



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).”

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MARSHAL LAW

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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

Mark Rothwell

THE STAGECOACH PITCHED AND swayed along the dusty trail winding its way through the clumps of saguaros and prickly pears. It gave a big lurch, nearly tipping over as it descended into yet another dried-up watercourse. The driver cracked his whip and shouted to encourage the tired horses up the slope on the other side. A cloud of dust, thrown up as the coach entered the watercourse, blew into the coach.

“How much longer are we going to be stuck in this goldarn dust-bucket?” Michael said, trying in vain to wipe yet another layer of dust from his face.

The middle-aged woman sitting opposite him looked shocked at his language, but the elderly man sitting beside her was propitiatory; “Not much longer now!” he said. The woman still looked offended. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take of being cooped up with these two rough young men.

“I can’t wait to see John,” said William, “and get down to work in the mine. I’d rather be digging for gold, but copper’s not bad, and from what he said in his telegram, we should be able to make a bit of a killing!”

“Hmph!” Michael grunted. He thought he knew John

better than his brother, and would rather wait and see. Anyway, his mouth was dry with all the dust and he didn't feel like speaking.

The coach struggled on its way for a couple of miles. The coachman blew his horn as Flintwood came into sight. William turned in his seat and looked out of the window ... what he saw didn't look that prosperous.

The Red Boot Saloon was quite busy. It usually was when a stage was due to arrive.

In the gambling corner, Slim Jefferson was sitting with "Flinty" Stone, who worked for him on his claim, and Jake Roberts, a drifter who picked up odd jobs and gambled away whatever he earned. Slim wasn't making anything much these days, just enough to keep him going, supplemented by occasional winnings from the gambling, and to pay Flinty his pittance.

Lucy was sitting at a table near the door in the other part of the saloon, nursing an empty glass and watching the company to see if anyone was interested. The general lack of money among the regulars meant that trade was bad for her too. There was no way Matt Dixon and Thomas Spencer were going to give her their custom; the two bank managers were sitting at a table not far away, talking in low voices.

John Lacey came into the saloon. Lucy gave him the eye, but there was no response on his lined and weathered face. He glanced at the two bank managers sitting in the corner. He hoped that so-and-so Spencer wasn't going to come over and start haranguing him about his debts. He went back to the piece of paper he had in his hand, deep in worried thought.

He had wired Michael and William telling them to come and join him in Flintwood saying that the prospects were

good, and here was the telegram saying they were arriving on that day's stage from Tucson. But the reality was that the prospects were far from good. That bastard Tucker had lured him into buying a stake in the mine, but the seam that Tucker had found had soon petered out. Tucker was no longer around, and John was virtually skint, having drunk and gambled away his share of what profits there had been. How were Michael and William going to take it? Michael was fairly easy-going, but William, the young son-of-a-bitch, had always been a bit hot-tempered.

As he ordered a shot of whiskey — drink may have taken much of the money he had had, but he needed one to calm his worries — there was a shout from the corner:

"Hey, John, come and join the party!" It was Slim Jefferson. Dammit, Slim was one of the ones who had repeatedly taken him to the cleaners at poker. And as for that shifty looking Jake Roberts, he wouldn't trust him an inch. He waved his hand.

"My brothers are arriving on the stage and I'm only here to meet them," he replied.

"When they get here, maybe they'd like to join in!"

John didn't reply and Slim went back to the cards in his hand.

There was a commotion on the balcony, and Anna appeared, followed closely by a tall, slim but muscular man in his early thirties. He was over six feet tall, handsome, with clean-shaven chiselled features and well-trimmed red hair. It was Red Morgan, a stranger who had arrived in town a couple of days earlier.

A shout: "Well, Anna, that didn't take you too long!"

"Flinty, a damn site longer than you're likely to take!" from Slim.

“Look at all of you horny bastards,” from Anna. “Just ‘cos you’re itching get your tools out of their holsters but ain’t got what’s needed!”.

“Hey, Lucy!” Jake joined in. “Can’t you get any action either? I could help, you know.”

Flinty again: “I reckon she’d rather go with Chinese Charlie over there than you, Jake. At least he’s got some teeth!”

Charlie Lee, a Chinese who ran a store in town, had just come in with a stack of bottles, put them down quickly behind the bar without a word, and scuttled out to the back. Charlie dreamt of having a screw with one of the girls, but even though he was one of the few people with money, with his thinning, lanky hair, his round-shouldered, less than manly figure, and his prominent buck teeth, he was too shy to even try.

At that moment, they heard the sound of the coach horn. “Stage’s here,” said Matt Dixon, the manager of the Wells Fargo Bank. “I must go to meet it.” He went out, followed shortly after by John Lacey.

The coach rumbled into town along Fremont Avenue, past the Mayor’s office, past the Red Boot Saloon, past the Marshal’s office and rolled to a stop in front of the Wells Fargo Bank.

William looked at the offices as they passed. The buildings looked unprepossessing and run down. He was tired, dusty, thirsty and in no good mood. John had talked of prosperity, but this didn’t seem anything like that.

Michael, looking the other way had observed the Red Boot Saloon without much enthusiasm and then saw John walking along the street in the direction they were travelling. “What are the odds that he has just been having a drink in that saloon?” He thought. It would be just like John and didn’t bode too

well.

As they waited for the old man and the woman to get out, William turned to Michael.

“This don’t look like prosperity to me! I reckon old John has sold us a bum deal.”

“Shut your mouth! Wait and see what’s what.”

They climbed out. As they stood waiting for their bags to be handed down from the roof, John came up. He shook hands with Michael and was about to do the same with William when a pretty young woman, fashionably dressed, wearing a bonnet and carrying a parasol came out of the bank.

William’s eyes opened wide and his lips immediately formed into an “O” ready to wolf-whistle. But before he could do so, John’s intended handshake turned into a cuff round the ears. “You mind your manners, young man! That’s Catherine Donley, and you’re like a worm beneath her feet.”

“Dang it! Who’re you to be so high and mighty? Don’t tell me she’s interested in you! Look at you! You said prosperity, and here you are dressed like a drifter ...”

Mike intervened. “Shut it. We’re both tired and my mouth’s like the dustbowl that we’ve come through. There was a saloon back there. Let’s have a quick drink, and then you take us out to your place, John.”

He walked off towards the Red Boot Saloon.

When the three entered the Red Boot, the atmosphere had changed. Anna was now sitting with Lucy, deep in some kind of conversation, and Red Morgan had joined the gamblers at their table.

At the bar, John ordered shots of whiskey and beers for the three of them. He turned round towards the gamblers at the table.

“Hi, Slim, can I introduce my brothers? This is Michael and that is William.”

“Michael and William, welcome. These here are Flinty Stone, and Jake Roberts, and that is Red Morgan, who has also just shown up in town. Come and join our game!”

“Yes, come and join in.” That from Red Morgan.

“Not now,” said John. “Another time, maybe.”

They took their drinks over to a table in the other half of the saloon, and sat down. William saw Anna and Lucy in their corner.

“Holy cow,” he said, gazing lustfully at Lucy. “I wouldn’t mind a bit of that pussy!” As Lucy picked up on it, John intervened once again.

“Look here you randy son-of-a-bitch, you keep your blamed prick to yourself. What are you after? A dose of the french pox. You’re here to work with me!”

Thomas Spencer, who had been in the saloon all this time, sauntered over.

“John, when are you coming to see me? You know we’ve got to have a chat!”

“I know, I know! These here are my brothers, Michael and William, who’ve come to help. I’ll get them settled in and then I’ll come over.”

“You do that; your time’s running out!” And he walked out of the saloon.

Michael rounded on John. “Who the fuck was that? And what’s that about ‘time running out?’”

“No one who matters. Just drink your drink...”

There was a crash and a shout from the gambling table. Flinty Stone, leapt to his feet, all five-foot-two of him, overturning his chair and sweeping the cards, money and glasses from the table. He was followed by the other three.

Flinty, dwarfed by Slim Jefferson and Jake Roberts on either side looked to be squaring up for an unequal fight with Red Morgan.

“You fucking bastard of a card sharp! I saw you then, trying to cheat us just as you’ve cheated everyone wherever you’ve come from! I saw you manipulating the pack.”

“What the fuck are you on about? Me, cheat? Never?”

“Lies, goddam lies. I bet you’ve bloody cheated your way right across this state? That’s how you manage to wear fine clothes and get to screw girls like Anna. I know your type... all flash and french pox...!”

Flinty and Red were beginning to slug it out, with Slim and Jake trying ineffectually to restrain Red to help Flinty, who was no match for Red.

As soon as the first chair had been overturned Jake MacDonald had sent for Ben Wright. Things were bad enough without fights breaking out in his bar. There’d been fights in the saloon in the past and the Marshal was good at breaking them up.

The door crashed open and Ben Wright came in with George Bell, one of his deputies. He pointed his shotgun at the *melée* in the gambling corner and shouted for them to stop at once.

The hubbub from that part of the saloon quietened, just as William got to his feet in their corner and shouted at John, “For Chrissake... a man dressed like a bank manager comes over and says ‘*your time’s running out*’, and you want me to believe that it’s someone who doesn’t matter. Look at this place, John! It looks like a dad-forsaken one-horse town, with run-down buildings and a saloon full of downbeats and card-sharps. And you told us we’d make our fortune! Come on. Where’s your fortune? The bank manager’s down on you, isn’t

he? And you won't fucking admit it."

While George Bell kept his Colt trained on the gamblers, Ben Wright spun round on the Laceys.

"And you lot, John Lacey and... you lot too, simmer down!" Realising he didn't know the two with John Lacey, he said, "And who the hell are you two... oh, must be relatives, eh? I'll deal with you later."

He turned back to the gamblers. "What's this all about? I'm not going to stand for brawling in this here saloon. You, Slim, you should know better."

"Well, we were playing poker, and we reckoned this here Red Morgan was cheating. Flinty saw him doing it ... and ... well ... he denied it, and..."

"Red Morgan, eh? I hadn't picked up that you were in town. I know about you, and what I know doesn't bear telling! So let me advise you, if there's any more trouble from you, you'll be run out of this town on the point of my shotgun faster than you can get your pants down for any of these darned strumpets. And as for you, Flinty, keep your fists to yourself or I'll give you Jesse!"

Turning back to the Laceys, he continued, "And that goes for you too! You may be a family, but I'm not going to have any cock-sucking down-and-outs making trouble in my town! So get yourself back to your place, John Lacey, and sort yourselves out so I don't have to come after you!"

"Come on," said Mike quietly, "Let's go".

They picked up their bags and followed John round the corner into Third Street, where they found a dilapidated cart with a broken-down nag lolling between the shafts. Its head drooped disconsolately. The cart had no springs, its wheels looked as if they would come off at any moment, and many of the boards

were rotten and crumbling.

“Here we are,” said John and climbed up on the bench. Without a word, Michael and William tossed their bags in the back and climbed on board.

John went up Third Street to Fremont Avenue, where he turned East past the Marshal’s office and the Wells Fargo bank and on out of town. A couple of hundred metres out of town he took a track leading off to the northeast. It was badly rutted and broken up, and the going was even more uncomfortable than that morning in the stagecoach. It was excruciating in the back, and William’s temper flared up again.

“How long have we got in this fucking death-trap?”

“About thirty minutes.”

“About thirty minutes! Shit, shit, shit... A goddamned one-horse town, a lousy saloon full of no-hopers! And now this! Just look at this cart! It’s falling to bits for chrissake! And that dratted nag between the shafts isn’t even worth selling for dog-meat! And you talked to us of prosperity, John. Where’s the prosperity? The goddamned bank manager is after you and you won’t admit it. Don’t tell me ... you haven’t got a dime and that mine is not producing anything, is it?”

“Shut up!” from Michael. John just kept his head down, guiding the ramshackle cart through the ruts and round the boulders. It was hot, and the cactuses bordering the track were swarming with flies that seemed to think human would make a splendid meal.

“I won’t shut up. John’s sold us a bag of shit, just as that Tucker bastard sold him a load of it in the first place. You bloody well know I’m right.”

“Look. We’re bloody tired; our throats are like the desert around us; our bellies are so empty they’re flapping like a flag in the wind. This is no time to go for John. Let’s just get to his

place, have something to eat and drink, have a sleep, and then we'll see what John has for us in the morning."

Michael didn't answer, a bigger lurch than usual had knocked the breath out of him. He sat there glowering silently at the surroundings for the rest of the way.

chapter two

Nick Calvert

IN THE SWELTERING HEAT of the late September day the three were squashed onto the bench seat of John's rickety old buckboard, they'd been jounced and bounced and travelling for some time before anyone spoke.

"I'm sorry boys, I shoulda told you." John said, taking a swig of water from the canteen before passing it on the Billy. Still partially drunk, John's voice was even more gravelly than it had been the last time they'd seen one another. He snapped the reins, and the horse quickened her pace for a moment before settling back into her usual plod.

"Yuh, ya should," Billy said, "Ya really should. I guess it's 'cause ya knew we wouldn't have come, huh?" He took a drink.

Michael smiled at Billy's lie as conversation died. Of course they would have come, and John should have known it. He should have been honest, should have kept the faith. They were The Lacey Brothers, and all the minions of Yankee hell, riding with the Apache and the Navajo, couldn't have stopped them helping each other. Michael's smile faded. At least that was the way it had been, back when Ma and Pa had been alive. Five years on his own had obviously changed his elder brother.

They should have come to Flintwood together, as a family.

Instead, John had bought into the Tucker copper mine without any thought of including his brothers.

"Serves you right," Michael muttered.

"What? John said.

"Nothing," Michael said. He looked over his shoulder at his battered trunk and the small box of provisions he'd bought at Flintwood's store. It wasn't a lot to show for twenty six years. He turned back to the front just as Bella raised her tail and crapped.

"Jesus Christ!"

"What?" John and Billy said in unison.

"I took the lord's name in vain. And you know what, I don't give a fuck. He's not gonna strike me down, but neither is he gonna help me. Or any of us.

"We're potless, boys. We got nuthin. John here spent his last few cents on a telegram to cozen us - that's you and me, Billy boy, in case you hadn't guessed - to this god forsaken..." He tailed off. "Shit."

