



Marshal Law

In his town you play by his rules

WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
ON OCTOBER 17th 2015



Praise for Novel-in-a-Day

“This was a GREAT exercise before NaNoWriMo! I most certainly want to participate with NIAD next year.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed being a part of this first NIAD... it was a fabulous experience.”

“It was a great deal of fun...I've never written and edited fiction at that kind of frenzied pace, but it was exhilarating.”

“This really was a fun project that I hope we can do again.”

“I had fun doing it, and I gather that the rest of the authors did, too.”

“More than reading the book I enjoyed the experience... Hope this becomes a tradition.”

“It was liberating to be given a précis and have to sit down and get on with the nuts and bolts of writing for a day, knowing that if I didn't get it done I'd be letting everyone else down. Liberating, because I have a tendency to fear the blank page and spend all my time arsing around with plans and notes and not getting on with the important part - the writing.”

“A big thanks from me... I thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Yes, tremendous fun... Seriously pleasant way to spend a morning. We should do it again.”

“This was wonderful fun. Wish I could do this again... This has been a good kick in the behind for NaNoWriMo.”

“It has been fun writing to a deadline and, well, actually just having to finish something. Because of this, I'm actually thinking that NaNo might be possible this year. So truly, thank you!”

“It's been brilliant, can we do it again?”

“I had fun... It got me thinking again about a true-crime piece that I've had in mind for years.”

“I was impressed by how smooth you made the whole experience for us. At least I felt like I had the information I needed, I knew the deadline, and the rest was up to me.” “The final product (now I've finished it) is really a very good read!”

“This was, in sum, great.”

“This has been a lot of fun (I'm new this year), I hope it becomes a tradition!”

“I loved the whole exercise. It was great fun, and I enjoyed the challenge of trying to write stuff in such a way that it wouldn't clash with other chapters whose plotlines I didn't know... Thank you for a brilliant Novel In A Day experience.”

“This was as last year much fun... awesome.”

“I had so much fun writing AND reading this.”

“I have to admire the *structure*... with a 'normal' plot but somehow none of the writers could tell where in the plot arc they might be. I don't think even the ones writing the first or last chapters could have known that they were. Very clever!”

“The worrying thing -- a bit worrying unless you're running an MFA course in creative writing -- is that it all seems to work as a book. I enjoyed it. Doing it, and reading it.”

“I'm glad I had the chance to contribute... I had a great time.”

“This is my first time participating in such an expedition and I had a lot of fun doing it! I hope to participate next year if we all do it again!”

“BTW, when I got the assignment I could see how I could POSSIBLY write 1500 words for such a little action piece. So why is the final count 3900 words?”

“It's amazing how [it's crafted] allowing for continuity while making room for creativity.”

“What a funny, enjoyable and fruitful experience this has been.”

“Would love to see this continue as a yearly thing”

“I had a great time doing this! I really loved the info pack. It had just enough information to give you a framework but left enough room so you get creative.”

“A thousand thank yous for running this magnificent project for us again! It's a blast, and wonderful mental exercise... How can you come up with a book with a coherent plot line that even the people writing it have no idea that they are writing the beginning or a climax or even the end??? It baffles me.”

“Another extremely good writing experience! The info package was just right for me, my questions were more formal than anything, and I had a great time going through all the background info. It was a really impressive effort and made my task easier than I thought... I'm definitely hooked to this particular writing exercise/party/crazy fun.”

“What the heck?!?! I was writing the last chapter and I didn't even realise?? I thought I was situated at the first 1/4 or 1/3 of the book! That's amazing.”

“I did love writing for this edition... I had a lot of fun.”

“Is there life after NIAD?”

“It was lots of fun for the participants, and I really enjoyed it (again).”

“It's very interesting to watch how different authors approach the same situation, and get an insight about what those briefs really said.”

“Brilliant fun, awesome day. Would buy from again A+++”

“Wonderful time! Really did enjoy the process & loved seeing the insides of how scrivener can be so productive for a writer... This project showed how when the skeleton is in place, the actual writing part can be confined to a day for a chapter. I know, some were much longer than others, but seeing this in action made novel writing attainable - at least in my estimation.”

“Loved every minute. Thanks for letting me join in!”

“I had a ball. Loved it.”

“This has been a grand experience. I don't know what was more fun: the writing of my section, or the reading of the finished product... Pleased to have been a part of it.”

“This event is pure genius! Pulling something like this off, worldwide? Brilliant. So very impressed by the time and work involved preparing and all the after care. Well done!!!”

“I enjoyed it immensely once again.”

“Wow, it was an amazing experience again.”

“Thanks for making this happen! As always, a reason to wake up at Oh Seven Hundred on a Saturday and stew miserably over not-enough-coffee until I finally feel too guilty over how late I am. The briefing was

well done and the scenes were a lot of fun to write.”

“Thanks for the opportunity mate, had a blast.”

“I think next year I'm using my vacation days for this event.”

“Thank you for doing this and generally so nice. I had a blast, and I hope to be coming back next year!”

“Thank you! It has been invaluable to me in testing my understanding of story craft.”

“Thanks for another interesting challenge for me, and for bringing many people together in such a good way.”

“It is fascinating to see another person's take on your scene, that was a good idea.”

“Loved it. A genius idea and a very clever way to pull it off worldwide.”

“This was a blast!!!”

“Yeah!! It was fun.”

“It was fun! I can't wait to read all the chapters and briefs!”

“Once again, I really enjoyed it.”

“I haven't written anything for a long, long time, so this was a great way to get back into it. Definitely count me in for next year... I'm so glad I said yes.”

“Quite a challenge. Exhausting and exhilarating.”

“I had a blast, and I hope to be coming back next year!”

“I had a blast as always! I like the fact that for one day, I have absolutely nothing to do except work on a chapter.”

“By the way, that was a stack of fun. I really enjoyed it... Thanks for letting me be part of this.”

Praise for “The Dark”

“The final product (now I've finished it) is really a very good read!”

“I've enjoyed every page of it.”

“I’m impressed with the quality and intensity of each and every chapter.”

“I really enjoyed reading The Dark... I like our little book, the many faces of Jane Scott were immensely enjoyable.”

“Bravo!”

“It’s damn brilliant when you think about the info we each had and how its slotted together.”

Praise for “Lunar520”

“It really is brilliant!”

“A very good read.”

“It's fun to read the whole thing and see how it came out, I'm enjoying it a lot!”

“Just finished reading Lunar520 and had a rollicking good time.”

“I can't remember the last time I waited for the publication of a book with such anticipation.”

Praise for “Made Man”

“It is a fun read.”

“In awe of what was achieved in a day... Congratulations to, and admiration for, everyone involved.”

“Astonishing!!”

“One thing sticks out for me with the book: The chapters are really blending together nicely from end to beginning.”

“It’s really well done, I think this year the crossover from chapter to chapter was really quite amazing.”

“I’ve just finished reading the amalgamated masterpiece, and it's good to see the plot arc as a whole -- not just a surprise ending, for me, but a surprise nearly-everything-else, too. Very enjoyable.”

“Just downloaded Made Man and opened in my ebook reader. I may be

gone a while...”

Praise for “Section7”

“I’m impressed... very impressed. Very well done everyone.”

“I love it.”

“Two wonderful books from many talented writers worldwide! Wow!”

“I don't know what was more fun: the writing of my section, or the reading of the finished product... Fabulous work by all the authors!”

“The continuity in terms of both style and story is remarkable.”

“I’m savouring it!”

“I have nothing but praise for everybody involved -- both versions of the novel hung together and were great fun to read (Makes me triply sorry that life wouldn't let me play this year).”

Marshal Law

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



MARSHAL LAW

Originally published: 2015

Copyright © 2015 Various Authors
Alyssa Judson, Julia Pierce, Rebecca Schuster
Hyla Maddalena, Adela Torres, Michael Roberts
Chris Lozac'h, Jaysen O'Dell, Sue Cowling
Linda Weeks, B. Morris Allen, Keith Blount
Lazey Winde, Heather Lovelace-Gilpin, Tim Edwards-Hart
Mike Devitt, Charlie Novak, S.R. Martin, J.A. Bell
J.D. Salt, B. Michelle Morris, Claire Woodier
Story by: Tim Rogers

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication are
fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental, Pardner.*

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.
You are free to share (to copy, distribute and transmit the work)
under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified
by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that
they endorse you or your use of the work).

Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this
work.

For more details, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Original cover photograph by Tim Rogers

www.novelinaday.com

Introduction

In November of every year, writers and would-be writers from all over the planet sign up for National Novel Writing Month, a now-famous event among graphophiles in which participants try to write a 50,000-word novel in a mere 30 days. The intention is not the production of high quality prose, but rather the provision of an artificial deadline and target that forces the writer to get something written every day - leaden words that can always be turned into gold later.

In 2011, a man named Tim Rogers decided that a 30-day deadline just wasn't pressure enough. An entire month! A gerbil could go from carefree singleton to harassed mother-of-six in that sort of time (I looked it up). No, Mr Rogers had a grander - or perhaps a smaller - vision: what if you could write a whole novel in the time it took for the Earth to spin on its axis but once? And so, gathering around him a group of like-minded (if not right-minded) writers and Scrivener users from the Literature & Latte forums, Novel-in-a-Day was born.

The novel you have in your hands is the result of Novel-in-a-Day's fifth anniversary. It was written over twenty-four hours by twenty-two different authors: twenty-two days of work written over a single day, 17th October 2015. The story was plotted by Tim and a chapter brief was given to each of the authors at the start of the day, without any of them having any knowledge of the other chapter briefs or the wider plot.

What ends can be expected from such an endeavour? Well, take twenty-two jigsaws, each showing a picture of the same castle but photographed from different angles. Then take one piece from each of those jigsaws and squish them together into a single, new picture of the castle. Something a bit like that, perhaps; something exactly like what you have in your hands. But also, a helluva lot of fun.

We hope you enjoy reading the novel as much as we enjoyed its manic production.

Keith Blount

October 17, 2015

Also by Novel-in-a-Day:

The Dark
Lunar520
Made Man
Section7

www.novelinaday.com

Marshal Law

chapter one

Alyssa Judson

“IT’S NOT GOING TO be like it was before, Michael,” William told him as he moved their luggage to the next stagecoach. “John’s gotten it together now, he’s real responsible. No more drinkin’ and gamblin’.”

As long as the trip was, Michael hoped his younger brother was right. Though it could be accomplished in a day, pushing horses hard and praying they wouldn’t spook from some dratted roadrunner clogging up the scenery, ultimately, the trip to Flintwood from Tucson was easier broken apart – it was, after all, nearly 200 miles. And it all led to too much time to think.

That was how it worked with the Lacey brothers — John, the eldest, dove right in, without checking to see whether the water was riddled with rocks and debris. William was the youngest, and the optimist. If he couldn’t find a silver lining in something, Michael would predict Christ’s second coming was right around the corner, accompanied by plenty of fire and brimstone.

Michael, himself... it was his job to worry. With the trouble John often got himself into, it was mostly Michael that covered the tracks, just so William would keep seeing him in

that light. William kept John on a pedestal, and Michael didn't like to see William disappointed.

This was probably why he'd allowed the youngest Lacey boy to talk him into agreeing to this crazy trip. John had left them behind long ago, with some wild hair and notion about copper and opportunity and riches. His newest scheme, and it was always just some scheme. That's what Michael had thought, anyway, until he'd seen that telegram William had been waving around in his hand.

But things changed, Michael told himself as they made the final leg of the journey, bumping and jostling along the desert, between patches of dried up brush that still clung to the vaguest colour of green.

William wasn't as naïve as Michael tried to believe, however. As he watched the shadows of the rocky outcroppings and mountains keeping time, he was grateful John had finally, at last, come through for him. The two younger brothers had nothing, really, to speak of in Tucson. William was aching for adventure, to get his hands dirty, anything that wouldn't prescribe him to a life of sensibility.

The stillness of the coach was a shock – the lack of rocking motion was almost debilitating after how long they'd been staring at nothing but dust and each other.

“Welcome to Flintwood, gents,” said the driver, propping open the door before setting about tending to the horses.

William took in the sight of him, his eyebrows almost disappearing into his sandy brown hair. The driver was covered in the dry desert — more orange than his skin, made all the more apparent by the triangle of clean chin the handkerchief had granted him.

“Well?” Michael said gruffly, motioning at William.

But William stayed in the coach, taking in the small town.

It was small to begin with, but there were a few buildings that were haphazardly shuttered and only partly built, and it wasn't half as busy as he'd anticipated. "Where're all the people?" he inquired, his hair dropping into his eyes.

"They scattered the minute they saw your sorry face," Michael snapped, frowning at William's distress. He wouldn't say it, of course, but that's what it was. Flintwood wasn't what he expected, and that bitter sense of shock was having its way with him.

William dropped out of the coach, lips twisted to the side in obvious frustration, so Michael bit his tongue as they unloaded their trunks onto the ground outside the stables. The silence stretched, and Michael could see the irritation building in the set of William's jaw.

"Look, Will—" Michael started, already noting the marked defiance in William's eyes that was so telling in the Lacey clan, he might as well have admitted defeat right then.

But the saddled silhouette interrupted them. "You're not from here, are ya?" he said, his voice smooth as the horse nickered, eager to be moving now that she was out of the stables.

"Can't really say anyone's 'from' Flintwood, can you?" Michael picked up his hat, smoothing the brim before pulling it low enough so that he could make out the other man. The first thing that caught his eye was the holster that was designed into the saddle perfectly so a spencer repeating rifle was tucked snugly under his leg. And shining on his chest was a six-pointed star. "Sir," Michael added after a moment.

A small smirk lifted the right side of the Marshal's moustache, and Michael got the gut feeling the two men would get along, if they managed to keep their guns holstered.

"What brings you?" he asked, one hand moving from the

reins to gently pat the mare's neck, anxious as she was.

"You prob'ly know him," William said, stepping up, cocking a hand over his eyes to see. "Our brother, John Lacey?"

"Yeh, I know him. T'ain't hard to." He coughed lightly, Michael noted, as of covering.

"I'm Will Lacey, and this's my other brother, Michael."

"Ben Wright, local Town Marshal, and if you're lookin' fer John, you'll prob'ly find him at the Red Boot." He prompted his horse into motion, waving them to follow. "I'm headed that way, it's not far."

"Nothing would be," Michael muttered, waving William off of the rest of their things. "It ain't that much, Will — if'n they want clothes, let 'em have 'em. Lord knows if they're that desperate, they need 'em more'n us."

William hurriedly tucked a few things in his pockets before hurrying after his brother and the rather sizeable mare. "Nice of him."

"Mm." It was all Michael replied with.

"What? You don't like him?"

Michael tipped his head. "Don't know too much to judge, but he sure don't like our brother."

"Why, do you reckon?"

"Not sure." They followed Ben around the corner onto Fremont, which, Michael saw, must have been the main thoroughfare. "Looks like we ought'a find out soon enough."

William looked relieved – ever so slightly, Michael thought with a shake of his head. "People," the youngest Lacey said. And he perked when, through the dust and ten-gallon hats, he saw a parasol. It would have been difficult to miss, though – it was the only thing that was so colourful, a bright daisy-yellow. Below it, in a matching hat and dress, was a lady.

The woman was simply lovely, with sapphire eyes that glinted in the sun, visible even from their distance. Her hair was dark brown, with a shimmer of red to it. But most noticeably of all, she was soft, from the curve of her lips to the arch of her brow. And, Michael noted, she looked amused, somehow.

Michael gave his brother a glance, chuckling under his breath at the look of wonder on his face. “Stop that, boy. She’s not the type-a woman to give you just one night for some coin.”

William frowned, the enchantment broken as he turned to look at Michael, crossing his arms. “What, you don’t see me married?”

“Yeh, I do. But not to the likes of her.” Michael shook his head as William’s face slowly turned tomato crimson under his tan, turning to follow the Marshal into the Saloon.

The light was dusty, to say the least, the air thick with dust and smoke. And there, clinging to the side of the green felt table was John Lacey – worse for the wear, based on the haggard look of exhaustion on his face, his chin unshaved and scraggly, and the haze of alcohol in his grey-blue eyes. Michael’s amusement faded at the sight of whiskey at his elbow, and just like that, he knew that absolutely nothing had changed about his elder brother.

The Marshal looked over to William as he joined Michael, and nodded at the looks of disappointment.

“How long’s he been like this?” Michael asked. He could feel William trying to find a distraction, a way to mentally disappear from the situation they had so eagerly walked into.

“Since the mine dried up,” Ben said with a sigh of his own. “About a fortnight, I reckon.”

The Lacey boys looked to Ben, and the air was suddenly

charged with the anger they'd tried not to admit to.

"Dried up?" William asked, his voice on edge, up an octave and desperate.

Ben nodded. "I was wonderin' why you was here. He didn't tell ya?" He sighed again, rubbing out an itch beneath his stubble. "We had a bit of a bad patch about a month ago. Seemed to just be a patch, but we ain't pulled nothin' out of the ground for more'n two weeks now."

"Mike!" William yelled, but it was too late – the middle Lacey had darted through the tables to sock John solidly on the jaw. William ran a hand across the back of his neck, watching as the two brothers fought, until, like a ray of sunlight, in walked the lady they'd seen on the street. Weighing his options, William finally shrugged before joining Michael in shoving John onto the poker table and adding his own fists to the fight.

"Miss Donley," Ben greeted with a tip of his hat.

Catherine Donley approached him tentatively, eyebrows high over those sea-blue eyes. "I take it John offended someone else?" Perching her delicate laced gloves on a table beside her folded parasol, she watched the scuffle.

"Aye. His brothers."

"John Lacey has brothers?" she asked, her curiosity piqued. "Well." She paused a moment. "I take it they were unaware of the fact that nothing has changed?"

Ben chuckled. "That'd be my guess." Placing his hat next to her things, he waded through the chairs and tables, taking in a breath and filling his full 6'1" height. Plucking off the youngest boy, who was now sporting a bloody nose, the Marshal shoved him toward the doors. "Laceys, you need to take this outside."

"S hot out there," was all John said, his words slurring as

he rolled off the table and onto the floor, a cut on his cheek already swelling.

“Hot in here,” Ben said calmly, fixing Michael with an ice-cold glare.

“I got no problem with that,” Michael replied. Of the three, he looked the best, only his hands a bit swollen and bloody, though, Ben noted, probably not from his own blood. “I can challenge him to a proper duel, then.” He reached for the revolver at his hip, spinning the chambers to see that they were loaded.

Raising his eyebrows as he helped up John, Ben cast a glance back to Catherine, who now, beyond the look of amusement, looked worried. “I don’t think that’s necessary, Michael.”

“You can stay out of it, then, can’t ya?” Michael tossed over his shoulder as he left the saloon.

Ben paused, taking John by his lapels. “John Lacey, you’d best sober up fast if’n you’re planning on not bein’ killed by your brother.”

Something must have clicked, because John looked up at him, a roguish, sideways grin crossing his lips. “Michael’s not a great shot.” There was no slur. “Don’t worry, Mr. Marshal Deputy, I’ve got a plan,” he said calmly, brushing off some of the dust, his eyes following Catherine as she moved to the door as well, watching the two men.

“You’re drunk.”

“Only a little.” Tossing a wink to the lady, he patted Ben on the shoulder, shrugging out of his grip. “I’ve bested him when I’m worse,” he commented calmly as he headed out the door.

Ben closed his eyes. John had caused him plenty of trouble since he’d rolled into town – nothing out of the ordinary, really, but he would have liked to go a week without having to

clean up his mess. Grabbing up his hat, he headed out the door after, Catherine right behind him, her arms crossed, worrying at her bottom lip.

The brothers had already continued their brawl, William grappling with John, the elder tossing William off of him with ease.

“Can I please explain?” John requested as Michael came in for another blow.

“That you’re at a dead end? Another one?” Michael asked as John fell in a heap. He kicked his brother’s boot, raising his brow. “Get up, and we can end this.”

“You want to end it?” John asked, the amusement, the act, dropping as he stared up at Michael.

Michael shook his head. “You don’t get it, do you? How much trouble you manage to cause? And now you’ve dragged us into it.” He motioned to John with his gun. “I’m done with this. Get up.”

Catherine clung to the wooden pillar that held up the porch of the saloon, and he reached out to Ben, brushing the shoulder of his duster with her fingertips. “Ben, please, do something.”

“He seems pretty set, Miss Donley. Not sure there’s anything I can do.” Ben told her over his shoulder, avoiding her eyes.

But he could clearly see the frustration in the set of her jaw. “Stop him. Don’t just stand around, watchin’. Stop him.”

William watched his brothers, swiping at his nose with his sleeve. “We can come up with another plan, Michael – it’s not so bad.”

“It’s not so bad?” Michael turned to William, disbelief in his every movement. “It’s not so bad that you and I picked up everythin’ to follow him out here, only to find out he’s broke.

Dead broke because he staked a claim that didn't pay out?"

"That's not fair!" John said, standing, he pushed at Michael's shoulder. "I took a chance out here, just like every one of these folks. I'm no different than any of them – hell, I'm no different than you!"

Michael shoved John right back. "Draw your gun, John."

"Micha-" William started.

"I said, to John: draw your gorram gun."

Michael's words rang in the street, a certain grimness cooling the dry desert air. It seemed that those who were witnessing the scene could sense the tension, and it came with the knowledge that, whatever words were spoken next would hold the fate of at least one man.

But John, resigned, drew his gun, facing Michael, the last few wisps of alcohol seeming to fade as the reality of his mortality stared right back at him.

"John, put your gun away." Seeming to come out of a haze, all eyes moved to the lady in the yellow dress, who had stepped out into the street, toward the set of men, determination in her eyes.

"Cat, you shouldn't be out-" John started, but she shook her head at him, glaring.

"You, all three of you, are being ridiculous." She crossed her arms as she stepped between them, chin raised, almost as if to ensure she wouldn't see the guns. "John didn't ask you here to deceive you. And if you think that, then you are more of a fool than he is."

Michael had watched her progression carefully, but at those words, his eyes dropped.

"You see my point. Good." Catherine looked back at John. Looking as if she were about to say more, she merely shook her head and moved back to the saloon.

Ben chuckled, following her. “Well done, Catherine.”

Snapping her head to fix him with a look of disdain, Catherine pulled on her gloves smoothly. “Well done.” She propped her parasol before her, setting her shoulders as she did so. “You have some nerve.”

Ben backed a step, surprised. “Catherine, I-”

“You were ready to let John die, without a care in the world, when I spoke maybe something like ten words to halt that progression?” Catherine snapped open her parasol, moving past him but stopping at his shoulder. “I’m disappointed, Ben. I had thought better of you.”

The Lacey brothers had made their way back to the stables, and the things they’d left behind. Though they’d been silent the short way, it was John that first broke the tension.

“Rather an impressive greeting, Michael.” John rubbed his jaw, raising an eyebrow to him. “Are you boxing in the underground, then?”

Michael couldn’t help a laugh. “It’s always been a hit-able jaw, John. You just happened to finally give me a good reason to hit it.”

The frustration having finally dissipated, William finally chipped in. “What happened, John? It all sounded grand when we got your telegram.”

John coughed slightly, brushing down his moustache with his fingers nervously. “Ah, well. It was, then.” Tipping his head side to side, he considered. “Or I thought so. It didn’t hit bottom until after I’d sent it. Got the notice you were coming – it was too late by then.” He motioned to the back side of the building. “I’ve got my cart ‘round here.”

After pulling it around, the single horse snuffling at the youngest Lacey’s clothes for a treat, they loaded their things

on. “What’s the plan, then, John?” Michael asked, obviously annoyed that he had to ask.

“Not sure. Kind of depends on whether or not you’re stayin’.” Adjusting the harness, he avoided looking at his brothers. John didn’t like depending on others, but he missed the company, the camaraderie that came with having his brothers around. And they always helped him think.

None of which he’d openly admit, of course.

Michael looked at William, who was looking right back at him. Beneath the dried blood and dust that covered his clean-shaven face, he had a marked hopeful look. Michael wouldn’t have a say, then. Not really.

“Of course we’re stayin’. Came all this way, didn’t we?”

“Really?” William asked, perking up.

Michael laughed, smacking his hat on his knee to lift some of the dust. “Course. Not like we gave up much. Plus,” he motioned to John, “he got himself into a bit of a pickle. Brothers stick together.”

John nodded, though the smile was one of relief. “Hop on, then. I’ll take ya to the house.”

Their chest of clothes loaded into the rickety mine cart, the three settled in and turned east, once more on the bumpy trail to a new place called home.

chapter two

Julia Pierce

THE CART AND ITS cargo of the three Lacey brothers rumbled eastwards along the parched track towards the eldest — John's — house, its single horse labouring in the heat of the day. Suddenly, a large jackrabbit broke cover, diving across their route into the bushes and startling the gelding, which lurched sideways, causing the cart's wheel to run against a rock at the side of the road. A sickening crunch suggested some sort of damage had occurred. The younger brothers jumped down while John struggled to regain control of the horse, which snorted and whinnied in dismay.

“Dammit, did you see the size of that thing? Steady, steady... nothin’ to fret for... okay... William — how’s she lookin’?”

“S’okay.. Nothin’ showin’; you’ll be needing to get under to look on the braces though, I reckon,” his youngest brother replied, as middle sibling Michael grabbed the harness, then ran his hands down the horse’s legs. “This ‘un’s a good’un, alright. Didn’t shy too far ’spite that buck being the size of a dog, and ain’t hurt itself. Ain’t gonna win any beauty contests but he’ll do you for a few more years. Not like this shackly cart, anyways.”

“Since when did you know anythin’ bout horses?” asked William. “Thought you came to the city with me to keep away from all that?”

“Naw. I was just looking’ for somethin’ a bit more... I dunno. Busy, I guess. Thought life might be easier n’all but I’ll take horses an’ life out here any day rather than haulin’ an’ buildin’ all day like I did in Tucson. I’ll give you that in town there’s gotta be a better way to get about than on the back of some big stupid animal, but out here I guess they’re as good as you’re gonna get.” He stroked the gelding’s nose.

“So, what’s doing with this new house o’ yours?” Michael asked John.

“Built it with some little feller. Came from the old place, England, followin’ the mines. But when the copper dried up he moved on. Going’ back east t’scare up some dollars, I guess. We was havin’ a fine time bach’n it. But all that corn juice an’ cards — I guess it’s why I ain’t yet found no lady to settle in it.” He shrugged and smiled thinly.

“You don’t got no-one yet?” William asked.

“Naw, in Flintwood them girls’ all miner’s whores, n’ most of them’s in about as good a shape as the mine is. Well...” He paused. “There’s one girl - well, she’s more of a lady. Catherine, Catherine Donley, old Marshal John’s daughter. But she won’t look twice at me, and it’s not for lack of askin’. Ain’t got nothin’ to offer, I guess... ‘Cept a dirty place in the middle o’nowhere, I s’pose. Money’s all gone now, and ain’t gonna be no more, ‘less I can start with breedin’ some stock or somethin’.” He testily flicked away a fly, eyes down.

“S’no different in Tucson,” William reassured him. “Ain’t no good work goin’, ‘less you can pay to set you’s self up. Way to do it is to start a store. That’s where the money is. ‘An no need to be messin’ with horses then... What I needs for it is

some capital, though.” He paused and kicked the dirt. “But that ain’t comin’ anytime soon - ‘less you got a big ole pot of gold under that porch o’ yours that didn’t get lost on the tables like the rest of what you had? Way I sees it, in total, none of us got much, an’ not through lack o’tryin’. Only proper money I ever had was dirty from helpin’ pass on some sawdust gold. Ain’t no real money to be gained by a proper livin’, that’s the truth.”

The younger brothers sat morosely beneath a scrubby tree, fanning themselves with their hats, while John crawled under the cart with some tools and set to work, pausing only to swear from time to time. Before long, he crawled free.

“Fixed it?” asked William.

“It’ll hold till we’re home — but better move the wagon; someone’s comin’ though, an’ fast. I can feel it in the ground...”

Sure enough, to the west, a small cloud of dust could be seen, billowing up from the mouth of a canyon, followed soon after by the noise of a stagecoach bouncing across the earth, accompanied by the drumming of several sets of hooves.

“That’ll be the money express,” shrugged John.

“Hold up, what they carryin’?” asked William.

“Could be gold; could be them bits o’paper that passes for gold,” John explained. “Nothin that we’ll ever get to see, leastways.”

“Well... maybe, maybe not - sometimes gold has a liking for being liberated,” said William, casting a knowing glance at the protruding rock that had nearly taken off their wheel.

“Hold it - we can’t come it like that,” said Michael, nervously. “What of the Marshal?”

“That’s Ben Wright - could be a problem, but his deputies are a bunch o’ coots... ‘Cept Bob Wilson. But he’s too busy in

the cat house an' miseryin' on the end o' the War to come out combin' the badlands," said John. "These hills is packed with hard cases an' high binders. Ain't no way they'll know it's us they're seekin'. If we can get our belly through the brush an' keep out of the way, I reckon if we did this we're gonna be set."

"It's a risk for sure... but if we do right ain't no more minin' an' building to be done by us, ever," said William. "That's as good a reason as any to have a try. 'Sides, I bet Messrs Wells an' Fargo won't miss a couple' a pieces from their fortune. We'll enjoy it a whole lot more than they could."

"Well... if you's all in, then ain't no matter for me," Michael murmured. "Jus' for saying' it, I ain't so sure, though."

"Look to this," answered John. "You left Flintwood 'cause the country weren't to your tastes an' you came on back here 'cause you got no honest work you were likin' in town. Now fortune's holdin' out her hand an' givin' you a ticket to somewhere easy an' what? An you're gonna turn her away? No — we ain't got nothin' to lose, less there's somethin' we got to fall back on that I'm missin' here?"

"An' lets be clear," added William, "if you're wantin' to sit this out under this here tree, you'll be sittin' it out when we're countin' out the gold, you hear? So... you in?" Michael nodded.

The men quickly positioned their cart across part of the track, making sure the vehicle would be directed to the edge against the rock. Sure enough, in a rending of wooden spokes, the red and gold stagecoach ground to a halt, revealing a crew of two men and a matching number of cases inside. William drew his revolver.

"Well, looks we euchred you, boys, making' you stop for us fellas," he said. "But I'm thinkin' you got yourself into some

bad box, baking' those horses like that. What's with the hurry?"

"We's deliverin' this to the bank in Flintwood. Property of Wells Fargo," said the driver.

"An' what would be so important as to drive four perfectly good an' handsome horses into the dust for?" asked John.

"I don't know. They don't tell us. Just that it's urgent. But you might not want to touch it; they was mighty funny when we loaded up. Must be something to do with what's inside..."

"Yep," added the second man. "I'm thinkin' you should leave it well alone. Seemed mighty important to someone. An' they'll be sore if it goes someplace else durin' its travels."

"Hmmm, I'm thinkin' you all better shut your bazoos," said William, tapping the barrel of his Colt against the driver's thigh. "You said 'ain't no business of yours inside them boxes, so it follows it ain't no problem of yours if this goes for a little ride with me an' my brothers here. Now, I ain't got no mind to hurt y'all and you don't look like no fools. If you both stays nice and quiet an' helpful-like, how's about we can do some business?"

"Okay..." said the driver, nervously. "But they ain't gonna like this in town. Someone's gonna be mighty angry. Say, you won't leave us here with nothin' will ya? We ain't from round here, an' I seen some big birds overhead back there. Don't want to be all thirsty and hungry, enough to lie down and make something some lunch."

Michael butted in. "Okay. We're good men, see? I'll leave you two horses an' tie you a bit so you'll get loose if you take the time to think on it a little. You can say that a couple 'a saddle bums jumped you and in all the flusteration they took your guns an' the cargo. That way they won't look to you to set the blame."

“That’s mighty kind,” said the younger one. “Much appreciated, sir.”

“Well, best cut us some dirt,” said John “Good to have met you citizens. My brother an’ I’ll just load up an’ we’ll be on our way.”

William gestured — “Friends, before I tie you like hogs, can you hitch these two on the wagon? Reckon our ole boy here won’t take the strain of us an’ them big boxes all together.”

A few minutes later, the stagecoach drivers were bundled into the back of their wagon, hands loosely tied with rope as promised. In fact the older of the two had already all but freed himself, but thought it wiser not to mention this. As soon as the Lacey’s were out of sight, he struggled to his feet.

“Alright Thomas,” he said to his junior. “First we gotta get some of that thorn bush and scratch us up a bit... You empty them guns into the wagon, like we fought ‘em proper, and loose out one of them horses like they cut her free. You know what’s gonna be said if we turn up without what we came with. I’m gonna ride into Flintwood to get us some help. Make out like there was some real drama with them boys an’ we put up some fight... This ain’t gonna end well for them...”

He wheeled his horse to the west, and was gone.

chapter three

Rebecca Schuster

CARLTON WHITMORE HATED HIS job at Wells Fargo. He hated it since his father had forced him to take a job as a clerk's apprentice some ten years ago and he had never quit hating it. If possible, his hatred had only become even more prominent, when the bank had sent him to this godforsaken town. Boy, how he missed Charleston, and the parties and the ladies! The only way to make his whole sorry excuse of a life a little more agreeable was the booze, which was served freely in the Red Boot Saloon - no ask, no tell. Thank God for little favours!

But even though he could not stand his job (or Wells Fargo or his life for that matter), he was nonetheless a groveller for praise. That is why he spurred his horse mercilessly. The poor nag, used to pulling stagecoaches at a decent pace, was panting hard, when they arrived in town.

Carlton just wanted to slow her down, when all of a sudden, the horse went up on his hind legs with a terrified neighing. Carlton, normally a good rider if he hadn't had too much whiskey, of course, was taken by surprise. He lost grip of the reins and fell heavily down to the ground. The horse galloped away down Fremont Avenue. Groaning, Carlton sat up - and faced the reason why the horse had bolted.

He tried to stifle a scream but didn't quite succeed. A very unmanly sound escaped his lips.

