



The O'Shea Gang

Wilhelmina Patricia O'Shea



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A lone rider rode into the small town of Hester's Spring just as the sunset. From a distance, the rider looked like a young man of maybe sixteen or seventeen but that was what she wanted people to see. A young woman traveling by herself out into the territories would draw the kind of attention Willie was trying to avoid. Her new life was west, and her past was to the east on a burning plantation and the bodies of her dead family. She kept her hat low and the collar of her jacket up hoping people didn't stare. It wouldn't be for a few days before she saw that people didn't care. Many young men were leaving the south with the war over and lost. She lost plenty because of the war, but it also opened her eyes to the misery she was a part of and why she had to go.

She stopped at a stable just outside of town with a sign offering full boarding for a small fee. She was met by a small black boy who looked at her funny then ran into the barn. A tall black man came out with a smile on his face at the sight of Jester, Willie's leopard appaloosa. He looked at her then back to the horse.

He asked, *“How long you planning to stay?”*

Willie didn't say a word she just flipped a gold dollar at the man. He caught it and stared at the gold. It was more than he would earn in a month for all the horses in his livery.

He said, *“so a young man of few words..... It doesn't matter to me, stay as long as you need, and your horse will receive the best of everything..... What's his name?”*

Willie said in as deep a tone as she could, *“three maybe four days and his name is Jester.....be careful he likes to bite.”*

The man laughed while saying, *“just like my wife.”*

The Stable owner was named Jasper Johnson, and he also rented small cabins near his stable. A small part of Willie was surprised to see a black man doing so well so soon after the war, but another part of her told her to shut up and mind her own business. The cabin was small with a bed that had a wood and rope

frame with several blankets acting as a mattress. It had a fireplace with a hearth big enough to boil several pots of water. Near the hearth was a metal bathtub with a high back. She pushed the tub closer to the hearth then started a fire. As the fire grew, she went out to the pump and dumped some water into the tub. She filled every bucket in the cabin and put them on the hearth to heat. When hot enough she poured the water into the tub. For the first time in a week, she took off her guns and placed them beside the tub on a chair. She slipped out of her boots, slacks, shirt and the padding she was wearing hoping to hide her femininity. She had a petite frame that helped her with her subterfuge. She slipped into the hot water letting the heat do its work and ease her muscles. She sat back in the tub and stared at the fire thinking about her home and everyone she knew. How they were all gone.

Chapter One

Wilhelmina Patricia O'Shea was the youngest child of Patrick and Francine O'Shea. She had three older brothers Patrick Jr., Frank, and William. They lived on the plantation her grandfather built when he moved from Ireland back in the early 1800s in the new territory that would become the state of Alabama. The family were cotton farmers and slave owners. They weren't the biggest plantation in town, but they were one of the first families. Willie never thought much about her family and what they did including the slaves they owned. Her father kept the slaves away from the family in a small village built on the other side of the cotton fields. He would hire young girls fresh off the boats from Ireland to work in the house. He like so many slave owners worried about slave insurrections so keeping them at arm's length kept his family protected and insulated from the peculiar institution. The separation also kept the family from seeing all the fair-skinned red-headed children in the slave village.

Willie was educated at home by her mother in as much education her father felt was necessary. Part

of that education was fostered by her grandfather. He lost his ability to see after being poisoned by a bad batch of homemade whiskey. She would read him the newspapers as well as the novels about the west. Martin O'Shea loved hearing about the Indians and the open plains. A sea of nothing as far as the eyes could see. When he died, he left her a sizable amount of gold and silver coins he had hid in the barn.

He said, "keep this a secret my love and don't let anybody make you into something you're not." He kissed her on the forehead and said, "my only wish is that I could see your beautiful eyes one more time. You have your grandmother's emerald greens, and I can see her in you."

At the age of twelve, Willie was introduced to Alex Goodwin. He was tall for a thirteen-year-old at nearly six-foot. His family owned the plantation next to theirs, and she was told he would be her husband just as soon as she was fourteen. Her mother insisted she was married according to their Catholic beliefs, and their priest wouldn't marry anyone under the age

of fourteen. Unlike Willie, Alex was raised with slaves all around him. From an early age, he would go out with his father and watch him whip and beat the slaves for whatever reason he could make up. That day was the first day of their courting and her first taste of what it was like to be a piece of property.

At first, the family followed them around in the traditional courting role. She was told not to talk just listen to him and do as he says. Back then people called her Patty with only her mother calling her Wilhelmina and her brother Frank calling her Willie. In front of her family, Alex was a gentleman. He talked about the possibility of war as the southern states started to succeed from the union. Alex looked to his father who then led her parents away. When they were gone the two sat on a bench. Alex leaned in to kiss her, but she backed away. She had never kissed a boy before and was told it was wrong. Alex took hold of her shoulders and pulled her close.

“Look I’m going to be your husband. I’m going to take what is mine when I want it,” he said as he pulled her close.

She said as she tried to push him away, “*you aren’t my husband yet, and you won’t be for another two years.*”

He leaned in and kissed her on the mouth as she tried to fight back. Alex was not just two-feet taller; he was also stronger, and he forced himself on her. She would later find red marks on her wrists and shoulders from him. He kissed her again, and this time she stopped fighting hoping he would be satisfied with a kiss. When he was done with the kiss, he looked her up then down.

He said, “*not much of a body but I think after a few children that will change.*”

He put his hand up her dress only to find enough undergarments to protect her modesty as well as her virginity. For the first time, she was happy to wear the styles of the times even in the sweltering south.

On the ride back home, they passed the slave village. She saw a young slave boy who could have been a member of her family with the red hair and sharp green eyes. She thought about her father and

how he would hire and fire the maids. She knew he was most likely forcing himself on them. Willie didn't know the word rape, but she understood the idea. The slaves were almost like a non-existing entity in their lives. Her parents never said the word slave, and they never talked about the village. Thinking about the boy she saw it was clear that her father also forced himself on the slaves.

Back home, she told her mother about the kiss and his wandering hand. Her mother took in a breath.

She said, "I know it can be distasteful, but as a woman, you will need to do as you are told and that includes kissing and other things."

Willie asked, *"what other things are there?"*

Her mother sighed saying, "that's not for me to say. A lady never talks about such things. Just understand that this marriage is important to your father so just do whatever Alex says, or you could ruin everything."

Frank walked into the room and saw the two ladies talking. He smiled and walked over to Willie.

He asked, “*so how did it go?*”

Her mother gave her an icy glare she only gave when she was mad. The glare said more than any words could.

Willie said, “*I guess it went like it was supposed to.*”

Frank looked at his mother then back to her and left the room. It was clear he interrupted something, and that something wasn't over. He would later tell Willie that Alex was a creepy bastard and wasn't worth her time. Frank was her brother and her best friend. While the others wouldn't give her the time of day, he would teach her how to ride both as a lady and as a man. He also showed her how to shoot. From that night it wouldn't be long before all three brothers were off to war and never come home again.

The next day under the guiles of a trip into town Willie and Frank rode over to the village. Like

Willie, Frank had never been over here before. Patrick Jr. was set to inherit the plantation and the only one of the children allowed to come to the village. Most of the slaves wouldn't talk to them, and when they did, it was no more than one or two words. Eventually, they found a pregnant woman who told them about their father and older brother visiting the slave quarters and how they both had children running around. A girl about the age of Willie walked by as they talked. The pregnant woman pointed to her and said she had Patrick Jr's child and it wasn't his first. They left the village with the knowledge they had nine half brothers and sisters and two nieces. Willie thought about the pregnant girl and knew this was that thing her mother wouldn't talk about.

Willie used some of her money with Frank's help to buy two thirty-six-caliber Colt Navy revolvers along with a holster that would fit her. She didn't have a plan at the time for using them; she just wanted something just in case she had to defend herself. Their father showed Frank how to load and fire a black powder gun while in the heat of the moment. He was

preparing him for war, and in turn, Frank was teaching Willie what he learned. Willie made a set of men's clothing and bought a pair of men's boots and hat. The boots were a size too big but it would have been impossible for her to have such a boot sized to her feet. She put it all in a saddle bag she hid in the stables near her horse's stall. Frank added a Bowie knife as well as a Henry lever-action rifle. The last night they saw each other he told her to just run away and let her father's deal die.

The war started with Patrick Jr and Frank joining the 11th Regiment Alabama Infantry. Frank told Willie to kick the guy between the legs if he tries anything. With Frank gone she was alone. A year later William left to join his brothers in their unit, but he was never seen again. A body found hanging from a tree had a letter his mother wrote for him explaining who he was. It was thought that a passing union detachment found him then hung him as a spy. Whoever it was peeled his face off as well as his genitalia. The body was buried in an unmarked grave somewhere on the road to Virginia.

On her thirteenth birthday, Alex gave Willie a gold necklace. After the kiss, Alex had changed his tune and was showing her more respect. She didn't know why, but it was nice, and just maybe she could see a future with him. His family threw a ball in her honor as well to raise money for the war effort. Her mother taught her how to dance, and she was excited to try. She danced with her future father-in-law, but her future husband wouldn't dance and seemed embarrassed when his father went out with Willie.

Near the end of the ball, Alex and a couple of his friends pulled Willie into a back room. Inside was a young black girl of maybe ten or eleven. She was in the simple cotton dress most of the slaves wore in the plantation. With a nod to the others, Alex's friends pulled the young slave girl back and onto a table. She squirmed but didn't scream out. Her only cry was when one of them ripped her dress open. Alex grabbed Willie by the back of the neck and pulled her over to the table.

He said, *“I want you to watch this because in a year this will be you.”*

The other two boys laughed. Alex dropped his pants then his underclothing revealing an erect penis as big as his frame. The girl saw it and started to fight back until one of the boys struck her across the face drawing blood. With one hand on the back of her neck, Alex moved in and thrustured into the girl. The girl made a horrible sound akin to a wailing moan. The other two held her down and her legs apart as Alex raped the little slave girl. When he finished, he pulled out and with a shrinking blood tipped penis he went over to Willie.

He said, *“clean this off.”*

She replied, *“no.”*

The boys shifted as one of the others stripped and started to rape the young girl. Alex stood there with his pants down. She didn't know why but Willie started to take a handkerchief from her hidden pocket and went for his penis. He put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her down. The other boy stopped raping the girl, and they watched.

“No, I want you to lick it clean like a good girl. I want you to know what I taste like and know your place,” he said as he pushed her down.

Willie slipped past his grip then got to her knees taking hold of his genitals and squeezing. She had a strong firm grip and a lot of him to hold onto. Alex bucked bending over.

Willie whispered, “I don’t care what my father says this will never touch me…… you will never be my husband.”

She twisted then squeezed harder as Alex’s face turned red then purple. The other two boys let go of the slave girl, and she ran from the room while trying to hold her dress closed. Willie let go of his genitals and let him fall back into the others. She left the room and made her way into a parlor where she could clean her hands. She had blood and small fragments of flesh beneath her nails. Much to her surprise, nothing happened to her or her family.

A week later, Alex was sent to act as an aid to a General eventually acting as a runner between units.

Close to the battle of Gettysburg he was caught by a union detachment and held as a prisoner of war until the end. He lost his arm to an infection and an eye in a fight over some moldy bread. When the guards found out he was from a prominent slave-owning family they used wooden batons to forcefully penetrate him from behind. He would never see Willie again.

Both Patrick Jr. and Frank died in the battle of Gettysburg. They were a part of a unit charging up a hill known as little round-top when they were forced back by a bayonet charge. When her father found out, he went to the Alabama state house and enlisted only to be turned away. As the war turned the situation on the plantation went from bad to worse. Her mother started to openly drink while her father would spend his days with his slaves and his slave children. A few days before she would leave, Willie found her father dead in the village along with the bodies of about ten light-skinned redheaded children. He had been stabbed then gutted leaving him to try and hold in his guts while trying to get home.

Willie went back to the main house to find it in flames and an angry mob of their neighbors taking turns beating her mother with clubs. Sneaking her way around the angry mob, Willie went to the stables and her horse. She grabbed her bag and saddled Jester. At the door, two boys came in and stood there.

One of them said, “*where do you think you’re going?*”

It was one of Alex’s friends from that night at the party. It had been two years, but they seemed the same. Willie looked to the mob than to the fire. The sounds were maddening loud. This meant they would drown out her gun, so she grew and fired hitting both in the throats then heads. She mounted her horse and went out the door just in time to see one of the angry men push her mother into the fire. Her face was a bloody ruin. They chanted how the rich brought an end to their way of life and how they would make sure they paid for all the death. Willie would be in Mississippi before the fire would finally go out. When the fire was finally out, it destroyed the house, barn, cotton fields, and the slave village.

Near a stream just on the other side of the Mississippi river, Willie stripped off her dress and put on her new clothing as well as the persona of a young boy traveling west seeking adventure away from a war-torn south. She cut her hair using the knife then a pair of shears she lifted from the barn on her way out. With the padding and the right walk she believed she could pass as a boy. Part of that padding included a bulge to simulate male genitals. The padding made her look a little pudgy, but she was used to the weight and heat after years of what passed as fashion. The first time she strapped on her guns she felt different like nothing could get in her way. She would ride west and follow the sun to whatever she would find. A part of her knew it could be death, but she had nothing left to go back to and everything to see.

Chapter Two

Willie stepped out of her cabin and walked down to the main street of two-story buildings acting as a town. She passed people as she walked tipping her hat to every lady she saw only to be ignored in return. She was hungry and hadn't eaten in a while. There was a saloon, but most of them wouldn't let a young man or worse a young lady into their establishment. Two buildings away from the saloon was a shop with a drawing of a pig but no words. She figured that many people either couldn't read or didn't understand English. The closer she got to the Frying Pig Restaurant the more bacon she could smell. The doors and the walls were coated in a layer of smoke and grease with an atmosphere so thick it could be cut with a knife. She sat down and ordered six eggs and six strips of bacon. The waitress brought her a plate of sourdough bread that had an unusual taste.

Two men sitting in a corner watched her eat then drop a silver coin on the table. She told the waitress to keep the change, and it must have been the biggest tip she ever received. The two men slipped out

the back without paying, but no one went after them. Willie walked around the small town working her walk and the padding between the legs. She noticed she was being followed by two men. One man was covered in dust while the second man was most likely an Indian. Thinking about what she saw she realized there was a third man. He was back in the restaurant with the dusty looking man. All three men had black bandanas tied on their gun belts. She had about half of her money on her, and just maybe someone saw her pay at the restaurant. She was about to be robbed. She had a choice, go back onto the street and safety or stand her ground and just maybe show herself she was no longer that girl being sold by her father. She took in a breath and went deeper into the alley making sure they saw her.

Back behind what was most likely a general store she met up with three other men. The first was the tall man from the restaurant. Next to him was a shirtless man with a heavily scarred chest and had to be the boss. He had on a large hat with a matching duster and looked out of place with the others. Willie

turned and back up to the building so no one can get behind her. The other three came out of the alley and joined the rest.

The boss said, *“my boys say you have some money for us and I think they are right.”*

The tall man in a high pitch voice said, *“yeah the little fuck has a pocketful of silver and is just giving them out like they free.”*

The six men moved closer. One of them pulled a large almost absurd revolver. The boss smiled a smile that was in no way warm.

He said, *“just give us the money, and we might just let you live.”*

The dusty looking bandit gave him a confused look but said nothing. Willie could feel things slipping away from her as they got closer. She knew she intentionally put herself here to face her fears, but she didn't count on her fears being living and breathing things. The man with the gun didn't cock it. She made a note of that mistake. The man in the duster, the boss kept his duster closed blocking his gun, another mistake. In the fluid motion her brother taught her she pulled her left

revolver while cocking and pointed it down not at anyone but in a way, she could aim at in case she had to shoot. She kept her right hand close to the other gun.

The boss said, *“Oh look he brought me some new guns..... how nice.”*

The man with the scarred chest said, *“let me take those guns for you, Mister Granger. I think the little fuck is shitting his pants and just want to run home to mommy.”*

Granger dropped his duster to the ground then looked to the dusty man who picked it up. Under the coat, he was in a gray Confederate uniform with captain’s bars. Like the coat his uniform was immaculate. He had two pearl-handled revolvers on his hips. Even the rounds on his belt seemed to have been polished.

Willie felt her heart stop then she grew cold. She knew this was it, either she will come out of this or die in the alley, but part of her didn’t want to kill. She remembered a trick from one of her grandfather’s books. If she just did it quick, then maybe she wouldn’t have time to think about how she was killing

a person. She lowered her gun on her left hand hoping the others would watch it then in a quick motion she pulled and fired the right gun hitting Granger in the chest. He looked down then fell backward. The scarred man moved quickly for a knife on his hip and at Willie. She cocked and fired again striking the man in the face to the left of his nose. He dropped his knife and made a gurgling scream as he spun around then went to the ground kicking and shitting his pants until he stopped.

The four remaining men put up their hands. The one with the revolver dropped it, and it broke revealing it to be made of wood. The four started to back away when Granger stirred on the ground.

Willie asked, “*who’s your boss?*”

The dusty man pointed at Granger and said, “*well I guess it’s him.... I mean he isn’t dead and all.*”

Not knowing she was going to do it until she did it, Willie took aim and fired hitting Granger in the chin.

His face bulged out along with one eye. He twitched then stopped. The dusty man kicked him in the arm.

He said, *“well I guess as of right now we don’t have any leadership... .. I mean we never discussed a chain of command or succession or anything.”*

The Indian said, *“just shut the fuck up about your fucking need for control mister educated.”*

The tall man asked, *“why is any of this important? I mean why do we need a boss at all?”*

The fourth man stood there watching Willie shaking his head.

He finally said, *“look, youngster, I guess you can see we aren’t about to rob you and unless you are going to rob us, I think we are done here.”*

Willie made a note on how no one came running to the sounds of gunfire. Just maybe they were used to the daily killings and just didn’t care anymore. She holstered her right gun but kept the left out and on the

remaining four. She slowly backed away seeing the four men start to strip the two men on the ground of anything valuable including the guns. She holstered her left gun and walked into the saloon. At the bar, she dropped a silver coin, and the bartender looked at her and without a word poured a shot of a brown liquid. The whiskey wasn't nearly as strong as her grandfather's drink, but it did the job, and she felt better.

She went back to her cabin and reloaded her gun. All the while she thought about the shirtless man and how he died. How she killed him. Granger was almost like shooting a target, but the shirtless man died badly. She stripped out of her clothing and lay naked on the bed letting her core temperature go down. The padding was worse than the dresses and other civilized trappings. When she felt better, she redressed and went out to the pump. She wasn't wearing the padding, but her clothing was baggy enough to hide her form. She pumped some water and walked back.

In the dark, she heard a voice say, *“there’s talk about a young man killing six armed men behind Drake’s General.”*

Willie asked, *“wow six people?”*

Jasper said, *“yeah I know. I mean the guy talking about it said he was there, so this kid didn’t kill everyone. He did kill Captain Gerald Granger of the Army of Virginia.”*

Willie asked, *“I bet he was your best friend in the whole world.”*

Jasper laughed saying, *“yeah the asshole thought he should get his horse boarded for free because of his service and how I was once a slave..... arrogant prick. The other guy is a different story. Ivan Greek was popular and could be trouble for the kid.”*

Willie picked up her buckets and started for the cabin. Jasper stood up and backed away. She knew he saw something wrong. He took off his hat.

Jasper said, *“I guess we all have our secrets.”*

She heated the water and did her best to wash without taking another bath. Knowing the man's name didn't help her with the image of the man's death. She left her clothes off and slipped into the bed feeling all the ropes underneath the blankets. She dreamed about all the red-headed children in the slave village. How someone killed them for some unknown reason. In her dream, she killed them including her father. In the morning she packed her bag and went for her horse. She didn't say a word to Jasper, she just tossed a silver dollar to him and saddled her horse. He nodded his head as he started to laugh.

She stopped at the store and bought two canteens and some basics for a long trip. About a mile out of town she saw she was being followed. The four men from the other day were behind her and not doing a very good job if they were trying to be covert. She turned north, and they followed. The sun started to set, and Jester was showing signs of needing a rest. She knew they would catch up with her and by the end, she would have to kill them. She found some sort of dried wood and made a fire. Taking a bowl out of her

kit, she emptied a canteen and gave it to Jester. About an hour later the dusty looking man came into her camp with his hands up. Willie had her Henry lever action rifle out and cocked.

He said, *“hi..... I guess you’re wondering why we’re following you..... I mean I bet you are interested.”*

Willie shifted her gun then said, *“talk and be quick or join your boss.”*

He replied, *“quick is my middle name..... actually, its Percy but that don’t mean nothing to no one. My name is Bart.....well..... Bartholomew but people call me Bart. The tall guy is Francis, but people call him Tiny, and the Indian is.....well I can’t pronounce his name we call him Half because he’s half Cherokee and half who cares because he’s half Cherokee. The fourth fellow is Guy, and we call him..... Guy.”*

Willie asked, *“and you think this is quick?”*

“we took a vote, and it was unanimous. We want you to join our team,” Bart said with an almost goofy grin on his face.

From out of the dark, the man this one was calling Guy appeared with a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of something different. He had his hands up and no weapons visible. Guy was maybe in his early twenties and in the light of her fire kind of handsome. She pushed that thought out of her head.

Guy said, “I know this sounds crazy, but I think you would make a good fit as our leader.... You know your guns and aren’t afraid to shoot. Outside of Jerry and maybe Half none of us have fired a gun much less killed anyone.”

With a frown on his face, Bart said, *“I didn’t mention the leadership part.”*

Guy said, *“yeah I figured you wouldn’t, so I came out to sweeten the deal.”*

Bart replied, *“you never gave me a chance..... you never give me a chance to do anything.”*

“because you never follow through with anything. We sent you to buy a gun, and you came back with a block of wood. We sent you to get a bottle, and you came back with a bowl of dried beans..... why would we trust you,” Guy said with his arms up still holding the bottles of booze.

Bart poked his chest saying, *“I have a college degree. I’m smarter than all of you including the Captain..... and those beans were delicious.”*

With her hands up Willie said, *“just stop arguing. I mean really how can you two go on worse than two ladies.”*

Willie realized she said what she said in her own voice and not the low tone she was using. She had taken off the padding because of the heat, and her shirt worked just as well, but now it was clear she was a woman.

Half came out of the dark and asked, *“we don’t care about who or what you are. You can*

shoot, and you can think even without a degree so will you think about what we are offering?”

Tiny asked, “the captain was a sodomite, Ivan raped children, and worse of all Bart’s a lawyer, so just maybe we would be better off being led by a woman?”

Willie got up and took the bottle of unknown liquid. She pulled the cork and took a drink. It burned like her grandfather’s homebrew but didn’t taste like anything she knew. She took another drink of the Tequila.

Guy asked, “so what’s your name?”

Willie said, “Wilhelmina but my brother called me Willie, and my dad called me Pat.”

Guy asked, “how about Billy..... we could call you Billy the Kid.”

Bart quickly countered, “hell no that sounds stupid. Who could ever take a person named Billy the Kid serious?”

Half asked, “so what do you think..... Are you in?”

Willie sat down with the tequila starting to work on her head. She looked at the four men and how they didn't seem to care if she was a woman or not. She knew this could all be bullshit but right there and then she had what she wanted. She was free. She took another drink.

She said, "there are going to be some changes if I do this. We won't steal from the poor or kill the innocent. We won't rape pillage or do any more harm than necessary. Think Robin Hood robbing from the rich."

Half replied, *"a white man with a bow and arrow."*

Willie asked him, *"I don't like calling you Half..... what's your real name?"*

Half replied, *"I was named for my father, and his name is sacred to my people. Having white people mispronounce it..... I would rather be called Half than have that."*

They talked through the night and, in the morning, Half led them to a safe water source for the horses. They set up camp to plan out what was coming next.

That morning, a Texas Marshal rode into Hester's Spring looking for the local law but not finding any. He stopped at Jasper's stable and asked about the law. Jasper told him they had no organized law. They just policed themselves.

The Marshal handed him a paper and asked, "*have you seen this man.*"

Jasper smiled and said, "*yeah that looks like Ivan, but I think you just missed him.*"

The Marshal asked, "*do you know which way he went?*"

Jasper replied, "*yeah he went six feet under he's dead. Why do you want him?*"

Under the drawing of Ivan were the words warrant and the charge of rape and murder.

The Marshal said, "*he was wanted for the rape and murder of three little girls back in Houston.*"

The marshal took his paper from Jasper and asked who killed him. Jasper talked about a new gang led by this gun happy kid. He explained how they had this live and let live in town and how most people didn't act up keeping the peace in town. Whatever happened out into the wild was up to those that wander out of town. He led the marshal to the grave where he dug up the body and took the head off packing it in a bag filled with salt.

Chapter Three

Willie spread a blanket across the ground then she lay her two revolvers and the Henry rifle on it.

She asked, “*so what guns do you have?*”

The men looked to each other then back to their saddles. Guy got up and pulled a single shot Kentucky long Rifle out. He placed it on the blanket. Willie looked at the gun that looked like a relic from the revolution then back to the men.

“*Where are The Captain’s guns? He had two pearl-handled Army Colts,*” she said as she started to stand up.

Guy looked at Bart as he looked at the blanket.

Bart said, “*those guns were worth a lot of money and we had some bills to pay back in town.*”

Willie asked, “*pay bills? What kind of criminals are you? Have any of you committed a crime?*”

Bart smiled, “*we held up a stagecoach.*”

Half said, *“we sort of did. I mean we could have.”*

Bart said, *“OK we didn’t stop it as much as we came upon it already stopped, but we did something.”*

Guy said with his eyes closed, *“we stopped and helped them attach the back wheel on their coach as one of their children snuck around and stole from our bags, but we did hold it up..... so the wheel could be attached.”*

Willie asked, *“have any of you even shot a gun?”*

Half said, *“yes my people taught me to shoot both long gun and handgun.”*

Bart replied, *“the Cherokee?”*

Half rolled his eyes then said, *“no my mother’s people the Hershel family of Long Island where I was raised after my father died.”*

Willie sat back on the ground and looked toward the setting sun. They were in the middle of nowhere about as far as she had ever traveled from home.

She asked, “*is there a place where we can buy a few guns?*”

The four men looked at each other than to the west.

Half said “*maybe.*”

The five of them rode away from the water hole into what Half called the badlands. Out in the badlands was a traveling bizarre of hard to find items. The Oculito Almacenar or hidden store was started by some former soldiers of the Mexican Army. Their original goal was to sell guns to the native population to start a war with the Americans, but they eventually sold to anyone with the money to pay. The store consisted of four to five wagons with fold out sides. When open, the store forms a small circle open in the middle. Only a few people who all had permission to approach the store knew how to find their location. They would sell you anything you want but only if they liked you. The rest were buried out in the desert.