"Shit? I haven't heard of him. Is he your new lord, Mikey?" Billy said, and sniggered.

"Enough!" John said, yanking on the reins. Bella whinnied and the buckboard stopped. John tied the reins off, then jumped down. "Come on boys, I've got something to show you."

Michael glanced at Billy who raised an eyebrow at him and grinned. They jumped down.

From the deep wheel ruts Michael could see the track was well travelled. It wound down through a valley carpeted by cactuses, and late summer wildflowers, before rising up on the other side onto a mesa, where John had said he'd built his house. 'Views for miles,' he'd said in one letter a year or so ago, and Michael was looking forward to getting there.

John twirled the end of his moustache trying to curl it. It was an old habit, Michael remembered, from when he'd first managed to grow the brute, and he still wasn't successful.

"Show us what, John?" Billy said.

Michael pointed to a spot a few yards on where the track ran beside a large rock formation. "There."

"Um, there what?"

"That there is the perfect place to hold up the Wells Fargo."

Michael almost laughed at Billy's expression. Almost.

"Are you out of your fuckin' mind?" Billy said.

"Nope," John growled. "As Michael said I'm bust Billy boy. Michael is too, and I think ... well, I think you make it a perfect threesome. Now, unless you want to go back to Tucson with your tail between your legs, shut up! We're The Lacey Brothers, and we're gonna hold up the Wells Fargo. Any questions?"

Billy shrugged. "I was just askin'."

"Good. I take it you ain't got a problem, Michael?"

Michael sighed. "No." He watched as John nodded and pulled a flask out of his jacket pocket. John took a swig and handed it to Billy who did likewise before passing it to him. Michael drank a little, then looked at the flask. It was nearly new, silver, with an inscription that read 'Much Love, Cath.' Michael frowned and tapped the flask "What's your beloved going to say, John? What if we get caught?"

"I'll say this only once. She changed her mind. She's sweet on the bloody Marshal, now."

"Oh. Right then," Michael said. "So what's the plan, John?" The lone 'char-char-char' of a cactus wren sent shivers down his spine as John began outlining their future.

"...so then I fucked her long and hard, Josh. Long and hard until she was a squealin like a piglet being thwomped by its moma," Ralf said with a gleeful squeeze of his groin. "And I swear, Josh, I swear I saw all the stars in heaven, and god a smilin at me as I came. Sheesh, but it were somethin!" Ralf swapped the wad of tobacco into his left cheek, then spat over the side of the stagecoach.

"Jesus Ralf, how many times have I told you not to spit to windward!"

"Sorry Josh."

"Yeah, well, sorry don't always work, especially if you hit a passenger in the face with that shit. Why'd don't ya take up a nice clean hobby, like whittling?"

"Ma says I shouldn't carry a knife lest I cuts myself."

"Oh. You do everything your ma says?"

"Sure I do. Don't you?"

Josh sighed, though it was good-natured. "Ralf. I'm twenty years older than you. My ma and pa passed away in the war, and I have a wife and three kids.

Ralf frowned. "So...?"

"Never mind, kid. Never mind." Josh flicked the reins and the four horses sped up a tad. They were approaching the last part of the journey to Flintwood, and though it had been an uneventful trip, he was always alert for trouble. After all, that's what Wells Fargo paid him for. Admittedly, this trip had been a bit strange. Normally he drove passengers - after all, it was a stagecoach - but now all they carried were two wooden crates. Two crates sealed every which way. 'Deliver them to the Wells Fargo office in Flintwood by the end of the day and there's a good bonus for you,' Herb, the dispatcher, had said. They'd even stowed the crates inside the coach rather than in the luggage compartment at the back. Instead, they were on the

floor between the leather seats. He didn't think they contained money, because money was always carried in a strongbox with a large armed escort. No. This delivery was all down to speed. It was odd.

"So, you've had your first woman then, eh Ralf?" Josh said, wondering what preposterous story the boy would come up with next.

"Oh yeah," Ralf beamed, then said slyly "want to tell me about yours?"

Josh rolled his eyes and snapped the reins again. "No. I don't. Though if I'm honest I do remember the stars and god bit."

"But ... but not the squealin?"

Josh glanced over at Ralf who wore an expression of utter sadness. He smiled. "Well, possibly."

"You want me to what?" Billy said, his hands on his hips.

"Lie down on the track and pretend you're wounded. Shout for help as the stagecoach gets close." John said for the third time. "As I explained, the stagecoach'll stop and we'll surround it."

"Why don't you lie down in front of it, then?"

"'Cause it's my plan you little whelp!" John roared. He took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself. "Look. For the fourth time. Michael's going to be on top of the rocks, so he's above them, aiming down. I'm going to be just off the track behind that rock over there, flanking them. And you'll...."

"Be lying down in front of tons of slathering horses and a stagecoach. I'll be crushed. To a pulp."

"Stop pouting, Billy." Michael said. "It's a good plan, provided there isn't an armed escort."

"There isn't," John said. "It's four to six passengers and

their luggage, a driver and his assistant. We'll be finished and on our way in under ten minutes. I guarantee it."

"The driver'll have a shotgun," Billy said.

"Normally kept under the seat. He'd be an idiot to pull it out while we have our guns aimed at him." Michael said.

"I was going to work for Wells Fargo," Billy said, "but my friends said I'd be an idiot."

"There's your proof, then. You'll be fine," John said, just as the sound of horses reached them through the quiet of the late afternoon. "Bandanas on and positions!"

The brothers separated. Michael climbed up the to the top of the rocks, some ten feet over the track and watched as Billy pulled up his bandana hiding his face. Gun in hand, Billy then lay face down in the middle of the track between the wheel ruts. To his right John gave him the thumbs-up, then vanished from view. As the stagecoach came down off the mesa and entered the valley Michael pulled his bandana up, and crouched down.

"Help!" Billy shouted. "HELP!"

"Did you hear anything, Ralf?" Josh said.

"No," the boy said. "Sorry."

"Oh." They'd just come down off the mesa and into the home stretch to Flintwood. Compared to the brightness of the sun on the mesa the valley was deep in shadows, and Josh was having a hard time seeing. He was looking forward to a hot meal and a few beers at the Red Boot Saloon.

"HELP!"

Josh stood up, his eyes widening in horror at the sight of a body lying prone on the track in front of them. "Whoa!" he said, yanking on the reins, "WHOA!" From a fair old clip the horses did the best they could to stop, but the weight of the

stagecoach pushed them on. Hauling the reins to the right, Josh closed his eyes as the horses went off the track a short way into the scrub, trying to pull the stagecoach after them. The turn was so severe the stagecoach teetered on two wheels before slamming back to the earth with a groan and squeal of springs.

Josh opened his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. Thank the lord he'd missed the body on the track. He was about to check on Ralf when the body got to its feet, dusted itself off, and pointed a handgun at him.

"You could have bloody well killed me," the body said in a young man's voice, before looking over at the rocks behind the stagecoach. "Next time you can lie on the track and I'll lurk on a rock in safety!" Josh peered over and saw another man, also holding a handgun. He was reaching under the seat for his shotgun when a third man tapped him on the shoulder with a handgun.

"They've got guns, Josh," Ralf said, wide-eyed.

"Yes, they have," Josh said, as it dawned on him that it really wasn't his day.

"Where are the passengers?" The third man said in a gravelly voice that Josh could have sworn he'd heard before. A bandana covered most of the mens' faces, but this one had splendid muttonchops that peaked over the edge. Josh thought he could probably find the man if he had to, then decided that he probably shouldn't get involved.

"No passengers on this trip," Josh said, and crossed his arms.

"Yeah, no passengers on this trip," Ralph said. "Sorry."

"It's a bust, then." The youngest gunman said. "Bloody typical."

"Check inside the coach," The gravelly voiced one

snapped. He pulled back the hammer on his gun and Josh felt the blood leave his face.

"There're two crates. Two crates on the floor between the seats."

"Bullion chests?"

"If they were bullion chests I'd have said bullion chests, and probably sounded more excited, too." The young one said.

"Shut up!" Gravel voice said. Josh could see rage in his eyes and hoped the young man would do just that.

"They're bastard heavy." This was a new voice. He sounded quite reasonable and Josh hoped he'd keep the gravel voiced man in check.

"Right," Gravel man said. "Take the lead two horses and swap them out for Bel ... For ours. Move the crates, then go, and I'll catch up once I've dealt with these two.

"No killing," The younger one said.

"No killing," Gravel man replied. "Now, you two. Sit."

Josh sat and had to push Ralf, who was moaning in terror, off his lap, much to the amusement of Gravel man. They waited in a tense silence as the other two brought around an old buckboard and loaded the crates from the stagecoach onto it. The young one took the two lead horses and swapped them with the old nag pulling the buckboard. Finally, as Gravel man began to get antsy, the young man brought over the old horse.

"Here you are. She's got reins, but no saddle."

"Good enough. Now go, and I'll catch you up."

Josh, Ralph, and Gravel man watched in silence as the two got into the buckboard. The young man took the reins and shook them. "Gerrup!" He clicked his tongue and with a lurch the buckboard set off, away from Flintwood. After a few minutes there was silence, except for Ralph's sniffing breath. Finally, Gravel man un-cocked his gun and slid it back into his

holster.

"They'll catch you you know." Josh said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. You still get paid. I'm sorry if I upset your... assistant."

Gravel man took the nags reins and leapt on her back. Josh glanced at Ralph, now openly sobbing, and by the time he looked back the Gravel man had vanished.

"Right, Ralph. As you know, two horses can't pull a stagecoach. So, I'm going to take one of them and ride to Flintwood for help." Josh got down, stretched, then disentangled Charlie, the least belligerent of the two remaining horses.

"Wait, Josh! You're going to leave me on my own?" Ralph all but wailed.

"Yes Ralf, I'm going to leave you on your own. But I'm also going to leave you in charge."

"Oh." Ralph sniffed, then wiped his eyes. "In charge. I think I like that."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. You stand firm, Ralph. Stand firm." So saying, and without further ado, Josh set off for Flintwood as a lone Cactus Wren started char-char-charing.

chapter three

Michael Bywater

THE BALD, SHORT FELLOW shifted on the horse. Couldn't find a comfortable way of seating himself, that was about the strength of it. The animal wasn't suited for riding, nor didn't like it any. A drawing-horse, built, broken and trained for teamwork in the traces of a four-in-hand. Suited the bald, short fellow just fine that way but here he was, hitched uneasily on the harness-saddle, clinging on to the water hook as the animal stepped springily along the stony track.

...Goddamn thing

but the horse was glad to be free of the harness, glad not for once to be pushing against the collar with his three teammates and you couldn't blame him, not even the bald, short fellow who could pretty well blame anyone for anything or vice-versa, come to that.

"Hold up for Chrissakes," he said.

The horse's ears flicked round and, distracted for a second, he slid on a rock. The bald, short fellow tightened his grip on the water hook. Hadn't signed up for this, but in fifteen years with Wells Fargo he'd done a whole bunch of things he hadn't signed up for. It was in the unspoken – the *real* – part of the contract: you signed up for the stuff you hadn't signed up for.

Article One. And Article Two, now he came to think about it, was: *Always expect the unexpected, and it won't be what you think.*

Not true, though. Three sweat-stained whoreson bastards coming out of the sun — where the hell did they *hide* in that flat, rocky terrain, and no wonder the goddamn Mexicans were so happy to sell the territory; nothing would grow there and the idle sombreros had no use for copper — waving their weapons (souvenirs, he'd bet, from whichever side they were on in the War, though the bald, short fellow doubted it was the side of righteousness, whichever side *that* was and who the hell knew anyways?)...

But out of the sun they came, the crick of hammers being cocked back, the shish of knives being drawn from greasy sheaths, the bravado sneers: that was exactly the unexpected you'd be expecting to expect. Not the first time. Wouldn't be the last.

Yet... There were odd things. Things that puzzled the bald, short fellow. He'd not thought they'd shoot him and when he turned to the charlie — guy he'd travelled with for years, all over, you name it — he didn't look worried either. It wasn't that they weren't serious. They were serious all right. It was something else. Three guys, that's a gang. They got a leader. There's always a leader, the guy who says *take care of him* and next thing you know there's an echo of gunfire and your charlie's toppled off the box, grabbing at the wheel as he falls but he doesn't even feel the rough iron tires skinning his hands or the stones flinting his eyes out because he's got other things on his mind, or more likely not, and no mind to have them on.

This time was different. But the bald, short fellow couldn't place it.

They'd known what they were after — those two leather bags — and they'd known exactly where they were. They'd

known what they were going to do — unharness the two leaders, abandon their broken-winded old Appaloosa and hitching the two powerful Morgan horses to their worm-eaten, sun-barked, old wagon — with not a word exchanged. No names. No voices. Pretty much silent, as though they were mute or maybe one person split three ways.

Then they'd gone. Headed off west-north-west along a track the bald, short fellow couldn't even identify, and vanished into the nowhere they'd come from.

Fanciful. Be seeing snakes next

but fanciful came with the territory, mile after unyielding mile, just you and your charlie, Mister Shotgun and Mister Whip, your job to make sure things got through for the good of your health and the good of Wells and Fargo and the whole almighty board of directors, and then (and only then) the benefit of the communities you served.

So here he was, Mister Shotgun who'd never fired a shot in anger or anything else (was there anything else you *would* fire a shot in?) and Mister Whip back with the rig, two bags light, three horses shy, minding the cargo while...

...while the bald, short fellow rode into town, askew on his fine Morgan, and with a habit of professional pride lifted his hat, mopped his brow and the dome of his skull and brushed the dust from his thirty-dollar John B Stetson "Boss of the Plains".

Which was how he thought of it.

Not a hat. It was more than a hat. It was his representative, his friend, his *associate*.

"Goddamn, Pug," one of the guys had said, "Thirty dollars for a goddamn *lid*? That's six months' rent. Damned if you don't think more of that hat than you do of your wife."