Still sitting on his bottom he hurriedly crawled away from the abominable figure towering over him. It was a bigger than life statue of town founder John Patrick Tucker - or at least it would have been, if Tucker had suffered a terrible disfiguring accident. Carlton looked up at the ugly wooden face mouth agape, when he heard someone snickering right next to him.

It was a boy, sitting on the stoops of a front porch, with a corn pipe in his mouth. He was busy carving away at a small piece of wood - and starred at Carlton with a mocking grin on his dirty face.

Next to him stood an Indian fellow, bare chested and almost as big as the statue of Tucker. He had a carving knife in his hand and stood in a small pile of woodchips.

"What is this nonsense?", Carlton snapped and gestured at the statue, the Indian and the boy all at once.

The Indian blinked, "No nonsense, Sir. It is our good town founding father John Patrick Tucker. Some people thought it would be nice to have a statue for our town centre."

"Damned redskinned bastard", Carlton mumbled as he scrambled to his feet, "Foolishness, if I ever heard one. We don't even have a town centre." He patted the dirt off his clothes as best as possible and staggered on.

Behind him, the accursed Injun started to whistle a well known tune, while the snotty-nosed brat sang the lyrics, which he altered in a way that they were cruelly close to reality: "Simple Carlton went to town, riding on a donkey, got drunken in the meanest bar, just like a good honky"

Carlton blushed furiously. He resisted the urge to grope for the little silver flask in his pocket. Instead he shook a fist at the man and the boy and snarled: "I'll deal with you later, lad! With

both of you!"

Accompanied by more whistling and laughter he hurried on to Marshal Wright's office.

Bob Wilson was close to dozing off. The day was too darn hot and last night had been too short (by courtesy of a certain little lady in the Red Boot). The only thing that preventing him from taking a short nap was a pertinacious fly that kept attacking Bob's sweaty bare skin.

"Go, find yourself some cattle to bug, you dirty little vermin", growled Bob, "Or even better yet: Go away and die!"

Once more Bob slapped the back of his neck, when the fly sat down to feast on his body juices. This time he was quick enough.

"Gotcha!", he cried triumphantly.

The same moment, the office door flew open and a man stepped inside the dark room. Bob knew him from sight. What was his name again? Charlie White? Carrington Wiseguy? No, Carlton - that was it! Carlton Whitmore, an unimportant pencil pusher at the Wells Fargo bank, who liked to visit the Red Boot. In fact, he liked it well enough to visit it almost every night.

Whitmore looked dirty, exhausted and... terrified?

The man in the stained clerk's uniform opened his mouth wide, but instead of the yell Bob had expected, he croaked almost inaudibly: "Robbery."

Bob sat bolt upright, "Did you say... robbery?"

Carlton who looked very pale and on the verge of fainting nodded solemnly.

Finally, thought Bob, finally something other to do than breaking up bar fights. Unconsciously he touched the scar on his right arm where he had been wounded in battle. Even

though the war had been gruesome, he sometimes missed the action in the field. Today, it seemed, his longing for action would be fulfilled.

"Marshal", he yelled and darted to Ben Wright's office.

The Marshal sat in his chair, his feet parked leisurely on his desk, and cleaned the barrel of his shotgun with a soft piece of cloth.

He looked up, when Bob flung the door open without even bothering to knock.

"Our prisoner again?", Ben Wright asked softly.

Bob shook his head. Gerard Dalton, a notorious fight picker, had made some fuss over the duration of the afternoon, but was fast asleep in his cell now.

"No, Sir", Bob said, "even bet... I mean, not Dalton, Sir. The lad from Wells Fargo just came in, pale as death, and said something about a robbery."

Ben Wright was on his feet instantly, "Bring him in! And get George, too."

Bob did as he was told.

Ben put the shotgun on his desk and fished a can of chewing tobacco out of his vest pocket. He had just put a fair amount of tobacco in his cheek, when Bob returned with the other two men. Bob gave Carlton a gentle shove in the back and said: "Tell the Marshal, what you just told us."

Carlton did as he was commanded.

"It's only a rickety cart", Carlton said when he had finished his story, "I am sure, you can still catch them, if you hurry!"

"I bet they are headed for John Lacey's house", George said, "It's not very far from here."

Ben exchanged a quick glance with his deputies, then he nodded, "I s'ppose you are both right."

He picked up his shotgun, "George, go to Fred's house. I

know it's his free afternoon, but for this chase I need everyone at hand. And Bob, have the horses ready in five minutes. And grab my Spencer for me, will ya?"

"Right, Marshal", said Fred and after a moment's hesitation, "What are you going to do?"

Ben straightened. His back cracked audibly as he did. He winced and said: "I go and do what I detest the most: I ask the good citizens of Flintwood for help."

Ben Wright's first impulse was to go to Mayor Bird's house. On second thought he decided that this sure wasn't necessary. On a hot afternoon like this, the Mayor and his sons would be at the Red Boot for a cold drink.

Ben hurried down the street to the Saloon and pushed the swing doors open unceremoniously.

Faces turned, and it was only a matter of seconds till everyone had quieted down. The Marshal visiting the saloon during the afternoon, and furthermore with a face grave like stone, could only mean one thing: trouble lay ahead.

The faces that had been turned towards Ben, when he had entered the saloon, turned back now, and Ben was left to stare at hunched shoulders. Only Mayor Bird, who sat on his favourite stool at the bar, flanked by his two sons, still faced him.

Ben cleared his throat and boomed with his impressive voice: "The Wells Fargo stagecoach has been robbed. According to Whitmore, one of the Wells Fargo men, it was the Lacey brothers."

A murmur ran through the bar at the mention of the name.

"My men and I are going after them", Ben continued, "and we could use some help. They are a dangerous lot and surely

not easy to capture. Also, we don't know if they have reinforcement waiting for them. We might have to face more than three men after all."

He paused. Awkward silence was all the answer he received.

"Besides", he said. "It was a money transport. It might be your savings that the Laceys are stealing."

Another murmur. Then someone said: "It's not, though."

Ben looked up in surprise, "Pardon me, Sir?"

"He is right", said Mayor Bird. "It is, in fact, not our money. As far as I know it belongs to some company that used to own shares of the mine. No citizen of my town is in danger of losing his savings, I can assure you as much."

Ben stared at him dumbstruck.

"Not risking my life for them", someone mumbled.

"Right he is", agreed another.

Quickly the room was full of similar muttered utterances.

The Marshal gazed up and saw Catherine at the top of the staircase. She glanced down at him with pity in her eyes and shrugged her shoulders apologetically.

Ben's lips were one thin white line, when he turned around and left the Red Boot.

His guts were burning in anger, but on the other hand, he really hadn't expected anything else. In this town, people only lifted their finger, if something was in for them. Or if they were about to lose something.

He saw that Bob, Fred and George were already waiting for him in front of the Marshal's office, men and horses ready for the chase.

He was halfway down the steps of the saloon, when someone small and skinny stepped in his way.

The boy hardly reached Ben's broad chest and was

probably not older than twelve.

Carlton Whitmore would have recognised the boy. It was the same lad that had mocked him after he had been thrown off his horse's back. The cornpipe and the piece of carved wood were gone. Instead of mockery the boy's face now showed nothing but determination.

"Sir", he said, "I heard you are looking for help."

Ben lifted an eyebrow.

The boy faltered, then he said: "Well, I would like to help."

Ben blinked. He had seen the boy before and had assumed that he was boy mischief growing up to be man mischief.

"What's your name, lad?"

"Tom, Sir", the boy answered, "Tom Finnigan."

"Tom Finnigan, I'm happy to hear that there's at least one living soul in this town with some guts."

The boy swelled up visibly.

"How old are you?"

"12 years, Sir, 13 coming winter."

Ben frowned, "A saloon is hardly a place for a boy your age."

Tom Finnigan didn't flinch, "Never entered the saloon, Sir. I heard everything you said sitting right here outside on the porch."

The Marshal grinned, "Also, 12 is hardly the right age to go and hunt down bandits."

The expression of pride vanished from the boy's face in a heartbeat.

"However", Ben continued, "Maybe you can be of use after all."

It took the four men about half an hour, before they first saw the rickety cart in the distance.

Shortly after they had left town and arrived at the site of the robbery, they had found a dead body on the ground right next to the abandoned stagecoach. It was the second Wells Fargo man, who had been left behind by Carlton to guard coach and horse. The latter, Ben noticed with little surprise, was gone. Obviously, the Laceys were cold-blooded enough to return and take the second horse - unless, of course, the Wells Fargo man had been unlucky enough to run into several bandits at the same day.

Which was not the case, as Ben could see as they drew in closer to the Laceys. One of them was sitting on the horse, while the other two sat on the rickety cart.

The Marshal and his deputies spurred their horses even more, and it was only a short time afterward that they heard the first gunshot.

The Laceys had spotted their pursuers and obviously decided to take some action.

The one on horseback had turned his horse around to face his opponents, while the other two had stopped and entrenched themselves behind the rickety cart. However, only two of them were shooting, Ben noticed. From the distance, he couldn't quite make out what the third one was up to.

The Marshal drew his freshly polished shotgun and fired, and so did his deputies.

Bullets pierced the air. Ben heard someone yell. It was Bob, but when the Marshal looked at him questioningly, the young deputy shook his head, "I'm fine, Marshal, nothing but a graze. Bastard!" He fired again.

All of a sudden, the Laceys stopped shooting. Were they already out of ammunition, Ben wondered.

They weren't but apparently they had different plans.

He could now see, what the third one had been up to. He

had uncoupled the horse and mounted it. Behind him on the saddle was a bulging sack, undoubtedly filled with as much loot as possible. He called out to his brothers than spurred his horse and took off.

"He's trying to get away!", George yelled.

So was the other brother on his horse. He dashed right behind his brother.

The one left on the rickety coach kept shooting at the advancing lawmen.

And he was quick. His brothers must have left them their guns, for whenever he dropped a gun, he simply picked up another and started shooting again.

Ben and his men had no chance to get past him in order to pursue his brothers, who already disappeared in the distance.

Then, all of a sudden, the hotheaded gunslinger stopped shooting. He grunted and fell off the cart like a sack of flour.

"Dismount", ordered Ben.

"What did just happen?", asked George wonderingly.

Ben made a showing gesture with his head. A young boy appeared from behind a small grove. It was Tom Flannigan, toting a slingshot and a broad grin.

"Nice shot, lad", Ben said admiringly.

"Thank you, Sir!" The boy glowed with pride.

"Now, get back to town", Ben said and flicked a coin at the boy, which he caught effortlessly.

Tom Flannigan mounted a horse that Carlton Whitmore would have recognised immediately. The boy had found it wandering through the streets of Flintwood and thought that might be of use. Well, it had been.

"New deputy?", asked Fred smilingly as he watched Tom Flannigan riding back toward town.

Ben grinned, "We can always use a good lawman."

Then he went to the unconscious figure on the ground. Tom Flannigan's stone had hit him at the temple, just over his left ear.

The Marshal looked down on the young man with disgust.

He spat out a mouthful of brown tobacco juice. It landed right next to the boy's ear on the dusty ground.

"Which one is it?", the Marshal asked.

"William, Sir", said Bob, "The youngest of the litter."

"Right."

"Look", said Fred, "His leg is grazed. The Wells Fargo man wasn't entirely defenseless after all."

"Yeah", George agreed, "but not the best shot, either, or he wouldn't just have hit his leg."

Ben spat out another load of tobacco, then he said, "Alright, let's get him back into town."

"Good morning, sweetheart", said Ben, when William finally opened his eyes.

The young man looked disoriented for a second, but then seemed to recognise the bars and the man sitting on the other side of them.

"Dammit", he growled.

"That's right", Ben agreed, "We might not have gotten all of you, but one brother is a good start."

An impressively wicked grin spread on William Lacey's face, "Let me tell you something, old man: You never will. John and Michael will be here in no time to get me out - and then heaven have mercy on you!"

chapter four

Hyla Maddalena

LEWIS ROCHE WAS NOT fond of the repetitive drumming of fingers on a desk. He stood in the doorframe that separated his room from the rest of the bank, staring balefully at the teller whose fingertips were moving at a great speed, producing a constant rumble. Lewis cleared his throat, trying to alert the young man to his annoyance, but the drumming continued without pause. It was a dry day, no rain or mist to speak of, and the shuttered and stifling Flintwood Wells Fargo bank was forcing Lewis to a boiling point. He had spent the entire previous night in a state of limbo between freezing and burning, and almost broken his wrist when he slipped and fell while walking here. Finally, in the second hour of silence that was broken only by the teller's drumming, he was ready to snap. Just as he stood to stride out confidently into the lobby of the bank to speak to the man plainly (and break his fingers, if necessary), the doors onto 4th street burst open, and a rather disheveled man hurried in.

"Where's the branch director?" He looked at the teller, who pointed a thumb at Lewis. The man ignored Lewis' proffered hand.

"How can I help you?" Lewis asked warily. The man, who

it seemed had been running, and was very clearly not accustomed to even walking long distances, attempted to compose himself before speaking.

“I am Isaac Tripp, an associate of the Wells Fargo bank, and I—” he drew himself up, looking somehow even less dignified than before. “I— our stagecoach has been robbed by a band of ruffians.”

“Robbed?” Lewis stared at him. “How much was stolen?”

“I couldn’t say, I was afraid for my own life at the time and preoccupied.”

Lewis and the teller glanced at each other for a moment.

“Well, were the men responsible apprehended?”

“One, yes. The others escaped.”

Lewis sighed. “If we don’t know how much we lost, how can we do anything about this?”

“Ah.” Tripp held up a finger, motioning Lewis to wait as he dug around in the pockets of his coat with the other hand. He produced an envelope that was only a little dusty and crinkled, which he gave to the director. “This is from the head office. I received it quite quickly after the robbery, which restored my faith and hope for the situation: we are clearly in capable hands.”

Lewis took the envelope and opened it, pulling out the letter inside.

“The gambling situation in Flintwood has become too great... the copper mine’s inactivity has rendered you unprofitable, and this recent incident has proved your entire branch to be dangerous to put our time and resources into... They’re shutting our bank down? Just because a stagecoach was robbed?”

“The head office believes, and I agree with them, that it’s truly the wisest course of action in this situation. How can this

office continue, with bandits everywhere and no money circulating outside of the saloon?”

Lewis kept reading, shaking his head in disbelief. “They’re sending someone to transfer any remaining funds to the Wells Fargo bank in Tucson, it says here. Do you know when that person will be here?”

“Well,” Tripp said carefully, “I received another missive this morning, informing me that he should be arriving within the next two or three days, at which point you will be forced to close the bank. Do you have any other questions about what you should be doing or planning to do in the coming days?”

“I would like to know if the head office has any plans for those of us who work here. What will we do now that our bank has been closed down, as far as I can see, completely unnecessarily? Will they have work for us, or are we going to be sent out to fend for ourselves?”

“The head office has no plans for you or your employees, I’m afraid. They seem to have made their decision, and you will have to accept it.” And with that, Tripp turned on his heel and skittered out of the door with the same velocity as he had entered it.

“Um, Mr Roche?” The teller looked up from his chair at Lewis. “What... what do we do now?”

“I’m not sure, Stephen. We’ll have to figure something out, though.”

Mayor Henry Bird sat in the chair at his desk, staring idly out the window at the street, where a child was kicking a rock back and forth while her mother watched her from the porch of their house. The stone was not a large one, but it was big enough for the girl to be entertained. Bird had always been

rather fond of the metaphorical, and chose to believe that the stone was representative of this little town that he had guided from its infancy (not too big and not too small, taking a bruising but still alive). The question bouncing around his large head was, in essence, who the child was. His first instinct was to believe that she was that damned Marshal, doing nothing to fix his failing town. But really, once he thought about it more, the two feet of the girl must be the Marshal and his deputies, and the mother on the porch was himself, watching them destroy his poor little town.

Bird was just congratulating himself on his brilliant metaphor (he really ought to write it down somewhere) when his secretary entered the room.

“Yes, what is it?” Bird looked up at the young man.

“Lewis Roche to see you, sir.”

“Yes, yes, send him in.”

Lewis entered the room, turning an envelope around and around in his nervous hands.

“Mr Bird? We have a problem.”

Bird motioned to the seat across from him.

In the still air of the Marshal’s office, Deputies Murphy and Bell talked quietly, laughing every so often, their tone congratulatory. Deputy Bob Wilson sat with his feet up on his desk, staring into the darkened eyes of the man behind the bars of the cell across from him.

“Is it just me, or does he look like he’s plotting something?” Wilson asked without looking at the other two, who glanced from their conversation to look at the prisoner.

“Maybe I am,” William Lacey said quietly.

“What do you think of him? He seems a little creepy to me,” Bell said to Murphy warily.

“I don’t quite know,” Murphy replied. Wilson grinned and threw a glance towards them.

“Make an assessment.”

“Ah, he seems like a nice gentleman,” Murphy said finally.

“Nice robber, sure, but pretty clearly worse than those other two. After all, *you* caught him, Bell. Any criminal who can’t get away from you has to be pretty terrible.” Wilson laughed at his own joke as the door opened, and Mayor Henry Bird himself walked in, past the silent duty officer and the deputies, into the Marshal’s office.

“You,” Bird snapped at the man in the chair. “The bank is being shut down, the town is failing, and it’s all your fault!”

“In what way?” Marshal Wright raised his hands in a gesture of incredulity. “I arrested the guy who stole from the stagecoach, or did you not see him when you came in?”

“The Wells Fargo branch is being closed down because their head office is scared of the lack of money and the crime rate! Lewis Roche just came to tell me that they’ll be gone within the next three days, and I heard yesterday that the First National Bank thinks our financial situation is going to be bad enough to drive them out soon, too. Do you understand what that means?”

Wright’s face fell, concern setting in. Bird wagged his finger at him, nodding emphatically. “You see now, don’t you? The town is going to fall entirely flat without those banks! How can you make up for the wrong that you’ve done to this town? You can’t, you know, you’re up for re-election and the citizens of Flintwood will not re-elect the man who ruined what was left of it!”

Wright laughed, reaching into his pocket for his badge and lifting it, examining it carefully. “This town isn’t going to run itself, Bird. You may have been in charge since J.P. Tucker

first found the copper here, but I'm the one protecting Flintwood. And really, even if I'm not elected, who else in this Godforsaken town would *be* elected? No one else could be the Marshal here, not even those three out there!"

Murphy, Wilson, and Bell glanced at each other and then sank back into their seats, staring at the ground. In the other office, Wright put his badge back on his jacket and stared angrily at Bird, seemingly trying to force him out of the room with his eyes alone.

"Fine, I'll leave," Bird growled. "But don't think you won't be held responsible if our only remaining source of income leaves."

Bird turned and walked out of the room, past the deputies and the duty officer, slamming the door behind him. William Lacey continued to frown at Wilson, who picked at a stray seam of his boots. Murphy and Bell kept talking, slightly less cheerfully, but just as casually. As the mayor strode down the street, Lewis Roche walked back into the lobby of the Wells Fargo bank, into his office, where he sat down and stared out the window, listening to the repetitive drumming of the teller's fingers on his desk.

chapter five

Adela Torres

FLINTWOOD WAS TAKING A long time to die.

Ben didn't like the dying, but didn't mind the slowness. He liked the town, he had liked it from the first time he set foot in the Red Boot Saloon. He liked it even more when it gave him a place to stay, a home, and a job: deputy at first, marshal now. It was a good town with good people, no matter what people were saying now.

Some days, this was true, he liked it better than others.

It was almost night and Kate was acting up, all tired and ornery from a long day around the outer homesteads and the copper mine. The mine was dying and taking the town with it but there was still some copper to squeeze from the tired veins and some men working it, holding out against hope. Ben liked the miners: no-nonsense people, thick and hard and direct, who didn't cause trouble apart from some isolated incidents in the saloon. He'd spent the day with them going round the huts and the hovels, listening to complaints and some accusations of petty theft. That was done now and he headed back to his office, fighting Kate all the way.

"Easy, girl," he grunted, annoyed. The mare fought the bit and tried to bite his knee, and Ben had a very uncomfortable

ride of it until they saw the first dim lights of the town.

He entered the town from the east, the lamps on Fremont Avenue lighting his way. Kate knew where were they going, the crafty strumpet, and suddenly turned all sweet and nice, trotting happily towards the stable behind the marshal's office, anxious to get there. Just beyond it, the bright lamps of the Red Boot Saloon were having much the same effect on Ben.

Duty first. He went round the block and took Kate to her stall, unsaddling her and giving her a good rub. She nuzzled his shirt.

"Oh, *now* you want to play nice," he said, rubbing her ear affectionately. "Yeah, yeah, I'm tired too. You're lucky, you're already set for tonight."

He gave her a final pat on the rump, took his rifle and the shotgun and went inside the office.

Bob was there, cleaning a gun, and George too, napping peacefully in his chair. Ben stomped a bit on the hardwood floor and put the rifle noisily down to give George time to wake up properly. He did, blinking only a little.

"Welcome back, marshal. All quiet out there?"

"As usual. Where's Fred?"

"Back home. Little Ann's cough still not gone."

"We reckoned you'd not mind," said Bob. "Place's been dead as a cemetery."

Ben didn't mind. He put his rifle in the rack and put the shotgun away, then did a rather useless attempt to pat some dust out of his clothes as he looked at the roster.

"George, you stayin' watch here tonight?"

"That's right."

"Well, then I'm going to the Red Boot for a bite. Bob, you go home now. I'll come later to keep George company."

"Appreciated, marshal, but not needed. When I was a

deputy in Holbrook—“

“Yes, we know, you stayed in your office five days with their nights to keep watch on a murderer they were takin’ to Houston,” Ben said, smiling. After six years George’s seemingly unlimited supply of stories, real or not, was starting to fail him.

The deputy didn’t seem to mind. He smiled ruefully and scratched his scalp under his hat.

“Guess I’m an old ramblin’ fool now.”

“Guess you are. But I’m not being a bloody saint here, George, just so you know. I’m too tired to sleep just now. Dinner and some time in your company, that’s all I need to put me right out like a little lamb.”

George barked a laugh and pushed his chair back against the wall. “See you later, then,” he said, and started snoring.

Bob was tidying up his table. “Sure you don’t want me to —?”

“No, it’s all right. Want to come to the Red Boot? You’re off duty if I say so, and I do.”

“Later,” Bob’s smile scrunched his whole face and made the scar above his eye stand out whitely. “I got some business to attend.”

“Uh-huh, yeah, I heard of your ‘business’. Very well, go. Don’t keep her up too late.”

Bob smiled again, a quite alarming sight, and left the office. Ben followed him but went in the opposite direction, towards the saloon.

The Red Boot was too large for Flintwood. It had been built when Flintwood was on its way to become one of the major towns of the territory, and then the town started withering. But the Saloon kept doing business. Not all of them savoury, and not without trouble, but the bar was made of

polished oak and the mirror behind it was large and clean and uncracked, reflecting a modest amount of brass and red velvet and frills. There was a piano, though rarely someone to play it these days, and rooms above the bar, and some tables for serious gamblers, even if the green baize was already frayed and darkened.

The room was quite full; mostly by townspeople, a bit by some who were not, maybe travelers stopping for the night or waiting for the next coach. There was a small table close to the stairs leading to the balcony. It was a bad table, cramped and out of the way, but it was close to the kitchen and Ben had claimed it, semi-officially, as his own. He sat down, signalling the waitress. They knew him there and the girl promptly put a laden plate in front of him. Ben attacked the steak and potatoes with gusto, washing it all down with the help of a jug of cider. He was planning on ordering something stronger at the bar later on.

There was a group of three men at the bar, and Ben was keeping an eye of them because two of them were talking a bit too loud and being a bit too rude. Nothing excessive, yet — loudness was not a crime and no one had complained yet. Still, he finished his cider and watched them some more and then went to the bar.

He ordered a shot of whiskey, keeping close to the corner of the bar. The three men were not locals: cowboys, probably. One of them was short, dark-haired, with a small, round head; he'd gone to the gambling tables a little while before. The second one was fat, ginger-haired, sweaty. The third one—Ben looked at the third one. Tall, lean, almost gaunt. Face like flint, eyes like shards of steel. He wore his revolver like it was a third hand. The other two merely carried theirs.

Ben was still measuring the third man up when there was a

crash behind him, a tinkling of glass and the angry scraping of a chair being pushed back. He turned, startled; men were getting up at one of the gambling tables. A man in a good suit was leaning over the table and grabbing the shirt of the small roundheaded man.

“You put that back on the table right now for all to see, you goddamned cheat!,” the man in the good suit was shouting, and pushed the round headed man, who fell to the floor, cursing. Some men, smelling a fight, went towards Roundhead. Among them was the sweaty redhead.

Ben cursed under his breath and crossed the distance in three long strides, pulling at collars of tipsy patrons who wanted to join the fun. He put himself between Good Suit and the rest of the onlookers.

“What seems to be the problem?,” he said in his most official voice, opening his jacket slightly to show the marshal star pinned to his waistcoat.

“The problem is,” Good Suit said, slurring his words, “the problem is that this here good-for-nothing had a card up his sleeve, that’s the problem.”

“I had no such thing!,” said Roundhead. “The man’s drunk! He was losing, marshal, and he thought he could get out of payin’ by callin’ me a cheat! I’ll tell you who’s a cheat!”

There were voices calling either man a liar, and then Ben had to grab Good Suit to prevent him from throwing a drunken punch that would have landed on someone else. Then someone picked up a chair.

The next minutes were a bit busy. Ben still tried to push Good Suit to one corner but the man was having none of it and sidestepped him to try and kick Roundhead, who got behind some miners. The miners, who had seemed undecided up until that moment, thought that they were being attacked

by Good Suit and retaliated. As at that point they had all consumed several glasses of the Red Boot's potent whiskey, two of them missed their targets and hit each other. Ben found himself fending off Roundhead's inexperienced punches, and got a kick in one leg from the sweaty redhead. Suddenly angry, he landed a kick on Roundhead that sent the man reeling back, colliding with another patron who happily joined the general din.

Ben started working his way from the outside in, taking men from behind and pulling them away from the fight. For some of them to *keep* away from the fight some more violent measures were needed, and his hand was hurting already. The sweaty redhead came at him suddenly; he had a chair leg in his hand and hit Ben with it on the shoulder, making him bend over and gasp in pain. He was trying to recover and counterattack when he saw a long, thin leg and a snakeskin boot trip the redhead, who fell flat on his face. Ben grabbed him, shook him like a rag doll, and punched him in the face with all his might.

The fight started losing momentum after that, and Ben was thinking that maybe the night would end without anything more serious than some broken glassware. Now or never.

"Come on, folks," he said. "Go home now. Let's stop the tomfoolery here."

"We still haven't dealt with the cheat," said Roundhead. The man in the good suit, limping slightly, stepped forward.

"I am no cheat, sir," he said. "I'll happily prove it."

"Outside," said Roundhead, and put his hand on his holster. Good Suit slipped his hand inside his jacket, and Ben saw red.

"There are no duels in this town," he said clearly, putting himself between the two men. Roundhead looked, very

pointedly, at Ben's gun-free hip.

"This is a matter of honour between *men*, marshal," he said. Ben looked at both men for an instant and then went to Roundhead.

"It's a matter of bullshit between jackasses," he said. Some men laughed; Ben was grateful for that. "There are no duels in my town and that's it, friend."

"I'm no friend of yours," Roundhead said. His hand tensed on the grip of his gun.

"You're right there," said Ben amiably, and in a fluid movement grabbed the man's gun hand, pressing it down on the gun to prevent him from drawing as he pulled hard and put him off balance. Immediately, his other fist hit the man squarely on the chin.

Roundhead had not even hit the ground and Ben had already turned, looking at Good Suit, who was still paralysed with his hand half inside his jacket.

"Don't even try, friend," he said in a low voice. The room was suddenly very silent.

"I—I want no trouble, marshal," Good Suit stammered.

"I like that. We can be friends then," Ben said. "You take the idiot, I'll take the redhead, and we'll all go friendly-like to my office where y'all will have a nice, cozy cell to cool off, all right? The rest of you clear the room. Come on, fun's over. Go. Go home."

The people trickled out, considerably subdued. Ben surveyed the damage: two chairs and a table lay broken, along with quite a lot of glassware, but there seemed to be no casualties apart from some bloody noses. His gaze fell on the third man and stayed on him for a second, then on his snakeskin boots. He remembered those legs.

"Thanks, stranger," he said. The man said nothing; his cold

eyes narrowed for a second. Then he touched the brim of his hat, adjusted his poncho, and left with a faint tinkling of spurs.

Ben went with his prisoners to his office, where George was waiting for him with a smile.

“Had fun? Joey passed by and told me you had a bit of a ruckus.”

“It was a laugh riot, sure,” Ben said, crossly, as they manhandled the two unconscious men into two of the cells. Good Suit went quite meekly to his own cell and sat there, his head between his hands. “I wasn’t really looking for this kind of fun.”

“Funny how you always seem to find it when you least want it, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on. These three will be OK here tonight. We’ll sort everything out tomorrow.”

chapter six

Michael Roberts

WILLIAM LACEY SAT ON his cell bunk, watching the rat.

It had been making its way steadily across the other side of the Marshal's Office, following the scent of something tasty, no doubt.

Out of the corner of his other eye, Lacey could see the old spotted tabby cat gingerly lift itself off its haunches and assume what Lacey could only imagine was once a striking stance.

Give it up, Lacey thought, that ol' rat is faster than you'll ever be.

True enough, Lacey watched as the cat tried to pounce, only to have the rat scurry halfway across the floor before the cat could land.

"Damn cat's older than Methuselah, looks like," Lacey said to Bell, who was reading what looked like an old copy of Harper's Bazaar.

Bell spoke without looking up from his paper.

"Yup. Him and me go way back. Rescued it from a burning whorehouse in Tempe, back in '58."

"Went in to get it, did you?" Lacey asked.

"Nope," Bell said, smirking. "Picked it up on the way out.

In the confusion, he almost got left behind. Hell, in the confusion, I also forgot to pay my... uh... host... so you might say.”

Lacey saw Wilson, the other Deputy roll his eyes and mouth along with Bell’s finishing of his story. “I got free pussy twice that night.”

“Jesus, Bell,” Wilson said from across the office. “You need to get another story to tell, that one’s near wore clean out.”

“Son,” Bell replied. “If you’d spot me the spud money to go back to a cat-house, I’d be more than happy to have a new story to tell.”

He winked at Lacey, then turned back to Wilson.

“That is if you have any scratch left after buying those new clothes to impress that barmaid from the Red Boot. What’s her name again? Bonnie? Hell, she’s bonny all right. Got tits and behind enough for three women. Hell, I’d be afraid to climb on top of that one... Might fall into her honey hatch and they’d have to organise a search party.”

Lacey saw Wilson flush.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with a big girl,” he said.

Bell laughed. “Oh, that’s true enough. Never said there was. You just need to stop renting her box a dollar at a time, make her honest and get a tin ring on that fat finger of hers. She’d push out a whole mess of little Wilsons, no problem.”

He made a rapid series of popping noises to illustrate his point.

“Just like that.”

Lacey saw Wilson grimace, then settle back into writing something. From the look of it, it was taking all his concentration to do so.

Unlike many in the Arizona Territories, William Lacey

could read and write pretty well.

As the youngest of the three Lacey brothers by a fair stretch — there were two brothers born between him and Michael, now mouldering in tiny graves out by the tree on his folks' property — William had been favoured by his Mama and taught to read and write by her. He'd been a more than fair student but had to leave school after a couple years to help out his family on their land. He'd gotten hired on to clerk with a fellow in his town, but then John's letter about riches in the Arizona wilderness had lured him and Michael both out. Some riches, he thought bitterly. A broke down mine and then that stage coach that got him nothing to show for it but locked up with a cracked skull from a rock.

He loved his brother, but realised now that, by coming out here like a dog that his brother had whistled at, he had pissed away the chance to do something other than just be his little brother forever

It was after noon sometime.

Lacey could tell by the fact that the shadow on the building had moved from one side to the other and was lengthening again.

The grumbling that he had felt in his gut after lunch had subsided about a half hour before but was started to come back full force.

Blasted jail chow, he thought.

It had smelled vaguely of cow plop, but by the time they'd gotten it cooked up and ready, he hadn't eaten all night and too hungry to care and had wolfed down a sizeable helping of... whatever it was.

Now he regretted that.

He waited, hoping the feeling would pass again, but it didn't and he realised that he need to use the mud-shed rather

urgently.

“Hey,” he said.

Only Wilson looked up.

“I gotta use the... ” Lacey indicated the out house in the yard.

Wilson indicated the corner of the cell with a motion of his head.

“Piss-pot’s right there.”

“I gotta take a... well...”

“Jesus, boy,” Bell said from the far desk. “You’re a piss-poor coach robber, can’t ride by half and you can’t even say ‘shit’. You should head back wherever it is you Lacey boys sprung from. This Territory will dry-hump you and leave you dead if you don’t watch out.”

“And you can use the piss-pot to shit in as well,” Wilson said. “I ain’t taking you out to the box at this time of day. Not with your brothers slinking around with the Marshal off on his business.”

“Go on, Wilson,” Bell said, “The office is bad enough to bear with the heat without adding his ass-stink to it. Just cuff him and take him out there and take the cuffs off while he’s in there, less’n you want to wipe his mud-hole for him when he’s done.”

Wilson gave him a look.

“Just don’t want to get ambushed, is all.”

Bell sighed.

“Hell, the other two Lacey boys ain’t going to be anywhere near around, if they got half a brain between them. Tell you what... I’ll stand in the doorway with the Winchester. Tell you what? Anyone shoots you, I’ll plug ‘em right straight after... And I’ll make sure you get that pretty spot up in the boneyard, next to that spinster lady.”

“You’re a true friend,” Wilson said wearily, shifting his weight in his seat.

“Ain’t I just?” Bell said with a laugh.

Wilson hoisted himself out of the seat with a sigh and a squeezed out fart.

Maybe he’d be visiting the outhouse himself right after, he thought.

He walked over to the cell bars.

“Come on, Lacey,” he said. “git up and hands where we can see them.”

“You really need to cuff me? I ain’t gonna run.”