Half told them to let him do all the talking and keep the money hidden. Most people traded rather than bought. He spoke of a man looking to buy rifles to start a defense of the south only to find his money taken and throat cut. They rode to what looked like an old mission out in the middle of nowhere. Half took two silver dollars and went in alone. About ten minutes later he came back out with a bottle. He handed the empty bottle to Willie and told her to look through the opening while holding it up to the moonlight. She did and carved into the bottom was a star with the center cut out.

Bart said, “*and where’s the whiskey?*”

They rode out heading south to what should be the current location of the market.

“You see, the captain said we should make sure and keep a safe place for us just in case we need to go to ground to get away from the law, so that’s why we paid that bill. I would rather be broke than not be able to go back there again,” Bart said as they rode.

Willie asked, *“just who was the captain and why did you join him?”*

Bart told her about how they first met. He was on his way across the badlands on his way to San Francisco when he was robbed by three men who upon learning he was a lawyer were getting ready to hang him from a tree when Captain Granger rode up on the scene. He shot the men and untied him.

“you see the captain was a well-liked officer in the army until he was found with another man and was told to get, or they would hang him as a traitor or some shit,” Bart said just before spitting.

After not saying a word for two days Tiny said, *“you are leaving out the part where the three men worked for him, and he planned on killing you until he heard about your other profession.”*

Bart spit again then said, *“yeah it was the captain that refused to let us have real guns. I think he was afraid we might shoot him or something.”*

Guy quickly replied, “*no he knew we would shoot, or at least I would shoot that bastard. Either way, Ivan wouldn’t have lasted a minute past me getting a gun.*”

Off in the distance, they could see smoke. Pushing the horses, they came upon the fiery remains of a camp. Six wagons in a circle on their sides with dead horses and bodies everywhere. There were arrows in the bodies along with multiple gunshots. The wagons and the people were stripped clean of everything including their scalps. Most of the people seemed to be Mexican with a few Black men and a few whites. Half pulled one of the arrows out of the side of a wagon.

He said, “*this isn’t right..... this arrow was manufactured. Indians wouldn’t have such arrows and would have most likely used guns but..... This market was important to them, so this just isn’t right.*”

He handed the arrow over to Willie who stared at the tip. The head was cast out of what looked like brass then painted with something to hide the shine.

Willie turned to Half and said, *“let’s not wait around here to see if anyone comes back. Where’s the closest town.”*

Half said, *“about twenty miles west there’s a weigh station for wagon trains but we might not be that welcome or that I might not be that welcome..... it’s run by the army.”*

Guy said, *“somewhere north of here there’s a town being built to service the railroad, and I think they may let you stay. The mayor is reportedly a member of your tribe.”*

Half asked, *“Cherokee?”*

Guy smiled as he replied, *“Jew. From what I’ve heard it’s going to be called Teller Town or something like that. The founder is a guy named Ilyas Teller.”*

Half replied, *“oy vey.”*

They rode for three days stopping where they could until they came across a small town in the middle of nowhere. Along the way, they passed a group of Hopi

on Horseback. Just on the outskirts of the town, they came upon a sign saying, “Welcome to Knuckle Smash.”

Bart cocked his head asking, *“what kind of name is that?”*

Guy replied, *“it makes about as much sense as building a town in a rattlesnake cove or Dan Town.”*

Half leaned over and said, *“look, if we come across any native peoples then let me do the talking and above all don’t call them Indian, or you might end up staked out in the desert.”*

The town was more unfinished than finished with just a few buildings completed. Among the finished buildings was a town square and what looked like it could be the town management building. They passed the future town hall and went into a saloon. Inside they found a small town’s worth of people in what must have been their usual after work positions.

The bartender said, *“we don’t let your kind in here.”*

Half turned to leave when the bartender said,
“no I mean the little brat not you sir.”

Guy leaned over and whispered, *“these people are surrounded by three nations with the army miles away so just maybe they aren’t willing to insult a native.”*

Half said, *“the Hopi call themselves The People.”*

Willie walked over to the bar and dropped a silver coin down. She told him she wasn’t there to drink, and she would be gone before long. The bartender looked at her guns then told her they could find what she needed with a dude at a table in the back. Rex Nelson was in a black suit with a gray derby next to him. He looked like a cross between a town preacher and the undertaker. They would find out later he was both of those jobs and a foreman on a couple of construction jobs and a beer brewer. Willie sat down while the others remained standing just behind her.

Rex asked, *“so what are you looking for son?”*

Willie looked to Half who said, *“we need some firearms for defense and-”*

Rex interrupted him saying, *“we just signed a deal with the People not to sell guns to anyone, so you're out of luck.”*

Guy asked, “we traveled for two days to get here. Is there anything you could do?”

Rex said, *“I don't care if you traveled for two years, we aren't going to do anything to anger the Hopi.”*

They talked for a few more minutes until Willie could see they made this trip for nothing. As they went to leave a man came in wearing a bright white suit with a black tie. He had silver guns on his hips and a holster decorated with silver and jade medallions. People stepped back from the bar for him. Rex said how he was a big rancher from Texas. He and his men drove up a dozen head of cattle to the town at an outrageous price. Willie stared at the guns to him. It was clear he never worked a day in his life. Jonathan Jackson owned every room he walked into and worked his people as if he owned them. That point became clear when they stepped out and saw his men on horseback waiting outside for their boss.

Willie said, *“I have an idea.”*

Three days later they rode back into Hester’s Spring. Willie rode Jester over to Jasper’s Stables and paid for Jester then her own cabin. After some talk, she bought the cabin outright. Part of the sale included a real feather mattress that would be made in town. Jasper told her how her actions in the alley had become a watershed moment with her now having gunned down twenty men, and the town council voted to have a sheriff after the alley massacre.

Jasper said, *“yeah they hired some dude straight out of Texas, and he is talking about hiring a few men. I guess it won’t be too long before I’m not welcome anymore.”*

Willie asked, *“why not?”*

Jasper lost his perpetual smile and said, *“this is just a guess, but I’m willing to bet you are from the south and should know why a white man from Texas wouldn’t like a former slave doing so well in his town. Things change but not all at once or as radical as that.”*

She thought about how surprised she was to see him doing so well and wondered if she would always think things like that or could she get past her own prejudices.

Jasper said, *“I wouldn’t worry about me. The town likes me, and it won’t like having a law dog off a leash.”*

Willie walked into town past the saloon, and the restaurant over to a storefront Tiny rented for his stage props. She opened the door and was nearly overpowered with the heat and man smell. A mix of sweat, piss, ass and a musk that Willie could smell on almost every man she ever knew. The front was nearly blocked off by crates with a small corridor running down the middle. On her way to the back she found a crate marked with what she wanted. With the small crate in hand, she went into the back. She found five rope beds with no padding and random stuff spread all over. Three of them were sitting around a table in just their underwear. Guy was outside.

Willie put the crate down and said, *“as long as they think we’re armed, and we don’t plan on killing then I think we could pull this off.”*

Half asked, *“you can’t be serious. They will shoot us dead or hang us for stupidity.”*

Bart replied, *“why not we’ve been carrying fake guns all this time, and we aren’t dead yet.”*

Willie said, *“this will be just for one job, and after that, we should have a gun for each of you and whoever is the best shot will get one of my guns for this job. I think a rancher like that would have an arsenal in his home and if we take it by surprise, we could walk out armed and with some serious coin.”*

Tiny said, *“or we walk out dead.”*

Bart asked, *“how do you walk out dead?”*

The back door opened, and Guy walked in naked dripping wet with a dirty towel over his shoulder. The four of them looked at him, and he looked back. He just walked past them to his cot and put on his clothes. Willie didn’t take her eyes off his lower half as he

passed thinking while he was a little smaller than Alex, he was built harder like a man who worked for a living. She turned back to the three who were staring at her with a shit-eating grin.

Chapter Four

Jonathan Jackson sat in his office staring out at his son Quincy as he worked with the horses. If he could, he would go out and shoot the boy, and just maybe his wife would relent and give him another child. He wanted a girl from his wife, and while his second mistress did give him a girl, she was both a secret and half-Mexican. The boy was his greatest disappointment. His mother's son, soft and weak. He also liked to work as a commoner. The trip back from a town in the middle of nowhere was an eye-opener to Jonathan. A town built for a railroad showed him how people saw the railroad as the future. He could see having a line run through his land making cattle drives unnecessary. He could let half of his hands go. Most of them would be in town drinking and fucking their pay away. His son Junior was on the ranch next to theirs seeing a girl he would marry so they could acquire the land. His second son was still back east in uniform somewhere, and his wife was at a local hospital helping the returning soldiers. Jonathan hated her spending time around what he called losers. She would spend the night there so at least he could have one of

his mistresses over for a little fun or just maybe hire a little girl for something ruff.

He looked down at the woman going down on him. She was the third mistress he was working and about twenty years younger than him. He couldn't remember her name, after all, there were just so many of them. Just the thought of what he could do with a girl that had no one to look for her made him harder then cum. The seventeen-year-old Radica was happy he was finished and didn't do anything else. What she didn't know was she should be thinking yet as in he didn't do anything yet because her time was coming. She was just lucky she had a family.

That night a young girl came to the ranch with long blonde hair and a dress that was revealing as it was miss fitted. She was white and not his usual nightly fun, but for Jonathan nothing was wrong. He killed the last two sheriffs that dare talk to him without taking their hats off. The girl seemed to fit in with the

trappings of the ranch and was just maybe from back east.

Jonathan asked, “*well my dear I see you found the house. May I fix you something to drink or would you like to get to work?*”

Willie turned to face this man and did a curtsy. The oversized dress Tiny had was made for a Burlesque act, and as she went down, it revealed most of her small chest. The wig was horse hair and itched. She had to take her clothes off so Tiny could fit her for the dress with him being the first man to see her naked in with her knowledge since she was a young girl swimming in a pond back home. Jonathan looked at her like Alex did back in Alabama. She knew the dress trick would keep him watching the top of her dress and not around him as the others moved into the house. She also knew she would have to let this monster touch her until they were ready to take the house then just maybe his life.

The plan was simple. On the way, they found a very young Mexican girl on her way to the ranch. She told

them her aunt was paid twenty pieces of silver for her and she was supposed to let him do whatever he wanted. She didn't know it would most likely end with her in a deep grave out in the desert. Willie had found out about his proclivities back in the nearby town and had Tiny fit her for the dress and wig so she could take the girl's place. They would lure him into a room tie him up then take what they wanted. The biggest flaw in the plan was taken care of by payday with most of his crew in town blowing their pay. One of the men told them about his hideaway room filled with new guns as well as guns that were meant for the war. Jackson was also selling guns to both the settlers and the Indians.

Jonathan led her into a bedroom filled with locked cupboards. The room had a four-poster bed in the middle with signs of wear about where someone would be tied to them. Jonathan unlocked one of the cupboards. Willie turned around taking in the crushed dark red velvet curtains and bedspread the color of blood. She turned around and came face to face with him as he grabbed her dress and ripped it down the

middle letting it fall. She was naked under the dress, and most of that showed except for a place on her leg where the dress got stuck. Jonathan didn't notice the shape of a gun on her leg holding the dress up. She was the first white woman other than his wife he ever had like this, and he just wanted to enjoy it for as long as he could. He tilted her head up and kissed her while taking hold of her left breast. His breath was a mix of tobacco, whiskey, and rotten teeth.

The others searched as quietly as they could for his arsenal. In what had to be the master bedroom they found sterling silver combs and brushes. Behind a door, they found a room filled with silver and gold bars. More money than any of them had ever seen before. In the wall in the room with the gold and silver, they found a quiver of brass arrowhead arrows. In another room behind a thick wood door with multiple locks, they found about two-hundred Colt Army Revolvers an about that many lever action rifles and the newest Sharps 1863 Single action carbines. He had enough arms to arm an army or defend his house from one. Tiny found a small crate and both him and Bart loaded it with as many rifles and revolvers as the could while Half did the same for the ammunition. Guy

watched the door. As he looked out, he saw a boy of about fourteen walked past him and up to the door where Willie was with Jonathan. The door was slightly open, and both Quincy and Guy could see Jonathan kissing and groping Willie. Guy felt for his gun and wanted to do something about what he was seeing.

Jonathan's hands made their way from her breasts down to her half-covered ass then between her legs. He pulled his hand back and whispered, "Virgin," and she nodded back because it was true. He let go of her and started to take his clothes off. His usual was to tie them down then use the various whips in the cupboard, but since she was something rare, he decided to forgo the foreplay and go straight for dessert. He pulled the dress away from her leg revealing the gun.

He said, "*smart girl.*"

Willie replied, *yeah I know.*"

In an action so fluid and quick she kicked the gun up and caught it flipping it over, so the barrel was in her hand. She brought it down on Jonathan's head in a cracking sound. Jonathan fell back onto his ass as

Willie spun the gun around and pointed it at him. The door opened, and a young boy walked in with his hands up and Guy behind him. Willie kicked Jonathan between the legs as she aimed the gun at the boy.

She said, “*give me your pants..... now.*”

Quincy slipped out of his slacks then tossed them to Willie. He was about her size and build after years of work on the ranch. She slipped out of her shoes and into the slacks and then into a silk shirt from a closet. Jonathan tried to get up, but Willie kicked his leg away from him then hit him again in the head. She pointed the gun back at Quincy and asked, “*son?*” He just nodded.

Jonathan woke up with his wife and Junior in the room with him. His namesake was helping him up while his wife just stared at the open cupboard and all the blood covered whips. Jonathan knew the whips could earn him a date with the hangman’s noose.

His wife asked, “*what is all this.....what have you been doing behind my back Jonny?*”

Jonathan got to his feet and went to a dresser. He turned and said, *“don’t call me that.”*

He had one of his new Colt Army revolvers. He aimed and fired hitting his wife in the chest then head. He then shot his son in the chest emptying the gun into him.

Jonathan leaned over his dying wife and said, *“I’ll miss you, but my next wife won’t talk to me like that.”*

He looked at his dead son knowing his deal with the neighbor was also dead, but just maybe he could marry the girl or just force the man to sell. He found a wig on the floor hiding it in the cupboard with his whips. Jonathan walked around waking his staff and ranch hands to the murder of his beloved wife and son as well as the robbery. He also mentioned the note.

The note read, “we have your son, and if you want him back we want twenty of those bars of gold from your supply. Send them into town with the young girl that left earlier, or we send Quincy back to you in parts.”

Jonathan thought about just letting them keep the boy, but he knew it wouldn't look good for a future governor to let his son die like that. He placed some silver in a bag along with a note to the kidnappers. He was happy they asked for the girl because she was most likely illiterate.

Back in the barn they rented, they tied up Quincy and checked on the guns. Willie had Guy and Half take the guns back to Hester's Spring. Bart had also taken a couple of bags of silver and gold coins. Willie sent Guy because he wouldn't stop staring at her. The barn was converted for human occupancy with the stalls acting as semiprivate rooms. They took Quincy's shoes and underwear hoping it would deter him from fighting back. For his part, Quincy didn't say a word he just sat on the bed. When he did his shirt pulled up showing his penis. He pulled his shirt down trying to cover himself. Tiny helped Willie into another costume turning her into an elderly man, and as long as no one looked too closely, she would be able to get the money. They decided to let the boy go no matter what the father did.

Willie sat in the saloon waiting for the girl. Close to sunset, the girl walked in with a bit of a limp. She was beaten up, and it was clear Jonathan had taken what he wanted from the girl and sent her thinking she was going to be killed. She sat down and slid the bag over to Willie.

Radica asked, *“why didn’t you kill him instead of the misses and Junior. They were good people not like the mister.”*

Willie didn’t know what she was talking about. In the bag were ten brass coins and a note saying to keep the guns and gold just as long as you kill the boy. The note also said how if he ever saw her again, he would take what she owes him with interest. Willie knew she had to get out of there now. She gave the girl ten pieces of gold and told her not to go back, instead go home.

Back at the barn, she walked into the stall with her gun out. She sent Bart and Tiny out to saddle the horses and get ready for the ride home. She stood there trying to dehumanize the boy so it would be easier to shoot him. Bart came in and said they were ready. He also

said he could do it if she didn't want to kill someone like this.

Willie asked, "*could you really.*"

Bart looked at the boy then he shook his head. An idea came over her from her past. One way she knew to dehumanize someone. Willie told him to take his shirt off and lay on the bed. He did as he was told. Willie walked over to him taking her boots off. She took a hold of his genitals. He gave a fearful look. Willie took her hat and old man wig off while stroking him until he was hard. She got up and slipped off her slacks and got on top of him thinking if she treated him like Alex did that slave girl then just maybe she could shoot him. He didn't fight as she got on top and he slid into her. The pain was magnified with all the meaning of what she was doing. Willie sat back as if she was riding a horse and put her gun to his head.

She said, "*just let this sink into your mind. I am your master.*"

When he was finished, she got up and saw blood on his shaft. She stepped out of the stall leaving Quincy alone on the bed and still alive. Just outside of the stall she

found Tiny and Bart. Both men were giving her a look of despair. Bart leaned over trying to see into the stall.

Willie said, *“yes, he is still alive..... I just can’t do it.”*

Tiny pulled his gun as Quincy came out of the stall. Willie just pushed the gun aside and told them to let him go.

She took in a breath and said, *“look kid we are letting you go. I think you have more problems than us. Your father paid us to kill you, and I think he killed your mother and brother.”*

Bart gave him one of the prop guns and told him they only had two real guns. Quincy stared at the gun. Bart saw a small blot of blood on his shirt. Willie gave him a pair of slacks and told him to just go home.

Quincy said, *“master, I know my father is a monster and if you want to get paid, you’ll help me.”*

Bart asked, *“master?”*

Quincy put the slacks on as he said, *“my father is arming the Indians hoping they will drive out*

settlers making it easier for him to buy the land. At first, it was just guns, but now he's offering explosives. He sent men out to take care of a traveling market because they were in competition."

Quincy wiped back some tears and went on, "out in the desert he keeps all the money from his sales as well as the weapons and nitro. Take that before the shipment could be taken, and the Indians would kill. If there's a man that needs to die, master, it's him."

Bart asked again, "master?"

Quincy led them into a place among some cacti and mesquite trees. The guns were gone but the Indians didn't take the nitroglycerin. Willie figured they knew what it was and how it wouldn't travel well on horseback. Not knowing she was going to do it before she did it, Willie kissed Quincy and asked if he wanted to come with them. Bart nodded and realized why master.

Quincy said, “*someone has to deal with my father, and I think I should be the one.*”

Buried in a box was money of every denomination as well as gold nuggets and opals. Quincy asked for the silver his father gave them and said he would walk back. Willie told him they would come back, but he said not to, and they would eventually know why.

Jonathan Jackson sat in his office staring out at the ranch he just bought. He couldn't really see it, but he could see it in his imagination. The girl that was supposed to be his daughter-in-law was topless and going down on him. A part of his wheeling and dealing involved sabotage, and it had paid off with his neighbor broke. He sold the property for less than it was worth and gave his daughter to Jonathan to marry, but he didn't want to marry her. She would end up in the same grave with her father when his men caught up with him. Just outside he saw his son walking up to the house. He was bruised but still alive. Jonathan said, “*I guess you can't buy good, bad guys.*” The girl stopped and looked up at him. At first, he was angry, but then he realized he could take his time with her. He ordered

her into his room. Jonathan pulled up his slacks as Quincy walked into the office.

Jonathan said, *“I didn’t give you permission to enter boy.”*

Quincy stood straight and walked slowly like someone whipped him. He tossed one of the silver coins at his father. The silver was rubbed away showing brass underneath.

Quincy asked, *“you killed mother and Junior and paid in fake money to have me killed?”*

Jonathan said, *“I would say someday you’ll understand, but I think you never made it back.”*

He pulled a revolver from his desk and pointed it at Quincy who just stood his ground. Jonathan saw something in the boy he didn’t know he had. He saw courage and a backbone. Of all his children both legitimate and not he would have never guess Quincy would be the one.

Quincy said, *“do whatever you have to father. Just know it will be your last mistake.”*

Jonathan said, “*no son not killing you in your cradle was my last mistake.*”

Jonathan cocked and fired hitting Quincy in the chest just where Quincy knew he would shoot striking the nitroglycerin in his pocket setting it off along with the black powder bomb sending shards of fake money and nails into the room shredding both men and leveling that side of the house. After finding what was left of the two men Jonathan’s ranch hands helped themselves to his gold and guns leaving the house to burn. One of the men was a man named David Wednesday who made sure a fair amount of the money went to all the woman and children Jackson left behind then he rode off to a small town and his future.

A few days later, Willie read about the explosion and knew what had happened. The paper spoke about just what kind of man Jonathan Jackson was and how the world was better with him dead. It mentioned how his son was coming back from the war and was going to tear down the house and sell the land. She put the paper down and thought about the boy she bedded taking something she didn’t want. Even after a few

days, she was still a little sore while part of that might have been from the saddle, she knew another part was from her stooping to someone else's level and decided to never take from someone like that again.

Chapter Five

After burning the newspaper with the story about Quincy and his father's death, Willie went to sleep and dreamed about how she believed their deaths happened. In her dreams, she was both father and son. She awoke then went back to sleep and dreamed she was the one on the bottom as Alex had his way with her. A feeling of powerlessness overwhelmed her forcing her awake and out into the morning air. She went down to the stable to see Jester. Willie walked in to find Jasper's son brushing Jester. She didn't know his name and didn't know what to say to the boy. He saw her and dropped the brush then ran for the back. He was gone before she could say stop. Jester whinnied as Willie picked up the brush and finished the job the boy started.

The door where the boy vanished opened and Jasper came in with a club in his hand. He stopped and smiled when he saw Willie. He started to walk over to her when she looked up, and her look made him stop and start to lose his grin.

Willie asked, *“what’s your son’s name. I want to thank him for seeing to Jester?”*

Jasper said, *“I call him Mouse, but if he had a name, I think I’ll never know it, and he isn’t my son. We left the plantation together. About a year before we left the lady of the house had his tongue cut out for talking back to her. I think he’s afraid of women.”*

Jasper grinned then laughed saying, *“aren’t we all.”*

Willie jumped down off the stool she was using and walked over to Jasper. She thought about her time on her family’s plantation and how she was given a life built on the backs of such men and children like Jasper and Mouse. She didn’t say anything, and he lost his smile then nodded as he went to work cleaning the stalls.

Willie turned and said, *“you take care of him and make sure he’s safe so even if he’s not your blood he is your son.”*

Jasper’s frown vanished as he started to smile again and laugh.

Willie walked into town passing by a couple of covered wagons with their covers brightly colored with what looked like French painted in a curving scroll. She didn't know much of the language, but she recognized a painting of a woman in the dress she was in on the Jackson raid. Mouse slipped past her and disconnected the horses. She watched as he connected the horses and led the train back to the stables. He kept his head low and never once look back to her. Willie went back to her walk and found herself at the restaurant. She had a couple of overcooked eggs and a smoked sausage that had a strong whiskey taste.

Across from her at another table were a couple of women. Both were in fancy dresses with one in red and the other in green, and after a minute or two, she saw they were twins. Bart sat down with a plate of the sausages and fried potatoes. He nodded to the women and the one in the red gave a wistful wave back.

He said, "*Tiny's old troop is in town to see him and borrow a few props. Those two are the*

Satin Twins, and they do things on stage that no two sisters should ever do. At that other table is Maybell. That dress you had belonged to her, and she wasn't happy it was ripped."

A woman almost twice her size in height and curves was sitting by herself eating about a pound of bacon. Willie finished eating and told Bart she was going over to the store.

Bart replied, "*you might not recognize the place.*"

The storefront was cleaned off with the glass uncovered. Willie could see the crates were gone and a countertop and shelves were now visible on the right side of the store with small round tables and chairs on the left. She checked, and the door was locked. Hanging in the door was a closed sign along with another handwritten sign saying Opening soon. Willie walked around to the back and found the door open. She noticed the outhouse was rebuilt and the outside shower was gone. Inside the man-smell was gone and replaced by the scents of lavender, hibiscus, and other

tea scents. The crate with the guns was also gone. Tiny walked in wearing a long black suit making him seem even taller. He stood straight and almost blocked the door opening.

He smiled saying, *“I bet you are wondering where everything is? We moved it all to another place so I could open my shop.”*

She frowned asking, *“and it’s all safe?”*

Tiny pointed to the back door saying, *“safer than here. We have locks on both doors in the new place.”*

Tiny told her about his old friends coming to town to see if he would join them on a tour of the southwest but really so they could borrow a few stage props. He seemed excited to see his old friends again, and Willie wondered if they were about to lose him.

Tiny said, *“my partner will be running the day-to-day operations of the tea room so we can go out and make some bad and no I joined both gangs so I could do, not act.”*

Willie asked where Guy was, and Tiny told her that he would vanish for a week or two then come back ready for work. Willie wondered how she could have some sort of feelings for a man so unreliable. A man about her height walked in with a crate marked Darjeeling on the side. He was about Tiny's age with blonde hair and just a few strands of gray.

He said, "well you must be Willie, or do you prefer Pat..... Honestly, I don't see how either of them could look at you and think you were a boy. I mean it's so obvious you're a strong, well-built woman."

The unnamed man put the crate down then walked over to Tiny. He pulled her down by the neck and kissed her on the lips. Both men did their best to see how Willie reacted. After Tiny didn't say a word when she was naked in front of him while he fitted the dress, she wasn't surprised to see him with another man.

Tiny stood back up and said, "this is my partner James Joyce."

James put out his hand in a way that was more akin to how the women did back home in Alabama almost expecting someone to kiss it and just for a second Willie almost did.

James said, *“my friends call me Jammie and I hope you will call me Jammie because I plan on calling you Pat no matter what you think about it.”*

Jammie picked up the crate and walked to the door. He turned and said, *“Pat you are coming to the party tonight, and no that’s not a question, so I’ll see you there.”*

Tiny told Willie where to find their new place and gave her a key. She walked over to find a two-story adobe house with a courtyard. She walked around to find an Adobe shower room and outhouse. On top of the shower room was a large black tank. She walked into what seemed to be a kitchen with some sort of woodburning oven. Half was sitting a table cleaning one of the Colt revolvers. She heard a sound in the

other room. Half looked to the other room then back to his gun.

He said, *“I’m not sure you want to go in there.”*

Willie walked past him and leaned her head into the room. She saw a woman about her height and in fact someone who could be her twin or sister facing the back of the chair. She was naked and bouncing up and down. The woman saw Willie and smiled. It was about then when she saw what had to be Bart’s legs then arms move up her sides to her breasts. The woman leaned over and whispered something to Bart.

She started to move faster then said, *“we’ll be done soon so just wait if you want to be next.”*

Willie shook her head and walked away. She turned and said she would see them tonight. She left the house and made her way back to her cabin. She stopped at the stable and looked inside. Mouse was brushing one of the horses from the traveling show. He was mouthing words but with no tongue wasn’t saying anything. She stepped into her cabin and stripped down to her male underwear. She closed her eyes and soon

was back in that office just before the other her set off the bomb.