"Hell," he'd said, "I *see* more of that hat than I do of my

wife. Me and John B., till death us do part,” and he remembered the sharp pang of his words, like a bite of the chilis the damn Sombreros ate. Not Mrs Pug. Mrs Pug was just dandy. But, time to time, the bald, short fellow wondered (it crept up on him, sudden-like) how his life would have gone if he’d stayed in Boston, graduated in music, followed the life he longed for as a church organist, except his Pa had gone bankrupt and thrown himself off the Shawmut Peninsula and then Pug had just kind of stopped growing and a church organist with arms and legs just too short was no church organist at all

goddamned hymns and the prim pussies who sing them

... and in the end, thanks be for Wells and Fargo, good guys and a job for life, even if he was forty-five years old, had drunk the cream and soon it would be time to hang up his

John B. Stetson “Boss of the Plains”

hat for good. Maybe after this one was all fixed up and squared away.

“One-horse town” thought the bald, short fellow. Not much to look at. Twelve blocks or so. Four streets and nobody much stirring. The usual. Not on his route but this wasn’t his route anyway. Just bad luck.

The usual. The usual old bastard clicking his three teeth as he sat on an upturned barrel beneath a sign reading “GENERAL SUPPLIES STORE EASY TERMS FEED MINING EQUIPT JAS BALOCH PROP”. The usual boarding-house with the usual old

hymn-singing

pussy peering through the dusty lace curtains.

The usual saloon, a weather-faded red boot the size of a four-bit Mexican whore hanging from a bracket above the

stoop, though the bald, short fellow figured the Red Boot Saloon (painted in fancy letters on a fancy sign-board in case you were too stupid to work it out from the boot and the saloon doors and the smell of hooch and beer and black ten-cent cigars) would run more to the dollar girls: a couple of soiled doves at the very least, and plenty willing to pay. Girls like that, they could have bought a new

"Boss of the Plains"

hat every week and not noticed the cost.

The bald, short fellow climbed down, twisting his knee, hitched his Morgan horse to the rail, and went inside.

Faces. The usual. Town Drunk, the Doc, the guy who has a yearning for the schoolmarm, the preacher's kid going to the bad, the soiled dove hoping to help him get there, dusty guys, a fellow in a sharp braided tie with a turquoise stick-pin and a pale taupe

I'm so rich it don't matter none if my hat gets soiled with the copper-dust

whipped-brim derby perched on the back of his ginger head. The usual gambling table, the usual rigged games, the usual barkeep behind the usual bar, the usual eyes, sizing up the bald, short fellow.

"Help ya?" said the barkeep.

"Sour mash, straight up, beer back" said the bald, short fellow.

"Got it," said the barkeep. "Mind me saying, you look done in. Long way?"

"Bit of trouble." He slid his Wells Fargo badge across the bar. "Marshal around?"

"Couple blocks that way, but he won't be there right now." He paused. "Trouble?"

“Usual. Hold up. Three guys. The usual.”

“Anyone—“

“No. Not a shot fired. They knew what they were after. Stole a couple a horses, hitched them to their wagon, off they went. Can’t have got far. Our Morgans’ll tear the wheels off of their square-wheeled heap of sticks if they don’t know what they’re about. Should catch them easy enough.”

“Look like?”

The bald, short fellow thought for a moment, realised that here was the unexpected thing: he could not describe them.

“Guys. One clean-shaven. All tall. Youngish.” He thought again. “Tall.”

“You said tall.”

“Okay. So I’m all out of description.”

“Anna?” called the barman. The soiled dove abandoned the preacher’s kid and came slinkily over to the bar.

“Hi, honey.” She looked him up and down, a slow lick of attention. “I like a chunky guy, compact.”

“Never mind that,” said the barman. “Three guys. One clean-shaven. All tall. Ring any?”

“Narrow it down. Otherwise... you know how it is.”

“We need the Marshal,” said the bald, short fellow. “Can’t have got far.”

“You wanting to get up a posse?” said the barkeep. “Can’t remember last time we had to get up a posse. Don’t think anyone here would know *how* to get up a posse.”

“Or what to do when they got it up,” said Anna. She winked at the bald, short fellow. “Common experience, my line of business.”

The barkeep hammered on the bar counter.

“Fellow here...” He waited for a moment.

“I go by Pug,” said the bald, short fellow.

“Pug here’s a Wells Fargo Shotgun. Got stuck up.”

“Few miles out of town,” said Pug.

“Few miles out of town,” said the barkeep. “Wants to get up a posse.”

“Hurt?” said one of the customers.

“No,” said Pug.

“Stole?” said another.

“Yes,” said Pug. “Two bags of—“

“Not our money,” said an old man clutching a long-neck beer, “and anyhow it’s getting late and the weather this time of year is kind of—“

“I follow your reasoning,” said Pug.

“One for the road?” said the barkeep.

“Road?” said the bald, short fellow.

“You’ll be wanting to wait in Marshal Ben’s place,” said the barkeep.

The bald, short fellow looked round the bar.

“I guess I will, at that,” he said.

Dusk was falling, three miles out of town, when the Marshal and his three deputies picked up the trail.

“Shells for that thing?” he had said to the bald, short fellow.

“I don’t go in for shooting much,” said Pug.

“Much?”

“At all. Fifteen years. Couldn’t hit a thing anyway.”

“You need one of these, fella.” The Marshal unholstered a Spencer repeater from his saddle. “Hit a speck in a Mexican’s moustache at five hundred yards. Or one of these.” He produced a short-barreled shotgun from inside his long duster coat.

“One of ours,” said Pug. “Wells Fargo Stagecoach

Shotgun. Good piece. Hit five hundred Mexicans at one yard.”

“See to your Whip,” said the Marshal. “You get that coach into town okay, them two horses you got left?”

“Like stealing moneybags from a stagecoach, Marshal,” said the bald, short fellow.

The Marshal laughed. “Ben,” he said.

“Ben,” said the bald, short fellow.

“So,” said the Marshal, “you hitch up that wagon and take care of your business, we’ll take care of ours. See you back in town, Pug.”

“In town, Ben,” said Pug.

The Red Boot was crowded to the rafters when Ben and his deputies returned.

“Marshal,” said the barkeep; “Bob; Fred. Drinks on the house. What about George?”

“George got shot up lightly,” said the Marshal. “Doc’s bandaging him up. He’ll have a whiskey. He’ll have *two* whiskies. Be along soon. He ain’t hurt worth a damn.”

“He’s tough, George is,” said the Marshal. “All them times.” He turned to Pug. “All them tales of his. Anyone of them true, he’d be crow-bait now.”

“Still, he did get a bit shot,” said Fred.

“That fat hide of his took the shock,” said Bob.

“So?” said the barkeep.

“So it was the Lacey brothers.”

Brothers, thought the bald, short fellow. *That explains it. How I couldn’t tell them apart. How they didn’t speak. Brothers.*

“And?” said the Barman.

“Bit of a small shoot-out,” said Ben. “When the dust settled, John and Michael had gotten away. Williams in the cell, safe and sound. ‘Sound’ being the right word. Yelling the place

down. Said no joint could hold him, not with his brothers on the outside. Said they'd see him right. Said blood was thicker than the Law. Said it wouldn't be him that hanged. I said damn right it wouldn't be him that hanged. It would be all three of them that hanged, and from the same damn tree. Then I stopped my ears against his foul language and got me down here."

"So," said the barman to the bald, short guy, "the Lacey's get all your money?"

"Nope."

"Good. So you'll be wanting rooms for tonight? Names of Shotgun and Whip?"

"How much?"

"Forty cents. Or \$3.50."

"What's the difference?" said Pug.

"\$3.50 includes Anna," said the barkeep.

chapter four

Liz Carmel

“WHOA THERE!”

THE STAGECOACH driver yanked on the reins, pulling up hard the sweaty dirt-caked horses in front of Wells Fargo Bank on Fremont Avenue. The horses shuddered and stopped, flanks heaving and dripping. They dreamt of soft hay, oats, and water.

Charley, Wells Fargo’s man, jumped off the coach, barely waiting for it to stop. He hit the ground running, racing around the corner to 4th Street and the bank entrance. Before he reached the door, it opened. No time for water or a chair. He was on bank business. Charley exhaled for affect and began.

“We’ve been robbed!” he said, face covered with sweat and dirt like the horses. “It was those dang Lacey brothers! They done got everything we had.” He bent over, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath.

The bank director, face and body fleshy from one too many rich meals, blanched. “What are you talking about?” he barked. “What do we — what do I — pay you for?”

Charley looked down at his torn pants and scuffed boots, a

stark contrast to the director's starched white shirt buttoned up to the neck, tight jacket, and spectacles, the better to count the money.

"I'm done sorry Mister Director," he said, continuing to focus on his dusty worn boots. "We done all we could. There weren't anything more we could do." Charley had long ago learned the benefits of appearing stupid.

"Humph," the director snorted. "Now what?"

Charley blinked, appearing to suddenly remember the message. He recited it by rote, exactly as Mister Smith at the bank head office had told it to him just the day before. Charley had an excellent memory.

"Head office is closing the Flintwood branch," he stammered, hesitant but it had to be said. "Mister Smith at the head office done told me to tell you that they're closing the Flintwood branch. It don't make no money." Charley gulped for affect.

The branch director's face got paler. He sat down hard, on the nearest chair. "Water!" he called out to no one in particular. Glass proffered he gulped it down.

"Mister Smith done told me to tell you to do all the arranging for closing the bank right away," Charley continued, now more confident. "Mister Smith done told me to tell you that he's sending someone to move all the money from here to..." Charley paused, appearing to try to remember Mister Smith's exact words.

"To where?" the bank director asked, subdued by the reality. His life was evaporating before his very eyes.

"To another local bank or the Tucson branch," Charley finished, triumphant. "That's all I done know." Eyes still down, he headed for the door.

It was 10:00 AM and Mayor Henry Bird was already tired.

The mayor closed the back door to his office, careful not to make a sound. Charley had been a good investment, a back door as it were to what was going on at Wells Fargo. The bank director was a tight ass, a by-the-book-man. He didn't like the mayor and the mayor didn't like him. But Charley was a different story. As dumb as he appeared, Charley knew opportunity when it came knocking.

The mayor's day hadn't started out well, even before he learned about the stagecoach robbery. Emily had awoken with a bee in her bonnet. She was all fired up about Hank's wife wanting to leave Flintwood with her grandkids. Everyone knows that you don't get between a momma bear and her cubs or a grandmother and her grandkids. But Hank, Henry, Jr., was pussy-whipped. Unlike his father. No, Henry, Sr., wore the pants in his family.

Hank had always been soft, even as a kid. Bringing home broken-winged sparrows and every stray varmint or vagrant within a day's ride of Flintwood. Not like his old man. Blame it on Emily's side of the family. No one on his side was soft. The Birds were hard and proud of it. And hardness had gotten him to where he was today -- the Honorable Henry Bird, Mayor of Flintwood, Arizona.

The mayor smoothed his moustache with both index fingers. Too many good meals he thought looking down at his stomach. But that too was Emily's fault.

Mayor Henry Bird, never "Hank," no nicknames for him, had created Flintwood. This was his town, not that lowlife JP Tucker's. The mayor had spent ten years of his life making Flintwood into a bustling, prosperous town. And he was damned if he was going to let the Lacey brothers – or anyone else for that matter – ruin it. Not as long as he was breathing.

But if Wells Fargo left First National Bank wouldn't be far behind. No banks, no Flintwood, no the Honorable Henry Bird. Back to square one.

It was all the Marshal's fault. Marshal Wright wasn't doing enough to get crime under control. He was soft, just like Hank. Someone needed to start a fire under Ben Wright's butt and the mayor knew just how to do it.

The mayor opened the bottom left drawer of the handsome – and expensive -- cherry wood desk – imported from Philadelphia. His eager fingers groped into the far back corner, feeling for what he knew was there, hidden under a pile of papers. Got it. A pink, lacey garter. The mayor fingered the garter, turning it over and over in his hands, examining it from every angle. He brought it to his nose, inhaling the soft scent of violets and powder. He breathed in and out, insistent, heavy.

Secrets were good, the mayor's *modus operandi*, as it were. He tucked the garter into the inside pocket of his jacket, closed the drawer, and got up.

Marshal Wright sat at his desk, filing a report. He hated paperwork but it was part of the job and he loved the job. Sounds of chairs scraping on the rough wood floor, laughing, and the prisoner's cackling nonsense – Billy Lacey was daft after all -- seeped under the closed office door. Ben wasn't worried. The boys – as he called his deputies – had it all under control. They had Billy and it was just a matter of time before they had his two brothers. That would be a great day for Flintwood, and for him. That would change everything.

Ben looked up to see the door knob turn. Someone tried his door, not knocking first as his deputies had been taught to do. No, this guy was just walking in like he owned the place.

Ben wasn't surprised to see the mayor's short frame in the office doorway.

"Good morning Hank," Ben said, casually unwinding his long, lean frame up and out of the chair, to tower over the mayor. "How y'all doing this fine day?"

The mayor's eyes narrowed but he fought the urge to retort "My name is Henry if you please."

No, better not to react. Better to keep Ben off balance, to not let him know that his dig had hit pay dirt. He'd let it slide...this time.

"Good morning Benjamin," the mayor replied. Touché. "I see you've got yourself a new resident out there."

"Yep."

"One out of three isn't bad but in this case it is," the mayor continued. "What about the other two boys?"

"They got away."

"They got away? Just like that?"

"Yep."

"Let's go for walk," the mayor suggested. "Get a bit of fresh air."

"Sounds good to me," Ben replied, following the mayor out the door and down the street. The two men turned right on Fremont, calling out greetings as they walked over and across to the Red Boot Saloon. A good a place to talk as any. They didn't need privacy as much as neutral ground.

The two men settled at a back table, calling out for two beers. The mayor preferred scotch but was trying to look like "one of the guys."

The mayor smoothed his moustache with both index fingers. "Look Marshal," he began, "You know what's going on here. You heard about Wells Fargo leaving?"

"Yep."

“And after Wells Fargo leaves then First National will leave. And then the mine.”

“I reckon so,” Ben replied, slurped, not bothering to wipe the foam off his moustache.