For a second Wilson considered it. The kid probably wouldn’t.

Bell must have sensed his thought and said, “Cuffs go on or he can stay there and shit in his hands...I ain’t risking him running. Wright’ll give me jess if I had to shoot him or he got away. That kid’s got an appointment with a judge. Best hope it’s not Hangin’ Hank Pettigrew. He’ll have you air-dancing before you can say jack jump.”

“You heard him, Lacey... Git up... cuffs go on.”

Lacey stood, a bit too fast, as he felt himself get dizzy.

He swayed, something Wilson saw.

“Kid must have half-scrambled your brains with that slingshot,” Wilson said.

“Little whoreson blind-sided me,” Lacey said, holding himself against the bars until the stars disappeared from his vision.

“Was a hell of a shot, you gotta admit.” Wilson said, “Shoulda had him with us at Glorietta.”

“Well, maybe I’ll get to congratulate him one day.”

“Wouldn’t count on that, Lacey,” Bell said from his chair. “He’ll be growed and gone before you see the outside of a jail

cell, I figure.”

Wilson opened the cell door.

“No funny stuff or I’ll give you a matching lump on the other side of that knuckle-head.”

Lacey held out his hands and Wilson clamped the iron cuffs on him, then led to the door facing the courtyard.

Opening the door, the sun blinded both of them for a second.

“Damn it, “ Wilson said. “I didn’t think it was possible to get hotter outside.”

He turned to Bell.

“You comin’ to stand watch or what?”

Bell sighed and heaved himself out of his chair.

“OK,” he said, walking across to the door.

He pushed Lacey out into the yard.

“Make it quick, Lacey,” he said.

William turned and said, “Uhh... anything to uh...clean up with in there?”

“There’s a couple old newspapers and some old corncobs, I figure.”

The three of them walked out into the courtyard and then Bell stopped by the edge of an old rain barrel and watched the two of them make their way the thirty or so feet to the out house in the corner.

The wind shifted a bit and the stink of it or the butcher’s down the street wafted back to Bell.

He felt his stomach bounce a tad at the smell and thought that it might be his turn soon to visit the box as well.

He watched as Wilson slipped the cuffs off and Lacey opened the door, slid stepped inside.

“Make sure he don’t try to escape down the hole,” he yelled out.

Wilson gave him a look, as if to say, “You think he COULD?”

Jesus, Bell thought, the pair of them had barely a brain between them.

In the distance, Bell could see a thin trail of smoke rising up from the woods a couple miles to the east.

Just what we need in this heat, he thought, another brush fire.

He continued watching it and, despite his best intentions — he was, despite his vices, a pretty decent lawman, with the ability to sense something bad about to happen — he became mesmerised by the smoke.

He failed to see the two men edging their way around the edge of the fence leading into the courtyard, just at the edge of his peripheral vision.

He was about to turn in that direction when the outhouse door opened and William sort of half-stumbled out, gagging.

“Serves you right, you little pris,” Bell said to himself.

Ironically, it was Lacey himself that saved Bell’s life. His brother was drawing a bead on Bell and probably would have taken his head off with the revolver when William saw his chance and broke away from Wilson.

“Johnny!” he yelled.

Bell looked at him then over across the yard to where he was looking. He saw Johnny aiming, caught his forward momentum and tried to roll out of the way as John Lacey pulled the trigger. He saw the fire erupt out of the muzzle and a second later felt the thwack of the bullet as it slammed into his arm just below the shoulder, shattering the bone. As it spun him around, he tried to catch himself before he fell full onto his arm.

He reached across with his good hand to his holster, then

realised at that second that stupidly, he had left his pistol in the office.

Hell's bells, he thought when he saw the look on Wilson's face.

They both had.

Stupidly, he'd gotten lazy and just wanted to get the kid to the shitter and back in a cell without having to be out in the heat too long.

His carelessness was probably going to get him killed, he thought miserably and he slumped down by the barrel.

He looked at where the bullet had gone in.

The hole was jagged and bleeding heavily and Bell thought he could see the yellow of bone through all the mess.

A wave of nausea washed through him, both from the pain and the realisation that he might very well lose that arm if the Doc couldn't reset the bone.

From the ground, he saw John and Michael striding quickly towards him, John with his revolver pointed across the yard at Wilson.

Michael swung his revolver down towards Bell and cocked the hammer.

Bell tried to summon up the courage to take the next bullet without flinching beforehand.

Michael Lacey paused, looking at him

"Nuthin personal," he said to Bell, as he walked past him to his younger brother.

Wilson and William were still standing at the outhouse when Michael reached them.

Wilson looked defiant but scared.

"Hand over the keys to that iron and we'll be on our way right quick," Michael told him.

"You've damned yourself well and truly this time, boys,"

Wilson said to the three men, handing over the keys. "Shooting a Marshal's not something they're going to take lightly in the Territory."

"All I want is Billy here and what happens next is not yours to ponder or decide for us," Michael said. "Now, we'll be gettin' those bracelets off and on our way and you can git to looking after that partner off yours."

He glanced back across the yard where Bell was lying on the ground, then back at Wilson.

"I reckon you best be quick about it. He ain't looking so good and I don't want a dead man to be on your conscience, just because you were jawin' with us about what might happen or might not."

He turned to William.

"Come on... Git the horses and we'll be out of here."

William strode off to gather the horses.

"Give the arm-irons to Billy," John told Wilson.

"You boys are going to end up with your toes in a row," Wilson told him, handing the cuffs to William.

"Arms out, if you please and don't try anything Chi-nee or I will shoot you a new eye-hole."

Wilson sighed and put his arms out.

"Much obliged," William said, sliding the cuffs around Wilson's wrists and locking them.

Wilson looked at him.

"If you run, we'll run you down."

Michael laughed.

"Bit late to be backsliding now on that, Wilson. I'd say those cards have already been played. Just gotta hope there's an ace or two still waiting to make its show."

"You always were a shitty gambler. This time you'll lose more than just your pay packet, though."

He glanced over at William who was starting to fidget.

“No worries, Billy,” Michael said. “We’ll be on our way soon enough.”

John had brought the horses around and the three brothers were on them in an instant.

Wilson looked up at them.

“Next time you see me, I’ll be looking at you down the barrel of a rifle, so I’ll say goodbye now, if you don’t mind.”

He looked over at William.

“Take a look at your brothers, Lacey. Look at the fools who are about to get you killed.”

“Enough jawin’, Wilson,” John said and aimed a boot at his head, sending him sprawling into the dirt, then snapped the reins and took off towards the east road out of town.

The other two did the same.

Catherine was just coming out of the post office with a package from her brother back east when she heard the commotion building down the street. She turned to see the three Lacey brothers on their horses, all galloping at full speed out of the yard by the jail. Just then, the manager of the Wells Fargo stepped out from the doorway. Seeing the boys he ducked back inside and grabbed his Marlin rifle. As the boys approached, he raised it and took a bead on William. Michael saw this and pulled hard on his reins to draw his horse over and push William out of the way. William’s horse neatly sidestepped, then leapt over a trough, coming down almost on top of the manager who flew back, pressing into Catherine.

The horse reared up, almost unseating William. He grabbed at the reins and tried to get the horse under control again but it was one of the horses they had stolen when they had robbed the stage coach and neither was used to be

mounted and William, who had, to be honest, always been the weakest rider of the three of the three brothers. The horse whinnied and tried to jump back, but the other horse was in the way.

“Git that thing under control,” John yelled at him. He glanced backwards and saw Wilson and Wright rounding their way out from the jail-yard. That blasted Marshal must have been a lick away from the jail when they left.

“We gotta go now,” John yelled at the other two.

Michael spun and fired off a wild shot at the two lawmen but hit neither, instead sending up a plume of dust from the street where the bullet hit.

The shot spooked both William and his horse, neither of whom had been expecting it. The horse charged forward, past Catherine and the manager to the edge of the veranda, but found its way blocked by a railing and rain barrels.

The manager saw his opportunity.

He grabbed at the saddle, trying to take control of the horse.

“Give it up, Lacey,” he yelled up at William, who was now desperate to get his horse back under his control.

He looked down and back at both the manager and Catherine, who was pressed up against the door-post.

He tried to get the horse to make the leap over the railing and on to freedom.

Instead it jumped the other way and kicked out with its rear hoofs, striking both the manager and Catherine.

The manager flew back from the grazing strike the horse’s hoof made on his arm.

Catherine, however, trapped against the post, took the other hoof full force, her hip and leg being half-crushed between the hoof in front and the wood behind.

Both William and John cried out when they saw Catherine take the kick, then crumple.

John even started to get off his horse, but Michael yelled out to him.

“Get back on. You can’t do nuthin’ The law’s almost on our asses as it is. Come on. She’s dead anyway...No point in you going with her.”

Reluctantly, John righted himself in the saddle again and shook the reins, setting his horse to moving again.

With both the manager and Catherine now out of the way, William’s horse found its way clear again and leapt back into the street, where William joined the other two.

“Where the hell we going?” he asked.

“Anywhere but here,” Michael suggested, indicating the two lawmen who were now only a couple dozen steps away.

Luckily for the Laceys, neither Wright or Wilson had their sidearms out, but the boys knew that could change in an instant.

“Hiyahn,” Michael yelled, snapping the reins and setting his horse back on a gallop.

William and John both followed suit, even as John stared back at the crumpled body of Catherine lying on the veranda of the building.

Wright and Wilson ran up to where the manager and Catherine were, the manager holding his arm.

Wright knelt down to Catherine, sick with dread that he was looking at her corpse.

She moaned and his fear lifted a little, but settled back when he saw the odd angle her leg was resting at.

It was broken at best and at worst?

Like most men in the territory, Wright was very familiar with handling horses and large livestock and had seen a lot of

ranching accidents. It wasn't unusual for someone to take a hoof or horn to the middle and end up dying days, even weeks later.

He looked down at Catherine, who was semi-conscious and obviously in a great amount of pain.

"Hold still, Cath," he said, "you need to just be still."

He wanted to look to see how bad it was, but that was out of the question, obviously.

He was no Doctor and besides, Catherine would be scandalised to have some man rooting around under her dress in the main street.

He looked up at Wilson.

"Get the Doc over here... tell him to hurry. And tell him to bring one of those Apache squaws to help. Catherine might have broken something up in her parts."

Wilson stood up and headed back to the jailyard at a run.

Wright looked up from Catherine at the trio of riders receding in the distance, dust rising up behind them.

He'd have to go after them soon enough, of course.

But that could wait.

chapter seven

Chris Lozac'h

FRED HAD NEVER SEEN the Marshal this upset. Ben was storming around the office, gathering supplies and barking out orders. More than once he burst out, “I’ll be damned if those bastards are going to get away with this!” “Shooting a deputy in the very confines of the jailhouse? No. Not in my town!”

True, George’s injury could be seen as a blow to the Marshal’s office, and George himself was looking a bit pale, but Fred guessed that it was Catherine’s fall that had unhinged Marshal Ben. Years before, John Donley had confided to Fred over a bottle of whiskey that he thought Ben would make an excellent husband to his daughter. And while Ben had yet to proposition Miss Donley as far as he knew, Fred had no doubt that Catherine’s injury had rattled the marshal far more than the bullet in George’s arm.

“Bob!”

Deputy Bob Wilson had been sitting nonchalantly ignoring the marshal, but now he stood to attention.

“Fred!”

Fred—who had been pacing, nervously, thinking about his wife back home—stopped and listened in anticipation. He had never been on a manhunt where the prospect of a shootout

seemed so likely, and now he felt fear and excitement in equal measure. "Are we going after the Laceys?" he asked. The question seemed unnecessary. How could they not?

"*We* are doing no such thing. *I* am going after them, and George will accompany me. You and Bob are staying here."

Bob made an indignant noise and scowled. "I'm not going to just sit idly by while the town goes to pieces!" he protested.

The Marshal paused his frenzied preparations and sized up his deputy. "Bob, you've been sitting idly by all morning," he said, suddenly cool. Bob made to retort, but Ben cut him off, his tone impatient and fiery once again. "And no. You won't sit idly by. It's not enough to round up the Laceys. When trouble rears its ugly head, there are always those who fly to it like moths to a flame. You and Fred are going to go moth collecting. Follow me."

He hitched a saddlebag across his shoulder, hoisted his Spencer out of the gun rack and strode out the door. Fred and Bob followed close behind. The three of them headed for the door, then crashed into each other comically when Ben halted suddenly. He pushed back past Bob, who was holding his nose where it had hit the back of Fred's head, and stepped to where he could see the deputies' desks. "George," he said quietly, "you sit still awhile longer. I'll be back for you in a minute." George nodded his grey head and closed his eyes. You couldn't tell by looking at him, but, Fred thought as he followed Ben out the door, I'll bet his arm still hurts like hell.

Once outside, Ben circled his chestnut mare, barking out orders as he instinctively brushed his hands around her dust-dulled fur, inspecting her for sores or loose buckles, checking the fit of her saddle, then strapping on his rifle and supplies:

"Charlie Evans. That bastard will fight anyone over a raised eyebrow. I want him locked away until we've got the Laceys

buried or behind bars. Frank Brown. If he'll light a barn on fire for pay, there's no telling what he'll do. If John Lacey has him in his pocket...well, we're not taking chances. Lock him up. Cole Vaughan, too, for good measure. He's had one violent outburst. Let's not have a second. Round them up, boys."

A gust of wind sent a devil of dirt spinning up at their faces. Ben squinted through it. "I expect George and me will be saddled up by the time you get back. Fred, you're acting Marshal in town till we get back."

The deputies stood in anticipation, but Ben had nothing more to say.

"You have your orders. Git!"

Fred gave him a salute and turned on his heels. Striding next to him, Bob had his hand to his mouth and was ogling Fred in mock admiration. Fred sighed. This was going to be a long day.

The Red Boot Saloon had been built at the height of the Tucker Mine's success, and if copper was the blood of the town, the Red Boot was its heart. Her balustrades wore copper bonnets, as did her bedposts and chairs. The bar itself wore a skirt of hammered copper. The constant application of patron's sleeves kept the stool-side edge of the bar gleaming, and the Boot's bartenders kept the rest polished to match.

If you wanted to find someone in Flintwood, you started with the Red Boot: chances were, you wouldn't have any further to look.

"You heard the man," Fred said, squinting into the afternoon sun as they turned West down Fremont Avenue. "And Bob, These are good men we're bringing in. Let me do the talking." He could hear the dust grinding under Bob's boots as the younger man skidded to a halt. What childish

game was he playing now? Surely he wasn't jealous? Without turning back or breaking stride, Fred took a gamble, "Relax, Bob. *You* can do the talking if you want."

If Bob was pouting, let him pout. But apparently Bob had something else on his mind. His voice had a smile in it when he replied, "Naw, Fred. It's like Ben said. You're the Marshal now."

"One down," thought Fred. He stopped in front of the Red Boot, still squinting into the sun. The dust-green hills in the distance seemed to waver in the heat. As the sound of Bob's footsteps caught up with him, Fred did a sharp quarter turn to face the saloon and turned his head to face Bob, who was indeed, sporting a wide grin. Fred nodded toward the saloon.

"You ready, Deputy Wilson?"

The scar over Bob's left eye gave a menacing twitch, but Bob himself was smirking. "Ready I am, Marshal Murphy, sir."

Fred leapt up the few steps to the Red Boot's front porch and leaned his back against the saloon doors. Thumbs in his belt, head hung as if in thought, he swung into the room with the doors in a casual arc. As he had suspected, Charlie Evans was at the low, round table in the corner, his back to the wall, the whites of his eyes showing on all sides. Wide. Paranoid. Without letting his eyes leave Charlie's, Fred took in the other two players.

On Charlie's right, leaning protectively over his poker hand, sat none other than Cole Vaughan. Cole was glancing warily over the tops of his cards to Joker Hanson, who sat with her back to the bar on Charlie's left. Joker got her nickname from her husband, Thomas. Though Thomas, buried in a tunnel collapse in '58, did not survive, both his wife and his pet name for her still pressed on. Maybell "Joker" Hanson had lived

comfortably on her husband's savings for nearly three years before their Wells Fargo account ran dry. Since then, she'd survived Flintwood on sheer wit and gumption. Lately this meant hustling the men at cards, which they let her do repeatedly; her skill at playing cards was matched only by her skill at playing men. She would laugh with them and joke about how they always let her win. Everyone knew she could win a hand without help. But after a year of constant repetition, perhaps the lie was becoming true. Judging by the pile of chips in front of her, Charlie and Cole had been letting Joker win in spades, today.

At the sound of hurried footsteps from above, Fred swung his gaze to the balcony. Lucy had just come running from her room with a look of excitement on her face. Her smile settled back down to a polite, professional smirk when she caught Fred's eyes, but then she looked past him and the smile returned.

The other saloon door swung open with a bang as Bob swaggered in. Without a glance around the bar, his eyes scanned the balcony until they landed on Lucy with a devious stare. The two of them moved through the space in a sort of dance, she stepping down the stairs, he pivoting as he approached the bar, never taking his eyes off of the girl.

Fred tried to ignore this spectacle and took in the rest of the lower floor. "Most of the town must be hiding or at the mine," he thought. The barstools stood empty except for Big John Templeton's unworn top hat. Big John had found the black silk hat blowing down 2nd one day and, after showing it around the bar to the town's general amusement, had taken to leaving it on the stool by the wall; a reminder that both hat and stool were already taken. Behind the bar, Frank stood working

a wet rag in circles.

“Huh,” thought Fred, “All three in one basket. This is going to be a lot easier than I thought. Or a lot harder.”

As Fred watched, Frank’s bushy brown moustache gave a single twitch, but the bartender gave no other sign that he’d seen Fred come in. Frank, Fred knew, didn’t like to get involved. Not unless he was getting paid. In which case, he was as happy to shoot a man as dig a hole.

Fred’s chest tightened. How were he and Bob going to get all three of these men into the jailhouse without a fight?

By now, Bob was leaning with his back against the bar, his eyes still locked on Lucy. Lucy, meanwhile, had stopped at the bottom of the stairs, a faint flush speaking to either the effort of navigating the treacherous descent in high heels...or to a desire for Bob that went beyond pure profit.

“Evenin’, Deputy Wilson,” Frank said, his heavy voice rolling through the near-empty room. “Would you like a drink?”

“Yes.” Bob answered, eyes still on Lucy. “I think I would. And then I’ll come back downstairs and have a shot of rye.”

Both Fred and Lucy rolled their eyes, although in Lucy’s case, the purpose was to indicate one of the empty upstairs rooms to Bob. Fred sighed deeply as Bob lit across the floorboards and chased Lucy, screaming and laughing, back up the stairs.

“Guess it’s just gonna be me,” Fred thought wryly. “One against three. Not great odds. Lucky I’m not a gambling man.” He sidled up to the poker table, where the players looked up at him, nervously. Using just thumb and forefinger, he reached to his hip and gingerly lifted his Remington from its holster. If Charlie’s eyes had seemed wide when Fred first walked in, they were now two giant moons with black holes through the

centre.

“Got room for a fourth?” he asked, his head facing Joker, but his eyes on Charlie, whose thickset jaw was now clenching and unclenching visibly. Fred’s fingers worked automatically, pulling down the Remington’s loading lever, sliding out the cylinder pin, and tilting the cylinder into his left palm. Charlie’s eyes dropped down to the polished black cylinder in Fred’s hand, to the silvery steel balls wedged atop six of pristine beds of black powder. Fred pocketed this ammunition chamber, then placed the emptied revolver, still splay-mouthed, onto the table. It lay there, sharp-beaked, like the head of a dead egret.

“You don’t play cards,” Cole objected. Though only two years younger than Fred himself, Cole had a nasal, high-pitched voice so that he might have been mistaken for an adolescent if you heard it without seeing him. His clean-shaven face bolstered this impression of youth.

“Well, now,” Fred said, “it’s been a rough day. Surely I can allow myself one hand. Deal me in, won’t you, Joker?”

“Ante’s a nickel,” Joker replied with a trace of amusement, and she began shuffling the deck.

Fred laughed. “Spot me, won’t you?” he said, “I never carry cash on the job. The temptation for folks around here to attack me is strong enough without that!” Joker laughed along with him. Cole merely chuckled in his nervous tenor. Charlie was still staring at the dismantled Remington, trying to work out its meaning.

“Come now, Fred darlin’, the people of this town love you. They’s few and far between who can wield authority without bullyin’, and they appreciate you for that.”

Fred laughed again, “Enough with the sweet talking, Joker. Let’s play cards!”

“Alright,” she snapped, in mock seriousness. “Back to

business! It's five card draw, Deputy Murphy. You owe me a dollar." She deftly built two stacks of 10 chips each from her own pile and pushed them in front of Fred.

"Much obliged."

"Ante in," Joker said, tossing in her own nickel chip. Charlie, Cole and Fred followed suit as Joker dealt four piles of cards from the top of the deck.

Cole was right: Fred wasn't much of a card player. He glanced briefly at his cards without rearranging them, noted the lack of aces and face cards, and pushed his whole stash into the pot. Seeing this deputy lose his entire stash on a single hand would hopefully replace the bulging in Charlie's jaw with a gloating smile. Anything to ease the tension.

To his surprise, Cole, believing the bluff, tossed his hand facedown with a sigh of disgust. Charlie, who was still unclear what to make of the empty gun on the table, slid a matching dollar into the pot.

"I'm out," Joker said, face-planting her own cards and scooping up the deck once more. She held it in Fred's direction, ready for his trade-in.

"Standing pat," he said, pursing his lips and bunching his cards together.

"Showdown," said Charlie, who dropped three cards face down and pushed them over to Joker. She dealt him three new cards which he snapped up, one at a time, with sharp deliberation. On the second card, a smile played at the corner of his pursed lips, but faded slightly on the third draw.

Fred smiled congenially across the table and said, "Well, since I'm already all in...check."

Charlie smiled back at him, a gap-toothed grin that utterly failed to ease the tension that had been building in Fred's shoulders ever since Bob abandoned him for a little tail. "Raise

you a quarter,” Charlie grunted deeply, and pushed another five chips to the pot. Cole, who had been studiously avoiding looking at Fred, sat stock still with his hands grasping the copper-rimmed edge of the tabletop.

“No need to be greedy, Charlie!” Fred said with a laugh. It sounded forced, this time, and he worried that perhaps he was losing the upper hand. “If I ever had it to begin with,” he thought. He looked in Charlie’s eyes again, but found no answers there. Joker busied herself pulling folded cards into a tidy pile and waited.

“Um, ok. Joker, I’ll owe you a buck twenty-five.” She nodded and threw in another five chips from her own pile. “Call,” he said.

Flashing a grin, Charlie first slapped down two kings and a nine. Then with a kind of satisfied grunt, he dropped his last two cards on the table: aces, both.

“Well...” said Fred with a resigned sigh. He splayed his cards back out into a fan and dropped them, face up, in front of him.

“Shit!” spat Charlie, to Fred’s great surprise. “Three fives. You sneaky son of a bitch.”

Cole gave a small snort, relieved to see that he had made the right choice in folding early. Breathing deeply to steady his nerves, Fred leaned forward to collect his unwanted winnings.

“Thanks for the loan,” he said to Joker, counting a dollar and twenty-five cents from the small pile and pushing it back to her.

Adrenaline rising, Fred asked, “Shall we go again?” The other two men merely glared at him. Joker handed him the deck.

“Your deal.”

With antes in, Fred let Cole cut the deck, and then

inexpertly dealt four piles of five cards each. Once again, he barely glanced at his cards before pushing in his small pile, though he did at least verify that his hand held not even a single pair. To his surprise, Cole folded again with a sneer.

“This is bullshit!” boomed Charlie, slapping his cards down hard and leaping to his feet. (Joker quietly folded, too.) “You don’t play cards! What do you want with me, Fred?”

Fred spread his arms out wide, palms up, to show he had nothing to hide. Then, to underscore the point, he decided to come clean.

“Ok, ok, calm down, Charlie. You’re right. I’m not here to play. In fact, you can take your money back.”

“Keep your fucking money. What do you want?”

Fred sighed. “Well, Charlie, we’re here on an errand for Marshal Ben.”

Charlie grunted. “*We?* I don’t see any *me*.”

Fred gulped. Somehow he’d been imagining Bob still leaning back against the bar, his twin pistols at the ready. Now he remembered that said Twins were most likely on a pile of clothing upstairs. That son of a bitch!

Swallowing hard, Fred said, “Well, now, Bob flew the coop precisely because this...” he gestured vaguely around the table and hoped that his voice still sounded steady, “...this ain’t a big deal. If it were, Bob would be standing right there with his buddies, Smith and Wesson, pointed at your head.”

Charlie gave him a skeptical look, but then sat down. “Huh. I reckon you’re right about that.”

Joker let out a small, relieved laugh. “What, pray tell, *is* this mission of yours that ain’t such a big deal, Deputy?”

“Just call me Fred, Joker. We’re all friends here.” She gave him a shrug, as if to say, “Whatever you want, big boss.”

“So yeah, Bob and me are here for a few reasons. The first

is...we want to deputise Cole here.”

“You can’t do that!” Cole stammered. Fred just stared at him for a moment, wondering how Cole could possibly know the subtler rules of the marshal’s office. Then it hit him, Cole wasn’t complaining about procedure, he was genuinely worried about getting cajoled into doing dangerous work.

Fred laughed again, this time with honest gusto. “Ok, everybody, let’s all calm down here! Cole, I didn’t say you *had* to be deputised. This can play out any number of different ways, but only one of them has you agreeing to help me carry out justice as a deputy-deputy marshal. You get a choice.”

Cole, glad to have options, leaned back in his chair for the first time since Fred had walked into the saloon. “You’re not going to make me go chasing down the Laceys,” he said, half threatening, half relieved.

“No sir!” said Fred. “George and the marshal have that under control. In fact, this particular deputisation isn’t dangerous at all.

“I don’t mind danger.”

“I ain’t impugnin’ your honour, Cole. It’s just a fact. The job I have for you does not require gunslinging.” He hoped he was right.

“What’s the job?”

“I think you know, Cole.” This time he was bluffing, pure and proper. With this crowd, all you needed was the implication of guilt, and someone was sure to come clean about something. “Real them in *slow*, Ben had once told him. “Make them see the truth *gradually*, and just maybe they won’t fight it.”

“You’re not talking about Charlie here, punching that hole in the wall upstairs, are you?” Cole was clearly grasping at straws.

“I think maybe I am, Cole.”

Charlie leapt to his feet again and boomed, “I was going to pay for that!”

“By losing all your money to Joker here?” Fred asked, gesturing to Joker’s outsized pile of hips. “Come now, Charlie, be honest.”

“I was going to pay for it!” Charlie was getting red in the face. Fred decided to double down on the sense of control he had been faking since he walked through the doors.

“Charlie,” he said, his voice forceful but quiet. “I’m having a chat with Cole right now. You’ll get your turn. There’s no need to interrupt.”

Charlie slumped back into his chair, seething this time.

Fred turned his whole body deliberately to the left. “Now look here, Cole,” he said, leaning in, “Charlie’s not really in trouble. I didn’t even know about the hole in the wall, and I’m sure he’ll pay for that. Joker will help make sure that happens, won’t you young lady?”

Joker gave a noncommittal shrug and leaned back in her own chair, arms crossed. She seemed amused at the whole turn of events.

“Charlie’s not in trouble, but we do need to put him away for a night. We all know what he gets like when tempers get stormy, and this thing with the Laceys might just become a thunderstorm.”

Cole turned to Charlie. “Yeah. You do get pretty upset, Charlie.” Charlie frowned and stared once more across the table at the castrated Remington.

“It’s not his fault,” Joker said, her voice softening into a rarely-heard sincerity. “The poor boy’s been breathing sulphuric vapours from the smelting furnace for years. Enough of those hellish fumes would upset the humours in

any man.”

Fred paused to consider this. He had always thought of Charlie as a kind of raging bull, purpose-bred for provoking bar brawls and amplifying petty disputes.

“You’re absolutely right, Joker.” Fred turned away from Cole and leaned over the table toward Charlie. He thought of his own Ann. 10 years old and defiant. The only way he ever made headway with her was to start calm, and to stay that way. “It’s not your fault that you get upset, Charlie, but you do. Only this time, it might not be bruises and cuts. This time there’s going to be bullets flying. Hell, George has already been shot.”

Fred held his breath as Charlie, himself breathing heavily, sat in thought. Finally, he raised his eyes, scanned the table, and said, “Hey, if I’m outnumbered, I’m outnumbered. If three friends of mine say I need to be locked up, then I guess I need to be locked up.”

“Just for the night,” Fred reminded him kindly. Charlie had never suggested anything like friendship between them before. He stood up and, leaving his chips on the table, calmly reassembled his Remington and holstered it, pointedly. Charlie watched him, warily, but stayed quiet, even as Fred nodded to Cole to bring him in. Cole, who had forgotten that he was now officially a sub-deputy marshal, stood up awkwardly and made to grab Charlie’s arm. He thought better of it when Charlie jerked away, and contented himself with following the larger man toward the doors.

“Take care of the chips, would you, Joker?” Fred said. Then, remembering his orders, he grabbed a stack of chips from the table and called out, “Hold on a wink, Cole.” Cole and Charlie stopped at the saloon exit.

“Hey, Frank!” Fred said, approaching the bar. The

bartender jerked his head up in surprise. “Frank, how would you like to join us?” Frank shrugged. “There’s fifty cents in it for you.” Frank pulled the rag off of his shoulder, slapped it on the counter behind the bar, and—pocketing the chips from Fred as he walked past—took position next to Cole, flanking Charlie at arms distance.

“Hey, how come Frank gets fifty cents?” whined Cole.

“Because Frank is a cold-hearted mercenary who’ll do anything for a buck. Plus, I don’t trust him enough to deputise him, like I’m doing with you.”

Frank considered this potential slight, then nodded.

Cole laughed, nervously. “Guess you’ve got a point there. Fred’s got the measure of you, Frank!” He laughed again, reached up to give Charlie a slight push, but thought better of it at the last second. “OK, Charlie. Let’s get going.”

As the four men approached the jailhouse, Bob came running after them, tucking his shirt in hastily. He was out of breath, despite the short distance between the two buildings. Fred guessed he had heard the commotion downstairs and pulled out just in time to sprint down the stairs after them. He was grinning ear to ear.

“Sorry I’m late, boys!” said Bob jocularly as he came to a stop behind the procession. Still grinning, he drew the Twins and pointed the pistols directly at Cole and Frank. “Cole, Frank, Charlie. You’re under arrest.”

Cole shrilled in protest. “I’ve been deputised. You can’t arrest me!”

Bob laughed him down. “Fred isn’t a marshal. He doesn’t have the *authority* to deputise you, you dolt.”

Cole turned to Fred, his face a mixture of anger and resentment. Charlie was beginning to shake, his thick neck

turning red. He glared at Bob, who, if it was possible, only widened his grin. Such a grin on any other man would have looked boyish. On a scarred, weathered face like Bob's, the grin looked sinister.

"Cole! Charlie! Where are we?" Fred shouted suddenly. He let the question sink in for a moment. "We're in Flintwood, middle-of-nowhere. The war's over, and we're part of a new country, I guess, but the *Union*... you can't *see* it from here! This is the goddam wild west, and you know what that means? It means that authority isn't given, it's taken. So Cole, you can either take the authority I'm offering and help prevent unnecessary violence in this town, or you can join Bob and act up like a 2 year-old. What's it going to be?" He could tell that he had played his cards right. Charlie was just staring at Cole, ready to follow his lead. Frank stood calmly by, secure in his fifty cent fee. And Cole simply nodded, beaten.

"C'mon, Charlie," he said. "Ignore Bob. We're going to go spend the night in the marshal's office."

The three of them walked into the jailhouse with Fred close behind. Bob stood in the middle of the street, guns still drawn, looking bemused but unabashed.

"I'm still not putting away my guns!" he called out lamely, then followed them inside.

chapter eight

Jaysen O'Dell

“MARSHAL...?”

“IT’S BEN.”

“NO sir, it’s Marshal. I’ve been around long ‘nough t’ know that showin’ r’spect all the time makes sure r’spect is what evr’one sees all the time.”

“I get that, but...”

“No sir, no buts. Marshal it is and Marshal it’ll be ‘till I’m not yur dep’ty.”

“What’ll I call you?”

“Well sir, as I see it, yur right to call me anything yus want. I’m contented with dep’ty, ur George ur Bell ur ...” For the first time since they left Fleetwood Deputy George Bell stopped to consider his words. “Hmm... Well, sir... R’spects funny that yus gets what yus gives.”

“Well,” said Deputy Bell. “Well said.”

Marshal Wright lifted his hat to wipe his the dust and sweat off his brow.

“You know we have this conversation every time?”

“Yes, sir. One or t’other of us should be less stubborn”

“Well, George, I’m not going to give in, and I s’pect you’re not going to give in, so I guess we will have this conversation a

few more times.”

George Bell remembered all the Sheriffs and Marshals he had served under. This Benjamin Wright was the only one he really respected. He wanted to be “friends” with the Marshal, but having seen more than one man die in the line of duty, George knew that any friendship would be short lived.

Kate, Ben’s mare, glistened in the fall sun. The dry heat of September was tempered by the shortened days and the breeze coming from the west as they crested a ridge. Laid out before them was the undulating high desert of the eastern Arizona territory. Rugged terrain that either alienated or enamoured the souls of men.

“If I was them, I’d head east t’ward New Mexico territory.”

“Yes sir... Yud do that. I’d do that. But these boys... Yu think they think? They know the indian territory and I lay a bottle on Fort Apache.”

“Still, we could lose them in New Mexico.”

“No sir. No, we won’t. Don’t forget I still got some folks we can rely on in New Mexico.”

“That’s what I was hoping. You bring a lot to the table on a trip like this.”

“Mmmm.”

Looking west, three thin threads of smoke rose in the distance.

“Craven’s place to the north.”

“Yes sir, and that’s them folks from Kentucky at the southern smoke.”

“Didn’t see anything east. Looks like I owe you a bottle.”