The sun started to set, and Willie could hear the party from her cabin. The entire town was lit with multicolored lanterns with people everywhere. It seemed that almost everyone in the small town was out for the party. Off in the distance, Willie saw a man in a tan duster and a gold badge. She hadn't met the new sheriff yet, but his presence was already being felt in how people walked around and the absence of Jasper and Mouse. Half decided to celebrate in the Tea shop with the performers. No one knew what the party was about only that there were lights, and everyone was welcome or almost welcome.

Willie walked into the saloon and up to the bar where she bought a shot of whiskey and a beer. The whiskey was watered down, and the beer was brewed with some unknown grain, but it was cheap. In a corner in the back of the bar, she saw Bart and the woman from the house. She was mostly clothed. Next to her was the woman Willie thought she would be. A fiery-redhead in a shimmering white dress with emerald trim that

brought out the green in her eyes. Willie finally noticed the woman was staring back at her. She leaned over to Bart who lost his smile. She picked up a small bottle of something then walked over to Willie.

She pointed to Willie and said, *“well I heard all about you good sir and let me say words just don’t do justice.”*

Up close the woman’s beauty was even more pronounced. She seemed straight out of an oil painting. The woman poured out a small amount of liquid from the bottle into a shot glass. She put the shot to Willie’s lips.

She said, *“take of my life and see all that can be.”*

Willie let the liquid slip down her throat. It had a slight hibiscus and lemongrass taste but numbed her mouth and throat a second or two later.

The woman whispered, *“it’s just a hint of tea and laudanum to take the edge off. I’m sure such a strong young man such as yourself can handle it.”*

Willie saw the worried look on Bart as the woman pulled her back and through a door to a back room. In the alley, the woman said her name was Bonnie O’Dea, and she was from a small town in Georgia near the ocean. Before she could speak, Bonnie kissed her on the lips as she pushed her back against a wall.

Bonnie whispered, “*don’t worry I already know.*”

Bonnie tasted like the stuff from the bottle and something sweet like a faraway memory from her childhood. She kept kissing Willie as her hands moved all over her body. It took more than a few minutes before Willie realized what Bonnie had just said. She pushed Bonnie back and looked into her eyes. The image shifted as she looked at her as the shot she swallowed took hold.

She said, “*take me home Wilhelmina, and I will take you to places you have never dreamed of or thought you could find.*”

Willie didn’t know what was going on. She felt separate from her body as Bonnie pulled her into her

cabin and started to undress. Willie watched the dress as it hit the floor. Bonnie told her she could try it on later as she worked on Willie's clothing. Her slacks came down then her shirt, and soon she was nearly naked in front of this strange woman. She was pushed back to the bed as Bonnie kissed her touching her along the way. Willie shook her head but didn't do anything else.

Bonnie whispered, "*I understand but just let that go and take in a new understanding.*"

Bonnie put her hand down into Willie's underpants and started to rub. Willie's face went flush, and the top of her head felt like it was about to explode. She kissed back and in a forceful move pushed Bonnie onto her back as she kissed her. Willie put her hand down between Bonnie's legs and pushed.

Bonnie jumped saying, "*just use your two fingers darling don't go all in up to your wrists.*"

Bonnie slid down kissing Willie along the way until she was down between her legs. The room lit up with bright red and white flashes of light and a sound of

something. She realized the sounds of moaning were coming from her as her body turned red hot and cold at the same time. Her body felt heavy as the room started to spin.

Before she passed out, Willie said as loud as she could, “*what does it all mean?*”

Willie woke the next morning naked and alone in her bed. She looked around and saw nothing was missing. She found a note on the pillow next to her.

The note read, ‘Sorry I had to run, but my life was waiting for me, and I had to go. I usually get paid for such a night, but I had such a good time that this one was for free and as for your question, it doesn’t have to mean anything.’

On the floor next to her clothes, Willie saw the white and green dress. She pictured Bonnie running across the town nearly naked. Willie stood up and slipped into the dress. A few days ago, a full-length mirror arrived. The top was about three sizes too big for her as was the

hemline, but for the first time since she left home, Willie felt like a woman, but she didn't know if all the trappings were for her. She also didn't understand how she felt for Bonnie or Guy.

Chapter Six

A few weeks later Willie found herself sitting in the tea shop drinking a cup of some fancy tea that tasted like a mix of mint and licorice. The shop was developing a client base with the women of the community as it grew with the up incoming railroad. Sunday's seemed to be their busiest day just after church services from both the Catholic and Protestant churches. The different denominations let out at different times, and the two didn't mix with the Catholic parishioners being more Irish and Mexican and the other of English backgrounds. For their part, Tiny and Jammie kept their private lives private or lose their biggest client base. All that is on Sunday and Wednesday for the Catholics this day was Thursday, and the shop might as well be closed on Thursdays with all the activity. Tiny went to the newly opened post office to arrange a delivery while Jammie sat behind the counter reading a small paperback book. Some author was going town to town trying to find the perfect voice of the new west while selling his dime novels. She liked spending time in the tea shop because it smelled like Bonnie. For his part, Jammie always had on a pot of honeysuckle and lavender

peddles knowing it matched the scent of Bonnie's perfume.

Two large glass windows were sent and installed in the front of the store gave an unobstructed view of the street. Willie sat drinking the tea smelling the fragrance and watching as the people walked by on their way to wherever they were going. It had been almost a month since their last job, and it seemed like they had stalled as a band of outlaws. Tiny was hard at work selling tea, Half was seeing a woman who worked in a tent hotel, Guy came and went with little said to any of them, and Bart was practicing law. Their first job netted enough money to set them up for a good while but none of them went into this for the money. The back door opened, and Guy came in. Jammie nodded to him as he poured a cup of tea then dumped a couple of shots of tequila in with the tea. Guy nodded back as he took the cup and walked over to Willie who watched Jammie's eyes follow Guy's ass.

Guy sat down and looked out the window. He had his musky slightly sweating scent that made Willie feel attracted to him without knowing why.

Guy asked, *“so are we still a thing?”*

Willie didn't know what he meant, but her face went flush.

He said, *“I mean are we still a gang or not because I didn't join to do just one job I wanted to do as many as we could.”*

Willie replied, *“the way I see it we are still a gang and just waiting to find the kind of score that fits us. I left home looking to make my own life and not let others tell me how to live, but I don't want to hurt the innocent. I don't want to kill for nothing.”*

Guy took a long sip from his glass and some time passed before anyone else spoke.

He finally said, *“honest work and honest means are a good fit for good people and if good is what you want then just maybe we are finished, but I don't think you want any of that, I think*

that if pushed you will choose to live and not settle.”

Willie asked, “*settle for what?*”

Guy replied, “*protecting those that won’t protect themselves. No one who chooses to come west is innocent…… not a single gad dam one of them.*”

A few people went running past the windows. Then a few more went by in the same direction. Willie got up and went to the door. She saw a crowd of people in the street around something or someone. She stepped out and started to see what was when the crowd parted for the sheriff, and she saw an emerald green dress. Lying in the arms of some unknown man was one of the Satin Twins the one named Margaret. She was covered in scrapes and bruises and what appeared to be dried blood. Willie turned and ran back to the shop. Inside she ordered Guy to find Tiny while she went out with Jammie to see if they could help.

The crowd made it hard to get to her, but that wasn't going to stop with of them as they pushed their way to Margaret. Up close they could see she was nearly blind from sun exposure. She had several stab wounds and blood stains running down from the crotch of the dress where it had bled through. Under her matching bonnet, she had been scalped. Cries of Indian and redskins and calls for a hunting party came from the crowd. Tiny went to his knees then onto his butt when he was still too tall for her. He helped her over and into his lap. As she was moved Margaret came back to life.

She screamed, “*bandits..... highway men..... killers..... white hoods.*”

The town didn't have a resident doctor just a few people with some experience from the war and as a midwife. None of them were willing to touch her. Tiny picked her up and carried her to the rooms he and Jammie shared. She died about an hour later having never woken up again.

Guy came to the stables with six rifles and handguns. Willie and Jasper saddled horses as Bart and Tiny

gathered gear. They would meet up with Half on the way out. He didn't want to come into town after a white woman was found scalped. Willie saddled her new horse she named Bandit. She didn't want to take Jester on their jobs because of his distinct markings, and he was her oldest friend.

Willie turned to Jasper and said, "*we will leave you a gun, but you aren't coming with us.*"

The others stopped and looked at the two of them. Jasper stood up and crossed his arms. He looked to the hayloft at Mouse as he hid watching the others.

He said, "*men like this need to be stopped and I can't just stay back knowing I could have done more.*"

Willie said, "*you have your son and-*"

Jasper interrupted her saying, "*and he won't be safe as long as men like that are out there.*"

Guy said, "*there will always be men like that out there.*"

Jasper replied, *“that may be but if we make enough noise then just maybe they will stay away.”*

Willie said, *“it will get bloody, and once you go there then there may be no coming back.”*

Jasper smiled and said, *“most of those men were from the south. Killing men like that won’t mean nothing to me at all.”*

Willie gave Jasper a Colt Army revolver and a Henry rifle. He worked the action like he was well versed in its use. She made a note in her head to ask about it when or if they came back. The group left town following the easy trail left by Margaret. She was along one of the main wagon trails on the way west. They found a place where she had stopped and most likely lay for a while with a pool of dried blood. They rode for another hour until they found a wagon with dead horses. Inside the wagon were three dead including the other twin Margarett. She was scalped then stabbed to death. Willie checked, but Bonnie wasn’t there or around the wagon. About ninety feet

away Half found the body of a man. The man was shot in the back through his heart. He was dressed like a ranch hand with a nickel-plated Colt Navy revolver. Around his gun belt and his arm were gray bandanas. Guy pulled off the bandana and looked at it.

He said, *“Sons of the forgotten. A group of men working out of western Texas fighting against the encroaching American government. Their leader voted to stay out of the union, and when they joined, he said he would make them pay.”*

Guy dropped the bandana and picked up the man’s gun. He handed it to Willie.

Guy said, *“this gun is too new for these people to have. I mean he could have bought it or fond it, but these people stay away from civilization, so it doesn’t make sense.”*

Willie tossed the gun back and said, *“let’s go ask them.”*

Two miles to the west they found the other two wagons and their dead horses. Near the wagon’s they

found the ashes of a fire and the burned remains of several people. The woman known as Maybell was lying on her back with ten bullet wounds and her scalp gone. Willie searched around until she found her. She was lying in the tattered ruins of her clothes and blood. Bonnie died with her eyes open laying out in the sun. When they were finished with her they left her laying in the sun where the elements and wildlife had taken their toll, her semi-curly red hair was caked with blood with the top of her scalp gone. Bonnie's left eye was gone, and her right had clouded over the emerald green. Her scent was gone, but Willie could still smell her and that night. She stared at the body and could see herself lying there.

Guy came up behind Willie and told her they found a trail heading southwest, and they had maybe two days on them. Willie sat on her knees staring at the body. Guy told her that Tiny would stay and bury the bodies. Willie pulled out her knife and cut off one of Bonnie's fingers. She put the finger in a piece of Bonnie's dress.

She turned to Guy and said, "*they don't get away.*"

Night fell, and in the dark distance, they could see rising smoke with floating sparks. There had to be thirteen of them encamped near a stream with a bluff to their left. The gang tethered their horses to a nearby grove of mesquite trees. They watched the men set their camp and start to drink. Half snuck around to the horses and after a half an hour or so he came back with a bag of scalps. One of them had curly red hair. A scream came from one of the tents the gang set up. A young girl came running out of the tent holding what was left of her dress in front of her as a man gave chase. From what Willie could see the girl had cuts all over her body. Another man blocked her way forcing her down. She started to get up when the new man struck her square in the face knocking her back down. The man undid his pants and urinated on the girl laughing as he struck her face with the stream.

Willie said, *“if we rush in right now, we could take them by surprise and..... and.”*

She stopped talking when she saw two men with what looked like a cannon of some kind with rifle barrels where the cannon should be. Guy told her it was called

a Gatling gun and would cut them down long before they could move in. The first man pulled the girl up by her hair knocking the ripped clothing from her hands. He pushed her to the fire, stabbed her in the back then pushed her in. The smell of burning hair and cooking flesh filled the valley as did her screams.

Willie said, *“we’ll need to take out the men with the gun thing first and somehow scatter the rest, but we also need to take one of them alive.”*

Guy pointed out how the ridge followed the stream, and with a few good shots they could take cover and take out the men.

Willie said, *“force them away from the tents to their horses where we will be waiting.”*

Another scream came from one of the tents. Guy nodded and went around to the ridge with Half. The rest went to the horses. Jasper untied the horses and led them away as quietly as he could.

He said, “*a horse doesn’t know his rider is evil.*”

The two men took turns aiming the Gatling gun at the tents and the fire while not watching what was going on around them. Using his hands, Guy counted down from three then they both dry-fired in unison. When he knew they were ready, he loaded the Sharps Rifle and gave the signal.

James John and Jake Harrison played around with the new toy they took off a group of American soldiers traveling west. The soldiers thought they were friendly, and they were until they opened fire and took what they wanted. The gun was empty with the rounds nearby just in case they had to open fire. A crack of thunder went across the camp, and the two men went down with matching head wounds. The camp came to life with the sounds, and they saw the two men down. Another man went to the gun and was hit with two shots. Half and Guy fired wildly into the camp with their revolvers and Henrys hoping to make them think they had an army on the ridge. Someone yelled the horses are gone. Most of the men went running to

where the horses had been with just a few wasting their lives trying to get to the Gatling gun. Willie and the others opened fire as the remaining men made their way to the trees. Jasper turned his rifle around and struck one man in a white hat across the face knocking him down and out. The others were shot down then dead.

In the camp, they found the stolen goods from a dozen coaches as well as the props from Tiny's friends. They also found six children ranging in ages from three to thirteen. They were huddled in a mass inside one of the tents. The thirteen-year-old was a girl. She was only wearing a man's shirt. Like the girl they burned alive she was cut and bruised. She also seemed to oversee the younger children. Camila Sofia Isabella García Flores was born in Mexico, and at the age of six, her parents left to find their fortune in the north. They spent the last seven years going from gold rush to gold rush just making enough to get to the next job. Her mother called her Camila, and her father called her Sofia. Her little brother called her Issy. A week before the raid the white men raped and burned her nine-year-

old brother. They tried to get her to eat some of him, and when she refused, they gang-raped her, but their leader stopped them from burning her. Half told them who they were and to all their amazement Camila spoke English.

She said, “you didn’t get them all. A smaller group of them went back east for some job. Their leader went with them.”

Willie went to help the children when Camila backed away. Willie looked to the others then down to her shirt. She ordered the others out of the tent. She untucked then unbuttoned her shirt. Camila blocked the others with her body. Willie opened her shirt to show the corset holding her breasts down and in place. With a knife, she cut it away showing she was a woman. The three-year-old Rosella laughed at the sight of the young man that was a woman. Willie laughed with her.

Willie said, “we are going to burn the dead. If you want to help or just watch those monsters burn.”

Camila said, “I’ll help, but the others stay inside. They don’t need to see any more of any of this.”

Camila helped as they dragged and tossed the dead into the fire. She stopped at one of the men. James Johns was the first to die. She took the knife from Willie and cut his pants off him. She then cut his genitals off and stuffed them into his mouth breaking his jaw as she worked. When they were done, they put the kids into a wagon with as much of the valuables as they could. They also found clothing for Camila and the children. Their first idea was to have them meet up with Tiny, and he would lead them back to town, but Camila wanted nothing to do with that idea, so they decided to escort them back and help them get settled then find the leader of the gang.

Camila said, “you should stop pretending to be a man. Make them afraid of a woman for a change. be who you are and not who you aren’t.”

They moved out just as the sun came up. Half went to a nearby nation to let them know about the horses and the fancy repeating gun just waiting for someone to take. Willie watched this girl as they rode. She was just three years younger than her, but they seemed like equals in almost every way. Everyone noticed, but no one mentioned the change in Willie. The corset was gone and would never come back in the same way again. For better or worse she was she and she would remain that way in the eyes of the public from then on.

Mitch Grimes woke up with his face feeling like it was on fire. He looked around as he tried to move, but he was naked and tied to the boss's chair. His arms were tied to the arms of the chair, and his legs were tied to the legs with his hips spread and his manhood out. His first thought was the boss would be mad about him being naked on the fucking chair. The flap of the tent he was in opened and a young woman in slacks came in. Mitch looked down at his manhood then back to the girl.

Willie said, *“according to the children you never touched them so you might just live to see*

another day if you can answer me and I know you want to answer me.”

Willie put her boot up on the chair and lightly pressed down on his genitals. When he didn't say a word, she pushed harder.

Mitch finally said, “it doesn't matter. I'm dead by your hand or the boss's hand. Just ask already.”

He told her how he was brought on as a cook and didn't even have a gun. The man they called the boss was named Gerald Wendel Scott, and he was going to raid Dan Town for whiskey.

He said, “someone paid the boss to raid two towns and a few wagon trains. He thought it had to do with the train or something.”

Willie said, “I'm giving you two choices, come with us and face a possible hanging or stay here and see what the Indians do to you.”

That night they stopped and camped near the same water hole where they first formed their pact. Camila

and the children stayed in the wagon watching the others. Willie gave her a gun, and she held it close to her chest not knowing it was empty. After a long day in the saddle wearing nothing but a horse blanket turned into a serape Mitch found himself tied up near the fire wishing he could reach the fleas trying to eat him alive. Bart built up a fire as Jasper cooked something, he called chuckwagon stew. Everyone ate and for the children it had been days since they had anything to eat. Jasper used a lot of hot peppers, but they were mild in comparison to the meals Camila's mother made. She smiled then laughed as the grown men struggled to eat the spicy food. Guy took his bedroll out past the water and lay on the ground. Willie walked over to him then sat down on his lap. Guy looked over to his right and saw her slacks. She leaned over and put her hand across his face.

She whispered, "*just don't say a word.*"

She opened her shirt then she opened his running her hands across his chest then down to his pants. He started to say something, but she put her hand back over his mouth.

She said, “*this is happening wither you are awake or not.*”

She pulled his pants down to his knees and took hold of him. She wasn't gentle, and Guy jumped from the touch. She guided him into her as she started to slide up and down. Guy watched as her once confined breasts heaved with her exertions. He brought his hands down from her lower back to her backside trying to take some sort of control all the while knowing who was on top. When they were finished, she got up and put her slacks back on while he lay there with a mystified look on his face.

They rode the rest of the way back in silence with only the sounds of the horses and the singing of young Rosella. She sang something in Spanish that made Half cry. He wouldn't tell the others what she was singing only that it was sad and lovely at the same time. Jasper said he would prepare a cabin for the children when they got back. For his part in the raid, Jasper walked away with a large mantle clock like something Willie remembered from the plantation.

On the outskirts of town, they could feel something was wrong. The town was too quiet. They rode to the other side of the town to the stable to find it had been burned. In the middle of the courtyard next to the stable was a burnt stump of something. Along the way, they passed the heads of all the horses from the stable. Up next to the last post, Willie found Jester's head. Someone shot all the horses then cut their heads off. A scream came from the stable. Willie ran into the stable and found Jasper on his knees staring up at the lifeless body of Mouse. He was hung and left to die. Willie walked back out to the burned stump and looked at the ash on the ground. The ashes were in a sort of cross shape.

Chapter Seven

Jasper cut Mouse down as carefully as he could. The fire scorched his feet down to the bone. Tiny went to find the local undertaker and a minister to help with Mouse. Willie found something in Mouse's hand. He came back with a plain wooden box and a nun. He said the undertaker wouldn't come for a black man, but Jasper knew what he really said as well as the minister. The nun said they couldn't bury an unbaptized person, but she could help them dig a grave in the local cemetery on the other side of town. True to her word she went with them and did a turn digging a hole. The sheriff came over with his hat in his hand but a smirk on his face.

He said, "it's a shame about the boy, but I guess when you go where you aren't wanted bad things happen. Some niggers need to know their place."

He said it staring at Jasper. The Nun got out of the hole with dirt on her habit and walked over to the sheriff. He lost his smile and backed away a little.

The nun said, *“well I guess Sheriff you’ll have something to confess this Sunday won’t you.”*

The sheriff leaned past the nun and said, *“just make sure this is all cleaned up boy. I’ll be around later to talk about the horses.”*

While they buried Mouse, Willie helped the children settle into the cabin next to hers. It had a bigger bed and a place for another bed which Willie found stored in a building nearby. The two boys would share a bed, and the girls would take the bigger bed. When everyone had their chance at the outhouse, Willie showed Camila how to lock the door and brace a chair under the handle. She gave her a bottle with something clear with just a hint of amber.

Camila asked, *“what’s this?”*

Willie replied, *“its water with a hint of whiskey to help you and the others sleep.”*

Camila put her hand on her gun and said, *“all we need is that lock and this to help us.”*

Bart and Guy spent the night cleaning the stable taking out any damaged wood while making sure the horses had a place for the night. When the others came back, they buried the dead horses with their heads in an open field next to the stable. With the children in a cabin, the others met in the back of the stable. Willie opened a bottle of bourbon she bought a year ago and let sit in her cabin untouched. It was her father's favorite. Jasper looked at the bottle then poured a small glass of the liquid.

He said, *“I watched as this stuff ruined many good men and I never knew why they would drink such stuff.”*

He downed the bourbon in one go. He poured another glass and did the same thing. Willie looked at her pocket then back to the bottle.

She asked, *“did you see the sheriff? How did he act?”*

Guy asked, *“like the ass he is but what does that matter?”*

Willie pulled out the thing from her pocket and dropped it on the table. It made a metallic sound as it

bounced over to the bottle. Jasper picked it up. It was a silver medallion with an opal inlay. Thinking about it he remembered the sheriff's gun belt was missing something, but he wasn't sure what.

Willie said, *“this was in Mouse’s hand, and I think he took it off the sheriff. He was there.”*

Jasper picked up the medallion and stared at it. He tossed it back onto the table.

He said, *“that cracker bastard walked over to us burying Mouse and blamed him for his own death.”*

The Nun took the bottle and poured a glass.

She said, *“I bet he meant he was expecting to find you and not your son.”*

She downed the drink. Everyone looked at her then to the bottle. Jasper started to say he wasn't his son but stopped.

The nun said, *“I’m helping you.”*

Willie said, *“we can’t ask you to do that sister.”*

The Nun said, *“please call me Maggie, and I believe that God sent me here to do this even if it means breaking my oath to him. Sometimes you must break the rules to do what is right. Father Hanson stood by and did nothing to help. What good is the church if it’s not going to do what’s right.”*

Willie replied, *“no, I think this man needs to talk to me.”*

The Sheriff sat in his office with his gun belt spread across his desk staring at the place where the silver and opal medallion was missing. Back before he took on the job of enforcing the law he was a runaway slave hunter and with every returned slave he bought one of the silver medallions. He had moved out west hunting a runaway seeing how many were going west fleeing the new laws returning them to bondage. Two slaves had escaped his grasp only to turn up as property owners in the town he found himself as sheriff, but slavery was over, and all he could do was deal with them in his own way. His door opened, and someone

came in, but he didn't look up to see the person until he heard Willie's gun cock.

He looked up to her just as she shot hitting him in the right shoulder knocking him back against the wall. She cocked and fired again hitting him in the left shoulder. He tried to put up his hands to block the next shot, but his arms wouldn't move.

Willie said, *"I just shot you in your joints turning your arms into something as useless as you are."*

She cocked her gun and said, *"you have two choices, let someone feed you or I'll do it now."*

She put the gun to his forehead. He knew what this was about, and he also knew what she wanted.

The Sheriff asked, *"why do you look like that..... like a girl or something?"*

Willie lowered the hammer on her gun and pulled one of the sheriff's guns. She cocked the hammer and pointed the gun at him.

She asked, “*who?*”

The door opened, and the sheriff thought he might be saved then he saw Jasper.

He saw the gun on Jasper and asked, “*what are you doing with a man’s tool boy?*”

Willie asked, “*who?*”

The sheriff looked to the gun then the angry tall black man staring at him with the gun on his hip and the Sharps rifle in his hand.

The sheriff said, “*look it wasn’t personal, that rope was meant for you, and all I wanted to do was scare the boy, and I don’t know maybe castrate him, but the lynching was the mayor’s idea. He wanted all you out so people would know he was the big boss.*”

Willie pulled an ax handle from a pile of handles on another desk. The handle had blood on it like it was used to beat someone. She put it on the desk in front of the sheriff. She walked up to him, put the barrel of his revolver to the base of his penis and fired. The shot hit an artery, and his pants turned red almost immediately.

She turned to Jasper and said, “*make it personal.*”

Jasper laughed as he picked up the ax handle. She stepped out onto the boardwalk to an empty street. Behind her, she could hear a thumping sound. The cries and crying slowly died down along with the sheriff. She looked up to what acted as the town hall with the mayor’s office looking out over the town. She could see the back of his head. Willie knew he wouldn’t be alone. His teenage daughter worked as his secretary, and she would be there. She didn’t know if she could kill the man in front of his daughter, but she knew he had to die.

Mayor John Ghrist sat in his office listening for more gunfire and screaming. He listened for the coupe he had just started and his inevitable take over of the town. He thought about all those people back in Cincinnati who told him he wouldn’t amount to anything if he went west. He looked down at Janet as she went down on him. She was topless and showing the scars on her back from the other night. He told people she was his daughter and not a girl he bought

off a man on his way west. He liked to beat her and take her from behind, but he stopped short of intercourse so he wouldn't have to explain the pregnancy of his fifteen-year-old daughter. The gunfire stopped, but his plan was still going as was Janet. Neither of them heard the door slowly open.

Willie slipped in and saw the mayor's daughter on her knees going down on him. He had his eyes closed. She had a mix of bruises and scars on her back. The mayor opened his eyes looking down at Janet then he saw Willie. He looked down at Janet then back to Willie.

The Mayor said, "*so you are a girl..... I guess I owe my lieutenant a bottle of whiskey.*"

Janet stopped and stood up turning to Willie while trying to cover her bare chest. She looked to him then to her trying to understand what was happening. For a short time, she had a sort of crush on this new boy in town, but her employer never let her talk to other men. Janet went for her shirt on the desk, but Willie stopped her. The mayor just sat there with his pants down around his ankles and his erect penis pointing at her.

Willie said to Janet, “*put on your shirt then sit in a corner..... close your eyes, I don’t want you to see your father die.*”

Janet replied, “*he’s not my father he’s my.....my..... I want to watch.*”

The Mayor looked to Janet and her smile. He turned to Willie and the gun in her hand. He gave that gun to the sheriff and knew the only way she could have it if he were dead. He looked to the place where he kept a gun hid then to Willie wondering if he could make it to the gun and kill them both.

