snapped, "The fuck's wrong with you, Cain?"

The wind fell out of Cain's sails in a sudden disquiet, and he looked away, eyes to the ground. He heard himself mutter, "I saw you."

All the anger disappeared from the Indian's weather tanned face. "You *what*?"

"I *saw* you." Cain said, snapping back to his face. The Indian looked startled, but as their eyes stayed locked for a long, uncomfortable moment, his pupils blew wide and he let out his breath in a slow whistle. Before Cain could even figure out what the devil that meant, the man's pistol was back in his holster and the fighting fury in him was gone, replaced with an oily grin, smug and victorious.

"Oh." He said, and took a few slow steps towards Cain, hips rolling like some overgrown cat, a predatory stalk that made Cain step backwards. The outlaw was flush in his space in a flash of motion, one hand clawed into the small of Cain's back, grinding their fronts together, the other snaked down and gripping his cock through his pants, almost painfully tight. His face was a hairsbreadth from Cain's neck, a few inches too short to be looking Cain straight in the eye, and his voice was low and dark as sin. "So, what, you seen somethin' you wanted, cowboy?"

Whatever reaction Coyote'd been expecting to draw out of the stunned man under his hands, it sure as hell hadn't been a punch to the face, Cain's hand coming round in a haymaker so hard it cut him to the knuckles when it connected with the Indian's cheek with a muted crack.

Coyote went staggering back and fell on his ass with a shout, stunned for one breathless moment before his grin hardened into a fighting rage of his own, and Cain barely had time to brace before Coyote lit off the ground like a viper, fist swinging up from below and catching Cain on the left side of his jaw, just shy of hard enough to crack a tooth. Blood flooded his mouth, must've bit his tongue, and his vision swam when he tried to steady himself.

Coyote took a step back and made a move as if to lower his fists, sure that Cain would come to his senses, and the idea that the fight would be *over* made Cain see red.

Times a man got tired of talking, tired of saying the things he was supposed to say and doing what was right, *being* right, and everything now was so wrong and so alien it tore him apart, spun him around until he didn't know north from south, and he was sick to death of it.

He couldn't be right for his mama, all those years ago, or for a pretty girl like Kitty, tried to follow the law and ended up wanted all the same. He didn't have a

home to go back to, or a place to run for, and a lifetime of running and hiding and kill or be killed was all that stood in front of him, all for laying his lot in with whatever possessed him to trust the wretched, wicked man who stood in front of him.

All he was these days was lonesome and mean inside, broken, lost and tired, just takin' it and takin' it and now, he wasn't *gonna* any more. It just snapped inside him like a guard dog reaching the end of its chain with a lunge so hard it finally broke loose.

Cain bared his teeth at Coyote in a snarl that he was sure was wet with blood, and the other man paled, but raised his fists back up all the same. Cain threw himself at him, taking them both down into the dust, scrambling for purchase on the hard ground, and for once, Cain was glad for his big boned, pale skinned ancestors, because as wily a fighter as Coyote was, there was something to be said for the advantage of mass and size, and he had him pinned fast.

Cain's hit connected across Coyote's cheek again, and he heard the man grunt in pain, only to snake an arm loose and get it barred in around his shoulder, whipping Cain's bigger frame with a wrenching agony to reverse them. Cain collided hard on his back into the hard packed, gritty trail, impact forcing the air out of his lungs, out his panting mouth.

The outlaw planted a knee into his gut, grinding viciously, and Cain's breath didn't leave him so much as completely evaporate, muscles clenched and stunned and unable to uncurl enough to get his lungs to work for a few long seconds. He could hear Coyote above him, panting, eye starting to swell and bruise already, skin on his cheekbone split open, and as his breath returned in shallow gasps, he registered that where Coyote's hips were bony and digging down to pin him in a straddle, he was *hard*.

Cain was just as hard, butting up against Coyote's back pocket tight in his pants, and Cain wanted to scream in frustration and anger, that the Indian could draw this out of him like some kind of devil set on making Cain a man possessed, and he threw the man off, reversing their positions.

The Indian didn't go down so much as lock legs around Cain's torso and cling to save himself from impact, and Cain grabbed him by the throat and used his kneeling

leverage to slam all his weight straight through Coyote's lean ribcage into the ground. The Indian gave a choked groan of pain, but was up and swinging at Cain before he'd even stood back up.

Coyote fought like a cornered, rabid animal, for all he weighed probably fifty pounds less than Cain, he could throw a punch like a mule kick. Cain's blood nearly sang with pain and pleasure, want for a fight all that was left in him, leaving him gloriously empty. He knew the fight was slowing down, as hurts packed onto both of them and exhaustion started in, muscles burning and lungs aching, half grappling, half throwing punches, both of them starting to hit air now as they tired.

At a momentary stalemate, both refusing to admit defeat but neither winning, Mercede's voice called in amused disgust, "That's enough, boys."

Coyote laughed bitterly, lip split and dusty, shaking his head. Never took his eyes off Cain. "Fight ain't over till we say it is. So is it, Cain?"

He wanted to say never, wanted to find the strength to raise his fists again, but suddenly, the state of the Indian started to register. The man's left eye was already purpling and nearly swollen shut, and the cheek below it looked like it'd bit gravel falling from six feet up, bloody and chewed up.

Lip puffed and split, blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth, and he had his left hand wrapped around his gut, shoulders curled in protectively around what was probably a cracked rib or two. There was determination on his face, Cain knew if he said no, Coyote would try to fight him till one of them passed out or died, but it'd be ugly.

Like he knew, if it carried on and he started losing, Mercy wouldn't hesitate to plant a bullet in Cain's skull, and he didn't want it to end like that, but knew it might. Cain wondered if he could manage to kill him first.