The man was an idiot, the mayor thought, fixated on the marshal’s foamy moustache. How could he be so nonchalant? He expected – no wanted -- the marshal to defend himself. But he wasn’t. And this was odd. But more than odd, it was infuriating. How could the marshal not know what his ineptitude meant to the future of Flintwood? He had to. He wasn’t an idiot, or was he? Calm down, calm down.

The mayor paused and took a deep breath. Neither man spoke. Smoke hung in the air like stale milk. Specks of dust danced in the sunbeam breezes from the open door.

“You do realise,” the mayor said after several minutes of silence, “that you’re up for re-election next year?”

“Yep.” Ben didn’t care. No one else in town was crazy or stupid enough to take the job.

Damn this man and his “yeps.” Was that the only word he knew? Enough beating around the bush. Time for the big guns. The mayor reached into his jacket, Ben’s eyes following his every move. The mayor’s fleshy fingers came out holding something pink and lacey. He pulled the garter out just far enough for Ben to see what it was. And then back into the pocket just below his heart. The mayor smoothed his moustache with both index fingers.

Ben looked like he had been hit by a stagecoach. His brown eyes widened before he caught himself and settled back again, slouching in the high back wooden chair. But not fast enough. The mayor had seen.

The two men stared at each other, a poker game without cards. Who would break first and show their cards?

Behind the calm façade, Ben's mind was racing. Where did the mayor get that garter? Pink and lacey, like Catherine, his dear Catherine. What did Catherine have to do with the mayor? There were rumours that the mayor had a lady on the side but it couldn't be Catherine, not his dear Catherine. But how could he call her "his"? He had never told her of his feelings for her. He had never staked his claim on her. "His" dear Catherine could be anyone's, even the mayor's. Ben spat on the floor, imagining his dear Catherine in the mayor's arms. Disgusting.

Satisfied, the mayor pushed back his chair, and got up. He hadn't touched his beer.

"It's been a real pleasure talking with you Benjamin," he said, extending his right hand. "I think we understand each other better now."

"Yep," Ben replied, forcing himself to shake the mayor's clammy hand, outwardly calm like a fed, burped, and diapered baby. But inside he was seething. He finished his beer and then the mayor's. No need to waste good brew. Time to get to work.

chapter five

Alana Warlick

BY THE TIME MARSHAL Benjamin Wright walks into the Red Boot Saloon it's the time of night when the temperature starts to really sink and the bugs are out humming in full force. The perfect time for nursing some good whiskey in the cozy creaky saloon. It's full to the brim with people and the low amiable jumble of a dozen conversations. Woman laugh and glasses clatter, a heated voice or two is joked down by their companions. All in all, it's a grand atmosphere for the worn-out Marshal. He dusts off his pants, hangs his coat, and ambles over to the bar with a relieved smile crinkling on his face.

However, all's not well for everyone this night. Tucked away in the stuffiest corner and at the ricketiest table so they wouldn't be bothered, sits Ella Murphy and Catherine Donley. Ella weeps into a delicately embroidered handkerchief while Catherine sits close, skirts brushing hers, and makes soothing noises.

"Oh I'm sorry to be like this Catherine," she says for the hundredth time. "We're barely acquainted and here I am, an absolute mess."

Catherine tutts, petting her hand. "Oh shush, you got

nothin' to apologise for. We all go through rough patches.”

Ella whimpers a little but manages to nod, a short jerky thing. “You’re right, you’re absolutely right. Here I am, all down on myself for bein’ down on myself. It’s a bunch of hogwash that is!”

“Abso-lutely.” Catherine waves down one of the servers. “A girl’s got a right to be sad, and a girl’s got a right to drink when she’s sad.”

“Amen! So what’ll I get you this damn awful night?” The server smiles-soft her sympathies at the two.

Catherine looks at Ella expectantly.

“Oh...Shoot I dunno, I don’t usually drink...”

“Don’t fret darlin’, I’ll get y’all something that’ll go down easy and sweet, yeah?”

“Sounds great.”

She bustles away, skirts swishing and her big curly hair bouncing. The woman share a moment of silence before Ella leans in close and giggles in that semi-hysterical way people do when they’re completely out of sorts.

“Y’know, I haven’t drank in years. Years! Fred doesn’t like it, says it ain’t lady-like.”

“No!” Catherine gasps. “He’d be the town drunk himself if the Marshal didn’t keep him in line.”

Nodding solemnly, Ella continues, “Yup. He’s a full blown hy-po-crite. Whenever he gets on that unladylike line I tell him that he didn’t marry any lady then!”

They giggle together now and the server comes back, cheered on how Ella seems a little cheered up, and sets down their drinks.

“Alright now Ella,” Catherine starts, taking a sip of the heady-dark liquid. It’s spiced and a little sweet and just like the server said, it went down so smooth it hardly felt like alcohol.

“You’ve done good avoiding the subject but you really gotta talk about what’s got you all ruffled and weepy or you’re never gonna get over it.”

Ella sighs, fingering the handle of the mug. “You’re right, again.”

She doesn’t say anything after that and Catherine nudges her. Ella swallows hard and presses her lips together before beginning in a high pitched and barely controlled voice, “Old Nancy passed away today, one of the first hens I ever got and the last of the whole flock.”

She pulls out her handkerchief again and starts sobbing, blubbering out the rest of the story. “Ooooh, I loved those chickens! Got ‘em all when they were tiny little chicks and raised them myself. They would nuzzle up to me, oooh they were so soft as babies, and I knew they loved me back cause they always followed me around everywhere, even when they were all grown up.”

Catherine’s sniffing a little too, she was never good at staying stoic in emotional situations. She scoots even closer, patting the other woman on the shoulder with one hand and tipping back her mug with the other.

“I was their mommy just as much as I’m my daughter’s. They weren’t just for eggs y’know, they were like little feathered people and I loved them. And now they’re all gone.” She blows her nose loudly and Catherine thinks she’s done but just as she opens her mouth Ella says even more high-pitched, “And do you *know* what Fred said to me?”

“Hmm?”

“He said, he *said!*” At this point Ella finally takes a swig of her drink, coughs a little, and continues in a tone of outrage, “He said that we should HAVE HER FOR DINNER!”

The Saloon goes silent for an awkward second before

conversations clatter back to speed. Some of the men around them peer confused at the two woman in the corner. Catherine glares at them while rubbing Ella's back until they slowly turn away to their own business.

Ella's drinking like her life depends on it, cheeks flushed and damp. Catherine wipes under her eyes with her finger. "That's so sad, how heartless. I've seen that chicken of yours and it was nothin' but feathers and bones anyway. Woulda hardly made a mouthful. It's wasting nothin' to give her a proper burial."

"Exactly, exactly."

The clomp of boots their way catches her attention a little too late, and she's just turning to look when-

"What's going on here?"

The rough voice comes with a rough-stubble face and the rank smell of sweat. Catherine's face drops instantly and she says in a flat and annoyed voice, "Nothin' Marshal."

His eyes widen, "Catherine? I could hardly recognise you it's so dim over here."

She says nothing, eyes fixed on a point past him. Ella glances between the two, putting down her almost-empty mug softly.

Ben grins and looks around for a chair to pull up but there's no empty ones nearby so he stands there shifting from toe to toe like an overexcited puppy. "I didn't think you frequented the Red Boot Catherine. Doesn't seem like your kinda place."

He laughs weakly like he made some sort of joke and Catherine closes her eyes for a second to send a prayer to sweet Jesus in heaven for patience. "It usually isn't my sort of place," she says in the terse voice usually reserved for nagging parents and insufferable bosses. "But I'm here for some

personal and *important* business.” She looks pointedly over at Ella.

“Oh that’s nice,” Ben says vaguely. “Hey so Catherine, I heard you like riding horses. I’m really good at that you know. If you wanted I could teach you some tricks sometime.”

Catherine flushes, “Did you just try an’ insinuate-”

“What? No! Shoot Catherine I didn’t mean it like that, I swear.”

“Ben! What are you doing over here?” A second pair of boots joins the party. Catherine groans and slides down in her chair.

“Oh hey Fred, I was just uh, chatting with Catherine.”

Ella tries to make herself as small as possible pressed against the wall, but after Deputy Fred Murphy tips his hat to Catherine he finally recognises his wife sitting next to her. He splutters before choking out, “Ella! What’re you doing *here*?”

She opens and closes her mouth but no words come. He sees the mug in front of her and puffs up like a constipated bull. “And you’re drinking! Ella how *dare* you.”

Ben tries to put a hand on the man’s shoulder, “Look Fred-”

Fred bats it away, lurching forward to grab at Ella over the table.

“Don’t touch me you filthy heartless beast!” she screams, scooting away. The chair screeches across the floor. “I can’t believe you wanted to eat her!”

“Are you botherin’ these ladies?” The server from before is back. She’s tall enough to tower over Fred--especially considering the magnificent curls piled on her head--and she glares at both him and Ben from her queenly height, hands on her hips.

“What?” Fred is mercifully distracted and confused.

“Bothering? I’m her husband! And a deputy.”

Catherine glares at him too, standing up and crossing her arms, “Are you sure? ‘Cause you look more like a bully to me.”

Ella’s about to burst into tears again, her small moment of courage starting to fizzle even with two other woman on her side. She doesn’t know how they’re so brave to talk back like that and look so sure of themselves. Especially to the Marshal and her husband, men of the law.

Ben puts up his hands in a placating gesture, “Alright now everybody hold your horses. We’re all friends here. There’s no need to be screaming and causing a ruckus.”

At that exact moment, there’s a crash and a womanly scream in the direction of the bar. A mug flies and shatters against the wall. Ben curses as he’s pushed over by a sudden surge of panicked people scrambling to get out of the saloon. Two men wrestle on the floor punching each other bloody while a few others bash each other with furniture. They’re yelling something about animal disappearances. It sounds like they’re all blaming each other about them.

“Of course,” Fred grumbles and heaves Ben up, struggling towards the bar to do his duty as deputy and break up the troublemakers. “I’ll have a few words with you after this Ella!” he yells over his shoulder.

It’s then that Catherine takes Ella’s arm and whispers in her ear, breath hot and wet with alcohol. “We’ll go out the back.”

The server winks at Catherine and she salutes back before disappearing through the door under the balcony with Ella. It swings shut behind them and they’re out in the cool night air. Ella takes a deep breath as the sounds of the brawl inside fade.

“Where are we going?”

“Oh let’s have a walkaround, poor dear, I don’t think you

want to go home right now.”

Ella holds onto Catherine’s arm tighter. “No I don’t. A walk sounds nice.”

They crunch over the dirt of the dimly lit street, pressing close together against the chilling wind. Both contemplate the events of the night.

“Y’know,” Catherine says softly, “Fred might not give you too much trouble. I know Ben, before he lets Fred lose to go back home he’ll give him a good talking to.”

“I don’t want to talk about Fred now,” Ella snaps.

“Sorry Ella, I getcha.”

“It’s alright.”

A few people from the bar pass them, walking home on the other side of the dusty street. Soon, there aren’t even stragglers left, and it’s only the two woman walking alone. They reach the last streetlamp and Ella stops.

“Want to turn around and keep walkin’?”

“No,” Ella says in trembling voice. She leans heavily on the streetlamp, sliding down to sit on the ground.

After a moment, Catherine follows her, wrapping her arms around Ella and resting her chin on her shoulder. Ella bursts out sobbing and Catherine rocks her gently. “Let it all out sweetheart. As soon as you do you’ll be much better. You can get through this, I know you’re a tough gal.”

“Mm-hmm,” Ella whimpers and grasps at Catherine’s hands, desperate for the comforting warmth of flesh. Catherine gets the hint and snuggles closer, kissing her cheek on impulse. Ella giggles and Catherine smiles and kisses her again.

“Look at the stars,” she whispers.

They do, cuddling in the filthy desert dust at the dead of the night. They’re chillingly beautiful, with no clouds to hide

behind tonight. One star is particularly magnificent, bigger and brighter than the rest, and an uncommon colour of pure violet. Catherine squints and that's when she realises that the star is moving, getting bigger at an alarmingly fast rate.

"Shoot," she says, "Ella do you see that?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"I dunno, maybe it's a fallin' star?"

"Those don't look like *that*."

"You got a point."

On consensus they disengage and stand up to get a better look. The violet star sinks in the sky, until it's at the horizon, and continues to get bigger. The wail of a coyote starts, lonely and distant. Then another voice joins it, then another, then another. The howling echoes across the whole desert, loud enough to be a half dozen packs singing together. The star surges on. Behind the two woman, Mrs. Mcathy's goats wake up yelling. And with that all the livestock in the town wake up and start braying/neighing/stomping.

"Catherine I think we should go."

Catherine turns her eyes from the sky and gazes into Ella's frightened ones. A feeling of impending doom stifles the air and sinks into their guts. Catherine takes Ella's hand and a diffuse purple glow lights them up. The star, a wide illuminated disk, slides directly over them. For a moment everything falls sharply still and silent, as if held in stasis by some unknown power. Then a roaring hum starts up and the chaos comes back.

"*Run!*" Ella shrieks, pulling Catherine with her and booking it back towards the saloon.

Behind them a solid-cylinder of light smashes into the ground around one of Mrs. Mcathy's poor goats. Catherine glances back to see it dragged into the air and up the cylinder,

kicking and screaming all the while. Ella doesn't let her slow down, running at a frantic pace while keeping a vice grip on her hand. They reach the saloon in time to see two men squaring up outside, fingers itching over their gun holsters, ready to start a duel. Ben pushes through the swinging doors of the saloon with a dark bruise on his cheek, "Hold it right there boys! There's no dueling in this town."

He sees Catherine and Ella come barrelling down the street out of the corner of his eyes, and when Catherine sees him looking at her she shouts, "GET DOWN."

No one listens, of course, and Ben and the other two men get knocked over from the wind of the bright disk zooming overhead, goat in tow. It accelerates rapidly and disappears into the distance in an instant. Hats tumbling over in its wake.

"What the hell?"

The would be duelers start to push themselves up, dazed and utterly mystified, but Ben is quick to jump up and push them back down to cuff their hands behind their backs. "Now while I don't know what in God's name that was, I know that you two are going to be spending a night in a cell to cool off."