The Mayor said, “*my boys will be here soon, and if they find you here, they’ll take out their anger on your ass.*”

A shot rang out, and a red hole appeared then filled with blood on the mayor’s head. Willie turned to See Janet holding a small derringer in her hand. She shot again but missed striking the back of the chair next to his head. The Mayor’s eye dropped, and his bowels let go spreading a foul odor in the room. Willie pulled her left revolver and fired striking him in the neck than in

the top of the head spreading his brains across the back of his chair and wall. Janet dropped the gun and her shirt. Willie walked over, picked up the shirt and help Janet put it on. Janet looked at Willie.

She said, *“oh my god, you are really a girl.”*

Willie walked over to the windows and looked out.

Janet said, *“he hired some creeps to hassle coaches and kill anyone who might get in his way. He wanted the dark man and his son dead for some reason but most of all he wanted to own the land before the railroad came. I had to call him master.”*

Willie said, *“you can sit here and stare at this lump of flesh, or you can grab that gun on the wall and join. Either way, this isn't over yet, and you could still end up calling some man master.”*

Willie stepped out of the town hall and ran to the tea shop with Janet behind her. They found Guy inside with a gun and a few bodies piled just inside. Jammie was behind the counter with a rifle.

Jammie asked, “*did you kill him, Pat?*”

Willie looked to Janet as she tried to almost hide behind her.

She turned and said, “*yes but it’s not over yet. The Mayor was the one that hired the forgotten to attack people, and they might be on their way.*”

Willie stepped back out leaving Janet with Jammie. Jasper stepped out covered in blood wearing the sheriff’s gun belt and holding his rifle. Next to him was the nun Maggie. Her habit was covered in dust and dirt. She had a revolver loosely held in a belt and a Sharps rifle in her arms. Tiny was on the roof of the tea shop with a rifle watching the trail. Bart and Half were on their way from the stable. They met in the middle of the street. Without saying a word, they all knew this was far from over. Tiny yelled as loud as he could that eight riders were coming from the west riding hard.

The eight men rode into town with a dust trail behind them and badges on their shirts. They passed the partially burned down stable into a town void of

movement. Maggie walked out into the rode in her habit and a rifle on her hip. The men looked at each other then back to the gun packing nun.

The lead rider asked, *“sister what are you doing with that gun. Does Father Hanson know you’re out?”*

Sister Maggie said, *“this is your one and only chance, drop your guns and badges and leave. Remember God is watching you.”*

Another rider pulled his gun saying, *“then he can watch this.”*

Before he could get his shot off, Tiny knocked him off his saddle with a well-placed shot in the head. The men and horses scattered as they opened fire into the buildings and the others fired at them. The horses stirred up the dust obscuring Maggie and the others. Willie came out of her firing spot and ran into the dust cloud. A horse ran by and out. She passed a smashed Sharps rifle and ripped habit. She found Maggie on the other side of the cloud only in her shift and covered in dust.

She saw Willie and said, *“I dropped the rifle.”*
Willie replied, *“you dropped more than that.”*

The dust cleared, and the two women walked up to the boardwalk. Father Hanson saw Sister Maggie and turned his back. He told her he was going to report her actions and she should pack for a trip back to the east.

Maggie said, *“fuck you and your bullshit. If you aren’t going to serve the people, then you should feed the worms.”*

Maggie brought up her gun, but she didn’t aim it at him. He saw the gun and ran. He vanished into the church and only came back out when the next coach came to town where he rode out for good.

Jasper asked, *“sister Maggie, won’t that hurt you with your bosses?”*

Maggie replied, *“I guess it’s not sister anymore and I just don’t care what they think. I did more for the people today in scaring that bastard away than in the two years I spent as a nun. I guess I’m now just a woman.”*

Jasper replied, *“I don’t know what just a woman means. Most women I know are far more than just anything, and you walked up to eight armed men on horseback, so you are definitely more than just.”*

Maggie looked to Jasper and said, *“maybe it’s time to break another vow.”*

Jasper smiled then laughed. The two walked away as the others started to move the bodies and try and control the horses. Bart leaned over to Willie and pointed to the two walking back to the stables.

He asked, *“did we just help a nun find someone to have sex with?”*

Willie replied, *“don’t think about it and just maybe you’ll be alright.”*

The owner of the saloon came running out with an ax handle in his hand. Willie made a mental note about his choice of weapon. He walked up to the others with the handle resting on the inside of his left elbow.

He asked, *“what does all this mean, who’s in charge?”*

Willie looked at the others then the town.

She said, “have another election or whatever just know we are running this town from now on. We won’t stand for any of this anymore.”

Willie went to check on the children in the cabin. Camila said they were fine, but she wouldn’t open the door. Willie put her hand on the door, but she also knew that the children saw too much, and she had blood on her. She could check on them in the morning after changing her clothes and some sleep. She went back to her cabin, and after getting enough water, she stripped and slipped into a hot bath. In the shadows of the fire, she could see her brother Frank in his uniform with a blood stain over his heart. In another corner she saw her dead father surrounded by all the children he had with his slaves; their clothes covered in blood after the neighbors killed every slave they found when the war was lost. She saw her mother after the neighbors had nearly beat her to death and just before they pushed her into the fire consuming their family home. Another face came out of the dark. In the dark, she saw

the woman she was going to become before the war
and her life changed.

Chapter Eight

The sun slowly came up in the east casting a pink light across the town. Willie woke up and looked over at the young man lying next to her. In the last five years, she let her hair grow and dropped her male persona letting people see her as a woman, but she still refused to let that force her back into a dress. She tied her hair in a long braid. She dressed and headed out for her usual walk to town. On the way, she passed a young boy as he started his chores. Adam dropped his pail of water and waved to Willie who waved back. She turned and made her way to the tea shop. Three years ago, the word came west that the railroad was going through the small town of Knuckle Smash and missing Hester's Spring by fifty miles. The town went from prosperous to a near ghost town as people moved to Knuckle Smash. Those that remained found themselves receiving help from an unknown source. Someone was working hard to keep the town going even without a purpose.

Inside, Willie ordered her usual and sat down with the closest thing to a local paper. Nearby Janet Ghrist, the former Mayor's sort of daughter was drinking a cup of tea. Jammie was hovering over her making sure she was comfortable. Janet was a little over six months pregnant with a child that was either Tiny's or Jammies. They wanted a child, and she wanted something important in her life. On the wall next to Janet was a list of names, people lost over the last five years. Near the top was the name Augustus "Guy" Hamilton. He was one of the first members and someone important to Willie. Six months after they took over the town he was shot by a man trying to steal his horse. The shot didn't kill him, the infection from the bullet took its toll, and he died a month later. Willie came here almost every day to sit near his name and think about their short time together. She also hoped the man back in her bed was gone before she got home.

The door opened and what could have been a handsome man came into the shop. On his right side he was rugged and handsome, the kind of man women

would do almost anything for, but from his hairline and down to his collar was a series of scars distorting his good looks. Only a few knew just how low on him those scars go. Charles “Chuck” Davidson saw Willie and smiled with his usual explosive enthusiasm. He seemed to bolt for her table and sat down. Janet saw him and smiled.

He leaned in and whispered, “*so are we a go?*”

His whisper was almost as loud as his usual voice. Willie looked around, but the only people in the shop already knew about their business.

Willie said, “*just like I said yesterday, yes we are going tomorrow so just try and find some calm or so help me I’ll shoot you.*”

Chuck got back up. As he did, he saw Janet staring at him. Willie saw the look on his face change from his usual grin to what could be a nervous smirk. He went back out the door leaving it open. Jammie walked over and closed the door mumbling about how men can’t close anything. In the process, he called Chuck the bad nickname Ground Chuck. Jammie sat down and stared at Willie. After more than a few minutes,

Jammie said, “*whatever is happening you know Tiny is out, right.*”

It sounded like a question, but she knew it was a statement and Jammie didn’t want an answer. Willie just nodded knowing Tiny was a member of the gang in name but not in person. Something about very tall men not living long and what seemed to be a stroke kept him in bed more than on his feet.

Back home she found the guy was gone. Camila was still in bed. It was about a year ago when they first became more than just friends. One-night Camila kissed Willie on the lips. The kiss went further until they were together. They shared a bed as well as everything else. Both still sleep with men and much like that night they would share a man they found in the saloon, but Camila would only go so far with them. Camila was three years younger than Willie and was seventeen. She spent her first three years in town helping the children in her care find either their families or new families, but her family was dead. She lived her life in the territories making Mexico a foreign land. With nowhere to go, she stayed with Willie until

she was her home. She slid over to Willie and put her head on her shoulder.

She asked, “*so are we going after that asshole?*”

Willie turned back to her and kissed her on the lips. It was more of a yes than any words could say.

Together the two women cleaned their cabin than the surrounding area. As they cleaned, Jasper walked by with his usual smile as his son Adam clung onto his leg. Upon the wraparound porch he and the others build, they could see Maggie with their latest child Evelin. Maggie was a former Catholic Nun who had to help them clean up the town when the gang took over. She and Jasper lived together and had two children, but because of the laws, they were not married or could admit to being with each other outside of their friends in town. Jasper did his best to prepare his son for what would eventually be his life in a white man’s world without trying to turn his son bitter to the harsh reality of their lives. When most of the people left, Hester’s Spring’s population shifted from mostly white to a mix

of Hispanic and former slaves with some whites and Indians. The town became a place where who you were didn't matter as much as what you did. There were no closed doors to anyone from the saloon to the churches. In a town struggling to stay alive, everyone's money spent the same.

Later, Willie walked down to the stable and found Adam staring into a stall. He had his usual infectious grin. In the stall, one of the horses Jasper owned had just given birth to a foal a few days ago. He was a charcoal-black with one white patch between the eyes. Jasper told his son the horse would be his when the foal was old enough to be away from the mother. Jasper wanted his son to one day take over the stables, and that would include not being afraid of horses, something his son was having a hard time fighting. Adam was torn between calling the horse Spot or Plop. Spot for the spot on the face or Plop for the sound he made when he was born. Maggie told Jasper they would never have a horse named Plop, but she could never say no to her son.

Jasper saw Willie and nodded as he slowly lost the smile on his face. When they worked, Jasper became a different man. He had said he did it all for his family and that wasn't a laughing matter. Ever since she had their first child, Maggie stayed out of the active parts of their jobs. She did help plan and pack, but this day little Evelin was having a bad case of croup, and Adam was a fulltime job. She didn't fight Jasper when he went on the jobs, but she didn't pretend she liked him going without her. Willie and Jasper packed for a three-day trek with food and arms. As with all their jobs, they wanted to prepare for a quick getaway. Camila joined them.

She said, *“let's get this out of the way..... I'm going, and that's that.”*

Jasper smiled and started to laugh as he made his way out the door knowing there was about to be a fight.

Willie took in a breath and asked, *“is there any way I could stop you?”*

Camila replied, *“you wouldn't stop Chuck or any of the others from going. I have every right to go I'm in this gang too.”*

Willie put up her hands and replied, *“I’m not stopping you just as long as you do as I say. That’s the only rule for everyone.”*

Camila looked to the open door knowing either Jasper or Adam was just outside listening.

She said, *“Oh yeah, by the way, I asked Chuck to come over tonight..... for a little fun.”*

Willie asked, *“are you sure you want to see..... the scars on his face are nothing compared to the scars on the rest of him?”*

Two years earlier when Chuck came to town, he had a hard time trying to find work. The scars on his face made him hard for some to look at him. As a child, he was with his father riding when his saddle broke spooking the horse. He was knocked off and hooked to the saddle where the horse dragged him for three miles ripping through his clothes than skin. The result was a series of gashes going from his hairline to his ankles. His eyes were saved from the horse as was his manhood, but the scars made him unwelcome in the society his parents wanted him to join. He was sixteen

when he came to town, and like every other town, he wasn't initially welcome. Willie brought him home after a long night of drinking. At eighteen he had never been with a woman or even had his shirt off with another person after the accident. He woke the next day naked next to what would become one of his best friends but not the love of his life. He saved that moniker for Janet, even if she didn't know. His connection to Willie helped him find a place in town and with the gang.

A knock at the door and on the other side Willie found Chuck with a bottle of the red wine Jammie bought in Texas as well as a semi-confused look on his face. Willie took him by the hand and led him into the cabin. Standing by the fire was Camila. She was in a simple cotton shift that showed her form with the fire behind her. Willie put her hand up to his mouth in a shushing gesture letting him know not to talk. Willie was also in a plain cotton shift or night dress. She unbuttoned his shirt but stopped short of opening to expose his chest. Chuck looked over at Camila as Willie went to her

knees and unbuckled his belt then the buttons on his pants.

Willie waved Camila over to them and as she walked over Camila let her shift fall revealing herself to him. Unlike the shirt, Willie didn't stop with his pants until they were down, and he was naked from below the belt. Camila brought his hand up to her bare chest. She opened his shirt and saw the scars. She would later say his chest was like rapids on a long river, calm on one side and choppy on the other but both dangerous. She brought his head down to hers, and they kissed. She knew he wasn't the kind of man she could love if she could ever love a man. She looked down at him and only then realized she had never been with a man like that before. The men that killed her parents had raped her in many ways but never intercourse. She looked down at this thing and made peace with what was about to happen. Willie let her shift drop and lightly put her arm around Chuck and pulled him to the bed. Willie got into the bed and pulled Chuck onto her lap facing Camila who slowly moved in and onto him. Camila looked down at him and soon realized she had

no idea what to do next. Willie took her by her hand as she told her what to do as Chuck help guide himself into her.

Willie woke the next morning to find Chuck gone. Camila was in the bathtub with no water wearing her shift while drinking something from a coffee cup. She looked over at Willie then back to the dead fireplace.

She said, "I didn't know what to expect, and just maybe you were right. Maybe that was a mistake. He did it because I asked and now, he will be a part of me no matter what, and I know he loves someone else..... but a part of me wants..... I just don't know."

Willie walked over pushing a stool so she could sit next to the tub. She took a brush off a table and started to brush Camila's hair.

She said, "it's only natural to feel conflicted. He was the first man to touch you with your consent, and that means something important. Most people either do that with the ones they love or fake it with those they are forced to

fame love for. I think this is just your head trying to justify what we did last night.”

For a moment, Willie thought about leaving her behind. Camila’s sudden affection for Chuck could be a liability for their job. She wondered if Camila could let Chuck die if it came down to it as she wondered if she could do the same with Camila. She let Guy walk into a trap, and he died after being shot, but he didn’t die right away. She knew back then that she would have to use people to get what she wanted but Camila wasn’t just anyone. She also knew she couldn’t let this man call her gang into question or the town wouldn’t be safe even if that meant Camila’s death. Willie leaned over and kissed Camila on the lips and told her they had to go. It was time.

The party consisted of Bart, Half, Jasper without his wife, Chuck, Camila and a new guy named George Harts. George was the son of an evangelist sent west to convert the native peoples only to die from alcohol poisoning in a saloon in Dan town. George was left

alone at the age of twelve to fend for himself where he gained a reputation as a skilled gunfighter and brawler. Now at the age of seventeen, he had a lot of scores to settle and a chip on his shoulder that made him dangerous. Some people called him Saint George because of the cross he wore around his neck and the ones he branded on his hands. George met Willie in Dan Town. She had just met with a man named Alastair Shepard for what should have been a simple job and was in a saloon for a drink. She saw the cross and knew who he was. Willie figured she could kill him and gain a better reputation, but instead, she ended up getting him drunk and taking him to a room. Three weeks later he was in the gang.

Alastair Shepard was a rancher with a problem the local sheriff was unwilling to solve. Squatters had made a homestead on his land and were claiming rights they had no right to. His father was one of the original members of the Texas independence movement and had died at the Alamo. The land was granted to them for his service and was now being taken away by people well connected to Huston. Willie and Half rode

down to find out what was happening. She found a small shack with a newly freed man with his wife and three children. Shepard had sold them the land thinking it was worthless only to have Percy Washington turn it around and grow cotton. The crop was worthless with every sharecropper across the south growing cotton but what Percy had proved was that they could grow on the land. Alastair wanted the land, but he couldn't kill this man with the Army close by fighting the KKK. He needed someone he could blame. Willie told Alastair she wouldn't take the job and if anything happened to the man and his family, he would die. A week later she read in a newspaper how her gang had killed Washington and his family.

The rumor was that Shepard had embezzled from the Confederacy and was hiding a fortune in gold and silver on his property. Willie and Half spent a week following first Alastair then his son Dean around trying to gain insight into the man. A week before their raid, Willie met Dean and took him to her bed. She knew that she could get the seventeen-year-old Dean to tell her anything. Two days ago, Willie learned about

his secret bookcase with a fake book that opened a panel onto what Dean had called a wall of gold. She had left him in her bed hoping he would go home even though he knew too much about her to be dangerous to their plans. She figured he would brag about the town girl he had and not talk about what he had said to get her. For her part, Camila said she would kill Dean to protect the gang.

Alastair Shepard sat down at his desk to read a newspaper. His son was back from a long trip bragging about some girl he tricked into sleeping with him. He sent Dean along with a few others to tear down the shack and pull out the cotton plants from Percy Washington's land. He had offered Washington fifty cents on the dollar for the land knowing he wouldn't sell. Alastair could remember owning men and what he would do to such a man if he had said no to him. He remembered the look on Percy's face as he raped his wife then beat his children to death with the handle of an ax all the while Percy was tied up with a rope around his neck about to be hung. Alastair killed him last. He was going to pay the sheriff to look the other

way, but the sheriff never came around. The ax handle went into the fire along with the deed to Washington's farm and their contract. Even with all the windows open, the house was already hot. Alastair heard horses and figured his idiot son was back for more orders. He had once told a friend Dean couldn't wipe his ass without being told how. He opened the door to his office and was promptly kicked between the legs then hit over the head. As his lights went out, he saw Willie.

Alastair woke with a throbbing headache and sore testicles. Someone had tied him to a chair, and the chair was tied upside down hanging from the ceiling in his office. The chair was at a slight canter and was slowly spinning around. When he came back around, he saw a large black man at his bookcase taking something. The secret door was open, and half the gold was gone. He had sixty large bars of gold hidden in his wall from a shipment he stole just as the war had started. The gold was to be payment to Mexico to enter the war, but as a Texan, he could never fight alongside the Mexican army. The chair slowly moved until he was facing his desk and the young woman sitting in his

seat. Alastair knew who she was and why she was there.

He said, *“look just take the gold, I don’t care just don’t hurt my family.”*

Willie replied, *“did he ask you the same thing as you killed his family then him? Did you offer to save his family? Did you offer mercy?”*

Alastair tried to see if the large black man was gone.

He said, *“they were just field niggers and not worth the beating.... We’re white, and we owe it to our race to protect our land from usurpers.”*

A large black hand slowly turned the spinning chair around until Alastair was face to face with Jasper.

Jasper said, *“well as another field nigger I think I owe you something.”*

Willie said, *“take him to their barn and make it look like he was stomped to death by that bull he has tied down. Make it hurt.”*

The gold was more than they could carry, so Half went into the barn to take a wagon. The horses wouldn't like pulling the wagon but taking horses would bring about the rangers and trouble. In a stall in the back of the barn, he could hear the thumps and snaps as Jasper beat Alastair to death. Half helped him toss the body into the cage with an angry wild bull that tore the body to pieces. Dean was not home, and they had run out of time. Willie knew he would come for her, but she didn't know if it would be for comfort or revenge. With Dean's mother long dead from the pox he was to inherit the ranch making him rich even without all the gold. Before she left, Willie placed a flag of the Confederacy in the secret cabinet along with a note calling Alastair a traitor. She hoped Dean would think the KKK killed him or at least took the gold.

They rode until night fell. Using the wagon, they tied the other horses to it and set up camp. Alastair had made it easy by sending all his hands out to Washington's place to work on erasing it from existence. Willie watched for riders from the south waiting to see if they found their tracks and were

following. She saw Camila pull Chuck away from the fire and into a small tent and just as she feared, Camila was with him. Willie took one of the horses and rode back to the ranch. To her surprise, the ranch was nearly empty. When the hands had found Alastair dead, they left having taken whatever they could as payment. The only light in the house was in a bedroom on an upper floor. A couple of the hands had found the flag as they searched for something to steal. Not knowing what the message meant they beat Dean within an inch of his life and left him on the floor of his bedroom.

Willie helped him into the bed, stripping off his clothes as she washed him down with warm water. She stripped off her own clothing and got on top of him feeling for broken bones as she washed him stopping to treat any cuts with a bottle of whiskey she found next to the bed. Dean woke to find Willie naked on top of him. He had so many questions, but none of them would come out of his sore mouth.

He said, “*my dad is dead.*”

Willie leaned over and kissed his neck. He felt her breasts as she leaned over, the warmth of her breath and her light touch as she kissed him. Willie felt him grow hard. Without saying a word, Willie slipped onto him and felt that same rush of power from being the aggressor, the one on top. Dean's head cleared as he felt her, as they merged into one. All his anger, sadness and questions went away as he turned to be with her at that moment. One nagging question came to him even as they went on, he wondered how she knew where he lived. Willie thought about Camila in her tent with Chuck. She felt this anger build up as she started to move faster. Soon she felt Dean cum inside her. She looked at his face and soon realized she had hurt him. Dean looked to the chair next to his bed and saw her slacks and the gun belt with her guns. He remembered his father talking about the O'Shea gang and how it was led by a woman. How he had tried to trick them into killing the squatters. He looked back to the belt and saw one gun was missing. Willie was still on top of him, and he was still inside of her.

Dean asked, "*did you kill my father?*"

Willie leaned over until she was lying on top of him.

She whispered, “*no one will question this.*”

The last thing Dean heard was the gun cock then fire. He would be found a few days later as the local sheriff came around to ask about his father’s death. Willie knew it would look like a suicide. The death of a son unable to cope without his father’s control.

Willie cleaned herself up and made her way to a place ten miles outside of Hester’s Spring. She didn’t like pushing the horse for such a hard ride, but a woman alone in the open would be an easy target even though she was far from that. In an old adobe structure built by the church a long time ago, they had built a place where they could melt the gold into a new shape that could be easily given out to the people. Most of the time the gold was in chunks made to look like gold nuggets rather than bars or coins. They all knew anything would be better than bars with a Confederacy marked on them. Over the next couple of weeks, the gold would be discreetly given out to the people of Hester’s Spring keeping the town that should have died alive for another year or two. Willie saw the look on Camila’s face as she came into the building. A lot was

said in her glare, and none of it was happy to see you. Chuck walked up behind Camila and openly kissed her on the neck. Camila just kept looking at Willie to see if she did anything.

Chapter Nine

Willie rode back to the stable with Jasper and Half, and the three of them help settle the horses. She went back to her cabin and found herself alone. She prepped and took a bath finding little blots of blood on her and on her clothing. She had used her own revolver to kill Dean then left one his father had hidden in his office for someone to find. Something stirred in the dark.

A voice asked, “*was it necessary to kill the boy?*”

Willie looked to the darkness and saw a form sitting on a chest of drawers.

She said, “*too many people know too much about what we are doing.*”

The Voice replied, “*and what are you doing?*”

Willie said, “*I know what I’m doing.*”

The Voice replied, *“No you don’t. You don’t even know why you came west. All you are doing is supporting a town that should have died. This town has no reason to exist other than a place where you can hide from yourself.”*

Willie sunk down into the water then came back up and looked back into the darkness.

She said, *“I miss you.”*

Guy leaned out of the darkness and said, *“yes but you still let me die……. You let me die.”*

Willie closed her eyes. She opened them back up, and he was gone. She got up and dried off. The tub had a drain, and it let the water out of the cabin down a warn path until it spilled out into a water-starved soil and vanished. She looked at her shift laying across her guns than her bed choosing to sleep naked rather than

touch something that could smell like Camila only to realize the bed smelled like her. She slipped out of bed, got dressed and made her way into a dark town. Her walk led her to the saloon where she found a few people drinking the darkness away. The gold would be sent out in a few days but right there and then the people were running low in funds.

In a corner, Willie found George with a bottle and a frown. George was almost mute. He could speak, but he chose to remain silent. She sat down at his table and poured herself a glass from his bottle. She put the glass to her lips and let the whiskey make contact slowly letting the whiskey slip into her mouth. She put the glass between her hands and rolled the glass heating the whiskey. She took a long drink. George picked up the bottle and poured more of the whiskey into her glass. Willie smiled and downed the whiskey in one

shot and put the glass upside down on the table.

George picked up the bottle and passed it to a man at another table. He got up and put his hand out for Willie who took it, and he led her up to his room.

Willie ripped his shirt open sending buttons flying as George took his gun belt off. She pushed him back letting him undo his pants as she carefully opened her own shirt. She pushed him down as she slipped off her own slacks.

George said, *“uh I.”*

Willie got into his lap.

She whispered, *“it doesn’t have to mean anything, just know I will always be on top.”*

Before he could say a word, Willie leaned over and kissed him. She had been his first and was the only

woman he had ever touched. He didn't know if he could trust another woman. Sex was meaningless, and love was just a concept the others talked about before being betrayed. Willie didn't hold back and was stronger than most men he knew, but he didn't know how he felt about her, he didn't know if he could feel anyway for anyone other than indifference and hate.

Willie ran her hand across his chest feeling the hairs and a few scars. She liked having sex with him because he had no inhibitions and he didn't talk. Some men would balk about her need to be on top and in control. In her dreams, she could see her life as Alex's wife spending her nights on her back as he did little to please her with sex being something only for him. George's eyes were closed, but she didn't think he was asleep. She figured that men like him, the kind that spent most of their lives on their own would only sleep

when alone. She ran her hand down his body feeling the muscles. He was thin but fit from years of hard work and lean living. The only real sign of his age was the threadbare pubic hair overtop of his manhood. He was bigger than Chuck or Guy, but Guy seemed to be more skilled a lover. Alex was bigger than all three, but he was driven by his own needs. She started to stroke his inner thigh next to his genitals watching as he grew aroused. Willie looked into his open eyes as the two went again spending the rest of the night not sleeping.

As the sun started to show in the east, Willie got up and made her way back to her cabin. She found a note on the door and took it as she went inside. Willie could see what the note was long before she opened it. All of Camila's clothing and stuff was gone. Her scent was in

the air making it hard for Willie to think about anything other than their last night together.

A voice in a dark corner said, “*read the letter.*”

Willie looked at the form in the shadow.

She said, “*this might not end well for either of them. Maybe I shouldn’t read it at all.*”

The form said, “*I left without a letter, and you never knew if I cared or not. Wouldn’t it be better to know what it says rather than face her with just your expectations? ... Little sister, you should have more faith.*”

Her brother Frank stepped out of the shadow in his gray uniform and the bullet wound above his heart she imagined he had after he died in some place called Gettysburg Pennsylvania.