“If that’s them, yu’ll be buying me that bottle at the Red Boot.”

They let the horses pick their way down the western slope of the ridge. Bell started into a story about chasing a gang of

horse thieves who expected to be welcomed by the Apache's in the foot hills only to find that thieves were not welcomed. Ben had heard it before and was lost in thought. Catherine Donley always seemed to occupy his idle thoughts.

Kate stopped short. Ben trusted Kate more than any man.

“Deputy, keep sharp.”

It was unnecessary. George already had his Colt out and at the ready. Years of experience had taught them both that a heading your horse would save your life. Ben had placed his Wells Fargo coach gun across the saddle horn. If it was a rattle snake then he was ready. If it was a man he would present an intimidating front. With Bell and that Colt as backup he did not need to affect the confidence clearly seen in his face.

“Mmmph.” An Indian appeared from behind the brush a few yards up the trail.

“Hello”. In all the years of dealing with Navaho, Apache and the other tribes in the territory, Ben had never gotten comfortable in his relations with them.

“Hello. You are looking for them.”

“Three men.”

“Hair on faces are not like yours. Two have more, one has none.”

“Sir, that sounds like them.” Deputy Bell had holstered his pistol and slowly come as close as the narrow trail would allow.

“The men you seek continued on.”

“Thank you. There's a reward in Flintwood.”

“Tobac?”

“I have a plug.” George had his tobacco pouch out and handed it to the Indian.

“I am grateful.” Removing a plug, he cut it in half and returned half to the pouch. “The reward as payment.”

Walking between the horses, the indian continued up the trail.

“That’s some mighty expensive tobacco that indian just bought from you.”

“Joe and I go way back. He’ll get square with me a’fore too long.”

“Bell... Sometimes think you’re a lying son of a gun, but then... Joe, huh?”

“Yup.”

Kate resumed her way down the tail.

Kate stopped short. Didn’t the Lacy boys have a place east of town?”

“Yup. Another reason I thought east was the direction to head. Joe reliable?”

“I’d take his word over most white men. Never given me a reason to to feel otherwise.”

“What’s the problem then?”

“Well, if I had a place to the east that I knew was secure, why would I run west?”

“Because you have a place you think is more secure.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. They have an extra man and we don’t now what for guns and fortification.”

Ben kept an eye on the ribbon of smoke. His mind was working on how to best scout the area without being seen. “We sure could use Joe right about...”

Kate started and took several steps back.

“Hello. Now you are looking for me.”

“Hey Joe. You still like playing your tricks.”

“I walk straight down when I realised only you two. How will you trap them?”

“I was hoping you could help us with that.”

“Mmmph. Wait here.”

George dismounted and sat on a bolder. Ben was always amazed that a man as large as George could be so graceful. Ben pulled some jerky from his pocket and took a drink from his canteen. There was no point being impatient. Joe would return when he was certain of the situation. That was the way indians did things. You did not rush them. They did not tell you the plan until they knew it was the right plan.

“They are in a cabin. One door. Cliff for a wall. One path to door. No escape.”

“Jeesh Joe! Sneaking up on men like that.” Ben could not hide his surprise a Joe suddenly showing up right at his back.

“Marshal, I think we should go on alone. Joe... well...”

“I understand what you are saying.”

“I would like store credit. No whiskey. Need supplies.”

George was writing on a piece of paper with a charcoal pencil. “Marshal, yu’ll need to mark this.”

“ ‘Provide credit to indian called Joe who has this. Put it on Marshal’s tab. Joe said no whiskey.’ Short and simple. Joe, I hope this will help. Smythe is a good man. Go to the back door to avoid problems with the town.” Ben handed the paper to Joe.

Joe looked at the paper and tucked it in his pouch. “Good hunting.”

Ben and George looked down on the cabin from the top of the ridge. Just as Joe had said, the cabin was built in a shallow box canyon. The back wall of the cabin was the canyon wall. There was only one door. No windows. The mouth of the canyon was narrow enough that two men could prevent anything from escaping the canyon.

“Lacey! This is Marshal Wright. We’ve got the canyon blocked. Come on out!”

“Dang it! Was it the horses?”

“Nope. Fire.”

Three men exited the cabin. Gun belts held over head. As they approached the end of the canyon, George collected all the pistols. “Saddle up and lead us home. By the way, I owes one of yus for this.” George was pointing at the bandage on his arm.

“Sorry dep’ty,” John said. “Gotta side with blood.”

“Yus shot me. You gotta pay for that.”

The ride back to Flintwood was uneventful except for the few times George harassed John about being shot. A water stop for the horses was the only interruption.

As Deputies Bell, Murphy and Wilson put the Laceys into a cell, Marshal Wright sat at his desk to look at a few papers that had not been there before he left. Bills from the general store for ammo and other supplies, a few meals from Red Boot Saloon, and one from the farrier for Kate’s new shoes. With the demise of the copper mine he knew that he needed to be careful with expenses. He had to pay these debts in cash or his scrip would be no good when he needed it most. “Damn one these one trick towns, how do you build a place with only one leg to stand on?”

At least working on the range you had everything you needed. Maybe, if he could interest Catherine, he would start a ranch of his own. He had some money saved up. Free ranging his stock would reduce his need for land and leave him...

“Damn that woman! She’s like laudanum.” He thought. At least no one would fault him for his addiction to her. Setting his mind back to the present he looked at the men lounging about the room outside his office.

“Ben, What you got fur us nixt?” Fred Murphy was always the leader of the group. Ben was painfully aware that Fred felt he was supposed to be the Marshal. Luckily, Ben and Fred worked that out before the election. Fred was here for his wife and daughter. “A place they can be proud to call home,” was his answer to Ben’s question of “Why are you doin’ this job?” That’s when Ben realised he needed to keep Fred on his side.

Ben looked at the men as they filed in to stand in front of him. A family man, a soldier, a man who’s life was nothing more than the badge on his chest.

“Deputies, I’m lookin’ at the state of things and I have to say, you’ve done right by this town. A full house back there, some quiet on the streets, and, if I figured this correct, we are not wastin’ the money we’ve been given to protect our town. I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye, but I think you’ve done right by me. Head on over to the Red Boot and get yourself a drink and a meal. Keep it sober. Tell ‘m to put it on my tab. And Bell, have doc take a look at that arm again. I saw you holding it back there.”

As the they started to gather their things, Ben looked at the papers again and said “Fred, hold back. We’ve some business”.

As the Bob and George filed out of the building Ben was thinking what to do with all the trouble locked up in the cells. He had an idea, but it was critical that Fred agreed to it.

“Fred, I have a problem. I don’t think you will like the solution, but I need you on my team.”

“Sounds om’nous. How bad is this idea of yours?”

“Pretty bad. I’m sure you won’t like it. I’ve been thinking. When I go back there in a few minutes, Charlie, Cole and Frank are going to be... obst’nate. *What’d we do?* It’s a fair question.”

“Well Ben, they make trouble. Drinkin’ and stealin’ and disruptin’ the peace. I’m sure they’re guilt of something.”

“Me too. But why? Because they’ve no work.”

Fred thought for a moment. “What’s a man with nothin’ to do goin’ to do? I see your point.”

“If I made ‘em kind of dep’ties you’d be in charge. Make ‘em keep the streets clean of people like themselves, and other things that keep ‘em busy and occupied. Hell, paint the cells so they know the other option. Do that, an’ if they lift tobacco plug or a box of ammo then no one will care. We set down some rules and you get to make the town a bit better.”

“I get your point. Not sure I like it. But I guess the worst thing that happens is we lock ‘em up over agin. I say go for it.”

“You hold here while I go and see what we can work out.”

Ben walked to the cells and leaned on George’s desk. The staring contest only lasted a few seconds.

“What’er we in here for?” Cole Vaughan was always quick to talk. No patience in that man.

“Because you’re a nuisance to my town.”

“Says who?” This time it was Frank Brown. The one man that could just bust the wall down by running into it. A horse of man that seemed to get in trouble only because he needed a place to sleep and food to eat.

“Says me. You’re all just this side of vagrants. You steal from my stores. You threaten my citizens. That makes you my problem.”

“Who made you the owner of this town?” Charlie Evans was just angry at everything. All the time. He would be the most likely to wind up back in this cell even with a badge on his chest.

“The people did. When they decided that I should have the Marshal’s badge. They pay me for protection. You cause a

problem with them, you have a problem with me.”

Let it sit a moment Ben thought. Let them think I’m going to keep them here a bit.

“Sheriff ...”

“It’s Marshal.” Ben suspected that for all that bulk there wasn’t much inside Frank’s head.

“Marshal, what I got to do to get out of here?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. You men can’t be trusted in my town. You’re idlers with no one keeping you busy.”

“Ain’t my fault that damn’ed mine shut down.” Charlie was less of a problem when he had a job and he knew it.

“I know. I think that’s part of the problem. You need something to do with your idleness and I need some men to deal with things. Here’s what I’m proposing. You men work for me. You do what you are told, when you are told. You get greedy, or slap anyone around I’ll shoot you on sight. What say you?”

“Agreed.”

“Works for me.”

“Can I sleep here?”

“No. Let’s go.”

Leading the three men to the front, Fred watched them closely. One at a time Ben called them into his office and shut the door.

“You’re working for us now. I get that you may not understand that ‘need’ and ‘want’ are different. Let me help you: You wipe one of my merchants out, make it so they can’t do business, and I’ll string you up on the spot. Other than that, I don’t care what you take. Shootin’ a gun at someone will get you killed. Heed my warning. Wait out there with Dep’ty Murphy.”

Only Frank said anything. After thinking a few moments

he asked “Can I get me a bath and a meal and a place to sleep?”

“You’d make a perfect dep’ty, Frank.”

As Frank left the office Ben called out “Dep’ty Murphy, Get these men over to Red Boot for a drink and a meal. Get them a weeks pay and show their mark to all the shops. And once Frank’s had his steak, put him up in the hotel. And let the other dep’ties know who’s side these men are on.”

A cheap trade for peace in his town. Fred will keep them in line. Frank will enforce Fred’s will on the others with his hammer of fist. All he needed to do now was figure out how to get Catherine to see him as more than a good man.

Damn that woman.

chapter nine

Sue Cowling

MARSHAL WRIGHT HAD ALREADY stepped out of the door of his office onto Fremont Avenue when he saw Sam Caldwell riding towards him, too late to go back inside and look busy, he shrugs and leans back against the door frame and waits for him, he already guessed at what Sam wants to talk about. Marshal had his own thoughts on that but he would give the lad a chance to prove himself.

Sam made quite an impression sitting on the brown mare, considering his height, somehow in his buckskins and with his wide-brimmed stetson hat thrown back he gave off an air of confidence, one the Marshal had not seen before. As he gets nearer the Marshal can hear the rowels of the spurs jingling, but then frowns when he sees the dragoon revolver holstered on his right hip.

Sam stops the horse in front of the Marshal and the mare stands still, just a twitch of the tail as he dismounts and ties the reins to the post. Sam runs his hands over the mares back to settle her, and then turns towards the Marshal.

“Hey Sam I am guessing you're here to see me?” he looks pointedly at the gun, never happy to see them being worn about town, especially by a kid like Sam.

Sam walks up the steps, appearing slightly self-conscious briefly touches the gun, stopping in front of him, clearing his throat and wiping his hands on his pants.

“Yea Marshal, I thought I might be able to help you out like,” he pauses, hoping Marshal might speak, when he gets no response he continues, “what with George being shot, after your break out, was a bit unlucky that was for George, left him a bit indisposed and you down on a deputy.” Again he paused, before adding, “I was thinking maybe you could use some extra help, like maybe a new deputy?”

Sam hitched his pants up, and the Marshal smiles at him. “Well, kid you know thats a dangerous business, that is, being a deputy. It comes with a lot of responsibility, and I am not sure that you have all the necessary skills to carry that out.” He paused, but Sam never said a word, playing him at his own game. “Know what I am saying here lad, I need me a skilled man to do that job.” He eyes Sam up and down adding, “You still living rough out at that abandoned construction on Gila Avenue?”

“Yes, sir I am but if I had me a real job I could soon find me a room to rent. I am sure that I could do the job, if you would just let me have a chance, It's my dream to be a marshal one day sir.”

“Son I am not saying you can't do the job, but I sure as hell need to see the skills you have to keep the towns people safe before I can hand over that badge to you. I need to know that once that gun smoke clears, I don't have me a bunch of dead onlookers, get my meaning, I sure as hell don't need the town mobbing my office?” He made a sound that came out a half growl and half laugh, trying to soften his words. “It's not what you would call a job with good prospects lad, good likely hood of getting injured or killed yourself. You need to have the guts

to do what you got to do, understand?”

Sam looked him in the eye, smiling slightly, “I do sir, let me show you what I can do?”

The Marshal seemed to contemplate that for a moment then says, “Okay, show me what you got, and try not to kill or maim anyone in the process Sam.”

Sam laughs as he turns and walks down the wooden steps and out onto the dusty road.

“Do you see that old metal signs up there Marshal?” Sam went to pull out his revolver, but was stopped by the Marshals shout.

“No lad you're not shooting off live rounds in this town, don't care how skilled you are. You leave that gun right where it is, and I will get you a couple of empty ones you can use to show me your skills with. Anyone can fire a gun Sam, it's the skill and the speed and the instinct to know when to use it that I need to see.”

With that he turned back into his office and went to the Gun case, unlocking it and removing a Wells Fargo short barrelled shotgun, a couple of colts and a Spencer repeating rifle, all empty, and carried them back outside, dropping them on the ground at his feet.

Scratching at his stubble the Marshal leans back up against the door frame and points at them with his boot. “Okay lad show us what your capable of.”

Sam walks back up the steps, and after looking at them for a moment picked up the two colts, tucks them in his leather belt and steps back down onto the dusty road. Turning so he is facing the Marshal he draws both guns out quickly, spinning them, one in each hand keeping all the power and control right there in his fingers, he spins them behind him and in front at great speed, not dropping either of them, and then puts them

back in his belt.

He turns and walks away from the Marshal about ten paces, before twisting to face him. Leaning his body slightly back his thumbs placed over both hammers he draws them back while moving his body further back at the same time as drawing both guns, firing just as the guns are clear of his belt.

“Not bad Sam, you picked up some nice handwork there lad, not bad at all, have to say that impresses me.”

Sam was clearly pleased with the praise, and walked back to the pile of guns and putting down the colts, picks up the Spencer repeating rifle. Walking over to his mare he unties her and jumps up on her back, holding the rifle down at his side, he turns the mare, patting her on the neck, an action the Marshal notices, and rides off up the street, leaving a trail of dust clouds in his wake.

“Dam weather, could do with some rain to settle this dust” mutters the Marshal. At that moment he sees Sam cantering down the street at speed towards him, and watches as he raises the rifle to shoot repeatedly at an old gnarled tree just before the Marshals office.

As he comes to a halt in from of the Marshal Sam dismounts again and ties his mare up to the railing, before walking back over to stand in front of the marshal, dropping the shooter back onto the pile of guns.

“Nice work Sam, and I like the way you care about your mare, all good qualities lad. Thing is have you got the gut to kill a man, not that I am asking you to prove that, but thing is when push comes to shove could you do it?”

“Marshal, I am quick on the draw, can shoot while riding at speed, I am good with a knife, I know the law, and what I don’t know I am a fast learner, I can learn. I just need a chance to prove to you I can do this.”

“Wow slow down Sam, I can see how eager you are, but lets not get ahead of ourselves, it's not just the skills, it's not just about speed or sleight of hand lad. You have never killed anyone have you? Never looked a man in the eye and shot him down dead.”

“No sir, I have never pulled trigger on anyone...”

The Marshal could see the hesitation and his eyes narrowed, there seemed to be a bit more going on here then he knew about.

“Well, lad, seems to me you don't feel very confident about pulling the trigger on a live person? It's ok shooting at trees and bottles, but that is not going to solve our problems with lawbreakers. I need to know you could stand there and back me up Sam, kill someone, shoot them down cold blood, if you had to?” He paused, looking keenly at Sam for some hint of what was going on in his mind. Then said, You done a bit of travelling before you arrived here, you must have seen a few gunfights along the way, maybe even been involved in some?

Sam shuffled his feet, looking any which way but at the Marshal. “ Hanging, I saw a hanging when I was a kid...”

“Yes, well Sam it happens, its the quickest deterrent we have, for keeping the bad people off the streets and the good ones safe.”

“No Marshal, it sure isn't right, it was a lynch mob, they hanged that man for thieving a horse, a bloody horse. My Da he made me watch, said would make a man of me, teach me right from wrong. All it did, was it made me piss my pants.” Sam wiped back of his hand across his nose, and carried on.

“ They took him, put a noose around his neck, under a huge oak tree he was, I remember him standing there on the back of that wagon terrified, his family were screaming and crying, little kids he had, and his wife was with child, then he

looked at me, caught my eye just as they drove that wagon away. He never died instantly he hung there and we watched as he took a last gasp, like vultures we were, all of us. I am never going to forget the look in his eyes as he looked at me, despair, sadness and fear.”

Sam looked the Marshal in the eye now, “So yeah I have seen death, never caused it, although it felt like I was partly to blame for the hanging by just being there, and I never want to see another hanging in my life. Its wrong, there has to be a better way then stringing a man up for pinching a horse?”

“Well, lad thats part of the job, we need to clear the town of the bad influences, and seems to me you don’t agree with that?”

“Well, Marshal I have strong opinions about hanging, but if you're asking me if I would shoot down a man in cold blood, I am telling you I can do that,” he hesitated, “I mean I could do that if he deserved to die, if you just give me a chance to prove myself.”

At that moment there was a shout and they both turned as a man run out of the Red Boot Saloon, closely followed by another man shouting, “Stop, thief.”

Seeing an opportunity, Sam stepped out onto the street in front of the man just as he reached him, causing him to falter, seeing the size of Sam he smirked, and at that moment Sam brought up his fist and hit him under his chin, knocking him to the ground, then quickly pulling his gun from his holder he knocked him senseless with the butt of it.

The Marshal was right beside him and grabbed the man by his collar and hauling him to his feet led him of to one of the cells, followed closely by the man who was explaining to him what had happened.

Marshal called back over his shoulder, “ThanksSam just

wait there, and we will finish this talk.”

Sam walked over to his mare, and looked around him, except for that bit of excitement, it was quiet, almost too quiet, the calm before the storm maybe?

At that moment Marshal appeared, followed by the man who had been calling out thief, Sam did not recognise him, but recently there had been a few strangers in town. He looked at Sam, nodding his head, “Thanks” he muttered and walked back to the saloon.

Marshal come over to him, “Sam well done back there, you did a good job stoping him.” He paused, “But lad this job is not for you, I need a man with the guts to do what needs to be done, and I don’t get the impression that you do have the courage to do the job.”

In a raised voice Sam spoke “I stopped that man, I can use a gun, is that not good enough proof that I can?”

“No lad it's not, when it comes down to it you're not the right person for the job, sorry Sam but thats my decision.”

Sam pulled the reins free of the post and jumped up on the mare, who kicked out at the rough treatment, “You're a cussed fool, Marshal, thats all I can say” and turning the mare he rode away back towards Gila Ave.

chapter ten

Linda Weeks

“COME ON FRANKIE BOY, get a move on!” Charlie swayed in the saddle as his mare pranced her two front feet in the dust outside Frank Brown’s front door. His horse exchanged mutual glances with the young colt already saddled and tethered there. It had been a short ride from Charlie’s house, but she’d been having a happy time in the barn eating her hay and hadn’t taken kindly to being suddenly disturbed, saddled up and ridden out into the sweltering sunlight.

Charlie could smell coffee and heard movement inside Frank’s house but there was no reply. Cursing, he swung down out of his saddle and threw the horse’s reins carelessly over the wooden rail outside the porch. His horse shook her head and blew through her nostrils, then settled her weight comfortably onto her back legs. The other horse swung his head round to acknowledge her presence.

“BROWN!” bellowed Charlie, thumping on the door. “We’re going to be late!” The door opened slowly, and Charlie swiftly pushed it further inwards with his foot, the latch catching Frank on the back of his hand as he did so.

“Keep your voice down!” grumbled Frank, rubbing his hand in annoyance. “The whole town will hear you!”

“What do I care? We’re just going out for a little ride, ain’t we! Nothing against the law in that, not so far as I know. What’s taking you so long?”

“I’m having second thoughts about this whole thing. I don’t trust that Marshal to turn a blind eye to whatever we’re going to do, and I’ve no wish to go back in that jail. I’ve got a job now; barman’s given me a chance and I don’t want to mess it up. Have the Laceys said what the plan is?”

“Nope, John said nothing to me. C’mon, let’s go and we’ll find out. Cole said he’d meet us there.”

Frank had planned to offer Charlie some of his freshly made coffee - Lord knows, he looked like he needed it this morning - but one glance at Charlie’s stubbly face decided him against it. They might as well go and get this over with. The Laceys would be waiting; no point aggravating them. He grabbed his hat, came out and fastened his door with a bolt attached to a piece of string, though there was hardly anything in his cabin worth stealing. His horse nuzzled his shoulder as he walked past and Frank responded automatically by scruffing the colt’s mane just behind his ears.

The two men swung into their saddles almost simultaneously, but though Charlie had his foot in the stirrup first the younger man was already seated by the time Charlie landed heavily in his saddle, causing his horse to shift and snort in annoyance.

“You could do with losing a couple of pounds!” Frank grinned, cheekily, and Charlie replied with something unprintable.

The men turned their horses’ heads with a practised one-handed movement of the reins and set off towards John Lacey’s house, pulling the brims of their hats down to shade their eyes from the glaringly orange sun. They were dressed

alike, and seen from a distance they could almost have been mistaken for brothers, but close up it was obvious that they were made in different moulds. Charlie was the shorter and stockier of the two, and Frank had an easy grace, and brighter eyes even though he'd worked late into the night after chucking out time at the Red Boot saloon.

He wasn't averse to alcohol but hardly ever drank it. "I've seen what this gut-rot stuff does to you!" was his usual retort, though usually only when the bar owner wasn't around to hear him. He'd rather sell it than drink it, and this morning he'd woken refreshed and with a clear head. Unlike Charlie, who was now slumping and lolling in his saddle, with his chest and stomach making rumbling burps and belches.

Half an hour later after traversing what some people called desert but which was full of scrub, shrubs and flowering cacti, they arrived at John Lacey's place, where three other horses were already tethered to a water trough in the shade of a tree, cropping the short grass.

"See!" growled Charlie, shooting a look of annoyance at Frank. "We're late!" Frank shrugged.

Frank and Charlie's horses had seen the grass and quickened their pace, neighing a welcome to the other horses, who briefly looked up and then resumed their grazing.

Once their horses had been given a drink and tethered with the others, Frank and Charlie made their way up the two steps to John's little veranda. It wasn't a big house, but it was easy to see that John had come to Flintwood at just the right time and done quite well for himself in the early days. Now that things were in decline, however, he'd had to look around for other ways of making money. And the Marshal's plan was just the thing. He'd made coffee, and Charlie grabbed the pot, poured out a mugful and downed the hot drink in three gulps, as

though it hardly touched the sides. Then he filled up his mug again and drank the liquid more slowly, while Frank sipped his. The others had finished theirs already.

“What are we doing, then?” Charlie asked John.

John had a natural air of authority that had nothing to do with the fact that everyone had come to his house and it was his idea. Well, the Marshal’s idea, but John had jumped at the chance to make some easy money and had been quick to share it with the others.

John glanced at Frank and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Yep, we’ve decided already. We’re doing the Red Boot”, he said firmly, in a voice that brooked no argument. But Frank argued, and Cole grunted in surprise.

Frank’s eyes widened. “No!”

“Oh yes! It’s perfect. You have the keys, you know where the safe is. Heck, you can open the safe! Your boss will be out of town this afternoon, those girls will be upstairs asleep, or getting themselves beautified ready for when these two pay them a visit tonight—“ he broke off to point his thumb at his brothers, who smirked and grinned “—and you’re going to go right in there and come out with the easy money.”

“No! I am not! You want me to take all the risks, lose my job, land back in jail? They’ll know it was me!”

“He’s right, John” said William, while Cole and Michael nodded in agreement. “This whole thing could be a setup. What if Wright double-crosses us? He’d probably get some kind of reward for catching the lot of us and throwing us in jail.”

“Well, that’s why we’re testing his plan. This way only one of us gets caught if it all goes wrong.”

“Yeah, me! No, I’m not doing it.”

John took advantage of his extra inch in height to glare

down at Frank. He wasn't used to being thwarted, and especially not in front of others. "We already talked about this before you got here," he said, "and we decided."

Charlie slammed down his mug.

"You can see his point," he said. "What about one of the banks instead?"

"Rob a bank!" John was incredulous, and Cole looked nervous. "For our first job? You crazy or drunk or both?"

"I ain't neither," replied Charlie, sticking out his lower jaw, though clearly that was not true.

"Look," said William, "let's all just simmer down."

John took a step back and Frank leaned against the door frame.

William outlined his plan, which was that three of them would walk into the bank with masks over their faces and demand a sum of money from one of the tellers, whoever was nearest the door. The other three would keep watch, just in case the Marshal had set a trap for them. They wouldn't use guns unless absolutely necessary.

"I still vote for the store", said Cole.

"We already decided against that earlier", replied John, but looked as though he was re-considering the idea.

"Well, maybe," he said slowly, "I reckon that would work. We'll watch until it's quiet. Frank and Cole can keep a lookout and hold all the horses round the back of Fremont and Third. Call like a pack of coyotes if you see any trouble. You -" looking at William "- and you two -" gesturing towards Charlie and Michael "- come in with me. We won't take risks, we won't take everything, just like the Marshal says. Then back to this place to divvy up whatever we get."

"And nobody gets hurt," added Frank.

John's hand moved involuntarily to the knife that he kept

strapped to his waist. "Not unless absolutely necessary," he said, moving towards the door. "Come on."

The men followed him outside, mounted their reluctant horses and headed back to town.

"Must go to the bank in a bit, Bethie!" Steve Mason called to his wife, as he heaved the last barrel of flour off the back of the wagon and expertly rolled it into the storeroom. "Can you watch the front of the store?"

"I sure will, honey" his pretty young wife replied, coming into the counter area from the kitchen behind. She was holding their ginger cat, who was purring contentedly. Steve went to the front door and turned the sign from Closed to Open.

"I'm a lucky man!" he said, smiling at her, and looking forward to later when they would eat the hot apple pie which he could already smell in the oven. "My wife's still beautiful after all these years AND a good cook!" he joked. Mary-Beth smiled back at him. They'd only been married a few months since April, not years, and already she was carrying a secret which she would tell him about that evening. She'd wait until -

"Give us the money! Now!"

Steve whirled round from the front door to face four masked men. Mary-Beth clung to the counter as the cat jumped out of her arms and ran back into the kitchen.

"And nobody gets hurt!"

Steve realised that he was looking at three Colt Army Revolvers. He also saw the glint of metal in the hand of the man who had spoken. The fourth man had no weapon but had big fists, and Steve knew that he'd never be able to take him on and survive.

"How did you get in?" Steve demanded, though realising

that he'd stupidly left the double back doors to the storeroom open. They must have been watching him unload the supplies, and then crept in behind him.

"No!" shouted Mary-Beth; "please don't shoot us! Please don't take all our money!"

One of the other men stepped forward from behind the leader, and just touched the brim of his hat.

"We're right sorry, Ma'am," he said. "We don't want to hurt nobody none."

"And we won't take it all," said the third gang member. "Just a hundred dollars, maybe?"

"Bethie," said Steve. "Stand aside; let them take the money."

Mary-Beth backed away as the man in front of the others lifted the flap at the end of the counter and walked round towards the till. He counted out some notes and threw in some coins and went back into the store. All four gang members looked up as what sounded like two coyotes fighting came clearly from outside across the street behind them.

"Our thanks, Ma'am," said the leader, as he put his gun and knife away. He took the bag and followed the other men out of the rear door. John glanced up and saw Marshal Ben Wright watching them from the corner across the street, but he didn't call out or try to stop them.

With hearts pounding, the men ran to their horses and mounted up, John still clutching the bag.

Ben walked slowly round to the front of the store and in through the door.

"They're in a mighty hurry," he remarked, casually, as twenty-four hooves kicked up a dust-storm as they clattered down the street.

Steve was comforting his distraught wife, who was

trembling in her thin summer dress. “Marshal! Did you see them? We’ve been robbed!”

The Marshal walked calmly up to the counter. “Get away with much?”

Mary-Beth’s quivering fingers pointed to the till, which was still open.

“Did they take the lot?”

“No — about a hundred, they said.”

Ben sauntered around the counter and looked in the till. “You got more than that left. Did they hurt either of you?”

“Well, no — but — aren’t you going to go after them?” Steve asked. “I’ll come with you — we can catch them if we’re quick.”

“And each get a bullet in the head for our trouble?” said the Marshal. “No. I reckon you’ve got off lightly. Whatever they took, letting them keep it is cheaper than getting shot would have been. Best leave things be.”

chapter eleven

B. Morris Allen

HANGING IS A TERRIBLE way to kill a man. When you hang a man, he jerks and sways and kicks like a dancing puppet. He fouls himself, but his manhood swells like he wants a woman. On all sides, there's a crowd watching, jeering, crying. It takes a long time to die and most of the crowd leave before the end. There's no dignity in a hanging. It's a lousy way to kill a man. It's not a great way to die, either.

Sam Campbell had seen a hanging, once, of a horse thief. He wondered now what had driven the man to crime, and whether being poor and at loose ends might have had something to do with it.

In the Red Boot Saloon, the shadow of a hanging chandelier crept spiderlike across the wall and trapped the barman's shadow in its arms. Sam looked away, to where a ray of sunset bathed his glass in blood. He took a sip. Blood and whisky, that was how to die. Not hanging.

"Blood and whisky, Red," he told the barman. "Blood and whisky."

"Got the one, soon as not, you'll get the other." Red laid a casual hand on the stagecoach gun in plain sight behind the bar. "But not in here. Not my blood, anyhow." He smiled.

“Not my whisky either, 'less you pay for it. Then it's yours to do as you like.”

“Aw, let it go, Red. I'm not looking for a fight. I'm looking for work. Honest work.” Never hang a Caldwell. “Never hang a Caldwell, Red. Only useful thing my brother ever said.”

“And where's he now?” A sceptical eyebrow suggested gallows might be involved. “There a poster in the jail for a Babyface Caldwell? Fresh out of mama's apron strings like you?”

“Hey!” It was a token protest. At nineteen, Sam's face was already settling in to a lean and leathery look that belied a childhood stocking dry goods in a Tucson store. “Brother's a ranch hand. Doesn't look at all like me.” He took a big swallow of whisky and coughed as the harsh liquor cut a new channel down his throat.

“Whyn't you go do that, then? That's honest work. Or go buy yourself a pick, and see if you can find a new copper vein.”

Sam snorted. “Hell, Red, I gotta feel the sun. Regular outdoorsman, I am. You want copper, go mine it yourself. You got the hair for it.”

Red slid a hand through thinning auburn hair. “Not so much as I used to. 'Sides, I don't give a damn about copper. Not until it turns into silver. Speaking of which.”

“You're a mercenary, Red.” Sam dug out a half-dime, leaving the other one lonely in his pocket. “And your whiskey's expensive.” He downed the rest. Probably best to not to let your throat rest too much between swallows. The first one hardened the throat for the rest, or hurt so much it just gave up. Just the thing before hanging, probably.

“Can't pay, don't drink.”

“New coins coming, I heard – part copper. You'll be taking

copper whether you like it or not.”

“Are you drunk already? Damn, but you're a lightweight.” The barman peered suspiciously at Sam's empty glass, his second of the day. “Flintwood's a *copper*-mining town, or used to be. We know all about those coins. You heard that here in town or I'm a priest.” Red took up the empty whisky glass and dunked it in a bucket under the bar before setting it on a towel with two others. “Look, son, you been telling me you're a good shot with a rifle. You don't want to dig, why'n't you ask the Marshal for a job? He's always saying he could use more deputies.”

“Yeah. Good idea. Maybe I'll do that.” Do it again. Marshal Wright had turned him down earlier that same day. He'd looked Sam up and down, and said only 'I don't think so, son,' in the kindly voice a man might use when his youngest grandson asked to play with a Colt. “Good idea, Red.” Two shots of whisky hadn't burned away the shame, and it hadn't given him the courage to face Wright again, either. All it had done was take money out of a threadbare pocket and leave him a little unsteady on his feet. “Guess I'll take a piss 'fore I do that.”

Red jerked a thumb toward a door under the upstairs balcony. “Shitter's out there. Don't go pissing against the wall, either; the girls don't like it.”

“Sure.” Which girls, Sam wondered, as he made his way down the bar. He kept one hand smooth on the counter to offset the whisky, which seemed to have jumbled his senses just the teeniest bit. At the corner, he paused to take stock. Against the farther wall, a player piano, now silent. Above it, a wooden staircase climbed at a perfectly ordinary angle. Not so drunk, maybe. He could probably have climbed the stairs himself, if he'd had the money for a room.

A group of miners came in from the twilight and took possession of the tables toward the front of the saloon. He could hear their laughter and their call for drinks as he went down a short hallway and out into the twilight.

A full moon coated the sturdy wooden outhouse in silver a few paces away. "Like a little palace," he said, fumbling open the door. The moonlight flooded in through an open hatch in the roof. The effect wasn't quite so magical with the smell mixed in, but it helped his aim.

"Good shot," he said, buttoning up. "Get the Marshal out here," he said, "show him my long gun." He chuckled and pushed his way out the door again and into fresh air. "My long gun," he repeated. Whisky made a good joke funnier, at least. "Show him my *long* gun." He fumbled with his buttons again.

"Keep it quiet out there, hey?" A golden voice called out to him from the silver moon. "Girl's got a right to wake up easy, don't I?" The voice came from an open window, he realised, from somewhere in the saloon's moon-pearled upper floor. The silver palace of cheer and comfort and ... girls?

"Sorry," he whispered. He tried again, a little louder. "Sorry!"