The two women jog up out of breath, hair wild, and cheeks flushed. Catherine leans on Ella a little and laughs, exhilarated. "That was crazy! ...We should do it again sometime."

Ella's about to say the same, eyes glowing and fear fading now that no harm has come to her, when Fred stumbles out of the saloon and makes a beeline towards her. Her face turns into stone and Fred grabs her arm. "There ya are Ella. Now that those hooligans are goin' to jail, you're comin' home with me."

She's taken away, looking over her shoulder and mouthing a 'Sorry' to Catherine. Ben pulls up the grumbling men and leads them to the jail. Catherine is left alone under a flickering

streetlamp, wringing her hands.

“Bye,” she says softly to no one.

chapter six

David Johnson

“WILL WAS ALWAYS THE one getting caught, always the one running to mamma afterwards!” Michael moaned in a hushed voice.

John Lacey and his brother were both crouched, obscured from view, opposite Wells Fargo Bank on Fremont Avenue. Why hadn't they opted for the bank rather than a Wells Fargo stagecoach that had rewarded them with next to nothing? They'd have been cash aplenty in the bank, and gold too. It was probably because Marshal Benjamin Wright's office was only a stone's throw away across the dirt thoroughfare, right where their younger brother William was now languishing in jail.

“Shh.” was all Michael got as a reply. “There goes Ben and Fred. Now's our chance!” said John.

Marshal Benjamin Wright and his deputy Fred Murphy looked calm but focussed as they left Flintwood jailhouse. Quite the contrast to John and Michael who were visibly showing the strain of their relatively unsuccessful day. Two horses and a handful of cash apiece hardly compensated for a captured sibling and a price on their heads.

As William Lacey was already in a holding cell after his

arrest, Ben had decided that he and Fred should continue the search for the other two Lacey outlaws. They saddled their horses and headed west down Fremont Avenue.

If John and Michael looked like they'd been having a bad day, William took it up a couple of notches. Deputy Robert Wilson wasn't against using one of his Smith & Wesson revolvers for more than shooting. The handgun had been turned and used in an unfriendly manner on more than one occasion, leaving William with a closing eye and a weeping lesion above his hairline. Ben had insisted that he be treated, and had mildly admonished Bob, but William was still in a sorry state. He was slumped over, but didn't fancy resting his humming head on a pillow that hummed to a different tune. This certainly wasn't up to the standards offered at the Red Boot Saloon.

Bob Wilson was fairly pleased with his day as a law enforcement officer, but his colleague, Deputy George Bell, wasn't quite as chirpy. He'd missed lunch, which always put a dampener on his mood. He adjusted his hat for the tenth time since their return to the jailhouse, and kicked at Bob's desk.

"Why you lookin' so pleased? They got away!"

"Easy old man, we got one of 'em. Ben will bring in the other two. He'll track the horses and pick them off with his Spencer rifle."

"He ain't a hothead like you Bob. He'll do it proper," George fired back.

George was right. Benjamin Wright had been doing things by the book since he'd been elected Town Marshal in 1864. Not something that was easy to do in Flintwood, especially since the copper mine had decided to hide away the rich vein's of yesteryear. The good times had built this town, now criminal gangs were tearing it apart. Not that the Lacey's had

always been on the wrong side of the law. The eldest, John Lacey, had even bought a stake in the Tucker Copper mine, but it wasn't long after that that John Patrick Tucker's attributed town naming line "the only *other* things he found in the river were flints and bits of wood" were the *only* things to be found.

John and Michael Lacey were now in plain sight. Colt revolvers in hand as they crossed Fremont Avenue heading towards the jailhouse. Their forlorn look but moments earlier had been transformed as they'd raised from their haunches revealing their impressive full stature. Neither man had the Neanderthal shape of the well muscled deputy Bob Wilson, who was adorned with the odd bodily scar here and there to add to the stereotype (which he now naturally liked to reciprocate when at all possible), but they were a good few inches taller, lean and athletically built. John still had his wits about him, and hurried past the front entrance and headed around to the back of the jailhouse with Michael in tow.

The stakes were high, but there'd be no bluffing. John kicked in the back door, raised his revolver and fired at the first figure he saw. That had been Bob, but his aim was so poor as adrenaline coursed through his body, that George took the bullet in his right arm. Not a glancing wound like Bob had received when fighting on the Confederacy side during the US Civil War either, but a real bone cruncher. George was immediately incapacitated, and the two Lacey brothers had the jump on Bob. He did go for both of his Smith & Wesson revolvers, of course Bob had one on each hip, but Michael had a gun to his temple before he could draw.

"Where are the keys?" hissed Michael.

John forceable handcuffed George, causing him to wince

in pain, as blood from his gunshot wound turned the floor around him a dirty shade of claret. Handcuffs had only recently been invented, and this unpleasant act compounded George's disdain for anything new.

Bob nodded toward Marshal Wright's corner office. Although Bob fantasised about action hero moves that didn't exist yet, he knew stalling was not going to end well. Although there really was no need, Michael clubbed Bob with the butt of his gun, rendering him unconscious. William smiled.

At first John struggled to locate the cell keys in Ben's office, but a finger lightly applied to George's arm delivered the appropriate response. George couldn't believe what a shit day he was having. Missing lunch, getting shot, then mild torture. Still, he was confident he'd have another story to embellish within the hour. He doubted the Lacey's wanted to add murder of a deputy to the charge of highway robbery, especially since they now definitely had the upper hand. Would he have gotten a round or two off in his version of events? Maybe even grazing one of the Lacey's with a bullet? His reverie halted as he vomited up what little breakfast he'd had.

William was almost free from his prison cell, where he'd actually spent less than an hour. His depth perception was bugged though, and he misjudged the heavy swinging iron door as it sprung back from the extremity of its hinges. Fate decreed that he wouldn't be leaving the cell without his head first resting on the pillow for at least a moment or two.

The brothers were reunited again. Two deputies were bundled and locked into one of their own prison cells. That should have been it. The three Lacey's riding west into a setting sun.

Cicadas chirping shrilly. Maybe the odd tumbleweed blowing across the path ahead. Their early swagger had undone them though. They'd been spotted brazenly walking along Fremont Avenue, and word had reached Marshal Wright and Deputy Murphy. If they'd have headed out of the jailhouse as they'd entered, they would have been filled with lead. Fred was an especially good shot with his Remington revolver. Ben preferred a shotgun at close range to his trusty Spencer rifle.

Luck had it that the Lacey's headed straight onto Fremont Avenue though. This provided the swiftest path to the two horses they'd tethered on Tucker Avenue and 3rd Street. They ran west along Fremont, reaching 3rd Street before Ben and Fred had cautiously entered the rear of the jailhouse. George started to recount his version of events.

"Where are they?" bellowed Ben. George motioned toward the front door with his good arm. A pretty impressive contortion considering he was still cuffed. It was more of a frenetically repeated hand gesture.

Sprinting through the jailhouse, they caught sight of the slightly laboured youngest of the Lacey brothers heading down 3rd Street. Shots rang out in vain, as the angle was too acute to make. Contrary to always getting caught, William was an excellent sprinter over short distances, so the block to Tucker Avenue was completed in swift fashion. John took one of the horses, as Michael helped William onto the rear of the second. They were literally spurred into motion heading east along Tucker Avenue.

Catherine Donley was a lady of leisure. Daughter of the former Town Marshal John Donley, when times in Flintwood had been considerably more prosperous. John had offered Ben

Wright his first position of authority in Flintwood. His daughter had immediately caught his attention, and this attention developed into affection as months turned to years. John Lacey happened to have noticed Catherine too. His advances had been spurned on many an occasion. John felt no malice towards Catherine though, as drinking and gambling had become his mistresses when his stake in Tucker Copper mine ran dry. The following was therefore mere happenstance. No ill will was intended.

As the Lacey brothers recklessly galloped along Tucker Avenue toward apparent freedom, Catherine was concluding business in Flintwood's First National Bank. She was already thinking about a gift she wanted to purchase across the street as she left the bank. One absentminded step forward and she was trampled under the hooves of John Lacey's ill-gotten horse. The impact was harsh, but the horse barely broke stride and canter swiftly returned to gallop. Catherine would never move at a trot, let alone a canter, again.

Ben Wright and Deputy Murphy were still hopelessly in pursuit. They reached the prone body of Catherine as the Lacey's rode off into the distance through the outskirts of town, heading east, away from the setting sun. Ben lifted Catherine tenderly in his arms. She was alive, but her left leg and hip looked oddly disfigured. Marshal Wright was pissed. Maybe the book that detailed how things were to be done was going to be rewritten.

chapter seven

Barry Lynch

"IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT Ben and you know it!" yelled Mayor Bird.

"Look Henry, I'm not happy either that the Lacey's have skipped town but I don't see how it is my fault. I didn't give the keys and wish them a safe journey. Or is that what you think happened?" calmly shouted Marshal Wright.

"Ben, don't try and be coy, you know the town was a lot safer when Marshal Donley was here. It's been going to the dogs ever since he left to go fight against the Yankees."

Ben looked at the little short round man in front of him with the red puffy cheeks. He wondered if the Mayor was going to explode or throw up he wasn't sure which. But he reckoned that him throwing up with be an easier clean up job for Mary the woman that kept the jail house clean.

"Henry, telling me again how you think I failed isn't going to help anything here and I always look forward to our discussions regarding civic responsibility. But I need to round up the Lacey's and bring them back here preferably alive. George, go get the horses and I'll meet you out front after I give Fred and Bob some instructions."

"Look Ben..."

"Mayor, if you say one more thing I'm going to have one of the Deputies here throw you in a cell for interfering with Marshal business. One more word Mayor, just one more." Ben looked at Mayor Bird with a threatening look that just said *I dare you*.

Mayor Bird looked like he wanted to say something and almost did but as usual he gave in to the law man and muttered something about... *This isn't over Ben...* as he grabbed the door handle and left the jail.

Ben watched as he left and thought of the number of times the same conversation had taken place. In the street, the jail, the banks, at the blacksmith's, the grocers even the saloon. Why did he put up with it? He had enough money to buy 50 acres outside of town with a creek that ran threw it. He could do some panning for silver or gold or just sit back and fish. Why not? Maybe after the Lacey's are back in the cells he might just do that. The Mayor didn't like him and he wasn't exactly sure why and there didn't seem to be anyway to change his mind.

"Ben, the horses are ready," shouted George through the open door.

Ben looked up at George and realised he must have drifted off after another wasted conversation with the Mayor.

"Fred, Bob, look I need you to round up all of the trouble makers in town and put them in the empty cells. But leave one open in case we get the Laceys back here alive. I don't want any unnecessary roughness picking them up understand?"

"Yes, Ben," said Fred emphatically.

"Bob?" asked Ben.

"Oh, what if they shoot at us?" asked Bob

"If they shoot, shoot back just try not to kill them, OK? I don't the town in anymore of an uproar than it all ready is. I'm

getting the feeling if I come back without the Laceys I may end up in a cell with the key thrown away by that worthless Mayor of ours. So try not to make it worse, OK? OK?"

"Yes, Ben."

"Fred, who we are going to pick up first, Charlie, Cole or Frank?" asked Bob Murphy.

"Charlie Evans will most likely be down at the Red Boot with Frank. I heard tell that Cole was cleaning out the stables for money so he may be there."

"Lets go get Charlie and Frank first, hopefully they haven't been drinking or loosing too much money playing cards. Is your gun ready just in case?" said Bob.

"Yep, cleaned it this morning. You?" Patting his Old Model revolver with his right hand as he talked.

"You know I'm ready as he patted down both his hips."

"Now you heard Ben. No shooting, he wants them alive."

"Fine, Fred, fine. But if they start shootin'..."

They were still bickering as they walked out the door and down the street towards the Red Boot.

The Red Boot saloon wasn't fancy not that you would expect it to be, but it wasn't clean or neat either. When you walked through the doors the bar was in the back with tables for playing cards on the left. In the back right corner was the staircase that went upstairs where the guest rooms were. The place was always dirty which was to be expected we were in Arizona after all. But there was an additional layer of dust that just never seemed to go away and other time it was getting thicker and more permanent. Fred walked in first and took a minute to adjust his eyes before walking to the bar and asking the barman for a glass of water.

"Water? Its whiskey or nothing"

"Whiskey. Have you seen Charlie Evans or Frank today?"

The barman who was named Norm looked up when Bob Murphy entered the bar. He also stopped and looked around before heading over to the bar as well.

"I was just asking Norm here if he had seen Charlie or Frank today? So have you Norm?" asked Fred impatiently. He wanted to be back at the jail with his feet propped up and taking a nap instead of rounding up some two-bit troublemakers he hadn't made any trouble yet as far as he could tell.

"Norm?"

"Charlie was here earlier. I think he went outside a little while ago after losing at cards."

"And Frank?" asked Fred again.

"He is up stairs sleeping. He worked the night shift last night."

"Is he alone? And what room is he in?"

"I don't know look for yourself." With that Norm turned and walked down to the other end of the bar where no one sat or stood.

Fred drank his whiskey in one gulp and started up the stairs with Bob on his heels. The spurs on their boots jangled as they went up the stairs and slowly announced there progression up the steps.

Suddenly a scream rang out followed by a heavy thud and then a thumping as a body came rolling down the staircase. The deputies had to move to the side to avoid getting knocked over. The body stopped with a large thud on the floor at the bottom of the steps and lay there motionless. Fred and Bill recovered and went to the bottom of the steps and looked at the body. It was Frank Brown bleeding but still alive, though

he wouldn't be moving under his own weight any time soon.

"He better not be dead, he owes me money" yelled a woman from the top of the stairs. It was Lucy Carver and she was new to the Red Boot.

"Hey Lucy, your supposed to get your money in advance honey!" yelled a man sitting a card table. This caused everyone except Frank and Lucy to bust out laughing.

"It's not funny!" and with that pronouncement Lucy turned and stomped up the stairs.

"Well you get the shoulders and I'll get the feet, and we will carry him over to the jail." Fred and Bob picked up Frank, carried him to the jail, dropped him on a cot in a cell and closed and locked the door.