She opened the letter: *“I don’t know if you’re going to read this or just hunt me down, but I wanted to have my own place. I don’t think I could have my own relationship with any man while I lived with you. I didn’t want to share Chuck with you. I feel like you used me that night. If this hurts you I’m sorry but don’t think for any reason I’m leaving the gang. The only way I’m out is dead.”*

Willie packed her bag finding she owned very little. She wasn’t sentimental about the past, or the trappings most women of her age would hold dear. She thought of this detachment as a strength. She could grab a bag and leave this place not missing a thing. Her first thought was to burn the cabin down, but a fire could take everything else around it down to ashes. Soon she figured it would make more sense if Camila took the cabin and she found a new place away from the scents

and memories and just maybe she was a little sentimental. She strapped on her guns, the only things she would never leave behind and went up to the main house to see if Jasper could sell her another cabin.

Adam was at the door to the big house wearing only a pair of slacks with suspenders. He was already reading at the age of three. The book was something simple for beginner readers from a publishing house in Baltimore. Off in another room, she could hear their youngest crying. Jasper was warming some water with eucalyptus and towels to try and help the baby breath. Sitting on a table next to the large wood cook stove was a set of keys. Jasper saw her and smiled.

He said, “yeah I guess you were coming, and I told her you would rather move, but she didn’t believe me.”

Willie said, *“I guess she doesn’t know me at all.”*

From behind her, she could hear her brother’s voice.

Frank said, *“does anyone.”*

Jasper said, *“those keys are for a place closer to town away from the stable and the other cabins. I think it might be better for you and her if you weren’t so close to each other.”*

The house was a one-story with a covered porch in the front. The front room acted as a parlor and kitchen with a fireplace and a Franklin wood burning stove. In the back were a bedroom and another room with a fixed bathtub. Willie put her bags in next to the bed and sat down in her parlor in a settee. She could feel her sweat build on her back from the heat of the room. The windows were the type that opened on the top as

well as the bottom. Willie remembered this type from her family's plantation. She opened the windows on the top and hoped a cross breeze would cool the place down. The temperature on the porch seemed cooler, and she figured this was why it was built. A place to escape the heat. The porch faced the west and gave her a view of the town framed in the setting sun. Life felt good.

Willie sat on her porch in the dwindling light drinking a mix of slightly hard cider and bourbon as she watched George walk to her house. The brush was cleared away giving her a good view all around including the way to and from town. She wasn't sure if she liked him coming to her house without being invited or not. She felt lonely for the first time in a while, but she didn't want him to think they were

anything more than what they were whatever that was.
George had a pail in his hand.

He said, *“I heard you took over this place and I thought a house warming gift was in order.”*

Willie replied, *“the house is already hot as hell, but I won’t say no to a gift.”*

Inside the pail were rose-scented soaps and some sort of rose scented liquid in a bottle.

George said, *“from what I can remember you use this stuff for bathing..... That is women do.....and you’re a woman..... yes.”*

Willie replied, *“let me show you the place.”*

Willie stood showing she was in a simple yellow cotton dress that was a little clingy and see-through from the heat and sweat. She stepped inside and let her dress fall. She walked into the bathroom without

looking back at George as he struggled to get out of his clothes.

It was going to be another hot day, but it would be nothing like back in Alabama where the humidity made life almost unbearable. Willie stepped out onto her front porch with a cup of coffee and no plans for the day. In a few nights they would distribute the newly minted gold, and the following day Hester's Spring would celebrate the influx of money. George had left sometime in the night, but he left his hat almost like a sign he would be back. As she stood there an impossibly tall black man walked past on his way to the stables. She remembered Jasper talking about a brother he had back on the plantation. Their master who was also their father had named all of them Percy, so they gave each other nicknames. The Tall Percy was called Lanky, and Jasper was Giggles. Lanky left the

plantation after the war while Jasper had escaped. He went west looking for a new life eventually settling in Knuckle Smash and was being called Apple for some unknown reason.

Willie put her cup down and followed the big man as he slowly walked to the stable. Near the fence, he stopped and turned to Willie.

In a harsh tone, he asked, “*may I help you?*”

Willie smiled and replied, “*no.*”

He turned to start walking then turned back.

He asked, “*where are you going?*”

Willie said, “*that way.*”

He asked, “*why?*”

Willie replied, “*because that way won’t come to me.*”

He cocked his head at her then smiled.

He said, “*you must be Willie. I’m Apple.*”

Willie asked, “*apple?*”

Apple smiled and told her it was a long story, but he had to go and see Jasper. They were having a sort of family reunion. All of the brothers that had moved west were coming together for the first time since Jasper had escaped bondage. Apple would be the first with his wife following later.

Willie stopped at the gate and watched as the two men came together in an embrace that made her heartsick a little missing her family. Her thoughts turned to Camila and how she missed her friend and not just her

lover. The others were meeting about noon to talk about another job and just how much of the gold would go out that night. The gold argument was the same one they had after every haul. Tiny would want to give it all away right up front while Bart and Half would say they should distribute it over time. Willie was the final say, and she would change on how much they had and what was happening in the town at the time.

Back at the tea shop, Willie walked in and found Jammie sweeping a clean floor. In all the time they knew each other she had never seem him like this. He was disheveled and dirty. She could tell he was crying. Jammie put the broom up against the counter and hugged her.

He whispered, *“I think it’s time. He’s gone, and I don’t think he wants to keep going like this, but I just can’t..... do what has to be done.”*

Tiny had a series of strokes and heart attacks leaving him bedridden and unable to speak, walk or feed himself. Jammie had asked her to help him, but she didn't know if she could kill a friend. Before another stroke cost him his ability to speak, Tiny asked her to do whatever she could to help Jammie and when the time was right, to help him pass on. Willie looked around and saw no one else was there.

She asked, “any word on when the others will be here?”

Jammie said, “they aren't coming. They others said whatever you want to do is ok with them and..... I don't think they want to be here for this..... cowards.”

Willie noticed he had a shake in his hand and a slight canter to his walk. He didn't smell like alcohol, but he

seemed drunk. The shop was empty, and the closed sign turned around. Jammie sat down and pulled out a small vial of something. He pulled out a cork and stuck his finger over the hole rolling it over letting the liquid touch his finger then rolling it back and recorking the bottle. He put the liquid on his finger up to his lips then stopped before it touched. He wiped the liquid on his pants. Jammie put the vial on the table.

He said, “I never told you how he and I met. My parents could never accept how I am, so they kicked me out when I was fifteen after they found me with another boy. I found a job on the street doing things I would rather not talk about. In that job, I found something that could help me get along. The Chinese sell this stuff made from poppies or something that gives you this floaty feeling that just makes everything good. One night I took too much, and I felt my

heart slow and my breathing stop. I was dying. Lying there in an alley I was on my way out when a giant found me. He took me to his friends and helped me kick the opium never asking for anything. He gave me a new life I don't owe him. I love him, and I just can't see life without him."

Willie took the vial off the table. She knew she couldn't shoot him, but she could use this stuff to help Tiny slip away.

Willie said, "I think you know this won't make things better and even if you don't think you owe him you do..... You owe him a life. You owe him a long life and memories honoring who he was to you and the world."

Tiny lay in his bed with his upper half propped up and his long legs dangling off the end. One eye opened and saw Willie. He tried to smile, but his face just twitched. Willie sat down on the side of the bed and showed Tiny the vial. He did his best to nod his head. Willie looked to Tiny then back to the vial. Tiny's eye darted to the door. Half and Bart came into the room.

Half said, *“sorry we're late.”*

Willie turned to Half.

She asked, *“I think we all want to know.....
what your name is? How do you pronounce it?”*

Half looked to Tiny who lightly nodded.

Half said, *“my name is Abraham.”*

Bart asked, *“what? I don't understand.....
What?”*

Half said, *“look over there..... it’s chief Red Feather..... and over there it’s Chief Running Bear, and that one is Abraham Hershel. My grandparents named me with no sense of my heritage. It doesn’t sound Indian enough.”*

Bart asked, *“you mean like Lincoln?”*

Willie asked, *“why not make a name up?”*

Half said, *“that was my grandfather’s name and his father’s name going back generations. It would be disrespectful to change it.”*

Bart asked, *“but isn’t Half a made-up name?”*

The bed started to shake. They turned to see Tiny laughing and like that they were the old gang again back on that day they came together and became a

family. Soon it was over and together they buried their friend.

Both Camila and Chuck never showed up to say goodbye or help bury Tiny. Willie didn't know why, nor did she care. George had waited outside so the original gang could have that one last meeting. He helped dig and bury Tiny. He came back to Willie's home, and together they stripped and cleaned up.

Willie said, "*Jasper invited us to his family gathering tonight.*"

George replied, "*I think we would be better off right here.*"

Willie looked at him thinking how he had just said more in one sentence than he had said all day.

She said, *“I already told him I would come but if you don’t want to then just stay here and we can get back to this when I come back.”*

Willie took hold of him and lightly stroked.

She said, *“but I would like it if you came.”*

George pushed her onto her back getting on top attempting to spread her legs. Willie slapped him across the face as she pushed him off.

She said, *“no fucking way..... I told you I’m on top and that’s the only way.”*

George put his hands up in a submissive gesture. He got out of bed and told her he would be back tonight and if she wanted him leave a candle in the window.

Willie said, *“no, I’ll see you back at the shop in the morning..... that is unless you come with me tonight.”*

Instead of answering her he got dressed and left.

Willie found her most feminine looking dress and did her best to fit what was expected for a woman to look like at a party. She stood and stared at her old self in a mirror thinking how she looked like a woman back home and just maybe that was a bad thing seeing how most of the people at this gathering are former slaves. She knew she never wanted to see this dress again, so she pulled out her knife and cut the dress off. She left for the party in a pair of slacks and an oversized shirt she realized was one of George's shirts he had left at her place. She felt bad about the slap and planned on going to his room and making it up to him after the party.

The smell of the food hit Willie long before she even got to the party. The scents brought her back to her childhood in Alabama and the week-long barbecues her parents would throw. Jasper and his brothers had dug a pit and roasted a whole pig. Jasper saw Willie coming up the path and waved her over.

He said, *“let me introduce my family. That one over there is Percy, this tall man here is Percy, the man next to my wife that’s Percy and the one by the pit that’s Percy. To all that don’t know this young lady is Willie O’Shea.”*

The man next to the pit said, *“she doesn’t look nothing like a boy to me.”*

The man next to Maggie said, *“yeah, she doesn’t look like five thousand dollars either.”*

The man next to Maggie walked over to Willie and Jasper putting his hand out.

He said, *“call me Percy and yes I know but as far as I can tell I’m the only one to keep the name, so that makes me the only Percy.”*

Willie asked, *“five thousand dollars?”*

Percy smiled a smile that was part saint and part sinner.

He said, *“yes, some dude down south put out a bounty on your head for some gold you stole that is you and your gang, but they only want your head..... and the gold.”*

Jasper smiled saying, *“now that’s just hurtful.... After all, we all took part so they should want all our heads.”*

The party went on as Willie learned all their new names and met their wives. The woman married to Apple was one of the most beautiful women Willie had ever seen. Kaia was from the Hopi tribe, tall and curvy

with long flowing black as a moonless night hair and magnetic eyes. She was also pregnant. Ten of Jasper's brothers came to the gathering traveling across states that outlawed their travel just so they could reunite once again with family. Most of them planned on either moving west or north away from a south that was slowly taking their war won rights away with new laws they were calling black codes. Two of his brothers, James and Jake, planned on staying with Jasper but most were leaving in a day or two, and this might be the last time they ever saw each other again.

After a while, Willie felt out of place in the family gathering. Her shame over her past and her family's ownership of such amazing people as well as the false nostalgia for a time that was never real made her want to leave. She slipped out and made her way home. The way was dark, and she stumbled along the path with

just maybe a drink or three too many in her. She saw a dark form sitting on her porch. George was sitting on her porch smoking a cigar. He looked up to her as she stepped onto the porch.

He said, *“I couldn’t let it end like that. I know you don’t want me but I..... I want more than just this, and it’s hard to be just what we are.”*

Willie sat down next to him on the porch.

She said, *“we didn’t end. I just need space. I felt trapped my whole life and having you hold me down like that just brought all that back to me. As for anything else I don’t see why we can’t be more than we are. Whatever that is?”*

George said, *“I was told I was good for work but not thinking so I should keep my mouth shut. Over time that just became easier than speaking.”*

Willie opened her shirt and slid into his lap.

He said, “*we’re outside.*”

Willie replied, “*then someone’s going to get a show.*”

Camila and Chuck lay naked in bed watching the fire slowly die in the fireplace. Neither of them wanted to get out of bed to add to the fire even though it was going to be another cold night.

Chuck said, “*we should have gone and helped bury the big man. I think our absence might make it harder for her to accept us.*”

Camila replied, “*I told her I’m in the gang no matter what she thinks, and I meant it. As for Tiny, I would rather think of him as the man*

that saved me rather than the one dying in bed.”

Chuck looked to the fire then the pile of wood.

He asked, *“I’ll rebuild the fire if you get us water for some tea?”*

Camila asked, *“or you could do both while I keep the bed warm?”*

Chuck got out of bed and over to the fire adding some wood in a way hoping it wouldn’t smother the dying embers. He grabbed the kettle and went to the door.

Camila asked, *“aren’t you going to get dressed?”*

Chuck walked over and leaned in kissing her on the mouth.

He said, *“the pump isn’t that far away, and no one is outside so no I’m staying just as I am.”*

Chuck opened the door to find four armed men. One of the men stepped forward kicking Chuck between the legs then as he bent forward striking Chuck in the face with his knee. Chuck went onto his back and out. Camila looked to her gun hanging on a hook on the other side of the cabin. She tried to cover herself as she went for the gun, but the first man got a hold of her arm stopping her. He ripped the blanket away and whistled at the sight of her. She kneed him in the crotch as she tried to drive her right-hand thumb into his eye. A second man stepped in striking her full force in the face knocking her unconscious. A fifth man came in with a large leather sack. He had on a tarnished Texas Marshal badge. He looked over the two.

He said, *“not what I expected but when does the person live up to the hype.”*

He dropped the bag and looked to the men.

He said, “*do whatever you want just make it bloody and take what I paid you to take, or you’ll answer to me.*”

Chapter Ten

Camila felt a pain in her head and arms. Something was pushing against her. For a moment she wondered if she fell asleep as they made love then she remembered what happened. Camila opened her eyes to find a strange foul-smelling man holding her down as he pushed his way inside her. Her jaw ached and throbbed. She tried to turn her head to see Chuck, but she couldn't see him. She could see three other men standing by as if waiting their turn. The man finished and got up. She made her move pushing him into the others and going for her gun. She aimed and pulled the trigger, click, click, click. The gun was empty. The first man took hold of the gun and with an upward blow struck Camila in the stomach. The pain went all the way up her spine to her head as she vomited all over the man.

He pushed her back to the bed saying, “*nasty fucking bitch and after I treated you so good.*”

Camila lay half on the bed facing down hoping this was all just a dream. The second man pushed her legs apart and forced his way from behind. She remembered seeing Chuck laying motionless on the floor, most likely dead.

The second man was finished quickly with something warm running down her leg. The third man looked at a watch.

He said, “*we don't have any time for this. They others will have the nigger and his half-breed soon, and when they do, we need to be away from here with them and O'Shea.*”

Camila realized they thought she was Willie. Someone told these men this was her cabin, but it had to be

someone that didn't know she had moved. She pulled herself to the side of the bed up against the wall.

She said, *“I'm not coming with you.....I'll fight you all the way.”*

The third man pulled out a long Bowie knife showing her the blade.

He said, *“don't worry darling, we don't need all of you.”*

He turned to the others and said, *“hold her down.”*

Camila could taste something metallic in her mouth as she looked around trying to find a way to escape. She jumped to the end of the bed sliding off and onto the floor where she found a fireplace poker. One of the men took a handful of ash from the hearth and tossed it into her eyes as he moved in. Camila swung and missed. They pushed her down holding her arms at her

side while the man with the knife put the blade to the back of her neck.

He said, *“I was going to do this quick, but now I want you to feel it.”*

Camila saw Chuck open his eyes.

Jasper and Maggie lay in bed listening to the quiet. Evelin was breathing better with the worst of the croup behind her. Just as they started to go to sleep, Maggie heard a horse, and a glowing red light appeared just outside. Jasper picked up his revolver and tucked it in the back of his pants. He made it about halfway out the bedroom door when Maggie put her hand on his shoulder.

She said, *“I think I should go out.”*

As she spoke, she pulled the gun out of his pants and tucked it into a pocket in her apron. Apple and Percy walked into the hall carrying rifles.

Maggie stepped out onto the porch. Out in her yard, she saw eight men in white hoods and a large burning cross. Three of the men had rifles. One of the men was wearing what looked like a red silk robe and hood.

He said, *“Sister we don’t want you despite being a race traitor, we want your nigger and half-breed. Send them out, and you can keep the baby.”*

Another man said, *“send them out, or we’ll go in and get his coward ass.”*

A third man yelled, *“we got a rope for both of you.”*

The door opened, and a tall black man stepped out. He had a Sharps rifle in his arms.

The man in red asked, *“who are you and where did you get the gun boy?”*

Apple smiled and said, *“I’m Percy and you stupid cracker bastard I got this from my family.”*

The Klansmen looked around seeing a man with a rifle in every window and coming around the corners of the house. Jasper walked out onto the porch.

He said, *“you choose the wrong family to harass.”*

Willie awoke to what sounded like either thunder or gunfire. She got dressed and put on her gun stepping out into the dark onto her porch. Whatever the noise

was had stopped and the night was still again. George stepped out wearing only a pair of long underwear with a rip in the crotch. Willie sat on a bench, and George sat next to her pulling her close.

He whispered into her ear, “*come back to bed.*

Whatever that was can wait until the morning.”

Willie leaned over kissing him while slowly slipping her hand into the rip in his underwear. George straightened out at the sound of a horse approaching. A riderless horse ran past. Willie let go of George and stepped off the porch. Another horse came running down the trail. She was able to stop it as the horse came closer. Unlike the first, this one had the body of a rider. He was wearing a white hood and robe with a red and black cross sewed on the breast over the heart and bullet holes. Willie pulled the hood off finding the bartender from the saloon in town. Willie looked to George then down the path back to the stable.

The house was all lit up with lanterns and the burning cross surrounded by dead bodies. Willie tied the horse's reins to a post and walked past the bodies to find Jasper and his family on the porch with two men on the roof watching the road. Jasper nodded to her, but his usual smile was gone. She could hear the baby crying from somewhere in the house. Percy stepped past Willie and over to the horse she found. He pulled the rider off the horse and piled his body with the rest.

Willie asked, "*is everyone ok?*"

Jasper replied, "*everyone that matters is. Those dumbass motherfuckers didn't expect to find a house filled with armed, angry former slaves.*"

He got to his feet and walked over to the bodies, pulling one of them over showing the face of the restaurant owner from town.

He said, “*do you want to know the worst part of all this..... I know every one of them. I called this man a friend and had him over in my house..... In my fucking house with my fucking family.*”

He kicked the man in the face making an audible snap where he made contact.

Percy picked up his rifle as George approached. Willie told him he was with them. Willie looked to Jasper who looked back. They both slowly turned to see the cabin.

Willie asked, “*do you know if they are there?*”

Jasper said, “*I don't think she would leave a light burning if she weren't at home?*”

Willie asked, “*she had to hear the gunshots?*”

George said, “*maybe they’re keeping out of all this?*”

Maggie came down the steps with a revolver on her hip and a rifle in her hands. She followed the gaze of the others to the cabin.

Maggie said, “*we should go and see.*”

George replied, “*no we need to do something with the bodies before someone comes around asking.*”

Willie turned to Percy and said, “*take the robes and hoods off the bodies. Try and keep the blood off them.*”

Percy asked, “*and the bodies?*”

Willie said, “*there’s plenty of desert out there.*”

Willie looked to Jasper who nodded to Maggie. The three walked over to the cabin with George staying behind to help with the bodies.

At first, nothing seemed wrong. The scent of fresh meat hung in the air along with the coppery smell of blood. A dark substance was pulled by the door. Willie dipped her finger in the pool and held it up to the light finding it to be blood and a lot of it. She kicked in the door and found the cabin awash in blood and a naked decapitated body on the bed. Willie didn't need to see the face to know it was Camila. Maggie screamed at the sight. Willie stepped into the room scanning the room while watching the body. The floor was sticky with blood. Camila's gun was on the bed. Willie picked it up and checked the cylinder. The revolver had rounds, but all the primers were gone. She pulled a round to find it was one of the dummy rounds from

Tiny's prop supplies. She spun all the rounds out finding the gun loaded with dummy rounds. Jasper covered the body with a blanket.

A form moved in a corner. Willie and Jasper pulled their guns and aimed at the moving thing. It was Chuck. He was naked and covered in blood to where he blended in with the room. He was in a corner under a table up against the wall. Jasper holstered his gun, but Willie kept her gun out. She tipped over the table and pulled Chuck out. He saw them but acted like he didn't recognize them. He looked at the others then the body on the bed.

Willie asked, "*what happened, how could you let this happen?*"

Chuck looked to the body on the bed.

He said, *“they came in and knocked me out.
When I came too, I heard one of them say……
They thought she was you and someone wanted
you dead. She never said a word.”*

Two men held Camila down as the third put the blade to the back of her neck. He made a slash on the back of her neck, and Camila screamed.

The fourth man said, *“keep that quiet. We don’t need to wake the nigger up before our guys can take them away.”*

The man with the knife looked to the fourth man. He took hold of Camila’s head by the hair tilting it down with his left hand. In his right was the blade.

He leaned in and whispered, *“I guess it’s the easy way.”*

The man ran the blade across her neck cutting to the bone sending a jet of blood across the floor. He pulled back her head and cut it the rest of the way off as the other men spread the blood around using whatever they could find.

Chuck said, *“he held the head out until the blood stopped and put it in a bag. I kept still hoping they would think I was dead so I could tell you what happened.”*

Willie looked to Jasper who just nodded back. She pulled out her revolver and shot Chuck in the chest twice.

She leaned over and said, *“consider me told.”*

Chuck grasped the holes in his chest as he fought for breath.

Maggie asked, “*what should he have done?*”

Willie aimed and fired a round into Chuck’s head.

She turned and said, “*he should have died with her.*”

Bart woke to the sounds of a party outside of the house he and George were sharing near the saloon downtown. He stepped out to find most of the town on the street having some sort of celebration. They had planned to distribute the gold that night but as of right there and then no one had any of the gold. Half had left that evening with a woman that seemed interested in him or at least in parts of him. Down in the small patch of land that passed as a town square, some men were erecting something. Even from a distance, Bart could smell the pine sap pitch. As he got closer, he could make out the arms as the form became a large cross. It

was an odd mix of clearly drunk men, a large symbol of faith and the scent of danger. Bart went back into the house to get his guns. Inside he found George packing a bag. He stopped and turned to face Bart.

He said, *“I was wondering where you went. There was some trouble up at Jasper’s place. I’m going to stay with Willie to keep her safe until this whole thing is over.”*

Bart looked over at the gun rack and saw most of the guns were gone.

He asked, *“does she know your plans because I don’t see her asking for protection?”*

George replied, *“some people need protection from themselves.”*

Bart said, *“just keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel useful, but we both know she doesn’t need either of us.”*

George looked to the large clock on the wall. The clock was a gift from Tiny and every morning Bart wound it too keep the clock on time.

George said, “*we should go and check on Jammie. Make sure none of this whatever this is has bled over into the shop.*”

Bart replied, “*we should check to see if he’s alright.*”

The shop was lit up and open. As Bart and George approached a group of well-dressed women walked out and past them. A strange woman was behind the counter.

She said, “*welcome to Lady Bessie’s Tea house. As you can see, we are under new management.*”

She laughed on the word under. Bart turned and saw Jammie hanging in the corner of the room from a rafter. His eyes were open. Bart went for Jammie when a hand grasped his left arm, and a sharp, intense pain made its way from his back to his gut.

The woman said, “*say don’t get that blood on my fine trimmings.*”

George in a sharp tone replied, “*shut up.*”

Bart looked down to see the tip of a blade protruding from his lower half.

George said, “*I’m sorry it had to be this way, but I can’t let you get in the way of my plans.*”

George slightly twisted the blade then pulled it out.

Bart felt his knees start to give and the room spin.

George helped him to his usual seat in the back next to where Jammie now hung.

George said, *“right now a group of men are on their way south with what they think is Willie’s head. I had to let them kill Camila, but with her death, Willie and I will be free to go away from this life. It also means you, the sodomite, and the Hebrew Indian have to go.”*

George looked up at the body hanging from the ceiling.

George said, *“I had to wait for the right moment, and that was after Tiny’s death. He was popular in town, but with him, out of the way we were free to enact our plan. It’s just a shame they others failed to kill Jasper and his family. He might complicate things.”*

Bart said, *“you forgot one thing.”*

Bart pulled his revolver aimed and click, click, click.
George took the revolver away from Bart.

He said, *“I took the chance none of you would check your rounds, so I replaced them with the dummy rounds Tiny had for his stage plays.”*

George pulled his own gun and placed the barrel onto Bart’s chest.

He said, *“sorry friend.”*

Bart replied, *“I liked it better when you kept your mouth shut. My only regret is I won’t see what happens when she finds out what you did.”*

He thumbed the hammer back and fired.

Willie saddled a horse loading it down with guns and rifles.

She turned to Jasper and said, *“George should be back in town by now. He’ll need help.”*

She turned to see Jasper's brothers saddling horses and a wagon. Jasper had his hat in his hand just standing behind her. He put his hand on her shoulder.

Jasper said, "*we can't stay. All these people will see is a colored man killed a white man and if I stay my family will be in danger. My family is what's important to me, and nothing else matters..... and you are my family.*"

Willie said, "*we can't let them get away with this.*"

Jasper pointed to the pile of bodies and said, "*the ones who did this are all here, and anyone else can go to hell for all I care.*"

Willie said, "*that's the difference between us. I want to send them there.*"

Jasper looked back at the bodies then to Willie. He put his hand on her shoulder again and notice a wave of visible anger in her face.

He said, “*hold on I have an idea.*”

Four people rode into town. Three of them were in white robes and hoods while another was in red silk that was just a little too big for the wearer. The people in town cheered at the sight of the clan coming into town. None of them noticed that three of them had dark skin hands. The mayor walked up to the riders and looked past them.

He asked, “*so where’s the darkie?*”

Willie looked to Jasper who had his eyes on the massive burning cross in the center of town. He turned back to see the mayor’s right-hand man standing

behind the mayor with three nooses, two of which were child size. Jasper pulled off his hood.