"What?" Dark blonde hair emerged from the window to gleam in the moonlight like copper. "Oh. Sure." The hair went back in, along with an indescribably frilly piece of lace and starlight.

Girls, thought Sam. Girls and crowds and laughter and belonging. If you had the money. He tried to remember the look of lace and frills and blonde. Lace... The blood drained away from his face and head like a chill settling around his neck. That kind of girls.

The blood rushed back to his face. She'd heard him talking about his ... his gun. Had he taken it out? He looked down.

His pants were done up. He'd buttoned them wrong, but they were closed. He turned his back on the saloon, into the moonlight, and fixed each button, one by careful one.

What now? Across the lot, angle past the cooper's and around the corner, and he'd be home – a half-built shell of a house some would-be merchant had abandoned during the war years. A lonely pile of straw and a handful of cold rice in a tin pot.

Behind him, the tinkle of the piano broke through as the back door opened. Or he could go back to the saloon and crowds and copper blonde hair and his last half-dime and hunger tomorrow.

“Can't decide whether to piss or go swimming, hey?” a low voice called from behind him. “Let me fill the river for you.” A pale head edged between him and the outhouse, looked him up and down. “Thought for a minute you were playing with yourself there.” The man stepped inside. “Playing with yourself, hey?”

Sam squared his shoulders and turned away. In the outhouse he could hear the man still chortling to himself, until the saloon's outer door closed, and he found himself back in the little hallway. In the front room, music and men's laughter rose and fell in rough chords. He listened for a few minutes. If he spent his last half-dime, he could join them.

“Hell, you're a real thinker, aren't you?” The low voice came up behind, and a hard hand on his shoulder propelled him out into the crowd. “Guess what I found out back, boys! A young man who knows how to handle himself.” Crude gestures left no doubt as to his meaning. “Handle himself! Guess maybe he was looking in Lucy's window, hey?”

“That so, boy?” A rough looking miner rose, his broad shoulders like rocky foothills rising to a craggy face with hard

blue eyes. "You been looking at my Lucy?" The man beside him snorted beer on the floor as he laughed.

"No!" Sam felt the whisky drain out of him like rain down a sinkhole. He'd heard of fights like this. They always ended in blood. "I didn't..."

"Who's been looking in my window?" Black hair and silver satin drifted down the staircase like ash.

"Jerr here says this pretty boy was looking in your window and handling himself," said the big man.

"Really?" Red lips, brown eyes, and skin the colour of sun-baked clay. "Well, it doesn't come free, boy. You got some cash?"

The beer snorter spoke up. "Jake here was just standing up for your honour, on account of how you're his girl." He laughed again as the girl rolled her eyes.

"No, wait," said Sam. How had things gone so wrong, so fast? He'd never beat the big guy. Even if he ran, there were too many of them. They'd catch him for sure. "Look, Miss, I ... I've never seen you."

"So you weren't looking in my window." She seemed almost disappointed.

"No."

"He was looking in mine."

Sam spun on his heel. Above him, on the balcony, dark blonde hair and a frill of lace above a dark satin dress.

"Were you, now?" It was the black-haired girl. Lucy, he remembered, turning back.

"Were you?" The big man rolled his shoulders and smiled.

"Yes." Blood and whisky. You got one, you got the other. "I saw her through the window." He set his jaw and set his feet. "She looked like an angel in the moonlight." If there was fighting to be done, let there be poetry to it at least.

“Aww,” jeered a miner. “Ain’t that sweet.” “You got a secret admirer,” called another. “Angel! precious! Be mine!” said a third.

“Well, good for you,” said the big man, thumping Sam on the chest. It felt like a mule kicking him. “If I liked girls I’d go for her myself.” He smiled and lifted Sam’s face with a callused hand. “You change your mind, though, you let me know.” He looked the boy in the eye. “Hey, you’re shaking like a leaf. I’ll get you some whisky. My treat.”

“I think the boy’s had enough, Jerry.” With one hard hand on Sam’s shoulder, Marshal Wright guided him out the door and into the night.

In the shadow of the Red Boot Saloon, the Marshal loomed over Sam, his lean face a dark landscape of seams and stubble. “You’re not too bright, son, are you? But you’re braver than you look.” He chuckled. “You looked like a man going to his own hanging in there. But you told the truth and you stuck with it.” He glanced back at the saloon. “Those boys are just having a good time. Jerry’s never hurt a fly, ‘less they ask for it. But you didn’t know that.”

“I tell you what, ... Sam, was it? You’re a big enough man to stand up for yourself. I’m a big enough man to admit when I’m wrong. I can use a man like you.” He let Sam go, dug into a pocket. “Here.” He pressed something hard and angled into Sam’s hand. “Go home and sleep. Tomorrow morning, you pin that on, and come by the jail to get your gun. I’ll see you then, Deputy.” His footsteps faded into music and banter as he stepped back into the saloon.

The moon threw shadows across the hardpacked clay of the street. Sam Caldwell stood alone in the dark, the dull points of a metal star cutting hard into his fingers, the thin wire of the pin against his palm. Girls, whisky, almost a fight.

And now Deputy.

And now Deputy. He smiled slowly, felt it grow wider and wider until his face hurt, like it was going to split in half from happiness. He set off down the street toward straw and rice and a bright tomorrow. Time to stop thinking about bad ways a man could die, and start in on good ways a man could live.

chapter twelve

Keith Blount

JOHN LACEY WAS HUNCHED over a gut-burner of a whiskey at a table near enough the doors that he flinched as they swung open; a storm of dust, heat and cattle stench almost as painful on the other senses as the light was on his eyes. When at last his pupils were able to dilate again, he saw that it was his youngest brother that had exploded into the saloon, all afret about something.

William scraped back a chair and folded his wiry frame down into it, all sharp angles and nervous energy. He looked about the saloon, agitated.

“Now what you in a freeze about, William?” asked John, twisting his greasy glass between thumb and forefinger, scrutinising the oily surface of the remaining liquid.

“I think we got trouble, John. I saw—” He lowered his voice, leaned forward. “I seen some new folk, out on Tucker, and I don’t mean no soft-horns, neither. Lurking, they were, in a most unsavoury manner.”

“Lurking?”

“Lurking. A definite lurking aspect to them, there was. And opposite the First National.”

“Ain’t no law against lurking, William.” John swigged the

last of his whiskey, grimaced at the hot jolt to his insides, and looked forlornly at the gambling table across from him, where three old-timers were eyeing each other with suspicious camaraderie. Once more he became aware of the lightness of coin in his pockets, pockets lightened at that very table the night before.

“I’m telling you these ain’t just regular out-of-town lurkers,” persisted William. “They’re intendin’ too. Intent on that vault in that bank. A look of intent written all over the face of the hairy one that I’d twig anywhere, because it’s a countenance I’ve seen on you many a time, right before a job. I ain’t no mush-head, John, you know that; and I know what I seen.”

John frowned. He looked across to the bottom of the right-hand staircase, where Charlie was trying to impress a bored Anna with his new boots, one leg up on the carpeted steps, the better for her to admire them. His words, stentorian in volume as stupid as they usually were in content, carried across the saloon and grated through John’s hung-over brain.

“...top-stitching and that right there is an underslung heel. Cost a pretty penny but just look at those patterns. Craftsmanship is what that is. Touch it if you like. You got clean hands, don’t you?”

Anna stroked the leather disinterestedly. “Mighty fine and impressive, Charlie. Truly.” She yawned.

“And I’ll have money on the morrow.”

“Money on the morrow ain’t worth a Boston dollar to me, sweetheart. Come back when you’ve got money on the day.”

“Charlie!” John called him over. Charlie scowled briefly either at the interruption or with bemusement that his boots hadn’t had the desired effect, but ambled across to their table.

John sent William to fetch Frank, who happened to be

working the bar, and presently all four men were huddled around the little table, listening to William insist that something was about to happen at the First National.

“What would that mean for the deal atwixt us and the marshal?” pondered Frank.

“I’m thinking it could be ruinatious. People get hurt or that vault gets cleaned out, the fat’s going to be in the fire for us. Deal stands as long as no one’s hurt and businesses stay in business.”

Charlie scratched his stubble with dirty fingernails, as he was wont to do when attempting to cogitate. His arduous mental calculations inevitably led to the same conclusion: he reached for his revolver and made to stand. John, sitting opposite, put his hand out to stop him.

“Now hesitate one moment. We ain’t got to go shooting without reason. Marshal ain’t gonna take kindly if you go and shoot up some out-of-towners if it transpires they were planning on bringing money in rather than taking it out. We ain’t been this fore-handed in some time, let’s do this right. We screw up the handling of this situation — if a situation it truly is - then the deal’s off and we’re back to being a whisker away from the marshal’s three-legged mare again. William, you go find Cole and Michael on the chance your fancy is fact. Charlie, Frank, let’s take a look-see at these interlopers.”

“This should be the marshal’s business, not ours,” hissed Charlie.

“The cards fall as they do. They can’t all be royal flushes, but we have to think straight.”

“Was that a gambling joke?” asked Frank.

“Attempt at. Better than gallows humour. Come on.”

“So, what do you think?” Frank feigned tending a horse

hitched on Fourth Street as John and Charlie, next to him, snatched glances up and down the bustling road. A wagon rolled by, a preacher shouting salvation at them. They ignored him. The men William had seen hadn't been hard to spot: Frank knew nearly everyone in town from working the bar, but even if he hadn't, these men would have stuck out like a snake on stilts. There were four of them, all at different positions on the street, occasionally stepping into a store but buying nothing, and all exchanging furtive glances often enough to be obvious to anyone looking.

"Yup." John's eyes were following what he took to be the leader, a large man with sideburns and whiskers so long that it looked as though he had a pair of Angora chaps hanging off his cheeks. Inconspicuous he was not. "Lurking and intentful they are."

Charlie spat a fid of tobacco into the dirt, went to grind it into the dust with his boots and then thought better of it. Instead, he spat on his fingers and wiped dirt from his toe, cursing as he smudged tobacco and spittle into the leather. "So what's the plan?"

"I allot upon conversing with them."

Charlie and Frank exchanged looks.

"Conversing with them?" repeated Charlie. "Well la-di-da, that'll put the shifts up 'em."

"Look see, the way I reckon it, we got three options. One: we wait for them to start pointing guns, then we got gunplay, and that might not work out so well for us or for our deal, what with the abundance of citizenry about us. Two: we just shoot them now—"

"I'm good with two," interjected Charlie. "Let's run with two."

"*Three*: we warn these fine folk that we are on to them and

hope they don't want the fuss. So: I opine we converse."

Charlie spat his disgust into the dust again - just sputum this time, though. John was already halfway across the road, making straight for Angora-chops.

"Afternoon!" John hailed the man and performed an exaggerated bow. "Welcome to our fine town of Flintwood. New here, huh?"

"What's it to you, friend?" The man's enunciation of the word "friend" couldn't have been less friendly.

"What's it to me is that I see you and your three fellow burlies" — John waved to a scrawny blond man with a scar bisecting his face — "seem to be taking some considerable interest in this fine institution." He nodded towards the bank. All three other men had ceased their peripatetic pretendings and were watching John and their hirsute leader now. "What *I'm* reckoning," continued John, "as a concerned citizen of this town, is that *you're* reckoning on getting yourself some actual from that vault in there."

Somewhere deep within that plush facial hair, the man reassembled his face into something almost resembling a smile. "I'm just a business man, going about my business. You ought to be minding yours. Your own, I'm meaning." He nodded to the other three, who now started making their way toward where John and Angora-chops stood.

"Now, there's no need for us to be set by the ears here," John said quickly, spotting the men's trajectory.

The three men stopped a little way off, still watching, keeping an eye on Charlie and Frank, too, who were likewise nervously surveying the situation.

"Funny thing. I ain't seeing no deputy's badge atop your flannel."

"That's as maybe. Truth is, me and mine have interests

here, interests into which you don't factor, and so I'm doing you a kindness by bringing your attention to the situation here."

"That so?"

"It is. And the fact of the matter is that, because of factors things at play in this fine town, me and mine don't have to be among the willows here, undeputised as we may be, whereas you and yours do. So I'm here, and I'm hopin' we can do this all civil-like."

"Very thoughtful of you. Thinking of us like that."

"That I am. So—"

Angora-chops made to put his hand to his belt; John swept his coat back just enough to reveal his knife. The three other men, Charlie and Frank all stood rigid: tense and ready to draw at any second.

"Ain't no apple peeler," observed the man, nodding at the knife at John's belt.

"And yet it peels well enough. Look, we don't gotta argy here. You and yours can go your way, and me mine; your way being elsewhere from here."

"Know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking this is all attitudinising on your part. I'm not seeing much you could do if we were what you reckon us to be. You, a bar dog and a moron?"

"Wait, which one's the moron?" Charlie frowned, having edged close enough to hear the conversing.

Conversing which the man seemed to think was at an end, as he began to walk away, toward a horse hitched by near bank's entrance. His three goons congregated with him.

"Now don't go giving me the mitten now!" called John. "I'm feeling all hurt-like."

"We have matters to attend to. We'll be taking our leave

now,” the man called back.

“Oh. Well. Good.”

John returned to Charlie and Frank.

“What are they doing?” asked Charlie. The men were hooking or unhooking - it was hard to see - packs on the horses.

“I think that went well,” opined John. “Seems to me that he respected my position and that they are taking their leave. See, conversing is all it took.”

At this, there was a click, and he turned to find the barrel of a shotgun an inch from his face.

“Now,” said Angora-chops, “me and my boys are just going to enter yonder bank and withdraw some money. In what manner ain’t no concern of yours. Make a gift of your guns, if you would be so kind.”

John, Frank and Charlie threw down their weapons and watched as the four men entered the bank. A shotgun rang out as Angora-chops fired into the ceiling and shouted, somewhat redundantly, “This is a robbery!”

“That definitely went well,” said Frank.

“Conversing with them,” spat Charlie.

Much could be said about Cole Vaughan, and not much of it complimentary. One thing that you couldn’t say about Vaughan, however, was that he was ever unprepared for a fight. Moments after the bank door clicked shut, Cole, Michael and William rode up, a veritable artillery swinging from Cole’s saddle.

“So where are they?” Cole demanded as they jumped from their horses. “These unsavoury lurkers of William’s?”

Someone inside the bank screamed.

Frank nodded towards the bank.

Cole squinted in its direction, then back at the three men, who shifted their feet sheepishly. “So why didn’t you shoot them before they started shooting?”

“Lacey opined that *conversing* with them might be a better course of action.” Charlie seemed to be gnawing on his own tongue as he said this.

“Conversing with them?”

“That’s what *I* said!”

“And that panned out...”

Frank nodded towards the bank again.

“And your guns...”

Once more, the same inclination of the head from Frank.

“Fucking yacks. Could be dead. Good for you I brought munitions.”

“In full view of everyone,” commented John.

“What of it? We’re doing the marshal’s work now, ain’t we? Practically law.”

Charlie spat into the dust - tobacco again, aimed well away from his boots.

Cole handed around rifles and revolvers, and the six men armed themselves, cocking their weapons and checking their loads.

“Remember,” warned John. “Try not to shoot anyone.”

The other five stared at him in disbelief.

“I mean it. We don’t want to hang for trying to *stop* a felony. Come to think on it, we don’t want to be hanged for committing a felony, either. As a general rule, let’s try to keep away from the hanging. So don’t shoot unless you have to.”

There was a general murmur of reluctant assent, and five of the men crouched low and headed for the door of the bank, trying to keep out of sight of the windows. Cole took a different route, heading left and away from the bank.

“Where are you going?” hissed John.

“Back lot. Got an idea. You distract them from the front. Michael, you come with me.”

John and the others crept towards the door and sidled up on either side of it. He chanced a glance in and saw that Angora-chops was standing with his back to the gate to the director’s office, with the other three dotted around the lobby. Angora-chops seemed to be directing things, while the blond man with the scar pointed his shotgun at a teller. The other two, one rotund and balding, the other tall, broad and whelky-eyed, had their guns trained on the customers and staff, all except for the teller lying on the ground with their hands behind their heads. The whelky-eyed one was nearest the door and was presumably supposed to be keeping his eye on it, but all his attention was on the Mastersons’ generously-bosomed governess, who was outstretched before him.

“Seems like now would be as good a time as any,” said John, and the four of them charged the door of the bank with each of their guns trained on one of the other four men, who immediately swung *their* guns in the direction of the unexpected entrants.

“Well look, if it ain’t the marshal’s boot-lickers,” snarled Angora-chops.

Blond-scar laughed in a way that sounded as though he had a wishbone stuck in his throat. With his gun still pointed at Frank, he said to the teller, “Ignore them and give us the money.”

“*Don’t* give him the money,” said John, whose gun was pointing at Angora-chops.

“Should I give *you* the money?” enquired the teller of John, looking not only out of his depth but also out of his breadth

and width too.

“No. Don’t give *anybody* the money.”

“What we have here is the reversing of a robbery,” said Frank. “A robbery reversal.”

“Yeah, we’re the good guys,” spat Charlie. “Fucked as *that* is.”

Someone on the floor stifled an unmistakably sarcastic snigger.

“Now everyone on the floor, don’t be getting breachy,” called out John. “Let’s everyone stay calm and be ensuring that no one gets all hole-ridden.”

“Ain’t no one guaranteeing that,” said Angora-chops.

“Four guns against four guns. Seems to me we’re in a fix,” said John. “We can all start shootin’ and ain’t no one coming out of that well. Or, way I see it, you can cut dirt and forget you ever came across Flintwood. No one gets hurt and we all get to thief another day.”

“Well, the way *I* see it—”

“Don’t really care for the way you see it. This here ain’t no polite conversation no more. You leave town now or this is set to be an exflunctication.”

“Well ain’t you the curly wolf.” As he said this, Angora-chops’ finger began to twitch on his trigger, and his eyes darted between his men.

“Easy now, or I swear to Christ, I will bed you down.”

“Sounded kinda filthy, the way you said that, Lacey,” pointed out Charlie, helpfully.

And that’s when the shooting started.

No one could quite tell who exactly started the shooting, but it soon transpired that all eight men were terrible shots. After sixty seconds of the air zinging with bullets, the ceiling, walls,

windows and counter were the only casualties. At the end of that first frenetic minute, John and his men were crouched behind the teller's counter on the Fourth Street side, while Angora-chops and his men were hunkered down on the Tucker Avenue side. The customers had managed to flee and could be heard outside moaning and calling for help, but no one was coming, that was clear.

Now there were just occasional volleys as one of the men would lean around their side of the counter to shoot randomly around the corner before retreating again.

Charlie was nearest the corner, and was reloading his revolver when a shot rang out from the other side and something made a *phut* sound near his foot before the bullet lodged into the wall directly opposite him. It took him a moment to realise what the bullet had passed through on its journey to the wall.

"Balls! Balls, balls, balls, balls, *balls!*"

"You okay Charlie?" called William, from the other end of their crouched line.

"No I am not fucking okay! Bullet damn near took my toe off but completely fucked my boots. Look at the top-stitching!" The other three didn't seem to comprehend the magnitude of his loss. "These are new fucking boots!"

Apoplectic at the unjust tragedy to his beloved, Charlie swung around the shotgun slung over his shoulder, cocked it, stood, let out a scream that was curiously goose-like, and then charged around the corner, unloading his shotgun between guttural yells.

He missed everyone, but they were so stunned by his unexpected rampage that none of them thought to shoot back until he had dived through the teller's window and was squatting down on the other side of the counter.

There was a brief hiatus, and then Angora chops shouted: “In all my born days, I ain’t never seen someone so stupid.”

“Docity ain’t his strong point, I’ll grant you,” replied John, “but he’s our stupid and you did do unwarranted damage to his footwear.”

“Damn right!” shouted Charlie. “New fucking boots. Patterned and all.”

“You know,” shouted Angora-chops, “I’m not too clear on your plan and all, but it seems to me that if it was to hold us here until the cavalry arrived, well that don’t seem to be happening, does it? Which means we’ve got a situation where whoever runs out of bullets first is going to find themselves cold as wagon tyres. And we have plentiful bullets left, thanks to your generosity with your weapons earlier. Unlike the moron on the other side of the counter there with the empty shotgun.”

“Shit,” snapped Charlie.

“So,” continued the man, “I’m thinking that the bettermost solution would be for you all to leave quietly and...” He trailed off. “Ah. Perhaps I was too hasty.”

“I reckon you were,” came a voice — Cole’s.

There was the clatter of metal objects falling to the floor. Metallic, weapon-like objects.

“You can come out now.” Michael’s voice.

Gingerly, tentatively, John, Frank and William stood up and stepped out from their side of the room. Charlie stood up on the other side of the counter, where the teller was cowering in a tight ball.

While the other men’s attention had been focussed on the corner of the counter and Charlie’s idiocy, Cole and Michael had crept in behind them through the director’s gate, having entered the director’s office from the back lot after the director

had fled. Cole had Angora chops in a headlock with a gun pressed tight to his temple. "Can't miss this close," he was saying. "And even if I did, and say just took off a teensy bit of your skull, I have five beans in the wheel, so that's plenty chance to take the rest off."

"You know, we were actually just leaving," spluttered Angora-chops through constricted larynx. "In all this flusteration, I clean forgot I had pressing plans... elsewhere."

"Them plans better involve a lack of ever setting foot in Flintwood again," said John. "Now get up, all of you."

John and the others picked up the weapons and hauled the four men to the door. As the fat one passed Charlie, Charlie clubbed him with his shotgun. "That's for my boots," he growled. The fat man whimpered and put a hand to the blood now pouring from his bald patch.

The teller, who had finally summoned the courage to stand up and watch six gnarly men march another four gnarly men from the building, now found Charlie's revolver swinging in his direction. "Money," demanded Charlie.

"What are you doing?" asked John. "I think there may be some point you're missing here."

"What? I need new boots. Don't want much, just enough to cover my costs. Asides, I'm gonna do the marshal's job, I want my tippery."

John sighed, but waited for the teller to hand Charlie his notes. Then they escorted the four men outside into the dust and heat, their own guns at the men's backs.

"On your horses, gentleman," said John. "We'll do you the honour of seeing you out of town."

On his own horse with his crew around him, guns still trained on the backs of the defeated and departing, riding towards the town limits to make sure they were gone, he

looked back for a moment at the town.

“So,” called Frank. “We’re the good guys now?”

“Not sure about that,” said John. “Stopping a robbery... That felt... befuddling.”

Not long afterwards, as the people of Tucker Avenue regained their composure and those at the bank began the task of cleaning up, the doors of the Red Boot swung open to a buoyant Marshal Wright. His moustache traced the smile that split his face, grooves in leathery skin running from eye to ear. He raised a jubilant hand as he recognised Bob Wilson, who was perched on a bar stool near where Lucy leaned languorously against the newel at the bottom of the stairs. Bob tore his eyes away from the direction of the staircase to greet the marshal; a greeting somewhat tempered by his guilt at being caught in the Red Boot in the middle of the afternoon.

“Afternoon, Marshal. I was just leaving. Just checking on —”

Ben indicated for him to sit back down and called to the barman for two tornado juices.

“You seem in good spirits, Marshal.”

“I am a veritable freshet of elation, Bob, and my intention is celebration through inebriation.”

An expression of either puzzlement or constipation contracted Bob’s face. “You seem... less stoic than usual, if you don’t mind me saying so, Marshal.”

“It’s a tensesome business, trying to keep this town in check and in continued existence, but today was one of the few that augurs well.”

“Is that right?”

“This deal with the Laceys might have seemed an anti-goglin plan to most, I’m aware of that. But just now those

boys drove out of Flintwood a crew of would-be bank robbers without so much as a peep from me. Watched the whole thing play out from the livery store, shotgun cocked but unneeded.” Their whiskeys arrived and Ben put his to his mouth. “A minor miracle that gives me some hope, Bob. Hope that this town maybe has a chance after all.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

They clinked glasses, Bob’s eyes wandering across the Marshal’s shoulder once more to the stairway and the lissom girl adjusting garter at slender thigh.

Marshal Wright wasn’t the only interested observer of the happenings at the First National Bank that afternoon. As the sun began its descent in earnest, blood-streaks of cloud across the blue bowl of sky, Jimmy Jackson and Seth Madsen dismounted from their horses atop an outcrop where Flintwood turned back into scrub. They had stopped to watch the Laceys below, whom they had followed out of town and who were still jeering at the retreating gang — Jackson and Marshal’s retreating gang.

“Some deal atwixt ’em, them and the Marshal, then, you reckoning? Or something else?” Seth was saying.

“Something like that, perhaps. Either the marshal is so impotent that a pack of nibblers hold sway, or he’s so desperate he needs them. That means something.”

Accustomed to blending in, Jackson and Madsen and watched the pathetic shoot-out at the bank from among the cringing but prurient crowd on Tucker Avenue; watched as their men had been driven from town not by the marshal and his deputies, but by a barman and ex-copper miners — by petty thieves.

“And what does it mean for us?”

“Opportunity.”

chapter thirteen

Lazey Winde

THE HORSES WERE THE first giveaway. The horses were out of sight, hidden behind dense brush. But the Lacey Gang's horses must have been able to smell Jimmy and Seth's mounts and whinnied to them. Jimmy and Seth dismounted and covered their horses' noses so they could not call back and give them away.

Jimmy spotted a small red dot of flame, and that cigarette revealed the hideout to James Jackson and Seth Madsen. The two picketed their horses, removed their spurs, and quietly approached on foot.

William Lacey sat outside the cave mouth, his revolver lying across his lap as he rolled another cigarette. The second cigarette helped Jimmy and Seth get into the hideout. If William's hands had been free he may have raised his gun faster when Jimmy let himself be seen, gun in hand.

As it was, William did drop his cigarette makings and grabbed at his colt, but Jimmy already had his own gun levelled at William's head and the hammer cocked. Before either man could fire, Seth had come up behind William and cracked the young man over the head with one of his Dragoon pistols. William did not cry out, only groaned and fell

in a heap.

“Six-shooter shampoo.” Seth snickered. He picked up William’s dropped gun and tucked it into his waistband.

“Grab him and take him inside.” Jimmy said.

Seth put his dragoon back in the holster and began dragging William Lacey into the cave.

It took Jimmy’s eyes a moment to adjust to the light in the cave. There were candles burning on a crate table.

Seth threw William Lacey on the rocky cave floor. William woke up, he reached for his head. “Dad-blame it, I feel like my head is about to split!”

William’s complaint got the gang’s attention. They jumped to their feet, reaching for weapons but Jimmy had his gun pointed at William, and Seth had his two Colt Dragoons pointed at the men.

“Drop ‘em and put your hands up.” Jimmy said. “I’ll kill the boy, and Seth here will shoot you all to pieces before you can get off a shot.”

“Damn it.” Charlie Evan swore, throwing down his gun.

The others in the gang also cursed, but those that were holding weapons too dropped them and they raised their hands.

“We’re taking over here.” Jimmy said. “Now put the money on the table so we can split it up right.”

Grumbling, Cole Vaughn and Frank Brown took six sacks of money and poured them onto the table into a big pile.

Jimmy counted the emptied sacks. “That can’t be all, where’s Wright’s cut?”

“The Marshal doesn’t take a cut.” Frank Brown said.

It was still a lot of money, Jimmy could see this gang making a lot more money with proper leadership. Instead of

petty cash they would go big, like the First National Bank. Robbing the bank would be possible if the gang was working for him instead of stopping him.

While the bushwhackers split up the money, John and Michael checked on their brother.

“What did they do?” John asked.

“I think they hit me over the head with something. Knocked me out cold.” William said.

“You have a lump.” Michael said. “Good thing your skull is so thick.”

“I was wearing a hat too.” William mumbled. “They got the drop on me. I didn’t think anyone could find us here. Are those two really taking over?”

“Looks like it.” John said. “But we might still have an ace in the hole.” John patted his large hidden knife.

“That toothpick won’t do you much good if you get shot first.” Michael whispered.

“Well I’m not going to run at him yelling.” John said.

Seth shoved his pistols into their holsters and moved over to the table and shoved most of the money into two large piles. The remaining money he put in six tiny piles.

“No.” Charlie Evans objected. “You two can’t just come in here and take over, take our money. We’re the ones who have been doing all the work. I’ll be damned if some bushwhacker takes my cut.”

Charlie planted his hands on Seth’s chest and gave him a shove. Seth knocked into the table so hard one of the crate boards cracked, but he quickly regained balance.

Seth drew his his dragoons and pointed both at Charlie’s head. “I’ll paint the wall with your brains.”

“Hold it, Seth.” Jimmy ordered. “This man has a point. Whoever leads this gang should prove that he is fit for the part.”

Seth lowered his guns.

“It’s only right that we fight for it.” Jimmy said. “Like men.”

Seth backed away from Charlie Evans.

“We’ll draw on three.” Jimmy said, he un-cocked and holstered his Remington, but left the holster unbuttoned.

“Just back down, Charlie.” Frank hissed at the former copper miner. “You can’t shoot straight right now. Try it after you’ve slept it off and are sober. They’ll kill you.”

“I aint got a gun.” Ignoring Frank, Charlie Evans spoke rudely to Jimmy. “You made me drop it, remember?”

“Don’t make him fight, he’s not heeled.” Frank said.

“He had better heel himself. Seth, give this man a gun.” Jimmy said. “How ‘bout the one you got off sleepy boy.”

Seth pulled William’s Colt Army Revolver from his waistband and threw it at Charlie. It landed on the ground at Charlie’s feet. William muttered something about having just cleaned it and sand getting in the gears.

“Real men fight with their fists.” Charlie said. “You’re just a yellow chicken who has a gun.”

“If you don’t pick up that gun we can see if your fists can get to me faster than my bullet can get to you.” Jimmy said coolly.

The Lacey Gang moved away from Jimmy and Evans, but were aware of the risk of ricochet and looked at the rock of the cave anxiously.

“This aint fair.” Frank complained. “Charlie isn’t half sober.”

“He should have kept his mouth shut.” Jimmy said. “If you think you can do better you’re welcome to pick the gun up from Evan’s cold hands and go next. The same goes for all of you.”

Evans reluctantly picked up the gun. He checked to make sure it was loaded and spun the cylinder, gave the barrel a quick check to make sure no sand got in the muzzle. Finally he tucked the gun at his hip and rested his hand on the handle. He swayed slightly.

“You’re nothing but a dirty bushwhacker. You can’t win a fair fight. So I’m going to win.” Charlie said. “And I’ll crow louder than you, chicken.”

“We will draw on three. Who here can count to three?” Jimmy asked.

“This is stupid.” Frank Brown said.

“You count, Brown, or Seth with gut shoot you.” Jimmy said. “Slow and painful way to die. At least I’ll kill Evans fast.”

Set had his dragoons aimed at Frank’s belt buckle. “Will your belt buckle stop a bullet?”

“We’ll find out if Brown doesn’t start counting.” Jimmy said.

Frank paled. He counted slowly, and very unhappily. “One... Two... Three!”

The more sensible men hit the ground, ducking their heads to avoid getting hit by stray bullets. The gunfight was over in seconds.

Jimmy’s hands were lightning fast, in a single fluid movement he pulled the Remington Navy Revolver from the holster with his right hand, the side of his left hand drew back the hammer. His first shot slammed into the left side of Charlie’s chest, the force of the bullet sent Charlie spinning like a ballerina. Jimmy drew back the hammer again and his

second shot took Charlie in the back of the head. Charlie began to fall forward, but did not land before Jimmy fired a third bullet into Jimmy's back, right between his shoulder blades and through his spine.

Charlie hit the edge of the crate table, then half-rolled as the body slid off to the ground. Charlie's hand was still on William's gun handle, barely lifted from the holster. The first bullet obviously was enough to have killed him; it went straight through his heart. Charlie's face was gone; the exit wound of the second bullet tore it away, leaving a mess of blood and bone.

Jimmy was already reloading his gun but the Lacey gang was silent in shock. Charlie Evans probably did not stand a chance against anyone, he was not sober enough for a gun fight. And Jimmy was a bushwhacker. But there was no questioning that Jimmy was fast- inhumanly fast.

Jimmy holstered his gun. He coolly took the gun from the dead man. "Brown, you want to try out-drawing me? No? Anyone else want to lodge a complaint?"

When no one came forward Jimmy dropped the gun in William Lacey's holster.

"Then it's settled. I lead this outfit." Jimmy declared. "You boys can pick up your irons — just don't get any ideas about pointing them at me."

chapter fourteen

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

MICHAEL CREPT QUIETLY, THE sound of the dry ground breaking under his boots. The light of the moon above him is the only way he can see where he is going. There aren't many places to hide, except a few Saguaro cacti, not that they would offer him any shelter, and it would only take someone peering out the window at the right time. Getting caught would surely mean death for him. They killed Charlie. Who is to say they wouldn't kill him. Even if he is a Lacey and he has his doubts his brothers would be able to help him. If they even wanted to.

He untied his horse, a black mare he hasn't bothered to name, and after taking one last peek behind him at the house, satisfied that everything seems in order, he led it down the path. He's taking a big risk going into town. A bigger one by going to the marshal, but he's not liking the way things are heading since Jackson and Madsen took over. The plans they are putting in motion, it goes against what the gang used to stand for and what he is willing to do. Jackson and Madsen are going to play by their own set of rules and Michael doesn't want any part of it.

He peaked behind him one last time, seeing the yellow hue

in the only window facing his direction. If he strained hard enough, he's pretty sure he can hear the drunken voices of the gang inside. He thought about waiting for everyone to pass out, but most of them, especially Jackson, are light sleepers. A creak in the floorboards would surely alert someone to what he's getting ready to do.

He stuck one booted foot into the stirrup, and hefted his leg over the broad back of the horse. Grabbing the reins, he tapped the side of the horse's belly and in turn, she started to gallop. The stench of the heavily overripe melons filled his nostrils. The flowers from the Saguaro cactus and if he looks hard enough, he's surely to see the long nose bats flying about.