They found Cole at the stables asleep on a pile of hay and manure. They roused him awake and he was more than happy to come down to the jail for a clean cot and a meal. They placed him in the cell with Frank, who was still passed out and threw him a blanket and he promptly went to sleep on the cot facing Frank.

"Now we need to find Charlie."

The two Deputies walked out of the jail and went down to the saloon to see if he had returned, but he hadn't. Lucy was now working her charms on a drunk miner at a table and his fellow miners were telling him to not pay in advance to which Lucy shouted again for them to stop.

Continuing down Fremont Avenue they didn't find him in any of the establishments there. They walked up morticians on the corner of 2nd and Cottonwood and asked old man Miller if he had seen Charlie Evans.

"Nope, haven't seen him. What's he done now?"

"Nothing. Just want to talk to him."

With that the two Deputies walked further east down Cottonwood and came across Charlie laying half in a water trough.

Fred ran over too him and pulled him out of the trough and let him fall unto the mud. Charlie moaned and then opened his eyes and they got real big.

"I didn't do anything!" he screamed again and again.

Fred shouted for him to shut up and then punched him in the face when he didn't. Charlie lay moaning on the ground.

"What did you do that for, Fred? Ben told us not to kill them!"

"I didn't kill him, did I? He wouldn't shut up. Come on let's get him to jail."

Fred and Bob lifted Charlie off of the ground and he walked between them whimpering and muttering all the way to an open cell.

chapter eight

Ian Philpot

“I’VE GOT US A plan to track down the Lacey’s,” started Marshal Wright as he kept his horse at a slow pace down Fourth Street. “But I want to play it slow until we’re away from the busy streets in town.”

“You know the worst part about molasses candies?” Deputy Bell asked with his left hand holding onto the reins of his horse and his right hand half in his mouth as he picked his teeth.

Marshal Wright looked over at Bell and began to wonder if he should have found another riding partner. Maybe someone younger and forty-five pounds lighter who wouldn’t look like such an idiot riding next to the marshal through town.

“It’s how they get stuck to your teeth,” Bell said. “Doc Sund — the old dentist — used to tell me to stop eating them. Since he moved outta town, the drugstore can hardly keep ‘em in stock.”

Marshal Wright let out a low grunt, and Kate, his horse, turned her head to look at him. He nodded at her, patted her neck, and let out a soft, compassionate noise to reassure her.

“Oh, Be-en,” called out a sing-song voice from the side of the road.

Marshal Wright pulled Kate's reins to stop her. He looked over and saw Catherine Donley standing in front of First National Bank. She was wearing a beautiful dress and her pretty eyes were locked onto Wright.

"I heard that noise you made to Kate there," Catherine started, "and, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were particularly friendly with her."

"Howdy, Ms. Donley," Deputy Bell said with a slight nod and his hand still half in his mouth.

"There's nothing wrong with being friendly with a horse," Marshal Wright responded.

In one smooth motion, he dismounted his horse and there was a jingle of his spurs and his belt when he hit the ground. "Kate here is a sturdy, dear friend," he said giving the horse a few pats on the neck as he walked toward Catherine. "While you on the other hand..."

"While I what?" Catherine asked quickly.

"Well, you're no enemy," Marshal Wright said with a wink. "If you were, I'd have to lock you in a special cell at the jail. One that only I have access to."

"Oh, Ben..." Catherine said as she looked at the ground with a smile.

Bell cleared his throat. "Marshal, don't you think we should get on after the Lacey's?"

Marshal Wright rolled his eyes but also straightened himself in front of Catherine.

"Of course, Deputy Bell," he said, turning his back to Catherine and hoisting himself onto his horse. "There's brave work to be done yet today," the marshal's words intended for Catherine and anyone else milling around the bank, "and Deputy Bell and I are the only ones set to handle it."

Marshal Wright gave a slight kick to Kate, and she began to

trop faster than they had been moving before. Deputy Bell gave a kick to his horse to catch up.

“Marshal,” Bell said in a half-hushed voice. “I thought you said you wanted to ‘play it slow’ until we were outta town.”

Marshal Wright didn’t respond. It was a shock the marshal that even with all of Deputy Bell’s experience being a lawman that, instead of developing an air of drama and courageousness, Bell had only developed a need to let out the waist in his pants every couple months.

By the time Bell fully caught up to Marshal Wright, they were at to Gila Avenue — the part of town that was still undeveloped (or underdeveloped depending on who you asked). Instead of the usual background noises from the middle of town of people working or talking, the only sounds on Gila Avenue were of pack rats looking for food or the wind blowing dust between construction sites — though most people in Flintwood had gotten to calling them “destruction sites.”

“We’re heading west,” the Marshal said as he turned his horse and, once they were surely out of sight from anyone who might have still been watching them from First National Bank, he slowed Kate to a pace that was more accommodating to conversation. “There’s a tributary to the Gila River about two miles away. I’ve tracked the Lacey brothers there before.”

“Mmhmm,” Deputy Bell replied. He thought about questioning the marshal’s judgment, but he changed his mind.

The two men continued on in silence for five minutes before Deputy Bell ran out of candies and got tired of the silence, so he said the first thing he thought of.

“Oh, Be-en,” Bell said with a half-grin in his highest falsetto to mimic Catherine’s greeting before.

The marshal gave an angry, squinting stare at Bell, but,

despite the look on the marshal's face, Bell continued.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were particularly friendly with her," he said with his high voice creaking and cracking along the way.

The marshal stopped his horse, but the muscles on his face relaxed. Bell stopped his horse as well, but his smile was gone.

"I'm sorry," Bell said in the falsetto before clearing his throat and trying again. "I'm sorry, sir," he said in his deepest octave. "I don't know—"

"Bell," the marshal said as his focus gave out, like he was staring at a horizon beyond the horizon. A moment passed. Then another moment passed. Then, without warning, the marshal said, "Get up," to his horse and rode her full speed. Deputy Bell, again, was riding behind the marshal, trying to catch up.

After a mile and a half, they came upon some foliage that surrounded the stream. The marshal hopped off his horse and pulled his repeater rifle out of his pack and slung the strap for it over his left shoulder. He then pulled out his short-barrelled shotgun out, clicked down the stock to make sure it was loaded, and tucked it under his left arm. He then led Kate over to a nearby tree and tied her to it.

Deputy Bell had caught up while Marshal Wright was pulling out his rifle, and he took it as a sign to dismount and make sure his Colt Dragoon revolver was loaded. When he saw the marshal secure his horse to the tree, Bell did the same, but he also grabbed some rope from the back of his saddle. His years of experience were a reminder that a bit of extra rope always comes in handy.

Without a word, the two men began on foot for a minute or two before some voices were heard in the distance. By the time they were close enough to see, it was clearly the Lacey

brothers. Marshal Wright squatted down to the ground and Bell did the same.

“Here’s my plan,” the Marshal said, picking up some fallen leaves and a stick off the ground. He placed the stick down and said, “This is the stream, and,” he put down three leaves, “these are the Lacey’s. As you can see, there’s a pair of ‘em together and John is separated from them a bit.”

“How do you know it’s John?” Bell asked.

The marshal squinted and said, “Because he’s the tallest.”

“How could you tell he’s the tallest when we’re a couple of hundred yards away?”

“Because I can.”

“How can you—”

“Deputy Bell, if you are undermining my authority—”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Bell said, looking away from Marshal Wright and back to the stick and leaves before them. “Please, continue. John is separated from the other two.”

Marshal Wright continued looking at Bell for a few seconds before returning to his plan.

“You,” the marshal said as he held up a leaf, crumpled it in his hand, and dropped it next to the leaf representing John, “are going to cross the stream and hide behind that bush about 20 yards from John Lacey. You’re going to lower his guard by pretending to be Catherine Donley. When he nears the bush, you’ll jump him and tie him up with your rope. You’ll lead him toward the other brothers and tell them to surrender. They’ll think of fighting, but then I,” the marshal picked up a rock and placed it behind the leaves representing the other Lacey brothers, “will be right behind them with my shotgun to encourage them to join John.”

There was a short pause as Marshal Wright let the plan sink in.

“Can you be honest with me? Am I sacking John Lacey alone because I made fun of your girlfriend?” Bell asked.

“Yes,” the marshal answered quickly, though he would not have yet called Catherine his “girlfriend.”

“Okay,” Bell said as he got up and began to backtrack. He headed back about a hundred yards and crossed the stream quietly. Marshal Wright watched as Bell crept closer and closer to John Lacey. He was doing fine, until it appeared that he got his foot caught in a shallow hole. He tried to pull it out, and that worked, but it thrust him into the bush with a force that shook it entirely and made John Lacey jump.

“Who’s there?” he asked as he grabbed his Colt Army Revolver 1860 and pointed it at the bush.

Marshal Wright immediately began to run for a better position on the other brothers.

“Oh, Jo-ohn,” Bell called out from the bush in a sing-song tone. “It’s me-e. Ca-ther-ine Don-ley.”

“I ain’t John,” he replied. “I’m Michael.”

“Dammit,” Bell said to himself in the bush.

“What was that?” Michael Lacey said to the bush.

“Dam-mit” Bell said in his high voice.

“Hey,” Michael called out to his brothers. “Get over here.”

John and William Lacey grabbed their guns and ran toward Michael. The marshal continued watching but kept himself in the background. Since the brothers were moving, he needed to change his trajectory under cover of the trees.

“What is it?” called out John as he and William approached.

“It’s a voice from a bush,” Michael replied.

“Is it a burning bush?” William asked.

“Are you a burning bush?” Michael asked the bush.

“No-o,” Bell replied.

“No-o,” Michael called out to his brothers, though they were now close enough that they didn’t need to raise their voices.

“What does that matter?” John asked William.

“If it was a burning bush,” William started, “then it could have been God talking.”

“This bush isn’t God talking,” Michael said. “It claims to be Catherine Donley.”

John’s eyes lit up. “Well, is it?” he asked.

“I a-am,” Bell replied.

John looked at his brothers confused. “Shoot it,” he said.

All three brothers pointed their revolvers at the bush and they pulled their triggers in unison, almost as if some predetermined, genetic cadence lived inside them and they each knew exactly the right moment to unleash hot lead upon their target. Bits of leaves and branches flew in every direction until all eighteen rounds were fired and the area seemed completely silent except for the gentle babble of the stream.

Then, behind the brothers, there was a familiar noise — the cocking of a shotgun. It rested in the lowered arms of Marshal Wright. The brothers turned their heads and froze like a deer caught in front of a wagon at night.

“You just killed my deputy behind that bush,” the marshal said.

“We didn’t know—” Michael started.

“You didn’t know he was back there, but you should’ve thought twice,” Marshal Wright said. He spit on the ground between him and the Lacey brothers and the continued, “We all know that killing a representative of the law is punishable by death, and I have every right to shoot you three down right now.” The marshal stopped and stared at the brothers. William, the youngest, was beginning to shake a bit. “Lucky

for you, I was getting a little tired of Deputy Bell, and, since he isn't leaving behind a family, he won't be missed by—”

“Excuse me,” called out a voice from behind the bush that had just been half-shredded by bullets.

The Lacey brothers turned all their heads at the same time to look at the bush, and there, next to it, appeared Deputy Bell with twigs stuck to his shirt and his hat on sideways revealing his deeply receding hairline. The Lacey brothers then turned their heads, again in unison, back to Marshal Wright. The marshal sneered.

“Don't just stand there, Bell,” he said gruffly. “Tie them up.”

Deputy Bell straightened out his uniform, grabbed his rope and revolver from the ground, and walked toward the Lacey's. Marshal Wright stayed cemented in his spot until the brothers were knotted together.

“I'm always sayin',” Marshal Wright said to himself as he walked around the brothers, ““No one can't hit nothin' with those revolvers.' That's why I carry this.” The marshal shot off a round from his shotgun at the bush the deputy had been hiding behind and it was destroyed.

Bell tied the brothers to his own horse for most of the ride back to town, but Marshal Wright insisted that they be tied to his horse as they made their way up Fourth Street.

“Wouldn't Third Street have been a faster route to get to the jail?” Bell asked.

“These men could use the exercise,” the marshal said nodding to the Lacey's.

Deep down, Marshal Wright was hoping that Catherine may still be around First National, but, if she was, she wasn't in the street to see the marshal's triumphant march with his prisoners.

When they arrived at the jail, Marshal Wright walked inside and left Deputy Bell to untie the prisoners from his horse and lead them inside.

Deputy Wilson approaches Marshal Wright and says, “We got three — Charlie Evans, Cole Vaughn, and Frank Brown.”

“Good,” the marshal replied. “We’ll be tight on room with the Lacey’s. Have Bell put John in one of the remaining cells and let the other two share the last cell.”

“Which one is John?” Deputy Wilson asked.

“He’s the tall one.”

Marshal Wright walked into his office and shut the door. He could hear Bell bring in the Lacey’s and Wilson ask, “Which one’s the tall one?” and then Bell reply, “They’re all tall.”

The marshal opened one of the drawers of his desk and pulled out a bottle of dark liquor. He reached for a glass, but he then hear some grumbling among the prisoners outside. He put the liquor back into his desk, stepped out of his office, and slammed the door so hard behind him that dust on the floorboards was stirred up. The prisoners grew quiet. Marshal Wright walked in front of all the cells, staring at the occupants one-by-one until he reached the wall. When he turned around, he looked to the other side of the room where his deputies were standing, gave them a soft look, and waved his arm in a motion that told them to sit and relax.

“I demand to know why we’re in here,” Cole Vaughn said. “Habeus corpus says—”

“Habeus corpus is in the United States Constitution,” Marshal Wright said strongly as he approached Vaughn’s cell, “and we are presently a territory, not a state in the Union, so habeus corpus means nothing here.” The marshal then backed away from Vaughn’s cell and began pacing in front of all the

jail cells again. “There’s a story in the Bible, maybe you’ve heard the preacher mentioned it before, about Cain and Abel. Cain was a stain upon the early society of humans, while Abel was an honest and able man. Cain can’t stand Abel because he doesn’t think the world can have good and evil together, so he kills Abel. This leaves only evil in the world, so God had to correct things and send an archangel named Gabriel down to kill all of Cain’s children. Now, this all could have been avoided if Cain and Abel’s father, Adam, had stepped in.”