He said, *“I’m right here.”*

The four of them opened fire as the others using the Sharpe’s rifles shot from a distance shooting people as they fled from the street. The mayor went down as Jasper rode his horse over him. In the confusion, someone hit the cross sending it into the saloon spreading the fire. Willie rode her horse down the street on her way to the tea shop shooting anyone that got in her way. She walked into the shop, and the woman behind the counter gasped.

She said, *“we all thought you were dead.”*

Willie struck her with her gun. She turned and saw Jammie hanging from a rafter and Bart in a chair with blood on his chest and mouth. Willie grabbed the

woman and tossed her down in front of her two dead friends.

She asked, “what made you think this was a good idea?”

The woman replied, “we were done sharing our good fortune with the likes of them and you. Tonight, the angels will come and give us enough gold to live on for the next year. We won’t share it with a sodomite or killer any longer.”

Bart lifted his head spitting out a clump of blood.

He said, “just shoot this bitch and get it over with I need to tell you who did this.”

The woman looked to Bart then Willie.

She put her hands up asking, “just who do you think you are?”

Willie replied, *“as far as you’re concerned, I’m an angel, the angel of death.”*

She pulled her revolver and shot the woman in the head.

Willie walked over to Bart trying not to touch Jammie. Bart pulled her close and kissed her on the cheek.

He said, *“this will be difficult to hear. It was George. He helped plan this whole thing so he could trick you into running away from the life and become his wife.”*

Bart’s face went slack.

He asked in a rasping voice, *‘is everyone alright?’*

Willie didn’t know where Half was, but she nodded and told him everyone else was safe. Bart fell forward,

and when she pulled him back up, he was dead. Jasper and Percy walked into the shop and gasped at the sight of the hanged man and bodies. Willie ran through the events of the night including how George wanted to stay out of all of it.

Jasper asked, *“what should we do?”*

Willie said, *“get our friends out of here while I go and find George.”*

The fire started to spread fueled by the alcohol in the saloon and a newly arrived shipment of lamp oil. The dry, untreated wood went up like kindling spreading from roof to roof. As people fled from their burning homes, they were gunned down or trampled by the others fleeing the melee. Outside of the tea shop, Jasper hugged Willie and told her to come to the house after she finds George but not to wait too long. He

didn't say why but Willie knew it was all over and the gang was done. All that was left was to find George.

George was back at the hiding spot just outside of town packing the gold. He had no plans on sharing it with the town. As he packed a harsh glow came from town. He knew all too well what that was. The town was most likely burning. His plan included them leaving so he didn't care if the town burned to the ground. Willie walked into the barn. She ran up to him and hugged him. He didn't know what she knew, but the way she was acting made him think she knew nothing.

Willie said, "*the town is gone, and I can't find anyone.*"

Willie slowly slipped her hand down to his gun.

George said, *“we should stay here and wait in case any of them make their way here.”*

Willie asked, *“why so you can stab them in the back like you did Bart, you miserable motherfucker?”*

George backed away as Willie took hold of his gun and pulled it out of the holster.

He asked, *“what are you talking about?”*

Willie replied, *“you didn’t finish the job with Bart, and he told me your plan..... What made you think that would ever happen?”*

George slowly backed away and to the wagon where he had a rifle.

He said, *“you angered some powerful people by taking that gold. We had to disappear, or they would find us.”*

He made another step when Willie fired striking him in the knee. He started to fall catching himself on the wagon wheel. He lunged for the gun in the wagon. Willie fired striking in the back of the other knee then the upper right shoulder. The last shot pushed him into the side of the wagon then onto the ground. The shots spooked the horse moving the wagon forward and rolling over George's left arm. Willie stopped the horse. She came around to see George had a badly broken arm.

He looked up at her and said, *“I love you, and all I wanted was to have you to myself. I wanted to keep you safe.”*

Willie smiled as she emptied his gun into him then all three of her own guns. She pulled the horse and wagon out of the barn tying her horse to the back of the wagon. She left his body in the barn with about ten pounds of the gold. His share of the haul.

Willie made her way to the stables watching the town catch fire and burn. She rode up to find Jasper and his family packing a couple of wagons. Jasper saw her and walked over trying to judge her mood.

He asked, “*where’s George?*”

Willie stepped off the wagon.

She said, “*he’s where he belongs.*”

Jasper looked at the wagon then back to Willie.

She said, “*it’s all of the gold from the last heist.*”

Jasper said, “*we’re going west with my brother and sister-in-law. She said her people can help us escape, but we can’t stay here anymore.*”

Willie pulled her gun and put it at her side.

She said, “*we can take anyone that comes around.*”

Jasper shook his head.

He said, “*I have children to think of. I can’t ask them or Maggie to live in a state of fear when we could go and leave all this behind. I want my children to be safe even if it means letting go.*”

Maggie walked over to Jasper and Willie. Jasper nodded to her as she approached. She hugged Willie and told her she was welcome to come with them. She told her she was and always would be a member of their family. Willie knew this would most likely be the last time they were ever together. Willie took one of the lever-action rifles, a Sharps rifle and a bag of ammunition. She took a bag of the gold telling Jasper

and Maggie to take the rest and split it among his family. Maggie told Willie the house was hers to do with whatever she wanted.

Willie said, *“I don’t think I’m ever coming back here.”*

Jasper asked, *“where are you going?”*

Willie said, *“I’m going to see a man about a head.”*

Chapter Eleven

Eight days later.....

Five men camped near a river after a long day of riding. Their clothes were still stained with the blood of a woman they decapitated a week ago. They had stopped at a small trading post and bought enough alcohol to turn their camp into a party, but their attempts to bring out a few women failed. Not even a prostitute would go to a strange camp with men smelling of blood. On their way back they found a family traveling west. They killed the father and two sons, but they kept the mother and three daughters. The youngest of the girls was ten, and the oldest was sixteen. Janet Franks made a bargain with the men. She wouldn't fight them if they left her daughters alone. After some threats and more than a few bruises she relented and bargained her eldest daughter Diana's virginity away. That was the day before. She had to lay

in a wagon with her last two children listening as her daughter screamed and cried for her mother, her father, and God to come down and help her.

The men had set up camp waiting to hear from their employer a man known as the headhunter. He was a former Texas Marshal turned bounty hunter known for just bringing back the heads of his pray. Warren Gregory joined the marshal service from the beginning but soon quit when he saw they were little more than babysitters and glorified guards. After his first head, he went looking for the right kind of men to do the messy work while he gained the reputation. He shielded his men from harm if they did as they were told. Their actions helped make a legend of a large fake army of bandits known as the marked for the red mark on the back of the left hand made from a hot gun barrel. To help this myth, the others would mark the dead they

find making people think the bodies had been a part of the mystery gang.

That night a member of the gang they called Knuckles told Janet the rest of the gang would be there that night and together neither she nor any of her daughters were safe. To emphasize this, he picked up Tina the youngest and kissed her while groping her. Her daughter jumped away from the man and hid in the wagon. Knuckles looked down at his hand seeing blood.

He said, *“I guess I went too far.”*

He laughed as he licked the blood off his fingers.

A man standing next to their firepit said,
*“Knuckles, knock it off; we’ll have plenty of
time for fun later.”*

Janet didn't know his name, the others just called him Boss. Another of the men the others called Slappy for his propensity to slap people either on the back or across the face was pitching a couple of tents.

He turned to Janet and said, "*cunt, get your tasty little coozes over here and help me or I'll show them what pain really is.*"

Janet and her thirteen-year-old daughter Anna helped Slappy set up two tents with three cots then the third tent with a stove. All the time she and Anna worked, she could feel the eyes of the men on them. She knew these men couldn't let them live. Her only question was how long they could last and would that be long enough for someone to save them.

A quarter of a mile away, Willie watched using a naval telescope she bought in a town as she followed these men. After watching them buy supplies and try and pick up a woman she figured they were in camp nearby, so she left her horse at a stable and went on foot following them to their camp. The red and brown patched on their clothing was blood, and she knew it had to be Camila's blood. The men had a woman and what looked like three girls with her. She passed a shallow grave dug for four or five people. The men that brutalized Camila were close enough that she could just reach out and touch them, but their leader wasn't there, and all signs said he was on the way. The longer she stayed hid the closer these women were to their own shallow grave.

The sun started to set on another day past the deadline Gregory set for his arrival. Boss watched for signs

anything that said he was on his way or they should run. Five years ago, Gregory hired him to help him take out a problem. His old gang had grown out of control over the reputation they had forged. They laid an ambush killing his entire gang letting him make a new gang using the reputation of the old. He knew the reputation of the Marked was growing and their time as the marked could be coming to an end. Something felt wrong about their last job. Too many variables and too many things seem to go right. The woman people called Willie was too easy to kill. She was described to be white with red hair, but the woman they found was most likely from south of the border. They didn't find the gold and the gold was their actual job. Gregory's employers won't be happy. He thought just maybe their unhappiness was why the headhunter was a no show. Was he buried in his own shallow grave somewhere out in the desert and if so were they on

their way with shovels and plans to kill him and his men?

A lone rider rode into their encampment. He tied his horse off on the wagon and approached a watching Boss. The rider was little more than a boy of maybe twelve or thirteen. He handed a sealed letter to Boss and waited.

Boss said, *“just go boy, I don’t need you.”*

The boy said, *“Mister Gregory told me to wait, and you would know what to do.”*

Boss broke the seal and opened the letter. The first line told him to shoot the boy. Boss looked at the boy then the letter wondering if he should ask who he is or should he just shoot him. Knowing this letter was a sign he wasn’t about to die; he knew not to question. Boss pulled his revolver. The boy gasped.

Boss said, *“sorry boy but someone wants you dead, and I guess it’s my job to kill the messenger.”*

He cocked the gun aimed and fired. The boy took three steps back then fell with a bullet wound in his head.

Boss read the letter.

Hanson, before you read this shoot the boy that delivered this message.

Now that he is out of the way I have a new job for you. Our employers want the gold, and they are willing to either pay handsomely for it or have us killed if we don’t. Usually, I would just shoot someone that makes such an offer, but they have an army waiting to get paid and that gold was their pay. They have something planned that will make us either rich or dead. I prefer rich, so I’m heading north in search of the freemen who I think has the gold. I want

you to join up with me, and together we will ride down anyone in our way. To help you decide I made sure you had to join me. The boy you just shot was the son of a general in this new army, and he won't be happy if he finds out you killed his youngest son.

Boss looked at the horse the boy rode in on. A thoroughbred with a fine leather saddle. The boy was dressed in fine clothing and new boots. He wondered just how he missed it. He usually could smell out the rich and well to do. Slappy walked over with his usual smile.

He asked, “*so I guess we should bury the boy?*”

Boss replied, “*no there's no time. We need to strike camp and ride hard to meet up with*

Gregory. Just leave everything and kill the girls. We ride in an hour.”

Janet heard what was said and watched as Slappy pulled his gun and walked over to the wagon. She pulled her children to the front and got between him and her. The flap of the wagon top moved, and Slappy leered inside at the girls. Janet could feel his eyes on her daughters.

Slappy said, “I got an hour before I have to get. I think I can have some fun before then.”

Slappy looked down at his chest as a spot of something dark started to spread across his chest. Slappy fell forward into the wagon.

A voice came from behind him saying, “help me pull this sack of shit into the wagon.”

Janet moved over and helped Willie pull Slappy into the wagon. He groaned as blood bubbled from his

mouth. Janet looked at this strange woman and knew she was the one these men feared. Slappy tried to talk, but all that came out was blood and bubbles. Willie handed Janet the knife.

She said, “*we need to shut him up, but I’m willing to bet you would like to do the honors.*”

Janet took the blade and jammed it into the joint at the shoulder.

Janet whispered into Slappy’s ear, “*my husband was a butcher, and he showed me all he knew.*”

She pulled the knife and did the same with the other shoulder. Slappy tried to wiggle away while pointlessly trying to scream. Diana joined them taking the knife away from Janet and working her way down his body making shallow cuts until she came to his pants cutting the front of his pants away. Slappy had

lost his bowels on the first strike and the inside of the covered wagon filled with the rank scent. Diana took hold of him and started to stroke, and against all good sense and what was happening around him, he grew hard. Diana smiled at Slappy. His eyes went wide. Diana looked to her sisters then back to Slappy.

Janet said, *“just do it so we can go.”*

Diana lifted his genitals and cut them off. She jammed them into his mouth.

Janet said, *“that’s not what I meant, but I like what you’re thinking.”*

Slappy gurgled. Diana slit his throat.

Willie said, *“I’ll make sure it’s all clear, you take your children and go east. There’s a town and help.”*

Janet replied, *“you can’t take them by yourself... . . . Let us help.”*

Willie told her she had to let them escape so she could follow them to their leader.

Janet said, *“no the one they call Boss has a letter telling them where to meet with this Gregory fellow. All you need is that letter.”*

Knuckles packed his saddle watching the wagon bounce in the primitive springs. He looked to Slappy’s horse then back to the wagon. He knew what was happening and wondered why he should have all the fun. A shadow crossed by the wagon. Willie turned to Diana.

She said, *“take your sister and go. Let us clean this up.”*

Diana held up her knife.

She said, *“I want to kill every single one of them.”*

Janet snapped back, *“no take your sisters and do as you’re told.”*

Willie handed one of her guns to Janet and told her to take one side of the opening. Knuckles opened the flap and came face-to-face with the two ladies and their guns. Janet tried to fire, but she didn’t know how. Willie cocked and fired. She fired again as Diana and her sisters slipped out the side of the wagon and away in the dark. Knuckles fell back with two rounds in his head. Boss looked out and saw a red-haired woman with two guns shooting the man everyone called

Baldy. He stopped and watch as she went to the first tent. The woman, his men, took off the road was with her. She waited for them to go into the tent and ran for a horse not turning back until he was out of their sight. He left the letter, but he remembered where they were to meet.

The last of the five men fell with two rounds in his face. Janet looked to the ridge where her daughters ran.

She said, “*we have to stop them.*”

Instead of answering her Willie put her hands to her mouth.

She yelled, “*OK girls come back.*”

Diana and her sisters stood up.

Willie said, “*I didn’t think they would go very far without you.*”

Willie took her gun back from Janet and told her to take the wagon and whatever they could and head to the small town nearby.

Janet said, “*no we should go with you.*”

Willie pulled her third revolver.

She said, “*if I see you again, I’ll shoot all four of you. Don’t get in my way.*”

Willie tucked the letter into her pocket. She took one of the horses and rode back to the small town to get the rest of her gear and her own horse. On the way, she checked the note. At the bottom, it said to head to Bent River, a small trading post on the banks of the Colorado River. A long distance from where she was but close to where Jasper and his family were going.

On the way back to the town she realized she couldn't just go into Indian territory and stumble over them by accident. She would need to know where they were going. Kaia's people helped Jasper and his family so she should know. If she went to Knuckle Smash, she could not only find Jasper, she could warn the Hopi about these men and their intentions. She could be there long before the man that got away could get to Bent River. On her way out she noticed how people stared at her. Some ran from the street while others just stood slack-jawed, more than a few felt for their guns. She saw fear and liked it.

She rode out in the dark hoping the cool air would help her horse last the long trip and such a harsh ride. She planned to stop at any town along the way and change mounts with a fresh horse. As she rode another rider came alongside. She turned and saw Tiny, and on her

other side, she saw Bart. Her brother Frank was behind her on a pale horse with a black saddle in his gray uniform with a red stain about where his heart was. She rode by herself in the company of her dead friends and family turning her fear of the dark into an angry thunderous heart-pounding race to her final goal and the death of this man from the letter.

Janet and her daughter's road west away from the town with the wagon and as much of the gear the men had at their camp. She had a revolver in her lap and two others under the buckboard of the wagon with Diana sitting in the back with a lever action rifle watching for trouble. None of them spoke about what happened. Occasionally, Diana would look at the dark red stains on her hands and dress. Janet and her husband were on their way to what should have been a new life in a town away from their problems back in Chicago. This

desolate wasteland seemed like a different planet compared to the big city. They left after being evicted from their third-floor apartment when they couldn't afford the rent increase. Janet's husband Samuel had stayed out of the war by luck, but they found that for some people those that didn't fight were not welcome. Sam had family in the south and a family of his own to take care of so fighting a war didn't seem like something he should be doing, but it cost them their comfortable home and way of life in the big city. Janet grew up in the city. She had never ridden a horse or saw an open expanse of land until they left for the west.

They headed west with no place to go just a desire to get away from the mess they left at the camp. Six hours later, they stopped at a weigh station so they could get cleaned up and let the horses rest. Janet was

able to sell most of the gear they had taken from the camp and with the money the Marked men had they would be able to find a new homestead someplace safe. A man at the station told her about a small town with a train stop and how they could buy a ticket cheap. She didn't know why but she wanted to travel west and maybe find that strange redheaded girl with the calm demeanor and deadly aim. She felt that their part wasn't over yet. The bad news was the train didn't go to the strangely named Knuckle Smash yet, but for a price, it would stop and let them off nearby. The cost would be everything they had including the sale of the wagon. They would buy horses but not much else.

Three days and four horses later, Willie found herself riding into the town of Knuckle Smash. From what she could remember the town was built to act as an oasis for people traveling to California as well as a place for

people to interact safely with what the locals called The People the Indian nations that surrounded the town. After spending time in a place with dirt roads and wooden plank walks, the cobblestone streets and brick buildings seemed out of place. Ilyas Teller wanted to draw his people out west away from the anti-Semitism of the big cities by building a little big city surrounded by nothing. Willie wanted to get in and out without running into the local law. The sheriff was known as the Knuckle Smash Kid with a conflicting reputation of being both a man to talk and quick with a gun. She had also had a history with one of the deputies named David Wednesday.

Willie found the small storefront the Hopi were using as a trading post and inside she found Kaia.

Kaia said, “we helped Jasper and Maggie settle in a small town about fifty miles from here in a

place no one goes anymore. They plan on staying there for about a year then move on.”

Willie said, *“I think someone told this head hunter guy and he and his men are on the way.”*

Kaia said, *“we should let the sheriff know and.....”*

Willie put her hand up.

She said, *“we can’t let the law know.”*

Both Willie and Jasper were wanted, and it was within the rights of this man to take them in or kill them on the spot. Kaia told her that the man they called Half was traveling north to meet with his long-disconnected people. If she left now and rode north, she could catch up with him. Willie tipped her hat in an almost manly gesture she would wonder why she did later and rode north to find Half.

Two miles out of town the train came to a long slow stop, and with some help, Janet and her daughters had their horses and were on their way to town. They would miss Willie by about three hours. With just a few dollars and the horses, they rode in on spending everything on the chance they could catch up with a woman she didn't know the name of or why she wanted to find her. Spending half of what she had Janet rented what amounted to a tent on the outskirts of town. She sold the two horses the girls rode in on so she could board the last horse and have enough to keep them going for a while. Not knowing what to do next, Janet walked into a saloon in town for a drink and maybe some information.

Janet sat at a table drinking something the bartender called a sarsaparilla, but it tasted more like beer. A tall

black man and a native walked into the bar. At first, it seemed the bartender was going to toss him out, but he stopped and let the men in. The bartender pointed to her, and the two men walked over to her. Apple walked past to the door, but Half sat down.

Janet said, *“I don’t remember asking if you wanted to sit?”*

Half said, *“they say you’re looking for a woman gunfighter with red hair. I do believe I know her.”*

Janet was confused by this man. He looked like an Indian, but he had an accent of a New Yorker. Apple kept a lookout for the law knowing if Sheriff Warren showed up, he would have to arrest Half.

Half said, *“her name is Wilhelmina O’Shea, but we call her Willie. As in the O’Shea gang. They call me Half.”*

At the end of her ability to travel with not much to lose Janet decided to trust him.

She said, “from what I can tell Willie was traveling here to find someone called Jasper and a man called…… Well, I guess she was looking for you. They guy she was searching for was meeting up with his boss, and together they are looking for some gold or something. All I do know is she needs some help, and I want to be there for her. She saved my children and me.”

Half told her about Apple and his wife’s connection with the Hopi. They would send out riders looking for Willie and have her come back and together they would ride out. Janet told him what Willie said about shooting her if she ever saw her again. He told her

everything would be fine, but she shouldn't be there when Willie came back just in case, he was wrong.

Willie rode for about a day when two young Indian boys on horseback found her and told her Half was back in town. Despite telling them not to say anything they told her about Janet, they broke down and told her what they knew. She wanted to be angry, but something about a person that would do what Janet did made her want to see just what Janet was willing to do. She rode back to town passing it on her way to the tent city. After a few questions, she found Janet's tent. Inside she found Diana with a gun as well as the two other girls. Diana had the gun pointed at Willie, but she failed to cock the gun. Willie tipped her hat again.

Diana asked, "*are you going to shoot us?*"

Willie smiled a less than friendly smile.

She said, “if you are going to shoot that wheel gun then you better cock it first.”

Diana looked at the gun, but before she could cock it, Willie moved in and took the gun. Diana backed away blocking the other two girls with her body. Willie stepped into the tent finding it bigger than she thought it would be. She checked the gun and wasn't surprised it was unloaded. The tent flap opened, and Janet walked in with Half behind her. Janet walked over to her daughters with her eyes on Willie and the gun she was holding with the barrel away from them.

Willie said, “look at your daughters. You have something worth living for..... If you come with us, I can't promise you will come back.”

Janet said, “all I do is think about my girls. We lost everything because of this man. I don't know if I could ever face them again knowing I

did nothing to put him and his friends in the ground.”

Fifty miles to the west along wagon train moved on its way east. Hanson, the man everyone called Boss was in the front watching for trouble. Most of all he watched for the US Army. He had met with the wagon train and Warren Gregory the man most called the head hunter. Their current employer had hired an army for his plans, but he still needed the gold. They planned on raiding several villages hoping to flush out Jasper and with him the gold. A man called Fitz was sent by the employer to make sure their goals were fulfilled. He had ordered the death of Hanson for failing to kill Willie or get any information on where the gold was. Fitz was pale even after riding for days in the sun with long white and black hair and a mustache almost as long. He wore a long tan duster

over a black suit under a white Stetson hat. On his hips, he wore two Colt Dragoon revolvers he bought when they were the newest technology. With those guns, he killed forty-nine men, twelve women, and six children. He killed his wife and two children with those guns.

The other men including killers and rapists gave Fitz a wide berth while he kept his eyes on Hanson and the horizon. He could feel their eyes on him as well as the eyes of someone up in the hills. In the middle of the convoy was their leader, a man calling himself General. William Harrison or General Harrison was never in any military. Twenty years ago, he had gathered the capital to build a railroad starting in Atlanta and going to California. After spending millions in preparations and bribes, he found out northern interest were getting the contracts, and he

would be left out. In return, he backed what became the Confederacy. He hoped to build the railroad as well as keep his enslaved workforce. When it became clear that the west would be cut off at the Mississippi, Harrison sent his fortune to a hiding place in Texas. He also sent a small fortune to Mexico hoping to bring them in with the promise of returned land and revenge. The war ended, and no help came from Mexico. After finding where the gold went, he and a few others came up with a plan.

To pay for this plan, he would have to either find the missing gold or use what was left from his fortune. Without all the gold they might not be able to pull Mexico into supporting their claims. With the American army split between a rising war in the west and the occupation of the south they felt they could take over the Arizona territories and maybe with that

south of the border help take over Texas. Many within the Texas legislature were unhappy with the end of the war, and they wanted autonomy rather than submit to the hated Yankee. Perhaps with foreign intervention, they could separate the west from America making a country where they are in control.

Two boys watched as the wagon train moved. One boy was a member of the Cherokee and the other Hopi sent by their nations as a gesture of solidarity against the encroaching white army. The nations up north were in open rebellion as the army pushed the warriors back from reclaiming their history. The government back east gave the railroads the best lands and the freedom to do whatever they wanted while the nations starved on unusable lands.

A gunshot echoed across the desert. Janet screamed, cocked the gun and fired again. Thirty feet away the apple sat on the fence post almost mocking her aim. She looked at Willie who looked back saying nothing. Willie told her to point her sight at the end of the barrel at the apple and bring up the back, so the front post was between the back posts then fire. Janet cocked the gun. The cocked hammer became the back sights and following her instructions aimed and fired. The apple exploded. Janet spun around wildly jumping up and down.

Willie said, *“and it only took you nine tries.”*

Janet stopped and said, *“you’re having second thoughts aren’t you…… well don’t because this is going to work.”*

Janet holstered her gun and picked up one of the Sharps rifles. Before Willie could say a word, Janet

took aim at another apple firing. The rifle bucked knocking Janet off her feet.

Willie whispered, “*oh no you might want to take a different stance before firing.*”

Janet got to her feet without saying a word, reloaded, took aim and fired hitting the apple. As she took aim again, a rider rode into camp and went up to Half. The young rider was the boy from the Hopi sent out to follow the man that got away from Willie. He looked at the two women than to Half.

He said, “*we counted about eleven-hundred men heading east and another nine-hundred coming from the north. Most of them are in US army uniforms but a gray color not the blue.*”

He looked to Half then back to the south.

He said, *“those men also have canons and a couple of Gatling Guns. It’s a larger force than anything up north, and I don’t know what we can do.”*

Half said, *“we can’t take them on alone, but if they keep coming, they will sweep through the valley into villages with families. It would start a war no one can win.”*

The young boy said, *“no that war is already happening, and we will win.”*

Willie replied, *“if we do nothing, they’ll kill everyone they find but will never find the gold. We can’t let this happen. Somehow they need to understand the gold is gone.”*

Half stepped back and said, *“I don’t think you see the bigger picture. Whoever this is they are*

building an army for something, and I don't think it's anything good."

Willie said, "we need to let someone know what's about to happen. Back at Jasper's house, he had a list of contacts with what was the underground railroad. Maybe one of them has connections in Washington."

Willie tipped her hat to the two and rode off to the east.

The two columns of men met up about a hundred miles west of the remains of the town of Hester's Spring where it had all started. They would search the town and surrounding area for information. Harrison knew that the longer they waited, the harder it would be to start their little war and any money lost would be returned ten-fold when they become their own founding fathers. He ordered Fitz to take some of their

most trusted men and dig out the remaining gold while he moved the army south to meet up with the Mexican army. Harrison turned to Warren Gregory.

Harrison said, *“I’m giving you two weeks to come back with that girl’s head or know that I will have yours on a pike.”*

Harrison counted out ten men and left them with Gregory. His right-hand-man Henson rode up behind Gregory. Harrison nodded his head then rode off with his army. Gregory waited for the army to ride off. He turned to the men left.

Gregory said, *“I don’t know what any of you think, but I think that dumbass and his plans are crazy and are only going to get them killed. Now we can go follow them or find that girl, get the gold and leave the territory rich.”*

None of the men moved.

Gregory Said, *“to the east is a wagon load of gold and a future to the west all you’ll find is a shallow grave…… That is if the Mexicans even bother to bury you. He was never going to bring the south back. His plan will make all of you slaves to Mexico.”*

One of the men pulled his revolver and shot Hanson in the head and out of the saddle.