It's a 30 minute ride to Flintwood and Michael kept his eyes and ears alert. He didn't have a plan when he reached town. He had his doubts Wright would still be at the Marshal's office, but he had to start somewhere. He didn't risk his ass to come this far to give up now. Someone will know how to reach him. Or maybe Wright can be found at the Red Boot Saloon. There's talk among the townspeople that there's something going on between him and the Donley woman. One of the reasons why she shoots John down every time he asks her out.

Michael decided to head in through the far south side of town, using Gila Avenue. It's not as developed, he can sneak through the abandoned construction lots unseen. He tugged on the reins to slow his horse down, eventually to a stop, before climbing off. He tied her to one of the broken wood posts, giving her a good rub before walking away. The crunching of his boots disrupted the silence of the evening, although he can hear the vague sounds of someone yelling from the saloon. He wouldn't mind a beer to wash away his dry mouth, the heat of the evening stifling him. He turned right onto Third Avenue, dodging into one of the

construction lots to help shield him better. It's then Michael spotted someone lying on the floor. At first he couldn't tell if he's dead, sleeping, or just a pile of crap someone left behind. Not wanting to get ambushed, if by chance it is someone, he decided to venture closer for a better look.

Michael recognised him immediately. If his memory serves him correctly, he hasn't been a deputy long and spotting the revolver sitting on the makeshift table not far from him, he's a stupid one at that. It didn't disturb him when Michael walked towards it, picked it up, and balanced it in his large hand. It doesn't get better than this, Michael thought. I'll have this kid fetch Wright for me.

He knelt beside the kid and pushed on his shoulder with the revolver. Sam Caldwell's eyes snapped open. He quickly started to reach for his weapon, but Michael held it up.

"Looking for this?" He gave him a grin, standing to his feet. It's now he realised the kid could have another stashed underneath his pillow. "I ain't here to hurt ya. I just need you to do me a favour."

"A favour?" Sam spied Michael cautiously, sitting up, running a hand through his brown hair. "And what's that?"

"I need you to go and fetch Wright for me. We got some discussing to do."

"Why don't you go fetch him yourself?"

Michael lifted one bushy eyebrow, tugging on his moustache.

"Since I'm the one holding the gun, you might not want to back talk me, kid." He said after a brief pause. "Now go on. I'll wait here."

"What is it you want to talk to him about?"

"Not your concern." He waited for Sam to stand to his feet. Only he remained motionless. "Listen, Kid. I ain't got all

night.”

Sam finally stood, brushing the dust from his trousers.

“Marshal Wright may not be so willing to come if he doesn’t know what this is about.”

“He’ll see me.” Michael grabbed a wood crate and propped it up on one end, taking a seat on it.

“I need my gun.”

Michael cracked a small smile.

“I don’t think so, kid.” He motioned with a wave of the revolver.

Sam hesitated for a moment before heading up Third Avenue.

“What is it, Sam?” Ben asked when he pulled the door open, setting the shotgun down.

“Sorry to disturb you, Sir, but Michael Lacey would like a word with you.”

That didn’t surprise him. He figured one of the Lacey brothers would come to him eventually to discuss Charlie Evan’s death. He’s not happy about the developments there and he has a pretty good idea he’s not going to like how this will turn out. Jimmy Jackson and Seth Madsen are trouble. Big trouble based on what he’s learned from the federal marshals.

He grabbed the shotgun again, his hat from the coatrack, and stepped out onto the front porch, resting it on top of his head.

“Where is he?”

“In one of the construction lots on Gila Avenue.”

That explains why he didn’t see Sam’s horse. It’s a short walk from here and he decided to fall in step beside Sam. They didn’t talk, Ben didn’t have much to say.

“What do you want, Michael?” Ben asked when he stepped

into the abandoned lot, spying him on the wood crate.

Michael's head snapped up. Ben thought he may have caught him dozing and one hand running across Michael's face told him his assumption is correct.

"Why haven't you done anything about Jackson and Madsen?" He demanded, standing to his feet.

Ben glanced down at his hands, spying the revolver he held.

"Go on and set the gun down." His own grip tightened on his shotgun.

Michael sighed in frustration, setting the revolver where he found it. He's not here to start trouble. He's here to end it before it begins.

"Well?"

"I'm working on it."

"Working on it?" Michael stared at him in disbelief. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means just that."

"They're planning somethin'. You gotta take 'em out before they do it."

"And what are they planning to do?"

"I don't know." Michael said in frustration, tugging on his moustache. "You put the gang together, I figured for sure you would be out there, throwing your weight around."

"Right now, they haven't done anything wrong that I know of."

"They killed Charlie."

"You sure about that?"

Michael didn't answer, averting his eyes away.

"Look. You told us what we can and cannot do. I'm here to tell you that they ain't going to listen to some marshal."

"Unless you can give me something to go on, Michael..."

“I heard Jackson say somethin’ about the First National Bank. Is that enough for ya? That place closes shop and we can kiss this town goodbye.”

Ben sighed this time. With the copper mine gone and Wells Fargo Bank closed, it’s the only thing keeping this town on it’s feet.

“All right. I’ll go talk to them.”

“Good.” Michael gave him a curt nod and headed down the street. “Don’t mention my name. You and I never spoke.”

Ben waited for Michael to get on his horse and ride away before turning to Sam.

“Something tells me he’s not supposed to be here.”

“I reckon not.”

Ben gave him a silent farewell, making his way back to his house. Once he arrived, he headed to bed, thinking what he’s going to say when he does stand face to face with the Lacey gang. Maybe tell Jackson and Madsen to leave town. Ben didn’t want any trouble. Other than the occasional bar fights, Flintwood is exactly how he likes it. Quiet.

Catherine invaded his thoughts as he dozed off and when he woke to the bright sun filtering through the window, the room felt stifling hot. He prepared himself for the day and headed out.

He stepped into the Marshal’s office. Sam’s already in and he caught sight of Bob. A couple of drunks are sleeping it off in the cells. He started to remove his hat, but changed his mind. Might as well get it done and over with.

“Bob, Sam, you’re coming with me.” Ben called out.

“Where are we going?” Bob asked, standing to his feet.

“The Lacey Place.”

All eyes are on him.

“Maybe you ought to take a couple more men with you.”

Ben shook his head.

“We’re going to talk. That’s all.”

“From what I hear, they aren’t much for talking.”

Ben didn’t pay him any attention, stepping out into the dry heat. Kate, his mare the color of chestnuts, stood beside three other horses. He gave her a good rubdown before hefting himself onto her back. He spotted Catherine walking the street in front of the old Wells Fargo Bank. She caught sight of him, showing off that pretty smile of hers. He tipped his hat at her before returning one of his own.

“Ready?” He called to his deputies, received nods, and with a swift kick to Kate’s side, they rode off.

Thirty minutes later, Ben climbed off, holding the reins in one hand, and grabbing his shotgun in the other. Their presence is already known. Two of the Lacey brothers stepped out from around back and the slam of the wooden screen door that has seen better days, caught Ben’s attention.

“If it isn’t Marshal Wright.” He gave him a tight smile. A smile that didn’t reveal any teeth. “What can I do for you?”

The rest of the gang started to file around, some behind Jackson, Madsen took his side, and Ben saw Michael standing off in the distance. Ben handed the reins of his horse to Sam, but keeping a hold on the shotgun.

“Just thought it was time to talk.” He answered, keeping his tone light. “Since Charlie is dead and if you’re taking over, we should go over the rules.”

“Rules?” Seth Madsen laughed. His clean shaven face made him appear younger than he is. Except the wrinkles around his eyes gave away his age. “We don’t follow your laws.”

Ben glanced over at his two deputies. Bob’s hand is resting on his revolver, Sam stood perfectly still, holding the reins to his horse.

“Why don’t you get back on your horse and ride your ass back to town.” Jackson said. “I run the show now.”

Perhaps Michael has reason to be concerned.

“Is that right?” Ben’s eyes travelled over the other members. “Is there anyone here that would like to speak up and be heard?” He waited, but silence filled the space between them. Based on their expressions, no one has the guts to say anything.

“They’re scared.” Bob whispered.

Ben shot him a dirty look. He didn’t need to say that. He’s more than aware of the fear on some of their faces. Excitement on the others.

“Looks to me like no one has anything to say. Get along.” Jackson turned around to head back into the house, the Lacey brothers stepping aside to let him in through the door.

“Hold up a minute.” Ben waited for him to turn around. “I think it’s best if you and Madsen leave town. Before something happens...”

Jackson spun around to face him.

“Listen here, asshole. If you think for a second I’m gonna listen to you, you’re stupider than I thought. You’re as corrupt as they come. You and every deputy under you. Frauds. That’s what you are.” His hand rested at his right side. “Get the hell outta here.”

Ben mentally took count. He didn’t have enough manpower to take this gang on. He didn’t have any worries about Bob. He served in the civil war, but Sam here. From the gossip he’s heard around the office, Sam freaked out after witnessing a hanging. Ben had his doubts he would even pull his gun let alone know how to use it.

“You’re making a big mistake.”

“No! You are. I’m not your bootlicker!” He pointed a

finger at him. “And if I ever see you again, I’ll kill you.” He waved his hand to the other two. “Every last one of you.”

Ben grabbed the reins to Kate, and after running his hand along her side, the temptation to grab his other shotgun overwhelming, he started to lead her down the dry dirt road.

“Don’t fuck with me, Wright.” Jackson called out. “Or I just might pay Ms. Donley a visit.”

Ben paused in his tracks, the anger festering in him, but taking a deep breath, he expelled it out in a rush. He wanted to put a bullet between his eyes for even saying her name, he can do it from here, that he has no doubts, but he’s outnumbered. Getting him and his deputies killed will destroy Flintwood.

“Let’s go.” Ben said to the other two.

They didn’t climb onto their horses until they were away from the house, out of range from getting shot. Ben shuffled his foot to scare away a gila monster that crossed his path. It’s not the biggest he’s seen, but he didn’t feel up to getting bit. It’s orange and black banded body moved slowly away from him, it’s dark forked tongue sticking out of it’s mouth.

“What’s the plan, Ben?” Bob asked hefting his muscular body onto his horse.

“We’ll regroup back at the office and go from there.”

chapter fifteen

Tim Edwards-Hart

IT'D BEEN A COUPLE of days and Sam was itching for action. He was still getting used the feeling of a gun against his leg — he'd wanted a Remington, but old Ben Wright had said the one in the cabinet was too expensive. So he'd opted for a Smith & Wesson, just like the two that Bob Wilson carried. Bob had helped him clean it up and shown him how to reload it efficiently. He wanted to use it, but wished he had more time to practice. He'd shown it to the bar maid Maria last night and she seemed impressed. She was really interested in exploring his new gun with him and then his new badge. Then she asked him all about his new responsibilities. Thinking of the loose board he'd found on the back of the old barn on Gila Avenue, and the old dry hay inside, he started to wonder if maybe she'd be interested in exploring some other things with him...

"Psst, Sam!"

Sam was shaken out of his thoughts by the whisper. The other bar maid, Sally—he wished it was Maria—was holding a spittoon on the verandah of the Red Boot.

"Grab this for me," she whispered, "like it's an accident," and with that she threw it into the street, pot and contents landing a scant yard from his feet.

“Oh blazes! Cussed thing slipped. Didn’t splash you with tobaccy spit did I luv?”

“Nah Sal, you missed. Hold onto the handles next time, that’s what they’re there for”

“I know, but there’s spit all over them.”

Hearing her words, Sam adjusted his reach and picked up the old tin bucket from the sides. As he stepped up onto the verandah she whispered again, “Keep going past the door and look at the whoremongers on the stairs.” In a louder voice she continued, “Thanks Sam, you’re a doll. Keep that up and maybe Maria will show you some limb.”

Sam blushed as he passed the bucket back to her. His embarrassment didn’t last long. Glancing inside, he felt his stomach clutch. A giggling Anna and Lucy were leading Seth Madsen and Jimmy Jackson upstairs.

He kept his gaze moving, as if he’d not seen anything, and turned to go.

“Damn!”

“You saw them?”

Sam nodded.

“They said they were gonna get you all, starting with my Bob. So you tell Bob from me, ‘Give ‘em Jesse!’”

Sam could feel the eyes of Marshal Benjamin Wright staring at him and suddenly understood why he’d been elected Marshal unopposed. Ben Wright was usually a friendly and approachable man, kind to animals and women, but when he looked at you like that there was a hardness, a sense that he would act harshly if he judged against you.

It was Fred Murphy who spoke next, “They were both there? You’re sure?”

Sam turned to Fred to answer, “Yes sir. Both of them. And

Sally said they were bragging they were going to get us all, starting with... ah..." he wondered how to say what Sally overheard.

"Starting with what Sam?" asked the Marshal.

Sam blurted out the rest, "Starting with Deputy Marshal Robert Wilson, sir."

Bob looked startled, Fred snorted, but the Marshal frowned.

"Anything else Sam?"

"No sir. They were distracted by the girls, but I didn't want to risk them seeing me. So I just passed the pot back to Sally, she said to tell Bob to give 'em Jesse, and I came straight here. It's only a few minutes since I saw them, they'll still be with Anna and Lucy."

Sam felt the Marshal's stare for a moment longer, before it was turned on Bob, "Why would they start with you, Bob? What's your connection?"

"I don't know, Ben. Honest, I really don't know. The other day was the first I'd even seen..." Bob went quiet. He paled as the memory came to him. "Oh, no. No, that couldn't be."

"There is a connection?"

"Maybe. I... I'm not sure."

"Be quick. Lucy and Anna aren't known for extravagance. If we're going to act we need to do it now."

Bob took a breath, "The war. The Union soldier that shot me looked like Seth. *Exactly* like Seth. I was on scout duty and my partner and I stumbled across a Blue Coat ransacking a plantation house. Before we could mobilise, we were ambushed by a second Yankee with a Colt Dragoon in each hand, firing wildly. My partner took two shots to the head, dead before he hit the ground. I got this." Bob pointed at his sleeve, indicating the horrendous scar on his arm they all knew

was underneath. “The guy who shot me was Seth. I didn’t realise it the other day because we all thought Seth was a Confederate. But now...” Bob took a breath, “Now I remember. I was trying to get back on my feet and he just stood there, grinning, while he aimed. It was Seth. I remember looking down at his trousers while waiting to die and thinking it odd that a Blue Coat would wear cotton. And then, ‘click’, he was out of ammo. But even though he had no ammunition, he kept on smiling at me as he walked in. He leaned down and said, ‘Don’t worry, I always finish the job.’ I thought he was going to cut my throat.

“Then the first soldier—that must have been Jimmy—called out, and they both ran. At first I thought it was because I was being rescued by the Cavalry, but it was a Union Cavalry troop and they took me prisoner. Compared to what those bastards did, it would have been better if Seth had killed me. But I never understood until now why he ran: he wasn’t Union, he and Jimmy were just looting.”

Bob sat back in his chair and stared at the wall. Sam was scared. He’d heard his dad talk about men from the war get lost in memories of gunfights and gore. He wondered if that was happening to Bob. He wondered if that was going to happen to him. He looked at the Marshal.

Ben stared at Bob. Then looked at Fred and Sam. “Right. Well now we know what kind of devils they are: Piss proud pricks that can’t count their bullets!”

Sam burst out laughing. It wasn’t funny, but he couldn’t help himself.

Ben smiled then looked to Bob. “Stay here. That’s an order. You’ve got a score to settle, but you need to get your mind out the Union war camps and back to Flintwood. We’ll get Jimmy, but will try to leave Seth for you. While we’re gone, get your

guns ready and make sure you can shoot straight. Fred, Sam, let's go get the bastards while they've still got their pants down."

Sam was crouching by the gambling table in the Red Boot. His instructions were to guard the exits while Ben and Fred went upstairs. He knew it was because he didn't have enough experience, that both Fred and Ben were better shots and were less likely to get themselves killed. For once, he didn't mind.

He looked around the empty bar. Sally took flight as soon as she saw them, pausing only long enough to nod at Anna's room upstairs, and shrug when they pointed at Lucy's room. The barman wasn't in sight and it was too early for patrons, except for the lone reveller still asleep on a table in the corner. The only other person that should be here at this time was Maria. Sam hoped she was in the kitchen or somewhere safe.

He watched Ben and Fred creep up the stairs, then remembered that he was supposed to be watching for signs their quarry had been alerted of their presence. He looked out the window over his shoulder, then checked each of the doors on the landing. Nothing.

Ben and Fred were heading straight for Anna's room, ignoring the guest rooms on the landing. Sam tried to watch all the doors and windows at once. As he turned to look out the window again, the corner of his eye caught movement in a doorway on the landing. Even though he thought it was a curtain, he found himself standing up while everything around him slowed down. He could see the sun striping through the dust mites. As his eyes tracked to the landing he could see the grooves in the stairs from all the feet, and noticed how the handrail was polished from all the hands running its length. He could see the grey steel barrel of a rifle rise up through a

widening crack in the first doorway on the landing. He could hear himself call out to Ben and Fred as he raised his newly acquired pistol. He watched himself move, molasses slow, straining to reach the stairwell as he fired. He sensed Ben and Fred throw themselves through the nearest doors as the rifle continued its rise and began to fire. As he fired off a second and third round, he noticed that what he had thought was a curtain was in fact a dress. Maria's dress. The rifle she had fired began to fall as Maria staggered sideways into the door, red splotches appearing around her. Sam's hand was still ready to fire, his gun still pointing Maria. Maria the chatty barmaid. Maria, Sally's friend. Maria who was so interested in exploring Sam's new career last night while Sam was interested in exploring Maria. Maria, who had just tried to shoot Ben and Fred. Maria, who's body was now falling to the floor.

Sam stopped moving.

For a moment, he stood staring at the blood on the door and the body in the doorway. Then Ben yelled, "Check the exits! MOVE!!"

Sam looked away from Maria and saw Ben and Fred launching themselves towards Anna's door. Suicide mission if whoever on the other side was armed. But Sam had his instructions. As he turned back towards the window by the gaming table he saw a figure drop down off the verandah roof and run north towards Second Street. Sam ran through the door and onto the verandah, remembering as he jumped to the street that he was chasing an armed killer. He ran to the water pump opposite the Mayor's office and ducked down behind the horses' water trough. He couldn't see anything move along Fremont Avenue or north along Second Street. He got up to look round the corner of the building behind him to see if there was anything

moving south on Second Street. He saw Jimmy Jackson drop down off the roof and stumble south towards Tucker Avenue.

Sam crouched down to lower his profile. He was itching to run after Jimmy, but there was a part of him that remembered Jimmy was a gunslinger. Compared to Jimmy Jackson, Sam was still a kid; he knew how a confrontation between the two of them would end. But as a kid, he was always good at hide and go seek and he still knew what made a good hiding place. Sam could see three places to shield him from a casual view. While Jimmy still had his back turned, Sam ran down to Mrs Johnson's haberdashery and dived under her deck.

From beneath the steps to her verandah, he watched as Jimmy started to turn east on Tucker, then seemed to think better of it and continue running down to Gila Avenue. Sam squeezed out through the steps and ran for a saddle blanket airing in the sun. His feet would be visible, but only if Jimmy looked carefully enough. He peered round and saw Jimmy turn west up Gila. Sam ran again, aiming for the old sweets sign leaning against a wall. Squeezing in behind it, he lay down and looked up Gila Avenue. This was an underdeveloped part of town and there were few places Jimmy could go. Sam saw a figure move in the old barn and then one of the stable doors creak shut, then spring open again. "Gotcha", he smiled.

He wriggled out backwards and started trotting back to the saloon. As he approached, he saw Ben and Fred warily scanning the buildings around them. Whistling to get their attention, he beckoned them to join him down Second Street.

"So you lost Seth..."

"Yes. But I tracked Jimmy. He's in the old barn on Gila Avenue. I saw him try to close the door, then just leave it. He's in there. And he won't want to come out straight away in case

we're wandering the streets looking for him. We've got him Marshal!"

Ben looked at Fred, "Do you want to explain it to him?"

Fred turned to Sam, "I know that barn, those doors haven't closed for years. But what do you think will happen to the first person that walks through those doors? They'll be nicely silhouetted against the sky while Jimmy has had plenty of time to get used to the dark inside, find some good hiding spots, maybe even create some new ones."

"But he doesn't know the other ways in!"

Fred and Ben both looked at Sam as if he were insane.

"There's only one door..."

"Yeah, but there's other ways in. Well, one that I know of..." Sam thought of his plans for Maria and caught his breath as images from the Red Boot flashed through his mind.

"What do you think you could do against Jimmy?"

Fred's words helped Sam refocus, "I'm not crazy enough to take him on myself. But if one of us can get in there while the others distract him from the front, we could still take him out."

Ben smiled, "Risky, but it could work. The kid's got balls Fred."

Fred winked at Sam, but before he could respond there were a series of gunshots behind them.

"That was close, sounded like a .44"

"Yeah, but who was firing, and what at?"

"Shit! Bob!"

As soon as they reached Fremont Avenue, Sam could see that the door to the Jail was wide open and swinging gently. The three of them, guns drawn, approached slowly, eyes scanning all of the buildings around them.

“Bob? You OK?”

No answer.

They reached the door.

“Bob? What happened?”

No response.

Ben nodded, once, to Fred then shifted his gaze back to the street. “Eyes up Sam, they could be anywhere.”

Fred stepped inside.

“Ahh, shit.”

Ben turned to Sam, “OK kid, this is probably a bad idea, but I since don’t know anyway to keep you out here let’s both go in together. Just keep your gun ready.”

Sam nodded agreement and followed Ben into their office.

As his eyes adjusted, the first thing he noticed was that Fred had taken off his hat. Then he noticed where Fred was looking. Deputy Robert “Bob” Wilson was lying face down on the floor between his desk and the gun cabinet. He been shot ten, no *twelve*, times: calf and hamstring of each leg; forearm and tricep of each arm; once in each kidney; once in the heart; and one more shot in the back of the head.

Someone had then used Bob’s blood to scrawl on a desk, “I alwaz finsh th job”.

chapter sixteen

Mike Devitt

“AND, IF I COULD shoot the dogs in this hellhole too!” Marshal Wright slammed his fist against the solid but rotten front door to the jail. “Don’t see the point in owning a mutt anyway, their only another mouth to feed,” he said, pulling the cork out that allowed him to see through the peephole into the street outside. The smell of his fallen deputy had prompted him to reach into his pocket and retrieve the handkerchief he’d stolen from Catherine’s washing line earlier that afternoon. *She wouldn’t miss it*, he thought. How different he had felt then. It was one thing to declare war; it was another to carry out the first attack. Jackson, Madsen and their gang had taken the action their words had threatened, and now, across the road and down the street, each balcony was occupied by a hound poking its head through the railings barking incessantly. In the absence of someone ringing the church bell - that building had been abandoned for months - and no human was brave enough to make that journey across town anyway, the collective pack of canines signalled that the law enforcers in Flintwood were now expected to take action. Marshal looked around the room, two of his remaining three officers, deputies Caldwell and Murphy were dealing with the loss of their

colleague in different ways.

“It’s like they know. But they can’t see him from up there.” Deputy Sam Caldwell remarked as he crouched next to the motionless body of Deputy Wilson. His friends eyes were absent, a pair of brown marbles no longer working in tandem. “He liked to smile Marshal.” Sam touched Wilson’s face and gently pulled his eyelashes over the lost eyeballs. He looked up at his boss. “Bob always made us laugh.”

“It’s the shock from the gunshots Sam. They are barking in fright.” Wright replied, focusing on an explanation of the animals behaviour rather than the emotion he felt. He tried to give his young deputy a re-assuring smile but was away with his anger; the braver part of his soul was striding out of the jail and into Martha’s Saloon, the quieter rival to the Red Boot, where he was sure Wilson’s killers resided. Unfortunately, that was as far as his bravado would take him. Even though he had mastered his Spencer repeating rifle, he would need more than seven rounds to take out this mob, and re-loading that weapon always took too damned long.

The sight of his third deputy nonchalantly leashing his horse next to Wright’s mare, Kate, bought him back to reality, As Deputy George Bell, sidestepped (nimble, for him) the mound of dung that Kate had just deposited, Wright couldn’t help thinking that she was a great judge of character. Bell was the voice in Wright’s ear he could do without, but at least today he would actually have a real story to tell. All their lives were now changed and Wright wondered what Bell’s reaction was going to be like when he saw Wilson’s corpse.

“It was Madsen, we all know it!” Murphy announced, his voice breaking as Bell entered the room.

“Calm down, Fred. Cool heads needed now. Morning George!”

“Is anyone going to help me with this body? We need to get him outside.” Sam asked.

“Leave him there.” Wright replied.

“But he needs a burial.”

“And he’ll get one. But your not dragging him out into the street letting the rest of the town know that we are weaker. Wilson was unlucky. That could have been any one of us on duty.” Wright watched Bell circling the room, he’d already tiptoed around the blood and other excretions that were steadily pouring from Wilson’s body. “I can only assume they thought we were all here. Remove the law and the First National is theirs.”

“Which means they will be coming back.” Bell said, scratching the scar on his right arm and responding more to the thoughts regarding his own mortality than Wright’s supposition. He had manoeuvred his frame behind his desk and made the chair creak as he sat in it. “Reminds me of ‘56, in Wikiup.” he began, as he scratched his crotch and shuffled his Colt Dragoon revolver into a more comfortable position.

“Oh, Christ!” Murphy exhaled.

Bell gave his colleague a small sideways glance, pushed his hat above his forehead and began to chew on the cord that had been dangling under his chin. He continued, “We were surrounded then too.”

“No shit.” Wright replied, deadpan, still adjusting his position to see as much as he could through the hole. Lucy had just appeared on one of the balconies of Martha’s Saloon - not her usual place of work - giggling at the voice that urged her back inside the room. She held a towel over her breasts but the strong morning wind caught it and she wasn’t quick enough to cover herself. Her white bottom flashed into Wright’s memory and all he could do was think of Catherine.

“Red Fogerty and his gang. Remember them?” Wright, Murphy and Caldwell all sighed and shook their heads instead of replying. Bell’s stories were taller than Lanky Pete, the village idiot, who was the only current occupant of the six cells of the jail, and that was only because he needed a bed for the night. “It was a small town, much like this one.” Bell leaned forward and cupped his hands to illustrate the size of the town he was describing. “And, AND, we were more outnumbered then too! Jack Sambora, young kid, had accidentally shot Fogerty’s brother Howie. He had never fired a gun before. You all remember your first time, right?” There was no answer. “Well, he shot Howie in the face! You should see the mess that makes!”

“Can’t be any more than this.” Sam muttered. He had now given up trying to stem the flow of fluids coming out of Wilson’s body.

“Red wasn’t happy and came looking for the kid. He was a savage that one. I was the only one that could save Sambora. He needed a lawman.”

“Sounds like he needed a miracle.” Sam offered sardonically.

“Don’t wind him up, Sam. You know this will go on forever. My kid will be 15 by the time he finishes!” Murphy interjected.

“There won’t be time.” Wright replied, a new urgency in his voice: urgency mixed with dread. He patted his sides in panic feeling for a firearm and then slapped his temple in frustration. “Bloody idiot!” He rushed past Murphy who wobbled on his chair as Wright inserted a key into the padlock of the armoury.

“Marshal?” Caldwell stood and headed to the peephole where he was joined by Murphy.

“Shit.” Murphy took one step back as Sam spoke.

“I can see the Lacey’s, William and Michael, and there’s Vaughn, Brown, Jackson and, er, Madsen. Shit!”

“CHECK YOUR AMMO! Fuck the numbers. You can’t count anyone if your dead!” Wright shouted. “Come on. Move it!”

“No, No!” Murphy backtracked further from the window as Bell fumbled bullets into his Colt.

“Check your Ammo, Murphy.” Sam reminded him in a calmer tone than Wright’s, who was busy laying out all the weapons they had on Wilson’s desk. Next to each one, he carefully placed the appropriate bullets.

“I can’t. We can’t.” Murphy seemed to be staring through the door between him and the men that were moving toward the building outside, he grasped for the handle that would allow him an exit to the back lot and outhouse. “Ella. Ann.” He said softly twisting the knob in his hand.

“Murph! Deputy Murphy! Hold it there.” Marshal Wright had seen a deserters eyes before: his own, but he was the only one that knew that. “Stand still, Deputy. This is my final warning.” Murphy had already opened the door though and slipped through it into the yard. Shots then came from both inside the Jail and outside.

“They’re on the roof!” Sam shouted in terror as Marshal Wright reloaded his gun having missed Murphy.

“It’s OK, Sam. We are not going to get trapped in here but we must respond and we must do it now.”

Bell was stuffing ammunition into his pockets.

“Yes, George, you’re going to need all of that. I want you to remember that the Lacey’s are out there. Do YOU remember them? Are you up for this?”

He nodded, a certain stoicism appearing on his face at the

mention of their names.

“Good. Right. We are going to open that front door and let them waste some ammo. If they are foolish enough to enter we can take them down.”

“Marshal Ben Wright?” a voice Wright knew as Jimmy Jackson’s bounced off the walls of all the buildings outside. “That’s two deputies down, as far as I see it. We told you war was coming and y’all are losing it, badly.”

“Say nothing, Marshal.” Sam suggested.

“OK. Open the front door, George.” Wright whispered.

Bell was sitting by the handle and he rolled onto his knees, and keeping his body away from the opening, carefully swung the door in-wards.

The threshold became peppered with bullets, a range of ammunition that sent splinters and shards of wood into the air like the residue from a saw.

“They will have to reload and when they do that is your signal to go.” Wright shouted above the din.

“Go where?” Bell asked.

“We need height to break their advantage. Make your way to the saloon and head for the whore’s balcony. Know which one I’m talking ‘bout?”

They all knew.

“I’ll give you both cover. When you reach the Saloon, turn and do the same for me. I’ll then join you.”

“Not being funny, Marshal.” Bell interrupted. “But rather than fight them - and we are outnumbered - should we not just not give ourselves an even better chance of survival?”

“And, how would we do that?” Wright replied irritated.

“Let them come to us. Remember, they are the aggressors here. We can play the waiting game.”

“For how long? Every hour, every second and every

minute we are cocooned here we become more vulnerable. They will cut off the food and water supply. No, we need to go now. Are you both ready?"

"We are." Sam answered for both of them placing his hand on Deputy Bell's shoulder. He brushed it away, a little irked that his suggestion had been rejected.

"Sam, help me with Wilson. He's going to be useful one more time in his life."

"How?"

"I want to slide his body toward the threshold. Come up this end, but be careful."

Sam joined Wright and between them they pushed Wilson's feet toward the door. As soon as they hit the light, more bullets entered the dead man's carcass. Sam and Ben continued to push and waited.

"There it is. Go!"

Sam was first through the door. He could hear the feverish clicking of tubes being reloaded as Bell joined him, closely followed by Wright, who knelt down and began firing into the sky.

"Go. GO!" he urged them and they sprinted into the full sunlight and across to the boardwalk the other side: it was the longest three seconds of Bell's life. While Sam slid under it, Deputy Bell hid behind a barrel for a few moments. Sam was soon firing back above where Wright was standing and gesturing toward his boss that the enemy was above him. The Marshal contemplated making the same dash for a moment but could see that Bell hadn't joined the exchange of gunfire. Wright could see Sam motioning toward Bell to join them but the older man had disappeared inside the saloon.

"BELL!" Wright bellowed, but his deputy didn't turn around.

“I can see them all, Marshall!” Sam shouted as he re-loaded his rifle and fired immediately toward Madsen who was a constant moving target: he missed and fired again. Wright caught Sam’s attention just after Brown’s body fell from the roof. There was a cheer from inside the Saloon as the ex-barman’s bulk wobbled for a moment and then became motionless. Madsen had used him as a shield and had now scrambled clear of Sam’s aim. Wright was hoping Sam would help him make a decision as to whether he should follow him across the divide but then Bell appeared on the same balcony that Lucy had revealed her backside on earlier, and began firing toward the men who were now sliding and scampering toward the rear of the jail.

“Now! Run Now, Marshall!” Bell beckoned him toward the Saloon. As he did so, he thought of Catherine. If this was going to be his last moment, then even if it was just in his mind, he wanted to spend it with her. Sweat poured out of his glands as he charged across to the saloon expecting his head to explode with bullets at any moment, but nothing happened. He reached the same barrel Bell had hidden behind only a few minutes earlier, turned and could see the disappearing shapes of John Lacey and Madsen jumping down into the yard behind the jail.

“Sam. Come on, Lets go.” And he could hear his deputies body shuffle out of the snipers position he had dug for himself and they smiled at each other and then entered through the double doors of the saloon, meeting Bell who was hurrying down the stairs.

“It’s time to leave.” Bell announced to them both, realising he had spoken a little loudly, and that those he was supposed to protect had heard what he had just said. He drew in close and muttered. “I quit.”

“I do too.” Sam found himself saying as he tried to stop his body shaking.

“Lawmen don’t quit. The job quits you, not the other way round.” Wright replied.

“Not us.” Bell said, still trying to catch his breath. “This ones too young and I’m too old. And you should also give it up, Marshal.” He continued. “We know these people. There’ll be no peace around here.”

“But we’ve just beaten the odds, Deputies. We’ve gone beyond our own expectations.”

“And what happens when you wake up one day and find that you haven’t got that edge anymore? What happens when you can’t find that special strength? No, I’m done.” Bell said. “And so should you be. You with me, Caldwell?”

Sam nodded.

“I thought you were just a storyteller, Bell.” Wright said as they headed for the exit to the rear of the saloon.

“I am” he replied, smiling. “This will be the first one that I won’t need to colour!”

As Wright turned away and headed toward the double doors, he couldn’t hear the chinking of glasses or the general bar noise. The only sound that poured into his ear drums were the unbridled yelps and barks of the dogs that had returned to their balconies, they were in full flow now.

chapter seventeen

Charlie Novak

MARSHAL WRIGHT THUMPED THE heavy wooden door with his fist. He paused, and when no response was forthcoming, he pushed the door open and strode into the Mayor's office anyway. He didn't have any time to waste waiting around.

Mayor Bird was seated behind his fine desk, in his fine suit, signing some paperwork with his fine fountain pen. Wright didn't have time for fine things. The Mayor's office always made him feel ill at ease. With his dusty, well-worn clothes and scuffed boots, he was like a stain on the carefully polished wood and pristine carpet of the office.