Marshal Wright stopped in the middle of the jail. It was completely silent as all of the men stared at each other with furrowed brows and shrugs.

“You,” the marshal pointed to the jailed men, “are Cain. And they,” he pointed to the deputies, “are like Abel. But fortunately for you all, I am Adam, and I’m here to settle things. From now on, I want peace and quiet in this small town. I want it to be safe for everyday people to go about their business in our streets. So you,” he said pointing to the prisoners, “work for me now.” He then pulled the cell key from his pocket and began unlocking the cell doors. “You can keep up criminal work, but you have to work smaller. No bumping off an entire business. These people need to keep their businesses running, so you’ll take a cut of what they do — not the lot of it — and I’ll look the other way. Also, you can’t hurt anyone. Not one single scratch on a shopmakers head, or I’ll come down like the archangel Gabriel and I’ll hang the lot of you. Understood?”

There was silence from the cells. The prisoners looked at each other and then looked back to the marshal with nodding heads.

“Good,” the marshal said as he put his hands on his hips. “Now go.”

chapter nine

Rita Catching

“WHY ARE YOU SO upset, Sam?” Della eyes him over the rim of her glass.

Outside the Red Boot, some damn mule is raising a ruckus in the middle of the street. Sam’s gaze follows the noise and the question just hangs there.

“Well?” Della persists. “So he said no. You never heard anyone tell you no before?”

“Oh hell, Della.” Sam heaves a sigh and wads up his dishtowel, tossing it up into the air. “I used to think No was my middle name. No was about the only thing I ever heard from my pa aside from shut the hell up. It’s just that ever since George got hurt I’ve been thinking about this. I can do this. I just don’t know how to convince the marshal. I gotta think on it, come up with something.”

Ada, the small blond gal who helps Della in the saloon reaches across the bar and pats Sam’s arm. “I know how you feel,” she says. “It’s hard to want something bad and not be able to get it. But didn’t you say maybe you asked him at a bad time? Wasn’t the marshal just coming from some argument with Mayor Bird when you asked him?”

Sam shrugs. “Yeah, great timing as usual.” He takes off his

apron and shoves it under the bar.

Della watches as he straightens his thin shoulders and heads for the doors. She's seen many strong young backs walk out those doors these past eleven years. Some returned straighter and stronger, others came back frightened and frail. Still other never came back at all.

Sam walks slowly across the dusty street. The mule is quiet now, the dust has settled and Flintwood looks just as it has ever since he and his old mare, Rosie, wandered in a couple of months ago. A couple of long, lonely months to be sure, just like all the months leading up to them. Mucking out stalls at the livery and washing dishes at the Red Boot weren't what he had in mind when he got here, but then, just what had he expected? All he had really sought, in that headlong rush to put Tucson behind him, was an escape from his brother Caleb's disdain and his father's unpredictable temper. He took Rosie and his tack and left everything else behind.

At Jackson's Livery he slips into Rosie's stall and nuzzles her soft nose. She snorts horse snot and goes back to her hay. About the only good thing Flintwood has had to offer him, other than Della and Ada's sympathetic ears, has been a stall for Rosie in return for his twice daily chores. She's been his since he was ten years old and he has grown up on her back. He seeks out Reb Jackson to tell him he'll be gone the next morning, but will work over tonight to make up for it in advance. Reb nods and returns to his work. Man of few words, Reb, but fair. Reb sleeps above the stable, but it's Reb who pointed Sam to the old laundry down on Gila. Said he's spent a few nights there himself and there was a mattress and some blankets and the place seemed better insulated than most buildings in town. Might not be as miserable there come winter as he would in some other crib.

Morning is just threatening as Sam and Rosie set out the next day. Heading east, Sam watches the sky as a pink glow turns orange and then gold and the first sunbeams shoot under the clouds. A real showstopper of a sunrise, that's for sure. He rides until the sun is high and then stops by a narrow stream hidden deep in a fold of the hills. After watering Rosie and turning her out to graze on the prairie grass, he eats his meagre lunch and lies down under a cottonwood, watching the sky. He's spent a lot of time on his own like this, and Sam has come to the conclusion that his best thinking is done under this vast dome. High up a red tail rides a thermal pursued by two angry crows. The three swoop and dive, executing flips and barrel rolls. Not for the first time he envies the wild creatures. No yesterday, no tomorrow, only the moment, and that glorious freedom.

Why wouldn't Marshal Wright hire him, Sam wonders. Why would Marshal Wright hire him? Maybe that's the question Sam has to ask himself. The only things the marshal knows about him are that he can wash dishes and shovel a mean pile of horse shit. "Well, old girl" Sam looks over at the mare. "I guess we'll just have to show him". Rosie rips up another mouthful of grass and farts loudly. For the first time in days, Sam laughs.

It is getting on toward evening when Sam and Rosie approach Flintwood again, this time circling around and coming in from the west. The livery is on First Street, just up from the old laundry, and Rosie's nose is leading them back to the barn. He is almost sighting straight down Fremont from about a hundred yards out, when he realises there is a hell of a lot of activity going on. He hears shouting and maybe a shot. Was that a woman's scream? He whips Rosie into a lope and pulls to a stop at the back of the livery. Inside, Reb is seated

on a chair by the window, his old Henry lying across his knees.

“You’re back, boy,” Reb grunts. “Thought maybe you were going to miss all the action.” Reb holds up a hand before Sam can ask. “Put your old horse up and I’ll fill you in. It’s all happening over at the Red Boot but we need to keep an eye out down this way.”

Sam hurriedly unsaddles and waters Rosie and shoos her into her stall, pitching hay into the trough. He hunches down by Reb and peers out the window. From there he can just see the corner of the saloon. There is no one on the porch or visible in the street, but through the window he imagines he can glimpse figures moving.

Reb sighs. “Here we go again. Seems some idiots who like taking other people’s money better than working for it decided to take some from the Red Boot. I guess they aren’t very good at robbing though, ‘cause they shot the bartender but not before he shot one of them. One of the girls got out and warned the marshal and now they’re holed up there and Marshal Wright has the place surrounded and it’s a regular Mexican standoff.

“The girls are still in there? Is Della there?”

“Della?” Reb grinned. “You got it for Della? Don’t you know the lady’s old enough to be your mama, boy?”

Sam reddened and looked away. “I’m not in love with her Reb. It’s just that she’s, she’s nice to me, you know? Sometimes somebody being nice to you is.....” He trails off and Reb doesn’t answer. More shouting is going on down the street and they strain to hear.

Sam turns and starts toward the back door. “Where you going Sam? Stay here. Marshal will take care of this.”

“I can get in there Reb, across the roof of the mayor’s office.”

“You don’t think the marshal’s thought of that already? Stay put.” Reb is addressing the air. Sam is already out the back door.

He circles the town centre to the east, arriving at the alleyway behind the building housing the mayor’s office. Rickety stairs lead up to a small door on the second floor. Above that, Sam knows, the roof is accessible by standing on the railing and shimmying up a scrawny locust tree that clings to life in the hard ground. Long lonely nights in the laundry have given him plenty of time to explore Flintwood. He knows ways into just about every building that is worth investigating, and most that aren’t. A small window gives admittance to the top floor of the Red Boot. It is open already.

Sam slips down the back stairs and almost falls over Bob Wilson who is crouched in the gloom on the landing. His grubby appearance is even grubbier than usual and he focusses his malevolent glare on Sam. “What the hell you doing here?”

Sam doesn’t answer. Down in the bar, Grover, the bartender is sitting on the floor with his legs straight out, his head on his chest. There is blood on his shirt and he isn’t moving. A loud exchange is taking place among the intruders. There are some greenbacks piled on the bar beside a stack of silver coin. Whiskey bottles are lined up beside the money. There seems to be an argument going on about how to divide the loot. There appears to be four of them and they have been drinking. They are all young, poorly dressed, unshaven and wearing hats, except for one slender and pale fellow who is hunched miserably in a chair pressing a bloody towel to his thigh, sweating heavily. The other three strut about brandishing weapons. One of them, tall and skinny with bad teeth and a red bandana around his throat is standing behind Ada. As Sam and Bob Wilson watch, he slides his hands

around her waist and up to clutch her breasts, ripping open the bodice of her dress.

Della, who has been standing near the window, leaps forward as Ada gasps. In Della's hand is a small revolver. The guy holding Ada snaps his head back as his hat flies off. A red line creases his hairline. There is a shot from behind the bar and Sam watches in horror as Della's arms fling back and she slides slowly to the floor, her revolver dropping from her fingers as she falls. Bad teeth guy lets go of Ada, who cushions Della's fall and lowers her gently to the floor.

"Nooooo!" Sam flies down the stairs, skidding to a stop on his knees next to the women. A bright red blossom is spreading slowly over Della's breast. He slides his arms under her and takes her gently from Ada. Della's eyes are open, watching him, but blood trickles from the corner of her mouth and each breath brings an awful bubbling sound.

"Della, can you hear me?" Her eyes are still on him, but she seemed to be receding, moving farther away from him as the seconds pass. Sam barely notices the chaos around him as Ben Wright and Fred Murphy burst through the doors and Bob Wilson leaps down the stairs. Della takes one last shattering breath and the terrible bubbling sound stops. Sam barely registers the gunshots, the yelling, the screaming the sound of breaking glass. On the floor beside them Ada sobs softly. He holds Della to his chest and rests his cheek in the tumble of her red hair and cries.

The Marshal is sitting at his desk staring out at the street. Sam stands in the doorway waiting to be noticed. Eventually Ben turns, swiveling slowly in his chair. His face, usually alert and attentive, is gaunt and exhausted, his eyes dark and sunken. "Sam. Come on in. What can I do for you?"

Sam twists his hat and takes a deep breath. “Marshal, I’d like to apply for that job again. You know you need a deputy and I think I could do it. I’ve always wanted to be a Deputy.” He stops talking. Ben is looking him over and Sam freezes under the gaze.

“Sit down Sam. This has been a long couple of days. You’re probably as tired as I am.”

Sam sits.

“How old are you Sam?”

“Nineteen, sir.”

“Ever worked in law enforcement before?”

“No, sir.”

“Ever shot at a man Sam?”

“No sir.”

“Ever wanted to?”

“Not until yesterday.”

“I like you Sam. This town is tough. Not like it was. Oh, I guess it was tough before, but it was strong when the copper was flowing and everyone had money and people were able to stand up straight and look each other in the eye. Now everybody’s hunkered down, grasping for every last penny they can, afraid someone’s going to try to take what’s theirs. It’s not a place for amateurs.”

Amateurs. Sam’s heart sinks. “Is that what you think I am, Marshal? An amateur?”

“Well, you are, aren’t you?”

“Everybody starts out like that. Everybody’s gotta learn somehow!” Raising his voice isn’t going to help, Sam knows, but he can’t help himself.

Ben raises his hand. “Whoa, boy. Calm down. Just ‘cause I don’t want to hire you right now when you’re still wet behind the ears, doesn’t mean I never will. You still got some growing

up to do, that's all. I need Deputies I can depend on who can go out by themselves, take care of people, command respect. Courage doesn't flow from the barrel of a gun. Men grow into it. That kind of ability comes with age and experience. Give yourself time."

Sam sits, stunned. Ben stands up and holds out his hand. "No hard feelings, now. I know it took guts to come in here and ask again after what happened, son, but no, you're not ready."

The cemetery, so full of people just hours earlier, is deserted. Della's grave is raw, a grassless mound with a few wild flowers left by some of the girls from the Red Boot. A wooden cross, newly hewn, stands guard at one end. Della Crestwell. Funny, Sam hadn't ever known her last name. Hadn't ever thought to ask. He thinks about praying, but can't think of anything to say. What would he ask for if he prayed? What good would it do? The things he wants are not possible: Della alive and laughing; himself a deputy marshal; a future with promise.

Two meadowlarks flit in the tall grass along the fence, their crystal clear song piercing the silence. The sun is setting, red orange and huge in the haze from grass fires burning to the west. Sam turns and walked slowly toward it. Perhaps he does have a future but he's damned if he can see what it is.

chapter ten

Nils Cordes

THE CHEWING TOBACCO HIT the most unlikely spot of all. A rather large, female deer fly crawled across the muddy ground towards John Lacey's uncommonly shiny leather boots. The moment it was about to take off, a big splodge of the sticky brown juice dropped down on her, making it impossible to escape – even for such a lightning-quick insect. It was buried not three inches from the tip of the old cowhide.

Deer flies were rare in South-eastern Arizona.

“Damn crickets makin’ it impossible to hear yaself think!” Michael complained.

“Those ain’t crickets, they are cicadas,” William said.

The brothers glared at each other.

“Ya know, I think Bill’s right. Crickets chirp more; this is some kinda drummin’ sound.”

Michael and Bill glared at Frank Brown, who just shrugged.

“Now,” John finally looked up from his boots, twiddling with a small branch in his one hand and wearing an annoyed look on his face, “if you amateur zoologists are done with tha birds and tha bees, I’d like your ‘pinion on our good Marshal. Ain’t that too much to ask?”

Michael, William, Frank, Cole Vaughan and Charlie Evans looked at John, trying their best not to glare. A short silence fell upon the gang. They were sat under what was left of a small cottonwood tree just at the ridge of the canyon. The Lacey's place was fifty yards due West. Ever since they had accepted Marshal Wright's proposal, the gang felt somewhat cheated out of a proper deal. He had made it sound like a bargain, but it still felt like they were one foot away from jail, no matter what they did. John had put it into words when he had asked his brothers, Charlie Evans, Cole Vaughan and Frank Brown to discuss the matter: "He's gonna put us in tha dump first chance he gets. Thar's no denying he's been awaiting for it." Everybody had nodded their heads in agreement, but they were at a loss as to what to do about it.

William finally broke the silence: "Ain't bees ary, boss."

His lower jaw connected with the branch John had been playing with.

"Dammit, John!" Michael shouted.

John jumped to his feet, spitting tobacco everywhere.