He turned to Gregory and said in a mocking tone, *“the general told this one to shoot you in the back if you betrayed him.”*

Another one of the riders said, *“for a second I thought I’d have to go through with following that guy to another failed war. How many times are we going to follow a fool for a cause none of us care about.”*

Willie rode through the ruins of Hester Springs on her way to Jasper's house. She tied off her horse in the back and made her way into the front parlor where she found a hand-drawn map of the east coast of America. The names of the rivers were replaced by the names of the people that ran safe houses along the hidden highways that made up the railroad. A shadow past just outside the window, then a creak of a board from the back porch. The door opened, and someone walked into the house. Willie rolled the map and slid it into a leather tube. A floorboard creaked in the hallway. Willie put the tube on her back and drew her gun. From outside the hallway, she heard a voice.

He said, "*don't shoot.... It's me, Jasper.....I think we had the same idea.*"

Gregory and his men watched from a distance as Jasper and Willie packed a bag and rode off. He ordered the youngest of the men to follow them and report where they go. Another two of them went to the town of Knuckle Smash to follow the Freeman calling himself Apple. They figured if anyone could hide such a large amount of gold it would be a man with connections to the nations.

Two weeks later,

After a long ride south, General Harrison and about a third of his army three-thousand men rode into the encampment along the Rio Grande. Here they would meet with the Mexican Army and together move east to Huston then north to start a new war. Harrison sent the other two-thirds or six-thousand men into the Arizona Territory to harass both the Indians and the US Army ramping up the escalating conflicts between

Washington and the nations. About a thousand would go back into the south and join in the various antigovernment agencies such as the Ku Klux Klan. Force the Government to split their forces between the Indians in the west and the unrest in the south.

Harrison found a new army closer to the newly refitted armies in Europe including new rifles and more than a few Gatling guns. At first, they seemed strangely placed, but he figured they were there to show how dedicated they were to the cause. In the center of the camp were a brightly colored tent and a young man holding a sealed note. The man handed Harrison the note then backed away. Harrison broke the seal and opened the note.

If you are reading this, then you made it to our meeting point. Good for you. I have been very busy building a new army for my country. One that could maybe one day take back what is ours but right now I just don't think invading America would be a good idea. Right now, they are fractured, and they will remain that way until something brings them together. A foreign power invading would rebuild America long before the world would be ready. Also, I sent some soldiers to follow those poor unfortunate men you sent to retrieve my gold. Thank you for your donation. I would have more to say, but my men are ordered to fire five minutes after you break the seal. Goodbye.

Harrison dropped the note just as the sounds of the Gatling guns echoed into the camp. The Mexican army

set their guns high so they could sweep over the invaders. Ten minutes later and the guns went silent, and nothing was left alive in the camp. The bodies were buried along the border. In the confusion, six men slipped away including Harrison.

Chapter Twelve

Willie ducked down an alley between two buildings going back to the communal outhouses. She jumped up and into a hole made by the long-dead fire into what was a general store. After the fire, the store was looted by the retreating people, local hermits, and nations people. She checked her belt and her revolvers. Four rounds left. The rest of her ammunition was back with her dead horse just on the outskirts of town. Her Bowie knife was also back with the horse, but she did have her small upsweep skinning knife on her hip. A shadow walked past the front of the old store. She killed six of them on the run and another three in town but that left at least eleven men and only four rounds and a knife. She wondered if coming back to Hester's Spring was a good idea or her last.

Three days ago.

It had been over four months since they lost sight of the massive army heading south. There were rumors about a mass grave and Mexican soldiers along the border but no news on this man that called himself a general. Willie had rented a room in a small town along the border between Texas and the New Mexico territory called Pequeño Agujero or Little Hole. She left Jasper and the others hoping to keep the men looking for her away from their families. Part of her was happy to be away from the others. Family seemed to be a liability, an anchor holding her in place. This town was like so many she had seen in those months on her own. Most people kept their distance from the woman in slacks wearing three guns.

Her first week on her own, she ran into a man that wanted to teach her how to use her guns. In one of the many small outposts along the border between Texas

and the New Mexico territory, Willie walked into the saloon. A sign at the door proclaimed, no Mexicans, no darkies, and no Yankees. There were only three women in the saloon, counting her with the other two being working girls. The saloon smelled of stale beer, smoke, and sweat. Willie had about an hour before the room she had rented for the night would be ready, so she had time to kill. She had a revolver on each hip and another across the front for an easier draw in the saddle. The gun in front was a Colt Army taken from one of the men she killed some time ago. It had been converted from the ball and cap to take the forty-four-caliber shell. She walked past two men at the bar and made her way to the end with the wall behind her and the doorway in front. The whiskey was watered down and yet still strong. Such places like this were made for hard drinking with little thought put toward taste or atmosphere. That lack of thought gave the place an

atmosphere no one could replicate even though there were many places just like it.

A man walked up to her at the bar. He had his back to the door blocking her view. The man had that smell of sweat and animal odor common to a ranch hand or cattle driver after a long run. He had a Colt Navy on his hip set way too low for a quick draw. He got way too close to Willie to where she could smell the stale sour smell of beer on his breath. She figured this guy thinks she's one of the working girls. In such places like this, there were few single women with most being prostitutes.

He said, "*say there little lady let me show you how to use that thing there.*"

He reached for her gun, missed and grabbed her knee. Willie put her hand on her left revolver as she pushed his hand away.

She said, *“I’m not here for anything but my own business.”*

Quicker than anyone drunk should be, he pushed past her hand, putting one arm around her and another on her chest.

He said, *“my money is just as good as anyone else’s whore.”*

He picked her up and pushed her against the wall as everyone else watched and did nothing. Willie couldn’t draw her left or right gun, but the Colt was easier to reach. He felt the gun on his ribs as she thumbed the hammer and fired up. He stumbled back as she emptied the gun into him. People watched him fall then went back to what they were doing. Willie left the

bartender with some gold and a warning to not talk about what just happened. This unknown man wasn't the first man she killed and wouldn't be the last one to die in those months. She left the town and slept rough that night.

A man walked into the saloon. He was in a black suit with two nickel-plated revolvers on each hip and a black derby on his head. The people at the bar saw him and walked away as he made his way to a large dried blood stain on the floor. The bartender watched this man make his way to the end of the bar staring at the badge on his chest rather than the man himself. US marshals were an uncommon sight in such a place like this where people came to hide away from society rather than be a part of it, so having one here now seemed odd. The marshal turned to the bar.

He asked the bartender, “*which way did she go?*”

The bartender just stared at him.

The marshal said, “*I know she was here, and I know it was about a week ago. I also know she paid you to not talk. just point, and I’ll leave.*”

The bartender said, “*I don’t know who you are talking about. I serve drinks, and that is all. I don’t talk to my customers or follow them out the door.*”

A woman walked over wearing what had to be at one time a pretty dress laced with pink, red and white ribbons but now was just a ruin with years of wear and neglect. Much like the dress, the woman had seen many hard years of drinking and abuse turning what might have been a pretty young girl hard. She had a

shot of whiskey so strong the marshal could feel it from the end of the bar.

She said, *“I done saw that little bitch. She done shot poor Benny for just being a man.”*

The Marshal walked over to the woman trying not to take in her smell but failing. He ordered her a drink and asked what she saw.

She said, *“well that little harlot came in here like she owned the place. She walked over to the bar, bought a drink acting like a man. Poor Benny walked over to her, hoping to make her feel welcome doing the whole manly thing not meaning any harm when she pulled her wheel gun and shot him dead in cold blood. She shot his head and left like she did nothing wrong.”*

The marshal looked at the blood stain on the wood floor. It had been about a week since Willie shot and

killed this man and unless there wasn't a stain, he would never have known anyone had died there.

The woman said, "*she went west into the hills. I hope the savages get her.*"

The marshal stepped out of the saloon and up to six men on horseback. He told his men they were heading west. One of them griped about leaving the saloon without a drink, but he stopped as soon as he saw the look in the marshal's eyes.

Willie rode for three days away from the outpost heading southwest until she came upon a small homestead. The house was a mix of sod and adobe with a feeling of haste in its construction. A wagon with a wheel missing as well as a few boards was off to one side and in a small corral were two jackasses. She figured they were one of the many families

heading west for a new start. Off in the distance, she could see a man swinging what must be a pickax or just an ax working on removing stumps. A smaller form was next to him and was most likely a child out in the field, helping his or her daddy. A woman stepped out of the house wearing a dress made from miss matching pieces of cloth from other sources and a white apron. She saw Willie and backed into the doorway of the house. Willie tipped her hat to the woman in an almost manly fashion. The woman stepped out of the house, and a small toddler in a nightshirt stepped out behind her. Off out in the field, the man and child were running back to the house.

Most homesteaders didn't have much, and Willie didn't want to take from people with little to nothing. Willie turned away and went to ride off when the woman yelled wait. Willie turned around to see the

woman and her child were up at the fence. The woman was beautiful with an olive tone skin and long dark wavy chestnut hair. The child had fair skin with reddish blonde hair. The woman's eyes were a pale blue and almost luminescent against her dark skin. The man running just by his looks could have been related to Willie. Pale skin and orangish-red hair. The woman turned and saw the man running to the house. She turned to Willie and said, "hello."

After the usual awkward greetings, Willie learned his name was Dermot McCulley. He, his wife Isabella and their two children the nine-year-old George and two-year-old Martha had bought this piece of land from the railroad and were setting up their own little piece of paradise out in the middle of nowhere. Willie had been the first person they had seen in almost three months. Willie figured they didn't have much. The railroad had

overcharged them for the land, leaving them with barely enough to get by. Even with so very little, they still offered their hospitality. She learned that the couple met in St Louis. He was a second-generation Irishman, and she was from Spain, having moved to America with her family when she was ten years old. They met while waiting for a confessional, and they remained together ever since. They helped Willie with a bath, something she hadn't done in what felt like a month, and she ended up sharing a bed with the two children. The next day she moved on. Willie tried to repay the couple, but they wouldn't take the money. Willie slipped some gold into the pocket of Isabella's apron on her way out. It was more money than either of them had ever seen.

About two weeks later, Isabella was doing her favorite thing. From an early age, she would help her father

bake bread in a special woodfire oven. One of the first things they built on the homestead was an oven like the one her father had. Flour was expensive way out in the middle of nowhere, but that flour could be made into bread, and that bread was almost as valuable as gold. That morning, Isabella was building a fire while her natural rise dough shaped up into something special. The bread both given and sold helped them make friends and settle them in a community that had no idea they existed. With the fire going, she turned to see eight men at the fence. All the men were in some shade of blue wearing parts of the American Army blue uniform with some in the slacks while others in the jacket and or hats. All of them had tin stars on. The man that had to be their leader was in a white shirt with dark tan slacks a matching vest, a cream-colored duster, and cream-colored day rider hat. He stood out from the others like a white egg among a basket of browns.

Dermot heard his wife scream and came running out with his rifle ready for a fight. Two steps out the door, he walked into a hailstorm of led. He fell onto his back as Isabella screamed in both English and Spanish. The last thing he saw was his daughter lying on the floor with a bullet wound in her head. a stray shot meant for him, or so he thought. Isabella screamed at the sight of her dead husband and daughter. She tried to pull away from the men, but they had a hold of her, and there was no escape. One of the men struck her across the face, nearly knocking her out. Another man came around from behind the house with George.

The man said, “*look what I found in the back, hiding like a coward.*”

The leader pointed his gun at George.

He said, *“the girl. I know she was here. Tell us where she went, and just maybe you and your little bastard will get to live.”*

Isabella said in Spanish, *“I will tell you nothing..... murderers, monsters, hell is too good for the likes of you.”*

The leader said, *“well, I offered.”*

He took aim and fired striking George in the chest. The boy almost seemed to fold down the middle as he fell over. Isabella screamed a sorrowful cry that traveled across the valley and into their new community. The leader told his men to do whatever they wanted to get the information just make sure to leave nothing alive. The men pushed her into the house and ripped her clothes off her. After her last scream, Isabella never made another sound even as they took turns beating and raping her. Two shots rang out as some of the men killed the jackasses. Beaten and broken the men tossed

the still living Isabella into her woodfire oven, spreading the smell of cooking flesh across the valley.

Willie rode into the tiny Dan town with it's one building and rustlers attitude. She sold her horse and bought a fresh mount transferrring her kit to the new horse. She would do this horse trading along the way every four weeks or so hoping to keep anyone off her trail using any kind of tracking skills off their game. She made sure to overpay for the horses to maintain silence with the sellers. At this point, she had no idea of the trail of destruction her pursuers were leaving. It had been two months since she went out on her own and loneliness for those people, she called family was starting to set into her heart. She rode out that night not wanting to stay in such a place like this where anyone could turn on you at any time.

The marshal rode into a small community built out of land sold by the railroad. Up until a few weeks ago, they had no need for law enforcement. People watched out for each other as neighbors. That was before the murders of the McCulley family. A neighbor had come over, smelling the burning meat, and found the bodies. It would be two days before they would discover Isabella in the oven. The fear and the anger over their deaths helped form the first city council and the first vote on hiring someone to help keep the peace. All this happened even before the town had a name. A new sign just on the small road leading into the new town proclaimed it to be the town of Isabella. Over time the name would become Bella, New Mexico with a population of forty-five hundred and a plaque proclaiming how the town was founded.

The newly sworn-in sheriff told the marshal and his team about how they found the bodies. He had also saved the gold coins left after the McCulley family had spent some setting up their bread baking service. The marshal looked at the coin than at one from his pocket he picked up on Willie's trail earlier in the month. The coins were minted out of a pure gold usually done by governments. There were rumors about a large heist and those rumors all center around Wilhelmina O'Shea and her gang. The sheriff let the marshal take one of the coins and anything else that would help him find this gang. The marshal read the reports on the deaths and noticed how it didn't match with what Wilhelmina would do, but by the time he and his posse had gone the town had come to believe the McCulley family were victims of the Willie the Mad and her gang of murderers.

Twelve riders rode into the dead town of Hester's Spring. They met up with four other riders who had ridden in earlier to scout what was in front of them looking for the army, marshals and the girl. Warren Gregory was in the middle of the pack keeping men around him just in case someone took a shot. He never told them why he rode like this letting them think he was more than just a boss; he was one of them. They had been on the run from the army while searching for Willie for about two months. None of them knew that the army wasn't searching for them with no knowledge of the almost war that was planned with a Mexican General and a crazy millionaire. The town was abandoned and could serve as a resting place while they searched for the girl and the gold. They knew this was her town, and if she had buried or hid the gold anywhere, it would be here.

They searched the town finding it was stripped clean of anything not nailed down. A few places had hiding places with a little gold and valuables but no gold bars. Warren Gregory and two others rode past the town finding a series of cabins mostly untouched by the fire. Near a burned down barn was a house untouched by fire and looters. The doors were unlocked, and the house had a feeling that someone was living there and had just left for the day. A little moldy food and a musty smell broke the illusion of occupancy. It had been many years since Gregory had lived in a house. His work as a bounty hunter kept him on the go with no call for a home. He sat down in the parlor and looked around, thinking to himself how he could get used to all this.

Four riders rode into town past the men on their way to Jasper and Maggie's home. The men all knew them

and didn't think they would ever see General Harrison again. William Harrison lost his army and plans to a Mexican general looking to bolster his country's army in case the Americans make a move. Among the dead were his sons. His dreams of a west free from Yankee intervention and open to slavery was gone. The Men he sent east were having troubles with the army and President Grant's crackdown on the Klan. Rumors that Congress was going to make an anti-Klan law were driving many underground. With the three men at his side and the twelve men here, his army of over a thousand was down to fifteen. That is if these men were even loyal to him.

One of the men walked into the house and looked around, taking a silver hairbrush and a decanter of what was bourbon. The man took a drink and smiled. Gregory came up beside the man and drew his

revolver, putting it on the side of the man's head. The man put the bottle down then the brush. He backed away and out the door. At the bottom of the stairs off the deck, Gregory shot the man in the back of the head. He told his men the house was off limits and to dispose of the body. As he watched them take the body away, he saw four riders, one of which was Harrison. He looked past them trying to see signs of an army, but there was nothing. Harrison rode up to the house and dismounted. He and the three men with him walked past him and into the house. Gregory walked back into the house to find Harrison inside sitting in the parlor flanked by the three men.

Harrison asked, *“I gave you two months to find the girl and my gold, Have you?”*

Gregory looked at Harrison, then the three men. Something felt wrong. He quickly pulled his revolver

and shot the three men in the head. He placed the barrel of the gun on Harrison's head burning the man.

He said, *“there is no way you would come here with just three men. My guess is they are the only men still loyal to you. Coming here must have been your last chance..... well, it's your last alright.”*

Harrison said, *“the Mexicans turned on us, but they didn't get all my gold. Fitz was able to take about two-thirds of it out before the army moved in and he is on his way. We can still do so much with that gold or just split it and go our own ways.”*

Gregory smiled saying, *“that man is most likely halfway out of the territory by now. How do you trust a man that would kill his own wife and children?”*

Harrison answered, *“I trust the man that killed them on my orders.”*

A rider rode into town stopping at the saloon. After he was searched and disarmed, they let him go ahead to the house Gregory was using for his compound. He wore a tin star on his chest and parts of a U.S. Army uniform. Gregory stepped out in one of Jasper’s suits that was about two sizes too big. He stepped down, looking to the man that escorted this marshal in. The man nodded. He put his hand out and shook the Deputy Marshal’s hand.

Gregory asked, *“tell me why we don’t just shoot you here and now?”*

In a deep southern drawl, the man said, *“I was sent by my boss. We’re hunting this girl making*

trouble, and he thinks she might be trouble for you'll."

Gregory asked, *"what does your boss propose?"*

The Deputy Marshal said, *"he wants the girl. They have a history, and he wants something from her. He also knows she has something you want, and he is willing to make her tell you where it is. He told me to say, let us help you, and together, we can set things right."*

Willie left Pequeño Agujero or Little Hole on her way northeast. She planned on stopping in Hester's Springs for a day or two in a place that felt like home. Her

current horse seemed to be bred for racing and was a little harder to control than her usual mount. The man that sold him to her called the horse Furieux. She would find out at her next stop the name meant mad. One night while Willie slept underneath the stars, Furieux untied himself and went on a run with some wild horses. Willie awoke to find herself surrounded by horses all just staring at her like she was on display. She slowly stood up and gathered her things, saddling her horse while the other horses just watched. She got on and slowly rode away, turning around to see the others were gone like they had never been there.

After hours of almost rushing to get to their destination, Furieux seemed to hesitate. Willie didn't want to push him harder than he was able to go knowing if something went wrong, she would be on her own. She also found herself liking this quirky

horse. Just outside of town she found their old hideout. The doors were open, and the weather had its way with the building, but it still was standing and would work as a shelter for her and Furieux. Someone was using this place recently with clean stalls and fresh oats. The water pump was also in working order. Whoever it was had left in a hurry leaving the food and some basic gear like a horse blanket as well as a Dark Blue Army Jacket. Willie put Furieux in a stall out of sight of the doors, and she moved into the long-empty hayloft. She closed her eyes and thought about this place, and the last time she slept up here. She had been with George, and together they talked about what they wanted for their future. He was most likely planning his betrayal even then, but at that time he was hers, and she liked that.

Willie woke up just as the sun crested over the horizon. She brushed down and fed Furieux, not knowing when they would find such a good source of food again. She saddled and set out for town when a shot rang out, and Furieux bolted with her on top running away from town. Two more shots rang out as Furieux turned and ran back to the stable. He nearly knocked Willie off running through the doorway. Willie jumped down with her rifle running up to the loft looking for snipers. Off in the distance, she could see about seven- or eight-men moving in. A thump and a whinny as Furieux went to the floor of the stable. Willie jumped down to find he had expired with multiple wounds. He had somehow taken her to a safe place with a round in his head, and with his last act, he saved her.

Willie went back up to the loft and looked out, trying to find the men. They had split into two groups of four

with one going around to the back and the other group walking to the front. From the cover of the loft, Willie took aim and fired in a rapid procession using the lever action hitting three of the men in front before they could react. The fourth jumped down, striking his head on a rock with a loud audible crack. The second four fired into the loft, forcing Willie out a side window and out onto the roof. She went down a ladder and around to the front where she found two of them and dropped them with her Colt Army revolver. The other two were in the loft shooting back. Willie ran keeping her back out of range of the loft.

As she approached what had passed as Main Street, she came upon a man with a rifle in his hands, and his back turned to her. He was also dressed in the same Army blue, but it was clear he was no soldier. He turned around just in time to be shot in the face. Willie

ran past him as he staggered then fell. She turned the corner to find three men carrying a bag of something heavy. She shot the first one before they could act. The bag of oats hit the boardwalk as the other two men went for their guns. She fired hitting another while the final man fell backward, rolling off the boardwalk out of her sight. Willie could hear more coming. She ducked down an alley between two buildings going back to the communal outhouses. She jumped up and into a hole made by the long-dead fire into what was a general store. She checked her belt and her revolvers. Four rounds left. The rest of her ammunition was back with Furieux just on the outskirts of town. Her Bowie knife was also back with the horse, but she did have her small upsweep skinning knife on her hip. A shadow walked past the front of the old store.

The rounds were for the Colt Army. She reloaded the gun and held it at her side. The shadow came back along with two more. A voice came from the outside.

It said, “*drop the guns and come out. you have no chance.*”

Willie aimed about where she figured his head was and fired. The round hit the doorjamb, and the dry wood exploded into fragments lodging in the man’s face and eyes. Willie ducked down as the other two fired into the store. Someone screamed how they had to take her alive. One of the shadows turned and fired. The other voice went silent. These men wanted blood. Willie put her Colt down on a chair and pulled one of the empty revolvers. She made a dramatized act of thumbing the hammer and having it drop on an expended round. The two men stopped firing. They walked in with their guns out. The third man was in tow with blood in his

eyes. Willie put her hands up and sat down. One of the men put his revolver back in his holster and walked over to her. The second guy turned to the third to say something. Willie quickly pulled her revolver from the chair and fired, striking the two in the head. The blind man gasped as the second man fell away.

Willie got up and collected their guns. Both guns were Colt Army but chambered in the forty-five. Willie looked back to the blind man. She used her last forty-four round to shut him up. She looked outside and saw a man lying in the street. Next to him was a man in a dark tan suit, a cream-colored hat and matching duster with a tin star. The man under the hat shocked Willie right down to her core. She hadn't seen him since she was sixteen and he was supposed to be dead. She had been told he died in a Yankee prison after losing an eye and arm to the war and infection. She wondered

just how this could be. With all the men gathering in the front, Willie was able to slip out the back and to the place the men had their horses tethered. As she rode off, she heard gunfire. The marshal walked into the store past the dead men and looked out the back. While worse for wear, Alex Goodwin was still very much alive and wanting what he thought was his.

Chapter Thirteen

Alex turned at the sound of gunfire walking out of the store to find his men had shot and killed the remaining men from Gregory's group. A man in gray slacks and a white shirt with a graying dark brown beard walked over to Alex.

He said, *“we lost four out by that barn, but the other boys took care of the rest of them, and we are all ready.”*

Alex replied, *“no, Tim, we need to explain to our new partners their place in the grand scheme of things.”*

Tim asked, *“does that new place require a shovel?”*

Alex just smiled.

Gregory sat out on the porch, admiring what he saw as his home. Sitting next to him on the deck floor was Harrison. His mock general uniform was stripped of all raking, and he had been beaten, leaving his face untouched so when Fitz arrived, he couldn't tell the role reversal between Gregory and Harrison. Alex rode onto the front yard against Gregory's orders to keep off his lawn. He had four men with him. Gregory got up and went to the end of the porch near the steps. Harrison smiled. Alex got off his horse and up the stairs to the porch, passing Gregory and walking up to Harrison. Gregory just stood there in shock. Alex helped Harrison to his feet.

He asked, "*your man will do as you say?*"

Harrison nodded. Before Gregory could say a word, Alex pulled his revolver and shot him in the head, dropping him off the porch into the dirt.

Alex said, *“two of his men decided to work with us the others are piled in a hole on the outskirts of town.”*

Harrison slipping his torn jacket on straightened himself out. He walked over to the side of the porch and looked down at the body. He spat on Gregory then turned to Alex.

He said, *“have two of your men change out of the Yankee blue and head west for about three hours. You should find Fitz encamped out there waiting for word from me.”*

He took a coin out of his hat and handed it to Alex and said, *“Give him this, so he knows I sent you.”*

Alex decided to go out and meet with Fitz himself. Unlike most of his men, he never fought in the hated Yankee uniform. He ordered his men to scavenge

whatever they could to change their clothing out of the uniform. Alex got onto his horse and headed out west like he did after the war and his death.

July 3th, 1863

Alex woke up laying on the ground next to another soldier, a union soldier. He remembered them moving out to flank the Yankee army entrenched on the small hill called Little Roundtop. As they started to gain ground, the crazy Yankees came running down the hill charging. In their charge, he remembered turning and running then a burning sensation in his back. He kept down as the Yankees searched for survivors. Soon word went out about a large movement happening in the middle of the line. A suicidal charge. Alex pulled the body into a standing of trees and changed clothing. This wasn't the first time he changed his identity.

After some basic training, Alex found himself on the way to a supply line to act as a courier for some general who wasn't even in the war. He was given a place with no chance for honor. Alex knew that given a chance, he could beat the entire Yankee army on his own, but his father wanted him safe. On the way, he met a man named Jack Turner, a new private on his way to meet up with his unit already in the war. Jack was the son of a poor farmer in Alabama, the kind referred to as white trash. Unlike Alex, he was drafted into a war he had nothing to gain from no matter who won. Alex wanted in the war, and Jack wanted to live to see the end. That day they changed identities so Alex could fight, and Jack could see how the other half lived. Alex would later find out the General's unit was caught and the man using his name was tortured and killed in a Yankee prison.

Alex woke up in a Yankee field hospital a few days after the battle. He was told his wound would keep him out of the war. He was also told he would be returning to Maine when he could travel. Alex had never been north of the Mason-Dixon line, but he did know that it got cold in Maine. His new name was Shamus McMillin, and he was released from the army and offered a way home. On the way back, he learned this man had no family waiting for him. He had traveled to America and was tricked into joining the army, thinking he was being offered a job. Six weeks later he found himself in Maine with nothing but the shirt on his back. A shirt of the hated Yankee. He found a job and worked for about three months in a logging camp to earn enough to travel south. He found a job on the Erie Canal traveling on his way west to Ohio then down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River. The

river was controlled by the Yankee army, making the trip home impossible. While in Cincinnati he found out about the death of the man pretending to be him.