The Mayor looked up, an expression of affront already forming on his face. This changed to anger when he saw who it was. His round face grew red, and he smoothed at his moustache – a habit that had always annoyed Wright.

“What do you want?” asked the Mayor, a vein in his temple bulging.

Wright had the feeling that his request wasn't going to go down well. But he had to ask anyway. What else was he going to do?

“I need reinforcements from County. With Murphy and Wilson gone, and with Caldwell and Bell up and leaving... I

need more men.”

The Mayor stared back at him, his vein still pulsing.

“Mayor, we’re at war.”

“And whose fault is that?” snapped the Mayor, pushing himself to his feet and puffing out his chest.

“Jackson’s and Madsen’s, Mayor, they’re the ones who declared it.”

Mayor Bird marched across the room until he was standing so close to Wright that the slight bulge of his stomach was brushing against Wright’s belt.

“You’re the Marshal,” he said, jabbing a finger at Wright’s chest. “You’re the one who’s meant to keep the peace and stop the crime.” Another jab. “Any deaths are on you. The very existence of this gang is because you,” another jab, “are not doing your job.”

With each jab Wright felt closer to grabbing the Mayor around his chubby neck and trying to shake some sense into the man, but he was pretty certain that assaulting Mayor Bird would only make him angrier. Some men thought too much of themselves to be intimidated easily.

“With respect, Mayor,” Wright said through gritted teeth, “men will always turn to crime when there’s nothing else left.”

The Mayor’s face grew even redder, and his whole body seemed to swell with rage. In another situation, it might have been funny.

“Are *you* accusing *me*? You have let an all out war break out in the streets! I want you gone. Out. I never want to see your face here again. And not just in this office, in this town. Leave.”

Leave? Was Bird insane? What was the bastard thinking? If there was an all out war with a Marshal in town, what exactly did he think was going to happen without one? Besides, even

if he'd wanted to leave he wouldn't have. Wight was the Marshal after all. Even if this whole mess wasn't his fault to begin with, the Mayor was right about one thing: it was his job to fix it. If he left there'd only be more deaths. Who would replace him?

"No."

"No?"

"If I left like this, it'd only show them that they're winning. How long do you think it'd be before more people died?"

"You're the one who's letting people die in the first place!"

Flecks of spittle landed on Wright's face, but he ignored them. His fingers itched for the grip of his shotgun. But that wasn't how Wright dealt with things. He was Town Marshal, not a criminal. And that meant he only shot criminals, not idiots.

"Who will it be next time?" Wright asked softly. "One of your sons? Emily?"

Catherine? Wright was not about to let that happen. It was his job to protect the good people in this town.

"Out!" screamed the Mayor, spit flying from his mouth. "Out, out, out!"

"Fine!" Wright shouted back, any pretence at keeping his temper down the well. He turned towards the door, but looked back over his shoulder. "But I'll be back. If you won't send for reinforcements, I'll go and find my own blazing recruits. I'm sure there're some deputies in these parts who, unlike you, will understand what needs to be done."

There'd always be people ready to clean the world of scum like the bastards he was dealing with. Plus, it'd probably be faster for him to find his own men, than to wait on the Mayor and all the damned paperwork he'd probably have to fill out. Men like him loved paper work. It made them feel more in

charge.

“You’re fired.”

“And I’m choosing to ignore that.”

The Mayor huffed indignantly. “You—”

“Look, no matter what you say, I’m not giving up. I’m going to track down those sons of bitches and put a bullet in every one of their heads. I don’t care what you say. Hell I don’t care what you do as long as you don’t get in my way. But I am going to find them, and I am going to end this. No matter how long it takes.” And he meant it.

Wright turned his back on the Mayor, and made for the door. He reached for the handle. He’d get this done his own way. Though, he still wished the Mayor could see reason.

“Wait.”

Marshal Wright lowered his hand from the door. Was the Mayor changing his mind? Had his words actually convinced him?

Slowly, he turned back to face the Mayor. “What?”

The red had faded from the Mayor’s face, and his shoulders had slumped slightly. He looked tired. Now that Wright was paying closer attention he saw that the Mayor’s fine pinstripe suit didn’t seem to fit quite as firmly as usual. And it might just have been him, but Wright was sure that there was more grey in the man’s hair than he remembered. He looked as bad as Wright felt. Flintwood was the Mayor’s town too. Flintwood had chosen both of them. He was probably under as much, if not more, stress than Wright was. They should be helping each other out. Protecting Flintwood right now was more important than their disagreements. Maybe the Mayor had reached the same conclusion.

The older man sighed. “Come back first thing tomorrow. We can talk more then.”

Wright just nodded, and went to leave. If the Mayor was willing to cooperate then he wasn't going to push his luck.

Before closing the door behind him he glanced back at the Mayor. "Does this mean I'm not fired?"

Mayor Bird just motioned for him to leave.

Marshal Wright walked slowly through the streets, keeping his hand on his shotgun. He would've felt better riding Kate – and with his Spencer – but riding a horse in town made him too much of a target.

He kept his eyes open, and tried to keep track of everything around him. A part of him nearly wanted Jackson, Madsen, or one of their cronies to show up. He wouldn't say no to an excuse to kill any one of them. Although, if it came down to a straight gunfight in the street Jackson would probably win, especially when Wright didn't have his Spencer – the man was a devil with his revolver. Wright was still annoyed he'd had to release that sack of shit Vaughan due to lack of evidence. He wouldn't have that problem next time.

Flintwood was quieter and emptier than it should be at this time. People were scared. With good reason. Wright considered heading back to his place, but decided against it. Everyone knew where he lived, and he'd be no use to the town if he was dead. He considered going to Bell, but he'd quit, he didn't really have a reason to help him now. He could go to Donley, but he didn't want to draw any trouble towards him or Catherine. He sighed. Gila Avenue it was. No one would think to look for him there, and at least he'd still have a roof over his head while he slept. Besides, maybe the gang, or at least some of them, were hiding out down there, and he'd be able suss out their place, even if he didn't confront them.

He kept expecting one of them to appear around a corner,

or take a shot at him from one of the half-finished buildings that lined the street. But there was nothing.

Mayor Bird strolled down the street, hands in his pockets. Recent rain had left the usually dusty streets muddy. The muck coated his shoes, and dirtied the hems of his trousers as he went. It was probably stupid of him to be walking around alone – hell he knew it was stupid. He wanted to tell himself that he was out because he needed to be seen. He was Mayor. It was his job to show the people that he was not afraid, so they shouldn't be either. Fear would kill this town. Fear was killing this town. But the truth was, the Mayor was frightened too. Hell, he was probably more frightened than most. He just couldn't stand another second sitting in his office.

He looked glumly around the street. Bird could feel the town suffocating. Too many shops were closed, and too few people were out. Those that were walked quickly, with heads down and arms by their sides as if they were trying to keep themselves from being seen. Ahead stood the abandoned Wells Fargo Bank. The symbol of Flintwood's decline.

Bird veered onto Fremont Avenue and peered into the building through a window. The lobby looked much the same as it did when the bank had still been open. It could've just been closed for the day. The Mayor wished that were the case.

Something moved inside the building, and Bird ducked below the window, nearly slipping and landing in the dirt. Who would be in there? And why? It wasn't like there was anything left to steal.

Slowly, heart pounding in his throat, Bird raised his head and peeked in. Luckily, the window gave him a decent view of the whole bank. Two men were standing behind the counter. It looked like they were talking – maybe arguing – about

something, but they must have been keeping their voices low, because the Mayor couldn't make anything out.

One of them shifted slightly and, with a small jolt of fear, Bird recognised who it was. Jackson. That meant the blonde man next to him was Madsen. It looked like the Mayor had tracked them down.

Marshal Wright knocked on the Mayor's office door.

"Come in."

The Mayor looked better today. He was holding himself a bit straighter, and some of the tiredness seemed to be gone from his face. He gave a small smile when he saw the Marshal. Wright himself must've looked like shit after sleeping on the floor in his uniform. He certainly didn't feel his best, but seeing the Mayor's changed countenance gave him hope. Maybe it meant there was good news.

"Good morning, Marshal." So he definitely wasn't fired then.

"Well?" Wright asked, "What did you want to tell me?"

"Unfortunately we won't be getting any help from County. At least not for a few weeks."

Well that certainly wasn't good news. What was he going to do in the mean time? Maybe he'd have to go and find his own help after all.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I know where Jackson and Madsen are."

"What? Where?"

"They're hiding out in Wells Fargo Bank."

"How do you know? How did you find them?"

"By accident actually," said the Mayor, going a bit red in the cheeks. "Damned lucky they didn't see me."

"I still need more men before I can do anything. No way I

can take out the whole gang without more help.”

“They were there alone. There was no sign of the Laceys or Vaughan.”

Wright smiled. Now that was good news.

“I want you to deal with Jackson and Madsen,” said the Mayor. “End this thing.”

chapter eighteen

S.R. Martin

LAYING HIS RIGHT HAND on the grip of his holstered shotgun, Marshal Wright squinted through the brightness at the dusty thoroughfare. Only a handful of townsfolk made their way along sheltered boardwalks on the other side of the street. All of them turned their heads in curiosity to see the blasted bricks of the jailhouse behind him, mortar chips still lying on the boards in front of the heavy iron door.

Ben saw their expressions. At once, he saw sorrow and anger. They screamed at him with their eyes. Why don't you do something? You're our protector, aren't you? How could you let your deputies get shot up like that? Didn't you see them coming? We sure did...

He wiped the salt from his forehead with the brim of his hat and then put it on, tilting it downward in front, as was his custom. He kept his right hand on the butt of the gun. He walked slowly onto the dirt of the avenue, keeping the façade of the Wells Fargo building safely in his peripheral vision on his left.

They were there, inside. And they could be watching him right now. They could easily take him out with pistols pointed through the broken glass windows. But nothing happened.

"Probably asleep," thought the Marshal. "This isn't their time of the day. But they are there."

He fought the urge to walk toward the abandoned bank. Tapping the mahogany grip, he settled himself. You can't do it. You can't do it alone. You are outgunned. Two deputies dead, and two more have just as well thrown their stars into the dust and stomped on them with their boots. What dereliction. What sacrilege! And you let them walk away.

Well, maybe they have cooled down by now. Bell has been through this too many times, or so he says. He always comes back, always patches up the wounds, cleans his guns, and rides back for more.

He looked up from under the brim of his hat. A portly matron with a small sack of flour stared at him.

"You all right, Marshal?" She came to his side and touched his right elbow.

He flinched, instinctively opening his hand and keeping the palm flat on the grip. Startled as he was from his reverie, he didn't want an accidental shooting on his record.

"How do, Missy Barnes," he said. "I am not all right. I'm sure you know that. I can't be all right."

"You've had too much sun," she said. "I can tell because my John gets that same far away look in his eyes. Not focused on anything. Are you thirsty?"

Ben furrowed his brow and glared at the woman. He looked at the bag she held close to her frock. "What is that?"

"Flour."

"You gonna make bread?"

"Bread. And biscuits. Maybe a pie or two."

"What kind of pie?"

The woman looked forlorn. She bit her lip and looked down the street, her bonnet flapping in a sudden gust of hot

wind. "Just bread and biscuits. Nothing to put in a pie."

Realising that he was standing with the woman in plain sight of the low windows of the bank, he guided her over to the boardwalk, and shade. By simply lingering in the street, he inadvertently placed her in danger. He thought, that's another responsible thing you've done. Hell, you will get 'em all killed. Just let 'em stand next to you...

"I'll bring you a tin of biscuits this afternoon," the woman said. "You'll be at the jailhouse?"

Ben remembered what he had to do, struggling to understand what was the best option. Should I leave town to get George? If I do, all hell could break loose. It is the last excuse that foul gang of murderers has to remain hidden. I can hit at least one of them with my coach gun - they know that. Even if Jackson and Madsen are holed up with the rest of them, at least one of them will die. They know it, and that's holding them back, for now.

Of course, I would die, too. And there is nobody left in town with an ounce of backbone to take my place. And no deputies. Lazy good-for-nothin' bastards. And why is this woman looking at me?

"Marshal," said the woman, "why don't you go to the Red Boot and get you something to drink?"

"Yeah, I will, Miss Barnes. Just leave them biscuits with Catherine. I've got some business to tend to, and I'll pick 'em up later." He took his leave of the woman and walked around the side of the jailhouse.

His horse stood in the shade. No water was in the trough, so Ben checked the water barrel. All dry. "Got to get you something to drink, Kate. Let's go to the river." He loosened the reins from the hitching post and led the horse by its hackamore to the street-side entrance to the jail, tying her off

there.

He unlocked the iron door, and went inside to get his repeating rifle from the gun safe. Looking around at the six cells to make sure all were locked, he checked the keyring in his trouser pocket, flipping through the keys with his fingers, counting six. He made a quick scan for anything else out of the ordinary, then he moved the iron door open to leave.

"When you gonna be back?" came a weak voice from the farthest cell. "I'm hungry."

"Grub at sundown, Harley," said the Marshal. "You know that. Go to sleep and hope the heat don't kill you."

"Fine Marshal you are."

Ben closed the door, slipped the repeater into its case on the horse's side, and mounted the horse in one fluid, practiced motion. "Come on, Kate. Let's go get George."

On the east side of the Gila River, George Bell had purchased a large parcel of land as part of the speculation boom back in 1861. He had land in other parts of Arizona and New Mexico, relics of his stints as lawman in numerous towns over the last two decades. For five dollars an acre, the deal seemed exceptional before the War, before the copper mines dried up the first time.

George was no fool. No matter what anybody said about new discoveries or a breakthrough at the existing mines, it all pointed to one thing: Flintwood was quickly on its way to a dusty grave, to be lost among the countless anonymous ghost towns created by promises of mineral wealth in the great southwest territories.

Alone on his land, with a one room cabin to mark his claim, he now began the tedious and painful job of loading a small, makeshift sulky he had built from wagon parts he stole

from town. It was rickety, and his horse was tentative, having never pulled a wagon of any kind. In fact, the horse had never been trained with a bit. It would have to do.

George lifted a box of pistol ammunition onto the sulky, groaning in pain as his right shoulder and arm weakened. He had to slide the box into position with his good arm, as the other one went numb. He braced himself against the wagon, lowered his head, meditating on the pain. Sweat poured from his face, and he began to see stars. A few more breaths, and he stood up, ready to retrieve another box of ammo.

The smell of creosote and acacia thickened the hot air. Puffs of dust hit George in the face as he dragged his saddlebags to the horse. As he gathered his courage to use his right arm to hoist one of the bags, he spied a cloud of dust on the horizon, toward town.

He dropped the bag and hobbled into the cabin to find his revolver. He grabbed it with his left hand, cursing the unfamiliar feeling, knowing that his shots would never be accurate.

Standing behind his cabin, looking around the corner, he recognised Ben, and lowered his gun. He breathed a sigh of relief, having fully expected to engage in a gunfight - a very short one.

Ben slowed his horse to a trot, and came to a stop near the sulky. "What the hell is all this, George?"

The former deputy pointed the revolver at his right arm. "This. I ain't no use right now, Ben. Maybe never again."

The Marshal swung his leg over the horse and hopped down, tilting his hat up. He peered through George's face, a burning gaze that disturbed George enough that he gripped the revolver in his left hand tighter.

"You have a duty, sir," said Ben. "You swore to uphold the

law."

"I did."

"Maybe to die trying."

"I did."

"And now you are leaving? Where to?"

"I don't know. Back east."

Ben took his hat off and fanned his face, the hot air evaporating his sweat. "There's nothing for you back there. You have no skills other than handling a gun and a horse. And don't tell me you have decided to join the Confederate army. There ain't one."

"I am not joining any army."

"Because if you had wanted to be in the army, you should have joined the army before the war was over."

"That wasn't for me. You know that. I've been out here fighting Indians, Mexicans, Californians, you name it, I have fought them. I have fought my wars. They might be small wars, but I have won every time." He spat on the ground. "Until now."

Ben scratched the stubble on his chin. He surveyed the tiny cabin, then looked about for water. "You got a well here, don't you?"

"Over there," said George, pointing to a pipe and spigot emanating from the hard packed dirt twenty paces from the cabin.

Ben walked to the spigot, pumped it until water of questionable color and odor came forth. He doffed his hat, bent down and allowed the tepid water to flow over his head for a few seconds. Standing up and wringing his hair out with his hand, he said, "George, I need you one more time."

"No."

"To finish them off. I got Jackson and Madsen holed up in

the empty Wells Fargo next to the jail."

George laughed maliciously. "Don't you mean they got you holed up in your own jail?"

Ben frowned and kicked the dirt at his feet.

George bowed his head. "I shouldn't have said that, Ben. This has been a rough time for the town, and I don't believe there is anything you or I can do about it. Nothing."

"Nothing, George?"

"And even if we had all the guns and men in the world, all we would do is shut down the town for good. This place ain't on the main trail from Tucson to Las Cruces or Albuquerque. The only reason anybody came through here was for the copper."

"And the copper is gone."

"So now," said George, "all that's left is the gambling, drinking, fighting, robbing, murdering..."

"Mayor says it's my fault," said Ben. "And sometimes, I believe him. With you and Caldwell quitting, I have no one. I cannot kill the Jackson gang by myself."

"Not even with that fancy coach gun?" George laughed.

"You can take my gun. You can fire it with your left hand."

"I can't hit anything with this left hand."

"That's why I use the coach gun. You know I'm a lousy shot with a pistol."

George grimaced. "Maybe you are. But I am not. At least, until I got hit in that ambush. This arm won't be the same again. If I can't aim right, I shouldn't be in the law business no more."

"Can't you just consider the town -"

"No, damn it, Ben, I can not. I've got holes all over me, lead and shrapnel in my shoulders, my leg. I'm not quick as I used to be, I ache, and this new wound is the last straw." He

walked over to Ben, placing his left hand on his shoulder. "I am not going to die for this town. Look what it got Murphy and Wilson."

Ben shuddered, not able to find a new angle.

"And Ben, you're going to be next. They had you pegged, they killed two of your deputies, they almost killed me, and they are going to kill you. You might want to consider leaving yourself."

"I have a sworn duty, just like you did."

George looked away and walked toward the sulky. "In the end, your duty will mean nothing. Get out while you can."

Ben wiped his face with both hands. "Well, I won't do that."

"Suit yourself." George bent low to pick the saddlebag off the ground. "Have you seen Caldwell?"

"No," said Ben. "Not inclined to. He's yellow."

"He's inexperienced."

"Yellow."

"And so were you once, not so long ago."

A wry smile curled Ben's lips. "It is kind of ironic, isn't it. I break up one fight at the Red Boot, and Donley makes me his deputy."

"You know, they shouldn't compare you to Donley. Flintwood is dying. He never had to deal with that."

Ben mounted his horse. "Good luck, George."

"And good luck to you," said George.

Ben surveyed the scrubby land. "Are you worried about squatters?"

George stared out over his acreage. He flapped his left hand in the air. "They can have it."

Crossing the Gila, Ben saw little hope. He began to believe

this would be his last day alive, expecting the gang to ambush him in the night. How they would do this, how they would break into the jail to get him, he could not say. He rolled the various scenarios over and over in his mind.

I've got to talk to Caldwell, he thought.

Sam's makeshift shack constructed out of leftover materials that would have been part of a new emporium of clothing and ladies' fineries was unprotected, inasmuch as a passerby could see plainly that it had no outward security. The young man spent his nights awake, ready to silence any intruder to his "property" on Gila Avenue.

Intruders never came. In spite of the fact that he was recognised throughout the town as one of Ben Wright's deputies, no one bothered to disturb his cobbled domicile.

They didn't take him seriously. "I'm the kid," he thought out loud at times, twirling his Colt Army revolver, the one that had functioned so poorly during the ambush at the jailhouse.

Or, maybe it had not been the gun that didn't work well on that day.

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows through the unfinished, skeletal frames along the street. Once again, night would come, and Sam would maintain his vigil. Before the ambush, he merely kept watch for vagrants and thieves. His gun was the only item worth robbing. Now, he hid in terror, worried that Jackson and Madsen, or the Lacey boys would find him and do him in.

Still too stung to contemplate escaping the town (and it's hard to do without a horse), he waited for sunset. Sitting quietly in the dust, he saw no hope for getting to Oklahoma. He began to lose all hope of anything else.

The violent deaths of Murphy and Wilson replayed in his mind. He placed his head in his hands and sobbed with horror

and fear of what lay in the near future.

A gentle breeze, dry and hot, delivered dust into his wetted eyes. He rubbed them as the sound of ambling hoofs grew louder.

Looking up, unable to focus, Sam grabbed his pistol. He batted his eyes, the dust working its way to the corners, and pointed his gun in the direction of the sound.

"Hold on now," said Ben. "You know, firing on a Town Marshal is a federal offence."

Sam cleared his vision and lowered his gun.

Ben continued. "And we don't want the U.S. Marshal to come down here. Right?"

"Right!" said Sam, cheered to see his Marshal.

"I hear you lived through an ambush. Is that true?"

"You were there, too, Marshal."

Ben laughed. "Sure I was. And you did what you could. We all did the best we could."

"But they died... I saw them... shot right through the head and chest... both of them." He lowered his head and sat cross legged in the dirt.

"Son, you are a deputised law man in this town, is that not so?"

"Yes."

"You have a sworn duty to protect the citizens of this town. Did you not uphold your duty?"

Sam sniffed and looked up. "I suppose. But I didn't fire when I needed to."

Ben got off his horse. "Neither of us did, boy." He sat down on the ground next to Sam. He pushed the brim of his hat up, and studied the sunset.

Ben watched the younger man's gun hand. "Let me see that," he said, reaching for the gun. He unlocked the drum,

spun it, then peeked through each barrel. He spun the drum, and relocked it, He cocked the hammer, and pulled the trigger repeatedly. Handing the gun back to Sam, he said, "Out of bullets."

"Yes," said Sam.

"What do you expect to do with a gun with no bullets?"

Sam lowered his head again.

Ben recognised the signs of shock in the younger man. You haven't seen anything, boy. Not like I've seen. Those hangings you witnessed when you were fourteen are nowhere near the carnage and inhuman behaviour I have seen. And not all by guns, no sir! Knives and swords, too. Horrible dismembering death. I have dealt it, too. I have certainly done that...

He raised his chin, and spoke with the sage air of a teacher. "As a lawman, you will be expected to kill when necessary. We all must do it at one time or another. They say we are the keepers of peace. Well, boy, the only way to keep peace out here is to get rid of those who will not let that peace happen."

"There is no peace," said Sam.

"Not now," said Ben. "But you haven't seen peace yet. I have. I wasn't always a law officer."

"Why didn't you fight in the War?"

The question took Ben aback. No one had ever asked him that. No one in the Arizona Territory could say why they did or did not participate. The reason eluded expression, but it was why they were there instead of back in the South. It was why they left, or did not return.

Ben knew deep in his heart why he meandered away from the South, but would never allow another soul to know the truth. The truth would be considered treasonous by Confederates. And God only knew, Arizona was full of

Confederate veterans and sympathisers.

The truth was this. He did not want to die as part of a large organised venture. If he were going to die in battle, he wanted it to be his own battle, not under the command of someone else. With no family to speak of, no wealth, and nothing to hold on to, why would he be commanded to his death by those who had families and wealth? For them?

I will never fight for someone else... I will command my own death sentence, if it ever comes to that... I know why they don't ask. I know why the people in the Southwest Territories are here... it's because they won't die for someone else's cause either...

"I am fighting here, to make this place safe," said Ben. "And you are, too."

Again, Sam looked away.

"I remember you telling me you wanted to be Marshal someday. You don't want to be a ranch hand. You want action. And you will get action." He grabbed the youth's shoulder. "You have to get used to it. It is not easy to kill a man. Even when you know that man is trying to kill you. But you have to get used to it." He stood up and dusted his trousers. "I'm here to tell you, it can be done, because I made it through."

Ben searched through a saddlebag. He pulled out a box and read the label. "Here," he said, tossing the box of bullets to Sam. "This'll keep you safe."

"They're not looking for me."

"A-ha!" said Ben, smiling. "And that's a good thing. It's how you can help me get rid of them. They've made a home for themselves at the old Wells Fargo bank. I want you to help me take them out."

Sam shook his head. "It's going to be the same thing as last time. They'll just kill us."

"Not if we are smart."

"What is smart?"

"The First National Bank has the same floor plan as the Wells Fargo. You and I could use the First National Bank to plan our entry and what to do when we get inside. I can teach you all about cover, when to reload, how to count their shots —"

"There's a lot of them, and just two of us."

"Sam, that's the way it is always going to be. The difference is in the outsmarting."

Sam sighed and stood up. "I've been thinking about going back to Tucson."

Ben mounted his horse. "All right. Go back to mama. But remember — you said you wanted to become a Marshal." He whipped the reins against the horse's neck. "This is how you become one." He galloped down Gila Avenue, turned left on Second Street, and disappeared.

The wrap at the door had a familiar rhythm, but Catherine didn't take any chances. Without conscious thought, she reached for the double-barreled shotgun left by her father and stood back from the door.

"Who is it?" she shouted.

"It's me."

Catherine lowered the gun, and breathed easier. She jerked the gun back up to the ready position. "Who's with you?"

"Just me. I'm hungry."

To be sure, Catherine lifted the curtains with the muzzle of the gun. Ben stood at the door, bobbing up and down on his toes. She unlatched the door and hurried him in, taking his hat.

They both darted eyes, and did not look at each other for more than one second or two.

"Did Miss Barnes slip a tin of biscuits your way?" said Ben.

"Yes, she did," said Catherine, breaking into a weary smile. "She told me you didn't look so good today. I see you have recovered."

Ben made his way to the dining room table. Catherine noted his show of comfort in the house her father built.

"Surely you don't just want biscuits for dinner," she said.

"Honey, I will take what I can get."

"Well, it's going to be about all you can get. The store is out of most everything. I don't know what's going to finish this town off first... the bank... the lack of food... or them boys..."

Ben tensed and placed his elbows on the table. "I've got to get rid of them."

Catherine stood behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders. "I know."

He turned to look up at her face. It was weathered and serious, reflecting beauty that had slowly seeped underneath with the hard life of a principled woman in the West. Hers was a face he trusted. In it, he saw the potential future of lighter days, children, a life elsewhere. Maybe California.

"Did you get George to come back?" she asked.

"No."

She rushed away from him, grasping the back of her father's tall leather chair and hung her head over it. "I can't... if you're gone..."

Ben stood up, walked up behind her and held her. They said nothing,

A rap at the door, an unfamiliar rhythm interrupted the silence.

Instinctively, Ben whipped out the coach gun from its holster, and Catherine darted for the shotgun propped beside

the door.

The rapping commenced again.

Ben shot a glance at Catherine. She returned his look, then said toward the door, "Who is it?"

"It's Sam, Miss Donley. I'm looking for Marshal Wright."

Ben threw open the latch and opened the door.

Sam stood straight, a determination in his eye. "All right," he said.

Ben reached for his hand and shook it vigorously.

Harley moaned as he heard the iron door screech open. He knew it could only be the Marshal, since there were no other law officers around.

"Is that you, Ben?"

The heavy plodding of boots on the plank floor grew louder. Harley rolled over on his lumpy straw mattress.

"Here you are, you old codger," said Ben, sliding the tin with three remaining biscuits under the bars into Harley's cell. He walked away.

Harley slid onto the floor and picked up the tin, opening the lid.

From his desk, where he had eased into a comfortable resting position in the old banker's chair, Ben registered Harley's silence.

"What?" the Marshal bellowed.

"No molasses?" said Harley.

chapter nineteen

J.A. Bell

BEN QUIETLY STEPPED UP to the side of a window on the eastern side of the abandoned Wells Fargo building, his finger resting lightly on the trigger of his shotgun. He glanced across the wall of the building, the darkness of the night making it difficult to see if Sam had made it around the corner of the other side. The moonlight helped by glinting off Sam's badge.

They were almost ready.

Just stick with the plan, Ben thought, willing Sam to do just that. *This should be easy pickings.*

Deep down, however, Ben wasn't so sure. Something just didn't add up, and it stuck in his craw like a tick on a dog's ass. Jackson and Madsen weren't the brightest gang leaders around, but were they stupid enough to hide out in what amounted to plain sight, right in this abandoned building? The mayor seemed all too eager to give up these boys, but he had his suspicions about that, too. And where were the Lacey boys and that Vaughn kid?

All niggling questions it was too late to ask. He and Sam were here now, and committed to what seemed like a simple plan.

The plan. Just stick to the plan.

Ben raised a hand up to indicate to Sam to hold steady for the moment. He put his ear to the wall, hoping the sound of voices would reach him, confirming the tip. He thought he heard some shuffling, maybe a footstep or two.

He leaned his shotgun to his shoulder, kept his finger on the trigger, and waited for the right moment.

Vaughn watched from the edge of the post office on the opposite corner of 4th Avenue as that goddamned kid Caldwell slid his spineless back along the back wall of the abandoned bank where Jimmy and Seth were holed up. He'd be worried for his two leaders were it not for a simple fact that kept his head up.

Everyone knew the Marshal was coming. This time, he couldn't get away.

Vaughn quietly walked back to the rest of the gang, assembled by the front door of the post office. With the other deputies dead and the Marshal lurking around the abandoned building just a block away, being in plain sight wasn't a concern for him or the Lacey boys. Vaughn's smile said all they needed to know about the current situation; the Mayor's information was good, and the trap was set.

"So, the little Bird's tattle was dead on, was it?" asked John Lacey.

Vaughn nodded. He grinned as he watched the elder Lacey brother unsheath his knife and turn it around in his hand. John was a good shot, but it was clear as day that he had something special planned for his other, more torturous toy. He slid the pad of his index finger across the blade, feeling its sharpness.

"Whatcha gonna do, John?" asked the youngest Lacey,

William. "Gut him like a fish?"

John just stared at his blade, a dark smile spreading over his lips.

Vaughn stopped smiling at the sight of that smile. "That spineless shit Caldwell is with him, too. Looks like we might get a twofer."

All three Laceys looked up at him. What felt like a minute to Vaughn passed before quiet, hushed laughter escaped from John's mouth. It was almost like a wheeze. "Hah," John whispered. "That'll take care of both our problem, and the Mayor's. Get rid of all these sonsabitches."

Vaughn walked back to the corner of the post office, and looked down the street at the abandoned bank. He saw the Marshal's head up against the building, and Caldwell at the opposite corner, gun up by his head. He turned back to the rest of the gang.

"Boys, it's time."

Ben had an uneasy feeling that they were being watched. The burr that stuck in his craw grew more itchy, but what could he do?

A simple plan, he thought, that might be just too simple,

It was now or never. He called Sam over to him with a gesture of his hand. He didn't want any surprises, so he decided to make the plan even simpler. Instead of taking opposite sides of the building, they would both enter through what looked like a broken-open door on the north side of the building, guns up and firing at whoever moved. Quietly, he conveyed the new plan to Sam, who nodded strongly.

Ben looked around, then made his way around the northeast corner of the building, when suddenly the wall next to his head exploded for a split second before temporary

deafness engulfed his left ear. It took him half a moment to understand what had just happened, and another half moment to realise what *almost* happened. And then John Lacey's unmistakable voice getting closer.

"Marshal Wright!"

Ben whipped around towards the sound, just as Sam fired off a round towards the men who were approaching. The four men walking towards them spun away from the various possible trajectories of the bullet, and then one of them, John, began bolting towards Ben. Ben levelled his shotgun, and as he was aiming for the running man, saw a glint of metal that unnerved him. As his vision, hampered by the nighttime sky and his adrenaline pumping, tried to focus in on the object in John Lacey's hand, another explosion behind him shattered his equilibrium, and as he tried to regain his balance, his shotgun not sure where it was aiming, he realised Lacey had a *knife* in his hand.

Who brings a knife to a gunfight? he thought to himself, the thought broken by yet another explosion to his left. He strafed right and away from the explosion. Ben knew he was lucky, because the Lacey boys were good shots. In spite of the chaos around him, he couldn't help but let the realisation dawn on him that they were set up, and that he let Sam get dragged into this.

Shit. Sam.

Ben looked around for Sam, who was firing another shot at the oncoming bumrush of armed men. But it was too late; John Lacey was already nearly on Ben, and Vaughn was just coming up on Sam, who despite his courage in coming on this little mission, couldn't hold his gun straight. It was all happening too fast, because Ben barely got the shout of warning out of his mouth when Vaughn finally reached Sam

and took him down to the ground in an almost comical leap. At the impact, Sam's gun flew helplessly from his hand to the ground. He now had no way to protect himself.

As Ben looked up, John Lacey was raising his arm, knife at the end of it, in a slashing position. Ben ducked, feeling a *woosh* of air above his head as the blade missed him by inches? millimetres? a whisker? and of course if didn't matter, the gap between Ben and a mortal wound, what mattered was *getting the hell out of there* and *fast*.

But Sam.

Ben looked up as John Lacey regained his footing for another attack, then lunged towards Sam. Vaughn was struggling with him on the ground as the other Lacey boys were both beelining for them. Ben wasn't sure he could make it to Sam in time. He ran towards them, the shotgun in hand, when suddenly he felt the full force of Jimmy Jackson's body slamming him back into the wall. In the split second he had to realise what was going on, he saw the barrel of a Remington revolver bearing down on his face. He ducked again, heard the explosion above his head, and swung his shotgun into Jackson's legs. Jackson swore loudly, and Sam continued east along the building to rescue Sam.

It was too late. Vaughn had Sam up by his neck in a chokehold, dragging him to the front of the bank building. Ben's mind racing, he knew this was a setup, and he knew he couldn't do anything for Sam when they were *this* outnumbered. While all hell was breaking loose around them, he thought he could manage the Lacey boys and Vaughn, but if Jackson was outside now, Madsen surely was, too.