The sudden revulsion at the idea of *killing* Coyote hit him like the icy slap of creek water, cold in his blood and left him wrung out with shivers, and he shook his head.

"Fight's over," Cain said.



Coyote smiled a little, but it was genuine, and he started to walk towards Cain, heading back for their horses, and where the rest of his gang was no doubt still sitting and watching, but he stopped



That night, Coyote fucked like some kind of animal, careless of his injured ribs or sore head, no matter what noise Mercy made about them in protest, hard and fast, too turned on to bother to aim for where she felt it or be gentle. She didn't mind, there were sometimes nights she wanted the same, wanted to feel it the next day.

She'd let him bleed out his frustration that way before, and after seeing the way he and Cain had fought today, paired with the realization that their straight laced ex-Marshall wanted Coyote *back*, well, she didn't blame him for being hot and bothered.

But when he'd gotten close, his eyes had fallen shut, sweat dripping down his nose and slick on his shoulders, and his hands left her hips to prop himself up further over her, and he'd moved fast and rough between her legs, fucking in quick upwards snaps that he knew did nothing for her, but everything for a man in her place.

He'd spilled inside her with a tortured groan, and pulled off and away from her when he was done, collapsing into a boneless slump beside her, rather than on top of her, and she *knew*. Possessive rage coursed through her, snapping mad and dark. She sat up, and started to re-dress, pulling on the few scraps of clothing Coyote had managed to get off her before he'd gotten fed up, and she heard him startle and sit up.

"Where're you goin', Merce?" He mumbled, sleep and exhaustion filtering into his voice.

"Somewhere else." She said biting, not looking back at him as she buttoned her shirt back up.

"Th'hell, why're you leavin'?" Coyote asked, trying to shake off the sleep.

"Why?!" She hissed, "'Cause I aint that fond'a sleeping next ta' men who cayn't even be assed'ta think of me while they're fuckin' me!"

Coyote's eyes went wide, and he immediately opened his mouth to deny it.

"Don't you lie to me, Coyote."

“Shit, Mercy, I’m sorry.” He said, and she could hear the conflict in his his voice, lost and a little helpless, and Mercedes sighed. “I know.”

“Then stay?” He offered.

She shook her head. “I know yer sorry, Coyote. Just ain’t sorry for the right reason.”

And with that, the tent flap closed behind her, and she was gone.



Gone turned out to be gone ahead, to San Francisco, along with the sack of diamonds for trade, and the boys for company, according to the note she’d written and left in his saddle bags. It wasn’t the first time a tiff of theirs had ended like this.

Sometimes, after too many nights on the trail with nothing but each other, even for lifelong friends, two personalities as fierce as theirs were bound to fray and wear at each other’s tempers to the point of snapping. He’d spent a month in Tulsa, fucking half the things that moved, after Mercy’d taken a strong shine to a card shark in Mexico and left his bed cold enough to worry he’d lose her.

Not that he worried to loose her love, at least not in the sense that people might’ve thought, because theirs wasn’t any kind of love story, but a loyalty and devotion bound like brotherhood, having fought and bled for each other, and nothing short of death was ever gonna take that away. *Sister-of-my-heart*.

He doubted anybody’d ever know him like she did.

But that card shark, *Ramirez*, he’d captured her attention with enough spark that he wondered if he’d have to steal her a white dress, and that had sent him to the bottom of a bottle and every hooker he could buy, till he got sick enough of it to come crawlin’ back, only to find Mercedes high-tailing it out of town having left her former beau, the *two-timing, snake oil, rat-faced motherfuckin’ bastard*, well, the politest way to say it’d be *half* the man he used to be.

And that was only cause she’d missed.

She’d once left Coyote to rot for a week, once, in the hold of Fort Yuma on account of him accidentally implying that she was an easy lay. When she’d finally

decided to spring him, she'd curtly told him that just because a thing was true didn't mean he had to fucking say it.

Coyote trusted she'd be back, after she sorted out whatever had ruffled her feathers so bad last night. She'd left the name of a bar to meet at in a week or two, in the bowls of the seedier side of the city, after she'd sorted out things with their buyer and cooled off, and he was just fine giving her room.

The devil if he knew *why* it'd made her so all-fired mad, he'd probably been her convenient stand in for any number of handsome devils over the years, couldn't see why this was different. Put it down for another one of those *women* things.

Or maybe just a Mercedes thing.

But either way, she'd left him alone with naught but Kujo and Cain for company, for the day's ride into the city, and more than a few days to get to know their tight-lipped ex-marshal. The idea that Cain *wanted* him was one he'd never bothered to entertain, as even a flight of fancy or a pleasant day dream.

The pale man was as unyielding as granite, tall and proud and cold, and there hadn't been a drop of water's chance in hell that the upright former marshal could be anything but a woman's man, until suddenly that drop of water was a veritable ocean. He'd known men to stiffen up in the groin in a fight, some kind of leftover animal reflex of aggression or something, didn't mean he was turned on, but Cain's pupils had been blown, and he'd *watched him*.

The idea of Cain, crouched in the shadows, watching him and Jack, all that pent up arousal that he'd pressed into anger, desperate and hot blooded as a stallion left Coyote's own blood running hot.

Coyote was little stranger to the idea of wanting something forbidden, of playing fast and loose with the laws of society for the illicit thrill of getting what he wanted. It drove him to steal and take what he wanted, consequences be damned, and the bigger the challenge, the harsher the risk, the deeper he wanted it.

And the risk of tryst with a man like Cain, judging by the fight he'd given today, could be deadly.