A watcher came and told Fitz three riders were approaching from the east. Fitz just sat still waiting for the right time to move. It always came down to how the men saw him. Too quick and he would appear nervous or too slow, and he would appear to be afraid. Aloof help him keep his mystique, the unkillable unstoppable force. Hiding behind his persona made him feel invincible. They were able to move almost three-fourths of the gold from the hiding spot before the first of the Mexican Army moved in. They were followed for about a day before the army turned south back to Mexico. Some of the men talked about just taking the gold and heading away from their destination, but none of them were willing to take on

the mythical Fitz. A man so feared they never gave him a nickname just in case it would offend him.

1826,

Augustus Eugene Fitz was a new landowner at the age of seventeen in the rural hills of Virginia along the Kanawha River. This part of the state would become West Virginia in about forty years but right there and then it was in a nowhere place that no one cared about except for those hearty people willing to carve a life for themselves. Fitz was seventeen and a newlywed. His wife was Mary Anne Martin, and she was fifteen. Together with their neighbors, they built their log home and cleared the hillside that was to be their farm. Life was hard, but so were they. Every morning, Fitz would work his land and the land of a neighbor who had turned ill, and every night, he would work on their new home. He would also hunt on his land. Fitz had a

Kentucky long rifle and a pistol. He would hunt for small game like rabbits but would also take a deer if one would show its head. Over time they made a life for themselves and their daughter Bessy May Fitz. This was the year he would earn his reputation for being a good shot.

Ten years went by like it was nothing. Most people called him Fitz except for his wife, who called him either Auggie or Jean. In those years they had five children losing two of them to sickness and one to the river. Bessy was the oldest at nine with a five-year-old son named John and their newborn Agatha. Fitz became known as a person you could go to for settling disputes. He acted as an impartial arbiter between warring neighbors. In 1837 he worked as an arbiter between a railroad and a series of landowners. The coal mines needed a way to move the coal, but the

farmers needed their land. After three weeks of negotiations, they came to an understanding that almost made everyone happy. For his effort, Fitz was given a set of Colt Patterson Revolvers chambered in 36-caliber ball. He had never owned anything manufactured brand new before, even his rifle and sidearm were hand downs from his father and grandfather. During those negotiations, he met the son of the railroad owner William Harrison.

Back home after a long trip, he learned his daughter Bessy was killed by a neighbor after she tried to fight off his advances. Fitz kissed his wife and children goodbye and went to see the neighbor. John Pearl was a widower with two grown children and no understanding of boundaries. He would regularly hunt on neighbor's land and steal from their gardens. That day he had come upon the ten-year-old Bessy skinny-

dipping in the river. She was more girl than woman and didn't understand why this man was following her along the shore, but her long understanding that she was to obey adults forced her ashore. He pushed her down, forcing his hand between her legs then up her body. As he tried to undress, she slipped away. In the chase, he knocked her down, hitting her with a rock killing her with the second shot to the head. Then he violated her still warm corpse.

Fitz walked up to the Tiny shack that served as Pearl's homestead. His oldest son named John Junior came out threatening to hit him if he didn't leave. Fitz pulled his new revolver and shot his first man. The second son named Jack came out with an ancient pistol that misfired. Fitz put a ball in his head. The shack shifted as John Sr. pushed a hole in the back wall and ran for the river. About the place where John had killed then

raped Bessy, Fitz shot John down. He emptied both revolvers into him not caring what would happen next. He carried the body back to the shack and waited to find out what his neighbors were going to do. After some time, he would learn they were all happy to see the man and his kin gone, but they also were now afraid of the man that gunned down three men.

1849,

Word finally came to them that their sixteen-year-old son John had died in the war with Mexico. He had run away to join the army acting first as a drummer than as a color guard. He was killed by accident from friendly fire. It was the new owner of the railroad William Harrison that came to the farm and told Fitz and Mary about their son. William's father had a stroke and was unable to move on his own, turning the company over to his son. William wanted to build a railroad from

Atlanta to either San Diego or San Francisco. He knew that if the railroad across the country were built by a Yankee, the south would be cut out of a future for sales such as cotton. The south had plenty of small railroads, but most of them were either not connected or a different gauge. Many went from farms to rivers with the rivers being the only way to move products. He hired Fitz to act as an arbiter between the railroad and the lawyers he would need to bribe his way across the country. As a token for his hiring, he gave Fitz a pair of Colt Army Dragoons, the guns he would carry for the next twenty-one years.

The two men came face-to-face, not knowing each other, just their reputations. Fitz had thirty men with him not the ten Alex was told. Alex nodded to Fitz in a gesture that almost seemed like a submission that Fitz was the alpha of the group. Fitz made a mental note

about the Alabama gentleman nodding to the West Virginia cracker. Fitz pulled out a gold bar from his saddlebag and gave it to Alex. The bar was marked with the unofficial Confederate seal. Behind them were six wagons loaded with similar bars. A large fortune. Fitz didn't recognize any of the men that came with Alex. Fitz could remember every one of the men that worked for him or Harrison over the last twenty-one years. His trust was with his men and not strangers. Alex gave Fitz the gold bar back.

He said, "*the general is waiting.*"

Fitz replied, "*yes, he has been waiting for far too long.*"

1852,

Fitz spent the last three years with a group of lawyers wanting to just go home. After a while, he could see

their chances of building the railroad was slim to none. Most of the lawyers on either side had more to gain with a northerner building the railroad. In what would be his last meeting he learned the lawyers working for Harrison were offered stock in another railroad if they tanked Harrison's chances. One of the lawyers put a revolver on the table saying he could either take a bribe or led. Fitz didn't hesitate to shoot all nine of the lawyers. That night under cover of darkness he left Washington D.C. and went back to Atlanta. There he told Harrison what happened and how he was being blocked by outside forces. Harrison said how the war between the north and south was inevitable, and the side that had another country working with them would win the war. Harrison spent the next seven years liquidating his assets into gold. During this time, he sent Fitz out to guard his shipments as well as deal with any problems.

When the war started Harrison sent Fitz to kill settlers along the border hoping to draw them over to the side of the south. It was at this time when he killed his first woman and child. A nine-year-old boy holding a small pistol that turned out not to have any powder. He drank himself to sleep for weeks after. As he killed, his reputation grew. Soon the rumor about that one child became twelve. Word came around that the gold sent to Mexico went missing and the war was lost. By the battle of Gettysburg Harrison had moved West hoping to save his fortune from the looting Yankees. It was in this time he ordered Fitz to cut all ties to his past. He was sent to kill Mary and their last remaining child. When he was done, he dug the graves and left his farm for good.

1866,

Alex was working on a dock along the Ohio River when an opportunity came to act as a marshal if he went west into the territories. A few months earlier he learned that his family's plantation was taken over by the Yankee army then burned down to the foundation. He had nothing to go back home for, even his future wife was missing. That day he was out on a slow-moving barge on the way south to a place where he could buy a horse and go west. While technically under the purview of the marshal's program he would really be a well-paid bounty hunter. While on the job he first heard about this woman and her gang in the New Mexico Territories called the O'Shea gang.

By this time Alex was heading west, Fitz was feeling his age. Fifty-seven hard years of farming, riding, and killing made him gray long before his time. He also had a reputation both earned and fantasy, making him

a legend among the men he trained. At night he could still see Mary's face as he came into their home to kill her and their daughter. She somehow knew and was ready for it all to end. Their neighbors had turned on them, making life on the farm difficult for Mary. Fitz knew he couldn't cry for his wife seeing what he did and knowing it cost him his soul.

Harrison watched as the wagons rolled into town. He expected to see two maybe three wagons but not six. His family fortune was rolling down the street about to be split up among men that should be guarding what was his. Fitz got out of the saddle and shook Harrison's hand.

He said, "*the men are loyal and will do as you say, General.*"

Harrison smiled, looking down the wagon train at all the well-armed men. Many of them were in the Confederate Gray. He turned to Alex.

Harrison said, *“have each of your men take one bar of gold, and why don’t you take two, then just go.”*

Alex looked down the line of men. He could tell they were all soldiers and would die for this man while his own men would slit his throat at night for the change in his pocket. Alex took a gold bar for each of his men than two for himself. He gathered all his men in the one building untouched by the fire. The adobe chapel was still standing untouched by flames or looters. The men found bottles of moonshine inside, along with food and tobacco. Upon the altar, there was a special lighter built to light the first candle if all the flames went out. One man rolled a cigar, dipped it in the shine

and using the lighter triggered the explosives in the floor demolishing the building.

Harrison smiled, saying, “*it sounds like someone just fired his staff.*”

Alex took a horse with him to carry the extra gold and rode out long before the bomb terminated his contract with his men. He would go and find a town with a bank that wouldn't ask any questions about gold with the CSA logo. From there he would hire new men and go hunting for Wilhelmina. She belonged to him, and he was going to have his pound of flesh. He had enough wealth to rebuild his life and just maybe have a plantation just like the one back home. All over the south, the local governments were implementing new laws called Black Codes that were, in a sense, re-enslaving the black population. The laws enforcing employment for young negro men turning them into

apprentices for life or just a new way to call someone a slave. Then there was the idea of sharecropping. They could put newly freed men in debt for land and seed while making a profit for doing nothing. All this was happening as the Yankee government was turning their attention to the wars with the nations out west. All he had to do was wait and take back what he saw as his, but first, he wanted Willie.

Harrison ordered four of his men out to find a tailor. He had a plan, but he wanted to look the part. With his men and the gold, he would re-build the town, and as both mayor and landowner, he would build his own little kingdom. First, he would change his own look. He told Fitz he would become their sheriff and the others would either take jobs as deputies or take on jobs in town. Fitz made a list of the men capable of doing more than basic grunt work. Harrison ordered

the signs for the town to be replaced with a new name. Harris town sounded so much better than Hester's Spring. After all there wasn't even a spring just a poorly dug well. His last order before sending them out to work was to stop the search for the girl and the gold. He would go as respectable as anyone stealing a town could. Tim woke to the sound of an explosion. He did as he was told setting up the food and booze for the party, but after finding a good bottle of bourbon in the stash, he took it and found a place to enjoy it himself. The Whiskey saved his life.

Fitz stared at the tin badge. He started his life as a peacekeeper only to turn into the kind of man that could kill his daughter and the love of his life, now he was supposed to set all that aside and enforce the laws he broke so freely days earlier. Being a part of something bigger like the railroad or the start of a new

country changed something inside of him, making him easier to be manipulated. His place as a founding father was now that of a man about to spend his days arresting drunks and walking the streets of a town no one will ever care about.

Alex walked into a small bar on the outskirts of Santa Fe. It had been about three weeks since he left his men to die in a church and two weeks since he found a bank he could trust. His new task was to hire some men for a posse, one that would hunt down the O'Shea gang so he could have his prize. In the last week or so, he had heard rumors about a new city called Harris town coming out of the ruins of Hester's Spring. He figured these rumors would bring Willie out of hiding and just maybe send her on her way to the town. A man walked into the bar and over to Alex. He was tall and built like

a bear. Alex wondered what kind of horse could support such a man.

Willie hired three brothers in Dan Town for a quick smash and grab. Dan, Ted, and Gregg were known as the Ernest brothers because they were brothers. Dan was twenty-two while Ted and Gregg were twins both at nineteen. They pulled off a few jobs here and there but nothing on the scale of Willie and their new gang. Willie wanted to get away from her reputation and just be known as an outlaw. With a little gold spread around, she soon found Alex and where his bank was. She wanted to find and take care of him. If Alex were alive, she would always be that little girl standing there in shock as Alex raped a slave. That morning the boys were out seeing family while Willie followed Alex from his hotel to a bar. She watched as he handed out tin stars hiring men knowing they were there for her.

After some time, she slowly got out of her seat across from the bar and walked down the street. The bar, unlike many of the saloons out in the wild, wouldn't allow a woman inside. As she walked, she passed a bulletin board filled with advertisements. Among them were ads trying to pull people to the many growing towns out in the New Mexico and Oregon Territories. An ad for the town of Harris caught her eye. A roughly drawn map put the town right where Hester's Spring was. Someone moved back into her town and thought they could just take it over. She knew it had to be whoever had hired Alex and the other man. They seemed to stop looking for the gold. Alex, while acting as some sort of law, had a large amount of gold in that bank. The bank owner she bribed for information thought she was looking for a husband, and he told her everything about his deposit. Willie figured if Alex had

ten bars of gold, then the man back in her town must have more. On her way down the street, she passed a clean-shaven Ted. He smiled and followed her, knowing they were on for their first job together and more importantly, a little revenge.

Chapter Fourteen

Willie moved forward as Ted pushed up and into her. She pushed him down by his shoulders and slid down so she could keep control. Ted tried to move his arms, but Willie kept him down as she sped up going harder until they both finished together. Willie got off him and slid off to the side of the bed. She got up and walked over to a table with a wash basin and a pitcher of water washing her hands then her face. She looked back to Ted, who was watching her. Using a washcloth, she cleaned herself as best as she could. She slipped back into her shirt then slacks. Willie sat back down on the side of the bed and pushed Ted back onto his back.

She said, “*we need to get moving soon so you can either lay here or earn your place in the gang.*”

Ted smiled replied, “*what was that then?*”

Willie glowered at him. She took hold of him squeezing and pulling him to the left.

She said, “*whatever you think that was your wrong. Only I decided when something means anything, and right now all you are is a gun and a little fun..... don't get ahead of yourself.*”

Willie stepped out of the small shack, leaving Ted to dress. She knew he would be coming if not for her then for his twin brother Gregg or their older brother Dan. It had been about a month since she found Alex and where he kept his money. He spent his time interviewing men for his new posse. From a safe distance, she watched this strange interview process as Alex searched for the kind of men he can trust while breaking the law. Just to see what happened, Willie

sent Dan for an interview, but before he could even sit down, Alex told him to go.

Back in her own shack, Willie put on her disguise. An oversized shirt with padding rounding out her figure while hiding her chest. She tied her hair in a ponytail, then tucked it into her hat while applying a fake beard. Using the tips and tricks taught to her from Tiny and Jammie, she would seem like any other lost drunk in a town that was full of failure. Every time she applied her costume, she would think about her friends and how much she lost. She would conclude her thoughts knowing in her heart that friends and family were a distraction at best, a liability at worst. It was better to be alone than vulnerable. The final touch was a little stale beer poured on her shirt, followed by a dab or two of whiskey. She took a shot of whiskey and rinsed her mouth out, making sure to spit it out. She wanted to

smell drunk not to be drunk. She stumbled down the walkway in a subtle swaying motion hoping to look not too drunk. Inside the saloon, she gave the bartender a gold coin knowing he would let her stay while he slipped her shots of sarsaparilla rather than whiskey. This would be her last trip.

Alex walked in wearing what could best be described as his tan uniform with the tin star over his heart. He had a saddlebag over his shoulder and a rifle in his left hand. Over the next hour, seven men joined him. None of them were talking or drinking anything harder than the cheap beer brewed in the back. Willie was convinced they used rhubarb rather than hops to add bitterness, and it was bitter. After two hours went by, Alex laid out a map and pointed to a couple of spots. He was planning out their search, but something seemed wrong about his plan. She couldn't get close

enough to see where he pointed, but from what she could tell, they were going to places she had never gone before. Finding her wasn't their only goal.

Alex said, “if we use this opportunity just right, we can be both villain and hero. Best of all we can make enough to buy our own legacies.”

Alex and his men got up from the table, and for a second, his eyes met hers. She felt like there was a moment of recognition, but he turned and left. She could remember when she was younger long before she got to know the real him. She had a crush on him from afar. Whenever her family would have celebrations, his family would attend, and he would come in his dark suits and that roguish smile that hid a dark mind. She could see being with him even if she

didn't know what that meant. As soon as her mind wandered to the past, she remembered his anger and the young slave girl he raped and most likely murdered.

Willie watched Alex and his men ride west before dropping her act and running back for the small shacks they were staying in. She knew she would never need to come back here, so having an old drunk run in front of people like someone much younger didn't matter anymore. She made it to the shack the boys were sharing and told Dan and Ted to get the horses leaving Gregg to collect their stuff. Willie never unpacked, so she was always ready to go.

Back in her own shack, she took the hat off, followed by the shirt and padding. Her door opened, and Gregg came in.

She said, *“we don’t have time for this.”*

Gregg replied, *“it will take them at least twenty minutes to get the horses.”*

Willie dropped her slacks and took off the corset she was wearing to hide her breasts. She turned back to Gregg, seeing he was taking his pants off.

Willie said, *“you have fifteen minutes, and I better enjoy it.”*

Gregg came up to her and kissed her on the lips as he gently pushed her back to the bed. He slowly kissed her from her mouth down as he helped her onto the bed until she was down, and he was between her legs. Ted and Gregg were identical twins but, in many ways, very different. Gregg liked to think he was in control

while Ted liked to be dominated. After a few minutes, Willie could see they didn't have time for this.

She said, "*Gregg, we don't have the time, so just get up here and fuck me already.*"

Gregg looked up at her. He slowly slid up, and on top of her.

Willie asked, "*what are you waiting for?*"

Gregg forced his way in and soon was riding her hard. Willie wasn't a fan of being on the bottom, but she knew Gregg did his best work on top. She fought the urge to moan.

Twenty-five minutes later, Ted and Dan were back with the horses. They finished packing what little they carried onto them and rode west in the direction Alex and his posse went. There was this unspoken thing

between Willie and the brothers, both of whom knew they were sharing her while both knew she was the one in control. For his part, Dan just stayed out of it. He was ruggedly handsome with a girl in almost every town. He also understood that what she was doing was more about control than sex. It hadn't been that long since a man tried to use sex to control her while he set up her friends to be killed by an ungrateful town, but Willie wasn't much for reflection letting the past stay the past. None of the brothers knew about this Marshal they were following and his past with Willie or the young girl she was.

They rode until nightfall. There was a new moon with an extra dark sky full of stars. They rode around until they found a water source for the horses setting up camp for the night. Dan dug a hole for the fire so the flames wouldn't be visible in the dark. That night as

with most nights while out on the move they took turns watching while the others slept. Both brothers kept away from Willie. Dan watched the sunset while watching the horses and the other sleep. Off in the distance, he could see a column of smoke from what must have been a chimney. The west was slowly being settled.

Two miles away. Alex pushed his way into her as she tried not to scream. In the next room, she could hear her mother crying and a strange thumping sound from her brother's room. Three hours earlier, eight men rode onto their farm. Her Father told her mother and younger brother to get into the house. Samuel was nine, and she was thirteen. She was named Alice for the maternal grandmother she had never met. Alice looked out to see the riders dismount and ignore her father as they helped themselves to the water trough

and the hay. Her mother grabbed the Kentucky Long rifle from the fireplace mantel and went to the door. She looked out just in time to see her father get in the way of the man in the tan suit. Her mother came out and fired into the air. The man in the tan suit saw her looking out the window and smiled.

Alice backed away from the window then ran into the room she shared with her brother and under the bed where he was also hiding. Under the bed, they heard a gunshot, and their mother scream. The door opened, and they could hear footsteps and their mother pleading.

A man said, “take her out back and let the boys have their fun. Anyone that wants the boy can take him in the parent’s room, but the girl is mine.”

At first, there was nothing. Alice could smell fire, and she thought about her father saying how they needed to save the wood. Samuel peed, and the smell was almost suffocating. Off in the distance, she could hear her mother crying out. The door opened, and a man walked in. He stepped up by the bed, then turned as if he was going to leave. The man lifted the bed off the floor and tossed it aside. Samuel backed away from the man slipping in his own urine. The man struck him in the face. He picked Samuel up and carried him away. Alice didn't realize she had started to strike him until he pushed her away. The door closed, and Alice found herself alone. For what felt like a long time, she sat there alone just listening to her mother then her brother cry.

Alex walked into the room they had the girl in. Her mother had called her Alice, but he didn't care what her name was. They were just staying for the night, and when they were done, none of the homesteaders would be left alive. They killed the father straight away, but he left the boy and the mother so his men could have some fun. Alice was curled in a ball up against the tossed bed. Alex lightly took her by the hand and helped her up. He told her if she submitted to his desires, her family would live. Alice didn't know what he meant, so she said she would do anything if it meant they could live. Alex told her to undress. She didn't understand, but he was the adult, so she did as she was told.

The next day Willie and the others came up on a homestead. A dead horse lay in a makeshift corral. Near a well, they found the body of a man with a hole

in his head. Behind the house, they found the bodies of a woman and a young boy. Both were naked and had been stabbed then beaten to death. From what they could tell the boy hadn't died from the initial beating. He had climbed into the arms of the mother and died there. They searched the house but found nothing until they found a young girl hiding behind a cupboard. She was battered and bruised with what looked like two gunshot wounds in her stomach. Alice was blue and cold. She saw Dan and immediately swung wildly with her left arm while covering her genitals with her right. Dan saw the blood on the front of her dress and running down her legs.

Dan backed away as Willie stepped forward. Alice put her hand out for Willie as she tried to help her. The wounds in the front were bad, but the exit wounds were beyond words. Dan said he believed they had

shot the girl in both kidneys and he didn't know how she was still alive.

Alice said, *“I had to live so I could tell you what I know. That man wants to rape and murder every homestead he finds blaming the O’Shea gang. He wants to be the hero stopping the monsters. I hope you are her and you can stop him.”*

Alice tried to move, but her legs were numb, and her hands were cold.

She asked, *“where’s my mommy and daddy.”*

Willie pulled her close trying to comfort this girl. Alice died about half an hour later. The four of them took the time to bury the bodies then they turned away from their path, knowing they needed help.

A three-day ride found them approaching the town of Knuckle Smash. On the last day, Willie felt something watching them. They were in Hopi territory without permission. The town had a symbiotic relationship with the Hopi with the understanding that if anything went wrong both the Hopi and the nearby Cherokee would erase the town. Some people in town admired what they called the people while others just respected out of fear. If either nation didn't trust them, then no one would ever find their bodies. Fear was a valuable tool.

Two miles out of town, they found four men on horseback. All four were from the Hopi with one being an elder with a long braid but wearing a white man's suit. He said he was the local Chief, and we had met his daughter, who was married to Jasper's brother

Apple. He told them not to go into town. A warrant was issued for their capture dead or alive.

The Chief said, *“the one called Half, as well as Jasper and two women, went out looking for you. if you head toward Dan Town you could catch up with them, but young miss you can’t go into town, or they will shoot you on sight.”*

The Chief gave them ammunition and some food for the trip.

Before they left the Chief said, *“tell Jasper to go home. He has a family that needs him, and he will listen to you. Your war is not his.”*

On the ride out, Willie tried to think about a comeback. How Jasper’s war was ongoing and wouldn’t end until he and his family could live without fear, but she knew what she wanted wouldn’t do any of that. She knew

she had to tell him the entire truth and let him know who she was and where she came from, and maybe then he would go home to his family. As they rode on, she thought about what she was doing. Why did she want to do this? Was it for her reputation or revenge? How many of her friends would she sacrifice to make a name for herself? The night started to fall, in the distance, they could see smoke from a fire.

Half sat watching into the distance as Janet and her daughter Anna cooked some food over the open fire. Jasper saw to the horses. He was the first to see Willie and the others. He wore his infamous smile only faded a bit with the look on Willie's face. He could tell she wasn't happy to see them. Willie got down off her horse and embraced Jasper. He was more like a father than her actual father ever was and seeing him here

even if she was sending him home felt like a true family reunion.

Willie said, *“I’m glad to see you....., now go home.”*

Jasper replied, *“no. This is my fight too.”*

Willie backed away.

She said, *“no, this is all about me and the girl I was before coming here..... I need to tell you who he is and why he wants me.”*

Back in their camp, Willie met with Janet and Anna introducing the brothers to everyone. Half walked over to her with his arms crossed, staring her down.

Willie said, *“Abraham.”*

Half raised his left eyebrow.

He said, *“Wilhelmina.”*

They stared at each other for a second, then smiled and came together in an embrace. Anna mouthed the name Abraham to her mother, who just shook her head. Jasper said how Willie needed to tell them something and how she felt it would turn them back home. The group went around the fire. Willie stood near the flames, thinking about the last time she was home, and her last memory of her mother as their neighbors threw her into their burning home.

She said, “I was born in Alabama. My family owns a plantation where I was raised and hid away from the rest of the world. I didn’t see what was happening around me. I was kept away from my family’s slaves..... My father and his father were cotton farmers. Like his father before him, he was afraid of a slave revolt, so he kept them away from the house hiring Irish girls right off the boat to work as

servants in the house. In my early years, daddy never said the word slave. He also never talked about what he and my older brother did at night. I would later find out about all the half-brothers and sisters I had among the slaves.”

Willie sat down with her head down staring into the fire.

Willie went on, “Daddy was grooming my brother to take over the plantation. A part of that was setting me up with a marriage. I was to marry the boy next door. His name was Alex Goodwin. I had a crush on him from an early age and the many balls my family threw. He was the one to show me the slaves, and he was the one to show me how my people didn’t see the slaves as human. Alex was told from our first courting I belonged to him. My life was built on the turmoil and backs of men, women,

and children, many of whom were my kin. Alex was supposed to have died in the war, but that man leading that posse is Alex, and he wants what he thinks is his.....me. I need to finish him, but I can't do that while worrying about any of you..... you have to go."

Anna broke the silence with a question.

She asked, "what happened to all your brothers and sisters?"

Willie told her about the end of the war. How she found her father dead with all his other children. They were killed by their enraged neighbors looking for someone to blame for the war.

Willie said, "I worked my way home trying to hide who I was. There I saw the house in flames. A group of my neighbors had my

mother. They had beaten her until she was almost unrecognizable then they tossed her into the burning house. I turned and ran, never looking back.”

Jasper said, “I already knew about your past. Not all of it but enough to know you came from the south and money which most likely meant slaves. I owe you my family and I owe you nothing.”

Janet said, “that’s all good, and everything, but I’m not here for you. I want the man that was behind the death of my son and husband. I want to find him and burn his world to ash.”

Half sat silently staring into the fire.

He eventually said, *“I’m not Cherokee, I’m not white or Jewish, but somehow I’m all of that. I have a brother back in Long Island who is a Rabbi. He looked white, so he was able to fit in as one of them. I only found a place where I fit when I found Tiny, Guy, Bart, and you. I will be by your side until the day I can’t stand..... family is forever.”*

Alex and his men rode into Dan town with the body of a man tied face down in the saddle. Alex told the local law this man was a member of the O’Shea gang, and there should be a reward for his capture. The man was just a drifter working his way from ranch to ranch until he came across Alex. A marshal told him they had to have proof he was in the gang. The two marshals came eye to eye and for a second Alex thought he knew this man he just didn’t know where he saw him before.

Alex smiled and said how it didn't matter; there were plenty of chances to take the gang down. The marshal just nodded. Unlike Alex, the marshal recognized him and knew what he was about. The marshal sat down in the one building that served as everything in Dan town. He pulled out a small photo of a family taken around the beginning of the civil war. He carried it into the war and into the Yankee prison camp. It was almost all he had left from his family.