They hadn't just shot Sam dead, so the boy had a chance. Ben knew if he stayed in this situation for another minute, they'd both be dead. He turned around and blindly fired a

shotgun blast into the remaining melee, and then his boots pumped against the ground to get away as fast as he could down, east down Fremont. Bullets whizzed by, but Ben knew to zig zag and throw off their aim.

“COWARD!” Jimmy Jackson shouted after him. “*We got the boy, though, Marshal!*” he continued, underscoring Ben’s enormous failure in getting Sam captured. “*We got the boy and WE’RE COMING FOR YOU!*”

Ben stopped hearing bullets and didn’t sense anyone’s presence behind him. He stopped at the hitching post, about two blocks away, and turned around, ducking behind the hub. He held his shotgun close. He wished he had the Spencer with him, but this would have to do if the men came after him right now. There was no way to get back to the Marshal’s Office without being detected, so he just sat here, watching back to the building, seeing the boys surrounding Sam in front of the bank. Even from this distance, he could hear Sam’s pleading. Sam was still alive, at least.

God, I hope they don’t just kill him, he thought. Then, unbidden, another thought came to him.

God’s certainly not here tonight.

chapter twenty

J.D. Salt

THE CLAPBOARD SIDING OF the Marshal's Office splintered one last time as a final bullet spat out by the gang's retreat tore into it.

Wright raised the Spencer repeater back to his shoulder and took aim. "Dammit." He could barely make out silhouettes in the dim light. Never mind the notion of missing—he might just as well hit Caldwell as one them bastards and he was plumb short of deputies at the moment.

He watched the gang retreat further into the darkness, the drumming hoof beats of their horses fading.

Wright sprinted around the corner of the building and into his office. He retrieved another shotgun from the rack, along with a box of ammo for it and one box for the rifle. He eyed the Colt hanging holstered in its belt—no point; damn thing was worthless and if he got close enough to kill with it, he'd be a dead man anyway—there were too many of them and he was fresh out of deputies.

The Marshal checked the shotgun—it was loaded—then stuffed the Spencer full of cartridges again, re-stocked his belt, and put a half dozen shotgun shells in his vest pocket, all the while trying to come up with a way to get Caldwell back

without getting both of them killed. Too much blood had spilled on the damned dusty ground of this dying town—it had to end.

Restock done, Wright ran out the front door and around the back to where Kate was hitched. He was glad he'd had the good sense to move the mare before he and Caldwell had tried to take Jackson and Madsen at the bank, otherwise she'd probably have joined the list of the dead, a victim of the crossfire as the gang made its escape. He put the boxes in the saddle bag, slid the rifle into its holster and secured the shotgun next to it.

The Marshal untied the reins from the hitching post and stroked Kate's head with a leather-clad hand. "There's dangerous business ahead, girl. Think you're up to it?" She snorted and dipped her head. "All right then. Let's see if we can get Caldwell back. It's gettin' hard to find deputies."

Wright mounted up, turned Kate away from the hitching post, and spurred her into action. "Fast as you can, sweet girl." She jumped at his encouragement and they sped off down Fremont Avenue and out of town. In this direction, there was only one place the gang would take Caldwell—if they meant to keep him alive—the old mines.

The Marshal was well behind the gang, but he wasn't concerned. Prisoner in tow, even on horseback, they'd have to ride slower. Plus, the trail narrowed in a few miles as it began to wind through the steeper hills—with only the hint of a moon low on the horizon, they'd have to slow down or risk a leg-breaking fall. Jackson, Madsen and their boys were brazen, some of them crazy maybe, but they were not stupid fools. He'd be able to close most of the gap well before he had to start getting cautious.

Wright put his trust in Kate to lead them through the

darkness as he began to ponder the gang's decision to take Caldwell prisoner. *Why didn't they simply kill him outright? With Murphy and Wilson dead, men were avoiding the deputy position like it was a man wracked with consumption. With Caldwell gone, I'm alone and will be lucky to survive this bunch if they keep their war up. Unless they want to turn Caldwell—he's a young man of course, impressionable, few prospects before I plucked him up. He's been loyal, but when a man's faced with livin' or dyin'...Unless they reckon to use him to get to me, lure me into a trap...*

Kate slowed to a trot then stopped, pulling Wright out of his pondering. "What is it, girl?" he said, looking up and recognising the tall shapes of the hills in the near distance. Then he heard the quick click of horseshoes on gravel, faint yet distinct—the Jackson-Madsen gang was maybe a quarter mile ahead, crossing Devil's Stream from the sound of it. "That's my Kate. Good girl," he said, scratching her head below each ear. He drew the Spencer from its holster, checked to make sure a round was chambered, then laid it across his lap, one hand on the reins. "On we go then. Quiet as you can, if'n you please." Kate huffed softly, dipped her head, then headed off at a modest trot.

Half an hour later, the steady, still-distant, sound of horses' hooves stopped. Wright reined in Kate and listened. The breeze brought a hint of voices punctuated by bursts of raucous laughter. *Have they stopped? They're still well shy of the mines.* The Marshal dismounted. They had closed the gap to four to five hundred yards, close enough to hear, yet far enough away to not be seen. From this point on it was all about stealth. This wasn't the best country for sneaking around—unless you were Indian—it was too rocky. Wright hoped the gang's good humor would cover his approach as he

led Kate on. If he was lucky, maybe they'd decided to do some drinking and get drunk.

Ten minutes later, the voices were louder, yet still indistinct, the laughter more frequent and still as raucous. Were they making sport of Caldwell? Wright estimated the gang was about one hundred and fifty yards further on, somewhere over a small rise that loomed in the night. He led Kate off the trail and tied the reins to some scrub at the edge of a rain-carved gully that appeared to lead to the top of the rise.

"You wait here. And be real quiet for me, ya' hear?" He rubbed her head as she nodded. Wright grabbed the Spencer and the shotgun, stuffed his pockets with more ammunition, then began his ascent through the gully.

About five minutes later, the gully emerged back onto the trail a short distance from the top of the rise. The Marshal kept low and edged forward, leaving the trail as it veered left, the voices and laughter becoming more distinct. Just past the top of the rise, he hunkered down behind a large, long boulder and scanned his surroundings—scrub brush and scattered small boulders to either side of him.

He peeked around the boulder. A rocky, gentle slope, less steep than the one he had climbed, spread out below him. At the bottom, some fifty yards away, was a band of scattered low brush intermixed with a handful of trees—hackberry probably; a creek was nearby. On the far side of the band he could vaguely make out a group of horses in the low light. The voices and laughter appeared to come from off to their right, near one of the trees.

Wright settled in and listened, able to understand more of what was said among the laughter, and the occasional shouts and cries that said someone was getting beaten, as he attuned

to his surroundings.

"Come on, enough of this Jimmy, he ain't gonna join us. Besides, the damn fool ain't even good enough, gettin' his self caught like he did. Right boy?"

There was an 'oomph' as someone—Caldwell, probably—appeared to hit the ground hard. More of that idiotic laughter followed.

"I suppose you're right Seth. All right, who wants him next?"

"Wait, Jimmy, I got a different idea. Cole, you still got that rope?"

"I reckon so, Seth."

"What don't you make us up a noose? I ain't seen myself a right good hangin' since the war."

As the group laughed, Wright's skin chilled and his heart went cold. Last time he had to hang someone he'd had to send Caldwell out on a scout, the man had so much fear of the noose. He stood, laid the shotgun on top of the boulder, brought the rifle to his shoulder, elbows joining the shotgun atop the rock for support. If only the light was better, he could pick half the gang off in quick order.

He watched, hoping for better light. A horse whinnied as it appeared one of the gang led it over to the tree. It was hard to tell for sure in the gloom, but he suspected the rope had been tied to the horse, with the business end draped over the stout branch of a hackberry tree.

"Come on, boy. We're gonna have a little fun."

Was that Cole?

He couldn't let them take Caldwell that way. His heart sped up as he began to rapidly scan the scene, the rifle tracking his eye, looking for a sure target. He didn't recognize the feel of the shotgun's stock against his elbow till he heard it skitter off

the boulder and clatter upon the rocky ground below.

Wright ducked behind the boulder as the group went dead silent, their revelry forgotten.

Ten seconds of silence turned into twenty, then he heard laughter again.

“Marshal? Is that you up there?”

It was Jimmy.

“Glad you could make it. How’s about you come on down and we have us a little palaver, see if we might come to some agreement about this little war we have betwixt us? I promise we won’t bite.”

Wright cursed his stupidity. He may as well have signed Caldwell’s death warrant.

“Marshal?” Jimmy called out in a sing-song voice. “Come on down and we’ll let little Sammy here go.”

“Marshal! They’re gonna hang me! Don’t let them hang me!” Caldwell. He was near hysterical. *If I go down there, maybe they’ll at least let him go And maybe I can take a few of them with me.*

No. Caldwell was a dead man. The only uncertainty was how—a bullet or the slow death at the end of a rope. They weren’t going to let Caldwell live and there was no way he could shoot them all—he’d lost his advantage. Wright could hear him wailing in the background.

“Marshal,” came the sing-song voice across the night once more. “You still there?”

“Come on, Marshal. Don’t you wanna save your boy here? All you have to do is come on out—without your guns of course—and we’ll let him go. You’re beaten, no need for the killin’ to continue. We just wanna talk a bit with you, come to an understandin’. Once we’re done you can go too.”

Laughter followed.

“Dammit! Michael, Bill shut your traps. I’m bein’ serious here.”

More laughter in the distance.

“Don’t pay them no mind, Marshal. Me and Seth is serious. We was soldiers after all.”

More snickering, followed by a yelp.

“What in the hell you do that fer, Jimmy?”

“I dun told you to quit it. Me and the Marshal’s trying to negotiate. Marshal, you still there ... or did you go an’ fall asleep on us?”

Wright moved to the other end of the boulder, brought the Spencer to attention, and scanned again. The only man he could clearly see now was Caldwell, in silhouette against the brightening night, noose around his neck, the full moon finally nudging its way over the horizon. He cursed that brilliant disk and mumbled. “Couple hours later and I could have killed the lot of them.”

“Marshal?” Jimmy called out, again in that sing-song voice.

Wright stayed silent, keeping watch for the chance to make a shot. If he could at least kill Jackson and Madsen, maybe the others would lose their nerve.

“Marshal, don’t let them hang me! Marshal!” Caldwell was in full-blown hysterics now, his voice shrill, sobbing. “I don’ wanna die! Jesus, I don’ wanna die! Not like this! Please!”

“Cole, why don’t you have that there horse take a bit of the load of little Sammy’s feet there, make him a bit more comfortable,” Jimmy said, plenty loud enough for Wright to hear.

Caldwell’s desperate wails diminished to a panicked choking.

Wright sighted in low on Caldwell’s head, the place that moved the least as the rope tensed under the horse’s pull.

When the target was big as life in his mind, he closed his eyes, and squeezed the trigger. The rifle roared in response. Caldwell went silent before the echoes of the Spencer began to return from the hills. "I'm sorry, Sam. Honest to goodness."

A tear ran down his cheek as he began to cross himself. But before he was halfway through, he heard the sound of boot-kicked stone to his right—dammit, they were flanking him; probably Madsen and John Lacey. He grabbed the shotgun and rolled away from the boulder. He saw a pistol flash once, twice, three times, followed by the reports. At least one slug glanced off the boulder not far from where had hidden. He stayed prone, cocked the shotgun's hammers, then fired both barrels in the direction of the flashes. He switched to the rifle, rolled to his back, pivoted, then fired a spread of three shots in the other direction to give pause to the other likely flanker.

Wright listened. With well-practiced speed, he quickly reloaded the shotgun and slid replacement rounds into the repeater. It was quiet to either side of him, but there were distinct footsteps from where the gang had been having their sport with Caldwell. He fired a round from the shotgun toward each flank then rolled back to the boulder and up on one knee. He spread six shots from the rifle in the direction of the footsteps, then took cover behind the boulder and set to work reloading each weapon. A barrage of pistol shots came in response, but so did the sound of footsteps hurrying away.

It was time to go. The Marshal rolled back away from the boulder, farther this time, came up on one knee again and fired the shotgun toward each flank. Then he was off and running. Forty yards on, he took cover and listened, rifle at his shoulder—they were coming, but slowly, cautiously. They had the advantage in numbers, but the Spencer's range made them

prudent. Satisfied, he continued on a few more yards, then slipped into the gully that would lead him back to Kate.

Clearing the hills, Wright spurred the mare to a modest gallop back toward Flintwood. Jackson and Madsen probably wouldn't bother chasing him tonight, even though he'd deprived them of their morbid fun. *Poor Caldwell. At least he didn't leave a wife and children that would need looking after. Mayhap I should ride straight on to Tuscon and let his parents and that sister of his know directly. Maybe even stay a while. Might be a blessing, in Bird's eyes, to be rid of me.*

chapter twenty-one

B. Michelle Morris

SOMEONE WAS AT THE bottom of this.

What were Seth's words? "Ask the Mayor."

If the gummy sludge at the bottom of this turned out to be Bird, Wright would do a little more than 'asking'.

The road between Flintwood and the Wells Fargo had all but disappeared.

No footprints, no wheel tracks, no hoof dimples except the lone set trailing behind him. Wasn't much use keeping up the trail to a bank that belonged to a town whose people had nothing to put in it.

But the Marshal could find his way back to Flintwood blindfolded in a dust storm in late July. On a clear night like that, he'd be there before Bird had finished his steak dinner.

He gripped the reins tighter and dug his heels into the horse's ribs, charging him forward along the trail. Bird was probably sitting in his parlour chair sucking down jugs of whiskey.

The roof of the Bird Estate used to be visible from the main road before Ned Ott's place went up twenty years ago. Those were sweeter times, when houses still went up and the ones standing weren't left to break down.

And Mayor Bird had sat in that damned parlour with a view of the whole town, just watching it all go up in smoke. With concern, yes, but the kind of concern a man feels when he's standing in a gun shop watching a scallywag make a purchase behind him, and not the kind he feels when he's staring down the barrel.

It was high time Bird had a change in perspective.

Just past the church, God bless Flintwood, was the estate, once the purest white with black shutters and a blood red door, now chipping at the corners and peeling in places.

Caldwell had been the last one to paint it to earn some extra coin between shifts, but eventually, to the credit of his wife Anna Mae's common sense, Bird had to let him go. With both money and food scarce in Flintwood, luxuries had to be cut. Painting, hedge-trimming, Sunday afternoon drives to Laramie, all gone overnight.

A decent police force recently added to the list.

Marshal flew down the street, dodging potholes left and right. He watched the signs and turned up Evert Road to Bird's house. The lights were all still on, even upstairs.

Were the boys still awake then? Playing cards at the table for a late-night treat?

Marshal was a hard-nosed, slick-tongued bastard if there ever was one, but he was a gentleman first, and he couldn't very well grab their father by the shirt collar and shake the truth out of him in his own living room.

Alright, Bird, he thought as he pulled back on the reins, kicked his leg over the saddle and leapt down into the dust, *You and I — we're going on a little trip.*

If he knocked, it would give Bird enough time to check the peephole, retrieve the Spencer from inside the Bible he kept on the parlour table, open the door and put a bullet through

Wright's eye before he could say a word.

A gentleman he was, but no dummy.

There would be no knocking.

In one motion, he turned the knob, swung open the door and took in the scene.

Anna Mae flinched at the sink, sending water flying from a freshly-washed dinner plate across the oak floor. Her eyes darted from Wright to the kitchen table where two boys sat staring up at him, an unfinished puzzle between them, an estranged piece in each hand.

Anna Mae stepped forward gingerly.

"M-marshal? What on earth--"

"There's been an incident, ma'am," he said, as dramatically and urgently as he could manage. He removed his hat for effect and pressed it against his chest.

Gentleman.

"Oh," she whimpered, "Well, I suppose you're here for Henry then. I'll see if he's still up. Henry!"

She turned to the hall door and looked up the staircase.

Even the sound of his voice made the hair on the back of Marshal's neck curl.

"Be right down, Mae!"

A shadow moved at the top of the staircase, and the creak of the wood under Bird's weight squealed through the living room.

Marshal watched him emerge, first his silver-buckle shoes, his denim, his loosely-tucked plaid, with one hand on the railing and one hand in his pocket.

Marshal eyed each hand. No gun.

He examined the belt. Two loops. Not three. No gun.

No hip holster, no boot holster, nowhere to keep a weapon.

Perfect.

His face appeared, a comfortable grin playing at the corner of his mouth and his beady eyes glistening until they locked onto Wright.

“Hey there, Bird,” he nodded, replacing his hat.

Bird froze, his mouth fell, he looked at his wife and back to Wright.

“Marshal,” he hesitated, “Well, it’s... awful late for you to be here, isn’t it? Unless you have news about the heist?”

“Oh, I’ve got news,” he said, stepping forward with a smile. Bird gripped the railing harder and took a step back up the stairs.

“Where you going, Bird?” asked Wright, nodding to Anna Mae, “Ma’am, you wouldn’t mind if I borrowed your husband for a little while, would you? Henry and I, we’re gonna take a little walk.”

Anna Mae put the dish down on the counter and looked at the two boys.

“Lois. Wilber. Time for bed.”

The ensuing groans and dropping of puzzle pieces was expected, but not prolonged, and soon the boys slinked from their chairs and trudged past their father, planting a kiss on each cheek before racing each other up the stairs to bed.

Bird looked at Wright again, beads of glistening sweat seeping into the lines in his forehead.

“Now, Wright, I know what you’re—“

“Anna Mae, you sure the water’s off?” asked Wright through gritted teeth. He nodded toward the window behind her and continued, “I think I heard it running. Out back.”

Anna Mae looked at Henry.

“Just go, dear, I’ll be back soon.”

She pursed her lips and stepped into the parlour, wiping

her hands on a dish rag as she went.

The back door creaked open and slammed shut.

Any snakecharmer could tell you that when trying to tame a cobra, the first and most important rule is to keep your eye on it.

“Shall we?” asked Wright, taking a step back and opening the front door.

Bird slowly lifted his palms and began to beg.

“Wright, come on, now. Let’s talk about this.”

“Oh, I’m glad you want to talk,” said Wright, reaching behind him and pulling the pistol from his belt, “For your sake and your family’s, I *hope* you talk.”

Henry’s shoulders were tense, his fingers shaking like reeds.

“Wright,”

“Outside.”

After a long moment of silence and a glance back at the parlour door after his wife, Bird complied.

“Alright,” he breathed, smacking his lips and stepping hesitantly past Wright to the door, keeping his eyes trained on the pistol.

The night was still cool that early in the summer, and on any other night, they’d be strolling through the wheat fields admiring the stars and sipping dandelion wine.

“Keep your damn hands up,” demanded Wright. Henry’s hands shot high into the air and he glanced over his shoulder at the Marshal.

“Marshal, please. Be a good man and let me explain.”

“Keep *walking*, Bird or I’ll shoot you where you stand.”

The silver buckle shoes trudged onward, down the road in silence. The tails of Bird’s shirt hung haphazardly from his belt, as if he’d thrown it on hastily at the sound of company.

“Where are you taking me?” he pleaded over his shoulder.

Where *was* Wright taking him? Where could they talk where they would be guaranteed privacy? Surely not the wheat fields, and they surrounded the house for a good mile.

He scanned the horizon for an option, and spotted the barn, the old abandoned one just past the dairy farm that had been left to decay.

“That way. Let’s go.”

They turned down the gravel road, past the white picket fence that lined the East side of the property. The air was cool, yes, but dry as bones, and Wright found himself craving water. He could use a bite to eat too, he knew, but he had a feeling whatever he ate would taste much better once Bird was given his just desserts.

“Wh-where are we going? Why the barn?”

It was the only building in front of them, as the estate was at the edge of town.

“Ask me one more question, Bird. *Please* give me a reason to pull this trigger.”

“O-okay, okay, Wright.”

The walk to the barn doors went much more quickly for Wright than for Bird, he was sure.

“Open it.” He demanded.

With a whimper and a groan, Bird lifted the beam from the iron incisors of the double door and eased it forward into the barn.

Wright took in the smell of hay, animal excrement, candle wax, and...something else...something pungent. Sour.

“What is that?” demanded Wright, pulling the chain on the wall at the door and illuminating the room.

Bird still had his hands in the air and turned around slowly, looking up at Wright like a boy caught terrorising the family

cat.

“What’s... what?”

“That smell, Bird,” he thundered, raising the pistol as he connected the dots, “It’s polishing wax! What the hell do you keep polishing wax in here for?”

“W-wright, please, let me explain, I didn’t keep much of it —“

“How much is *much*, Bird?” Wright was hollering now, grateful for the privacy of the barn, and he yanked the enormous doors closed, sending the boom through the room. His thumb trembled as he cocked the gun.

“Show me,” he growled.

Bird looked to his left where a wagon sat, sunken down into the hay as if it hadn’t been on the road in months.

“The wagon?”

Bird stared at the ground in silence, a nervous vein pulsing in his throat.

Wright marched forward and examined the reign clips. Silver. The iron frame has lost its shine; the curtains at the windows covered with a thin coating of dust.

The light from the lantern at the door was dim, glinting off the hubcaps. Then he noticed it.

The caps were orange.

He knelt beside the wagon and wiped away a bit of the dust from the caps. They glowed like brand new pennies – pennies as wide as Wright’s legs were long.

Each of those would fetch enough to buy a small house, or maintain fifty of the ones in Flintwood that had begun to disintegrate.

“Do you know,” continued Wright, rising again and aiming the gun straight at Bird’s head, “How much we could have used these six months ago, before these cretins rolled in?”

“Wright, please understand, these belonged to my father. It’s a family heirloom!”

“Do you know how many people are losing their belongings every day to those bags of horse shit? To hell with your heirlooms! What about their *food*? Their horses? Their livelihood?”

“Alright!” cried Bird, claspings his hands together and falling to his knees, “Alright, I’m sorry, alright?”

“Oh, you’re sorry?” asked Wright, lowering the gun in mock acceptance, “My mistake then! The copper’s gone, Wells is gone, First National is on the brink of collapse, and my deputy is *dead*, but it’s all alright because you’re sorry!”

“What was I supposed to do?” he shrieked, “You’ve met Jackson and Madsen yourself! You know what they’re capable of. When they offer you a shot at mercy...you take it. They... they promise peace after... after... you were taken care of.”

It couldn’t be.

“You set us up?”

Wright didn’t want to believe it.

“You... you looked me in the eye before I left and wished me luck! You sat in church with Caldwell’s wife on Sunday, knowing the whole time you’d just made her a widow!”

“I did what I had to do,” said Bird, dejectedly.

“No,” hissed Wright, “No, you did what was convenient. You slimy snake-eyed coward!”

Silence hung between them, amid the squeaks and creaks of the walls of the barn and the coo of an owl somewhere in the rafters.

“I’ll tell you what you’re going to do,” said Wright, “You’re going to give it all back. Every last scrap of copper you’ve got on this property, understand?”

Bird glared up at Wright and lowered his hands to his

knees, prompting Wright to clasp the gun tighter, aiming it straight at Bird's head.

"I can't do that," said Bird, "Those wheels belong to my wife. And they're staying here. You can take my copper-coated axe head out the back shed, you can have the coins upstairs in the office drawer...hell, take the wiring out of all my light bulbs! Just please, let me keep the wagon."

"Caldwell begged for his life. You denied him that."

Bird was silent, staring down at his hands, his forehead reddening with rage.

"I said I'm taking *all* the copper," hissed Wright, "That includes the wheels, the light bulbs, the coins, your wife's imported china, the metal tips of your boys' shoelaces, and that copper-capped molar of yours."

Wright pulled the trigger.

It was a surprisingly easy task, extracting the tooth. The copper-tipped bullet, however, buried deep in the jumbled mess behind Bird's right eye socket, took a bit longer to find.

Wright whistled for the horse.

chapter twenty-two

Claire Woodier

"POUR ME A CLEAN glass of your most splendid Rotgut please Andrew!" Ben gestured towards the wall of dusty imported spirits as if he were bowing enthusiastically before royalty. The colourful bottles had been brought in by the owner to make the place look more continental, and to be fair it had given the place an air of the cosmopolitan. The project's success was confirmed by the derision and suspicion it inspired in the locals. Andrew sucked a shard of tobacco out from between his teeth.

"You sound like one o them out-o-towner entertainer types." he sneered, and pointed impatiently at the unopened bottles, too lazy to ask him which one he wanted.

"I have indeed been spending time with many of this town's more travelled residents Andrew." He pointed at a green liquer and let his hand slam noisily down on the bar. "I have been hoping to better myself; make Marshal Ben more attractive to the lovely Catherine." Andrew rolled his eyes and poured the booze into Ben's glass with such an air of disgust it could've been horse urine.

"It turns out my new acquaintances are keener to blow my brains out than expand my mind." he mocked surprise at this

and downed his drink, wincing. "HOO-WEE! That shit is FLORAL!" He slammed the glass down and waved on another. "Come on Andrew, have one! Lets get stooled.." He looked meaningfully into the bottom of his refilled glass and raised it up in a toast before throwing it back.

"Stooled?" asked Andrew, confused. Ben looked up at him and gestured around the bar. You can do it with anything Andrew: chaired, stooled, pianoed. They all sound like they mean getting intoxicated." He sank his third glass, swilling it around his mouth and, swiping the liquor bottle from the barman's hand, promenaded himself round into a seat at a booth in the corner. He rested his chin on the table and squinted at the label of the bottle in front of him. He couldn't read what it said, and assumed it was from Europe somewhere. The picture had a shapely women in a red dress on it. He thought of Catherine, and brought his hands up to touch the image of the lady on the bottle. He had blown it.

The bar wasn't particularly noisy or busy that afternoon, but it fell silent when Seth Madsen walked in, paving the way for Jimmy Jackson, who followed in afterward.

"There he is, top of the bill," whispered Andrew who had hurried over and was wiping Ben's table in what he thought was an inspired way of acting casual. Ben had needed the warning but was still slumped over the table, lamenting his fall from grace. Seth Madsen was casing the place out, sniffing around like a Pointer dog, pushing men out of Jimmy's way, quick and violent. He made Jimmy's stillness more threatening. Jimmy stood in the light of the doorway like he was waiting to go on stage, supremely confident.

"Marshall!" Andrew hissed, letting his filthy wet cloth catch Ben's face still rested on the table. Ben awoke from his daydream, only mildly annoyed at the damp intrusion. He

looked up to see his two adversaries heading across the lounge. He raised his eyes at Andrew and thanked him with a heavy-lidded blink. Andrew snarled, not at Ben, but at what he knew Ben had faced. The kid had inspired good men with families to defend the law with him against Jackson and his Confederate crooks. He'd lost them all, and he had to live with it. Marshal Ben Wright was a man who could go no lower but dead.

"You poor kid. You are such a goner," rhapsodised Andrew, looking genuinely like it was a shame. Ben stretched his neck until it clicked and sat back in his seat to wait.

Seth Madsen came scurrying over to Ben's table and stood, shifting his weight back and forth like a prize-fighter. He was hyper-active as usual, his eyes darting everywhere maniacally, hyper-vigilant. The Marshal had once thought he had been taking the Laudanum, but it turns out that Seth Madsen hardly even drank. He was just that annoying.

"Afternoon Seth." said Ben patronisingly, pouring himself another drink and wishing he had gone for something more manly.

"Evening Marshal!" replied Seth, knocking over the Marshal's drink and sniggering at his own brilliance.

"Excellent!" smiled the Marshal. "Intimidating!" It was his turn to roll his eyes as he picked up the glass and quickly poured himself another.

"Jimmy's on his way over here." He caught his breath. "He's gonna kill you."

Ben downed his drink. "Well thats illegal Seth, I'm going to have to arrest him if he does that." He smiled at the confusion that crossed across Seth's face.

"Gee Marshal, I am SCARED of YOU!" mocked a serene Jimmy Jackson suddenly looming behind Madsen.

"Afternoon Jimmy." nodded Ben. "Real nice to see you. Hope you're keeping well. No typhoid or anything today?" Jimmy Jackson grinned eyes an' all and patted himself down. "I'm just peachy Marshal. Fighting fit I have to say."

Ben shivered through the aftershock of another green shot. "Thats a damn shame Jackson. I was hoping I could save myself a bullet."

"I always knew you were cheap Marshal, but thats outrageous." smiled Jimmy.

"HA HAAA the Marshal can't afford to buy BULLETS!" sang Seth and pointed rudely at Ben for effect. The Marshal smiled a short smile and shifted in his seat. He gestured towards the one opposite him. Jackson shook his head.

"No Marshal we're not staying. We're just going to end you and then we're off for the afternoon."

Ben Wright didn't sink. He didn't flinch or weep. He shrugged. He had nothing to lose. He was responsible for the deaths of numerous innocent and upstanding men. Ben felt as culpable as the Son Bitch stood opposite him. He hadn't a woman or a child who would wail magnificently for him. He may as well go all in.

"Listen Jackson, why sully up this nice saloon here? You'll have me bleeding all over the furniture! Some poor varmint's going to need to scrub my gizzards off the walls, and that shit is difficult to get off. Give Andrew and the girls a break. You don't want my blood under their fingernails when they're scratching up your back later on.."

Jimmy Jackson sat down in the chair previously offered to him. The volume in the bar had raised from silence to a low hum of scared murmuring.

"I'm afraid I can't grant you a reprieve Marshal. I'd be accused of having favourites. And I can't go back on my

promise. I PROMISED you I would murder you."

"Oh no no Jimmy, don't misunderstand me, I'm not asking for you to spare me! Lord no!" He eyeballed the cold bastard.

"I just want satisfaction."

Seth sniggered. Both Jimmy and Ben shot him a withering look.

"You want a.. a duel?"

"Yes! A duel! Lets give the tourists a show eh?"

Andrew stepped in towards Ben. "Are you mad man?" He wasn't bothering to whisper any more.

"You can't shoot!" laughed Jimmy. "Its suicide!"

"Then you'll get the job done quick!" said Ben. "Put me out of my misery!"

Jimmy Jackson was right. The Marshal couldn't shoot straight, not with a pistol anyway, and even if he could Jimmy knew he would beat him. Jimmy Jackson was the best and most accurate shot for three counties. What was the Marshal playing at? He looked at him.

Ben Wright had lost his shoulders in the days gone by. He was slouched, he was broken. His eyes had lost their gleam and his wit, although not gone, was slower. Jimmy knew sitting there that he had already won. This kid was trying to do his last civic duty: keeping the fight out of the public places.

"Okay kid, I'll give you your show."

Ben nodded in thanks.

"I'll even give you a head start. Take my gun."

Andrew looked confused. He glanced at Ben, who had even raised his eyebrows.

"You want me to use your gun?" Ben said, waking up. Jimmy Jackson laughed.

"You'll need it! You've never shot straight in your life! Have a practice, get used to her. I'll see you outside here in an

hour." Ben looked at the weapon in his hand, the one that had killed so many of his compadres.

"Don't look so hopeful kid." Jackson taunted as he got up to leave. "I'll still get you."

Marshal Ben Wright left the bar newly equipped. He had his bottle of liquor, and his new shiny Remington. He had aimed at a couple of empty moonshine bottles found disloyally outside the back door of the saloon bar, but with embarrassing results. He was drunk on perfume, yes, but his shot was the same. Still terrible with a pistol. He drank again to toast it, toast his steady hand, steadily worsening.

The hour came around and so did Andrew. He came running over with the Marshal's hat and coat, dusting both off as he hustled.

"EVERYONE is here!" he whispered inexplicably as he helped Ben on with his uniform.

"What do you mean 'everyone'?" asked Ben. His fuzziness from the alcohol was being kicked aside by the adrenalin leaving him not drunk but surprisingly fragrant. He tutted at the thought. He needed anaesthetic, not clarity. He turned the corner with Andrew in tow to meet Jimmy Jackson, Seth Madsen, Cole Vaughn and the ridiculous Lacey brothers. They all had their best bad guy faces on, and although he would have laughed at them ordinarily, he didn't feel brave enough to do it with NO deputy or ally beside him.

Lining the street was pretty much every inhabitant of Flintwood. They had all come out, reaching and blinking. Ben wondered whether someone had made popcorn.

"You made it then Marshal." Jimmy Jackson shouted.

"Yes." he broke. "YES!" he shouted. "Lets get on with it!"

"You in a hurry to die Marshal?" shouted Jimmy.

A gun clicked in the crowd. Everyone swung to look.

Straining to see, and aiming their pistols blindly.

"Put it down Jimmy" shouted a woman's voice from the back of the crowd. Jimmy Jackson, Seth, Cole and the Laceys all ignored the voice and lifted their guns higher, pointing harder at the Marshal.

"I SAID, put the gun down Jimmy." Catherine Donley moved through to the front of the crowd, aiming her Daddy's shot gun at Jimmy. "I WILL shoot you."

"Catherine?" said Ben, quietly, incredulous. "Catherine!" he shouted. "Don't!"

Cole Vaughn lifted his gun towards the shaking woman. "Put that thing down Beautiful or I'll see you ain't!"

"I won't Cole. Put the guns down. Put them down or WE'LL shoot."

Cole, Jimmy and the boys began to look around as from all angles, everywhere in the crowd, people lifted their guns and aimed them at the killer gang.

John Lacey let out a low murmur that stuck in a bubble in his throat. They were surrounded. All except Jackson lowered their guns, afraid, but scared to completely throw them down. Jimmy Jackson steadied, stood fast, and lifted his gun and aimed keener at the head of Marshal Ben Wright. He looked at all angles, at all the faces waiting on him. He shook with adrenalin and fear. He gulped and took in a deep breath.

"Stop Jimmy. Stop."

Jackson turned his eyes to see the barrel of a pistol pressed into his temple.

"Michael?" he gurgled.

"Arrest him Ben!" Michael shouted. "Arrest them all!" He looked around him as the resignation on Jimmy Jackson's face compelled the rest of the gang to drop their guns. Michael Lacey had tears in his eyes and a break in his voice as he cried

again, "Arrest them all Ben!"

Marshal Ben Wright's mouth was bone dry. He took a swig from his perfume bottle and got on his horse.

"Come on Kate. Lets go get a REAL drink."

And off they mosied.