"Now you listen. If Wright thinks he can play us for fools, he's picked on the wrong bunch of Laceys." He acknowledged Evans, Brown and Vaughan with a swift glance. "We agreed with him but that don't mean we gotta play by his rules. I say we give it to him straight to even the ground. Whattaya say?"

William jumped up and looked like he was about to applaud. Instead, he merely nodded his head. "Ay!"

Frank shook his head but without much conviction. Charlie and Michael remained silent. Cole Vaughan, however, looked up from where he was sitting and said: "You know, I think we should just go with it for now. Let's see what happens, test the water so to speak."

John gave this a bit of thought, but again shook his head.

“If it’s a double cross, we’re in tha dump faster ‘n you can say ‘test the water.’”

“We’ll just have to be on the guard. I mean, the Marshal says we can rob anyone, as long as it’s just a *small* amount of cash and no one gets hurt. I say let’s go for it, annex the Hardware Store and see what he does. I trust my Colt over Wright any time.”

Vaughan patted his holster.

Frank nodded his head, but without much conviction. John felt inclined to agree.

“Like a trap. For tha Marshal?”

“In a way,” Vaughan shrugged.

Six horses and their riders slowed to a trot when they arrived in town.

Flintwood was busy as always. Fremont Avenue rattled and clattered with carts, boots, horses and men, the clinking of glasses and bottles blowing over from Red Boot Saloon and the chatter of people both inside and out on the street. A coach was being loaded for the next big trip west and women were bustling to and fro, carrying plaid suitcases and dirty bags. Dust was in the air, and it helped the Lacey gang to quickly disappear among the townsfolk.

They trotted down the street, catching some angry looks from women looking out the upper storey windows as well as some of the hard-working men in the shops. They were used to it. Being popular was never high on their agenda. So what?

Not far away on their right was the Marshal’s office. Although they tried to remain inconspicuous and not stare, not one of them let the office out of their sight. Deputy Wilson stood in front of the doors, surveying the scene and chewing tobacco. John Lacey watched him shift from his left

foot to his right, thinking that he almost looked bored. But the two Smith & Wessons by his sides didn't, so John kept watch as he slowly rode past him. When their eyes met, they all nodded.

The gang tied up in front of the saloon. John could feel the deputy's eyes on his back. He exchanged a nervous glance with Vaughan, who once again shrugged. Why was the guy always so laid-back? Together they entered the saloon and headed for the bar.

The plan had been for Charlie to just say hello to the barman, complain a bit about the quality of the beer, like usual, and then get kicked out, like usual, hoping the deputy by then would have found something else to watch. To everyone's surprise, it worked flawlessly. Although he was a welcome guest when he happened to bring enough money, Charlie's antics had gotten him barred from the saloon a number of times.

When they had left the stale air of the Red Boot, they turned left and walked over jarring panels of wooden sidewalk to 2nd Street. There they turned the corner and stopped. Out of sight from the Marshal's Office, they needed to discuss their options for the trial run robbery. All thirty miles from John's place to town, they had not been able to agree on a place to rob. Half of the gang had house arrests in half the shops, making it impossible to just walk into about any one house without causing a ruckus.

"What have we got? The Hardware Store, the General Store next door, the Cattle Co.?" Frank suggested.

"I'm for the Hardware Store," Vaughan said. "There's always plenty of cash in Willie's register."

"But it's packed this time aday," John said.

“How ‘bout the Hotel?” Michael asked.

“Minnie’s workin’ there,” Frank said.

Charlie rolled his eyes.

“Shut it,” John spewed at Charlie before he could start anything. “I spose the boarding house is outta bounds. If we so much as frighten tha guests, Wright is gonna kick our asses, deal or no deal.”

“The Assayer then,” Vaughan said. “It’s obvious anyway. Wash is alone most of the day, and he usually hides behind his magnifying glasses. We could be in and out before he notices.”

John did not much like the idea, given that he had depended on the Assay Office so much when he first arrived in Flintwood. But there was no debate. For easy cash, few places were as inviting. And regardless of the whole deal with the Marshal, they could use some fast money.

They quickly agreed to split up, with Michael, Frank and Vaughan to rob the place, and the others to stand watch. The Assayer lay just down on South 2nd Street, almost near Gila. The door chimed when they entered the dark room, but nobody seemed inside. The lights were out, curtains drawn. A small light shone from a slid by a half-closed door in the back. Frank walked over to the register and indicated Michael and Vaughan to walk through the back door, towards the light. They slowly, quietly moved into a tiny room with only one desk. Old, small, grey-haired Washington Page sat behind the desk, crouched under a bright desk lamp, his glasses perched on his large forehead. As they had predicted, his mind was focused on a magnifying glass he held in his hand.

Wash did not even notice the Colt until it touched his temple. Vaughan smiled at him, and with some gentle pressure from the barrel he indicated that it was time for Wash to stand

up.

“Whatta – what are ya up to now?”

Wash looked from Vaughan to Michael. They looked dead serious.

“Sorry to bother you in the middle of work,” Vaughan explained. “It’ll just be a minute of your time. Would you mind standing in that corner over here and wait for a bit. We’ll be done in a moment.”

Another smile.

“Are you robbin’ me?” Wash looked a mixture of confusion, anger and something not unlike amusement. “Really? Well, you won’t find no gold or silver here if that’s what ya after.”

“We’re not,” Vaughan assured him.

“Copper?! Ya jokin’.”

“Not copper. Just shut ya bazoo a minute, will ya?”

They waited. A minute.

“Frank, what’s takin’ ya so long?” Michael shouted.

Frank showed up with a wad of greenbacks.

“Ya robbin’ me for cash?” Wash was astonished. “I haint none here right now.”

“I noticed,” Frank said.

“How much?” Vaughan asked.

“About 25.”

“Shit.”

“How much can we take?” Michael asked.

They exchanged glances.

“Bout ten percent?” Frank whispered.

Vaughan shoved Wash into the corner and took Frank by the arm. “You stay back here!” he instructed the assayer as they left the small room.

“Are ya telling me we’re robbin’ this place for ten bucks?”

Michael said.

“Two-fifty.” Vaughan said.

“Shit. Are you sure there ain’t no more?”

“I caint find none,” Frank said.

Again, silence. After a minute or so, John and William entered the shop.

“What’s takin’ ya so long?”

“There’s nothing here,” Vaughan said, offering the crumpled bills.

“Well, let’s take it and get going.”

“But we can’t take it all. The Marshal said only a small amount.” Michael said.

“Well, what *is* a small amount?” Frank asked.

“25 is small enough for me,” Vaughan said.

“Shit,” John said.

“Didn’t he mean, in percent?” William asked.

“That’s what *I* thought,” Frank said.

Suddenly Wash came out of the small room, his hands in the air.

“If ya let me ...”

But Michael had already drawn his Colt.

“We told ya to stay in that room,” he yelled and fired a shot into the wooden frame of the door.

Wash cowered at Michael’s feet. John quickly grabbed the dollars and ran out of the office. The others followed suit. They ran straight into Charlie, who was deep in conversation with Marshal Wright and Deputy Wilson.

“Where there’s one, there’s allers six. Right?” Wright smiled at the gang.

“He just ...” Charlie started.

“We’re good,” John interrupted, pocketing the bills visibly for the Marshal to see.

“Are we?” Wright asked.

John and the Marshal faced off on the dirt road just a couple of houses up from the Assayer. Just looks, no guns. Although they could have drawn their weapons immediately, somehow they knew that the other one wouldn't. So they just waited until the moment had passed.

“We're good,” John repeated, this time with the air of finality to his voice.

Slowly, the gang walked past the Marshal, nodding at Wilson. John kept his eyes on the Smith & Wessons again. Vaughan smiled as he walked past Marshal Wright.

“Let it go,” Wright told his deputy. He shook his head. Then he watched the gang disappear around the corner and back onto Fremont Avenue.

“The blazes! 25 dollars is all I earned this month!”

“I'm sorry Wash, I know it's a lotta money. Have you got anything left?”

“Well, acourse, I ain't no idiot. I got my stash in the back, the rest at First National. But ever since the mine's been declinin', it's been a-tough to get by.”

They looked at each other, unspoken words hanging in the air. He hadn't known Wash very well, an old man who mostly kept to himself. The rush when the mine first opened should have made him a rich man, and he might very well be, but as far as the Marshal knew, Wash had no friends and just as the mine declined, so did business. Assaying metals was only good for as long as there *were* metals.

“I recognised one of them Laceys, the kid who shot me,” Wash said.

“Shot you?”

“Well, I don' know, he fired his Colt up into the

timberwork. Bumblin' coot. Did you see 'em escape?"

Wright did not say anything. He knew what he was doing with the Laceys right now wasn't at all according to Hoyle. But he needed those fools.

"Why didn't ya stop 'em then? You're cuttin' in on those thugs your own ways, huh, Marshal?"

"You just dig into your stash for them taters and don't worry your head about me. Losin' a month's salary is still cheaper than getting shot."

And without another word he walked out.

chapter eleven

N.D. Robitaille

SOME FOLKS ARE AT lunch and the Spanish take siesta, leaving Gila Avenue deserted except for a few tired horses hitched at the end of the block. Sam passes a chestnut mare and wonders if Ben is right. Maybe he should move on. He doesn't have to go to the ranch with Joseph. He could always take up with the guys heading back East to Camp McPherson or move to Texas for a fresh start. No, Sam almost speaks out loud, shaking his head as he rounds the corner of Second Street. I'm not going anywhere.

As he approaches the Red Boot Saloon, music and laughter fill the air while a half a dozen men spill out the back door slurring a chorus. "Freedom or death!" they shout before scattering into the street.

Sam opens the door and takes a seat in the corner. The lunch crowd is wild today. People are two rows deep along the bar and even Mayor Bird has a full glass and the pink flush of alcohol.

"Good citizens of Flintwood, may I have your attention?" the Mayor announces when the song finished. "As you well know, the Apaches have made our way of life difficult lately and the land telegraph brings nothing but news of political

unrest. In the past we have had our fair share of trials here in the Territories, but today we have seen the light at the end of the tunnel. Governor McCormick has given us his support and I promise you men, this is only the beginning! So raise your glass for Governor McCormick and the salvation of our beautiful land!” Glasses clink, men whoop and holler, and the piano man starts out another lively tune. Under normal circumstances Sam would belly up to the bar, but today he needs fresh air. Pushing back his chair, Sam adjusts his hat and walks across the room.

“Where do you think you’re going, sugar?” Lucy says, grabbing Sam’s wrist.

Sam tips his hat, “Ma’am. With this crowd I do believe your dance card is filled.” He flashes a smile then climbs the stairs to the balcony.

Sam sits against the outside wall of the Red Boot watching the traffic below. Fremont Street is a stark contrast to the quiet walk on Gila. A man has to keep his wits about him just to dodge the foot traffic, and one wrong move could put you in the street where you could find yourself at the wrong end of a horse or caught in the wheel of a buggy. Most people take side streets when they can, preferring the risk of charlatans and snake oil salesmen to the danger of gun fights and traffic. Sam loves Fremont street. He loves its unpredictability and watching the steady foot traffic pass through town, but mostly he loves the feeling in the pit of his stomach. The mix of excitement, fear and freedom makes Sam feel alive. He never had that back home in Tuscon, but on days like this it would be nice to be able to talk to his sister. Two sides of the same coin, she always knew how to bring Sam back to good.

Suddenly the piercing scream of a woman cut through his thoughts and he jumped to his feet. Sam raced toward the

sound to find Anna staring into the doorway of the far guest room, red skirt clenched in her fists, frozen in terror.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” Sam tries to get her attention. “Miss Anna? Are you hurt?”

Anna turns to Sam, “Look.”

Sam feels the icy grip of terror seeping into his chest and reaches for the door frame to steady himself. A few feet away swings the large boots of a freckle faced man not much older than himself. He hangs from the rafters with a makeshift noose made from the bedsheets. Not this. Sam’s mind flashes back and suddenly he is fourteen again watching another man swing from the gallows. Swallowing back bile, he turns to Anna and tells her to get the Marshal then pulls out his pocket knife and enters the guest room. His boots feel like lead weights and each step across the wooden floor sounded loud and intrusive. Sam takes a deep breath then climbs on a large wooden chest at the end of the bed to saw through the sheets tied to the beam above. Sam can’t help but notice the only thing moved on the bed is the sheet. The pillows are fluffed, what appears to be a fresh pitcher of water sits beside the mirror and basin, and the man is dressed in what appears to be new clothing. Why would a man kill himself before meeting Anna or Lucy?

The final threads broke with a snap and the body fell to the floor with a loud thud. Sam felt his stomach lurch as he returned to the ground and he looks up to see Anna, eyes wide and frightened. The door clicks shut behind her as a lean man in a dusty suit nudges her farther into the room.

“Keep walking. Don’t you get any ideas either Cowboy.” Says the man waving a revolver over Anna’s shoulder.

“There is no need to hurt the lady.” Sam takes a step forward. Before he can take another, the man shoves Anna

into Sam. “Back off Cowboy. You ain’t got a dog in this fight. Both of you, sit. I’m calling the shots now.”

Sam and Anna do as they are told sharing a seat on the wooden chest with the dead man splayed at their feet, hazy eyes staring at the ceiling.

Their captor paces back and forth talking to the corpse in a bizarre one sided conversation about sticking to the plan mixed with shouts about Alexander being in charge now.

Sam interrupts, “Is this man Alexander? Look sir, if you could just let the lady go maybe I can help you out.”

“Is he Alexander? Is HE? No you corn fed idiot! Now I have the power. Idiots everywhere! Alexander has the power now.” Sweat drips down the balding man’s face as he waves the gun at Sam.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Sam says frustrated, just before Deputy Fred Murphy kicks in the door, Remington pointing at Alexander’s chest.

Something between a scream and guttural moan leaves Alexander’s lips and he leans forward to charge the deputy. Murphy fires off a shot, but Alexander knocks the Remington to the right and the shot sinks into the wall beside what remains of the door.

Sam quickly grabs Anna ushering her out the door to safety. He sets one foot in the hallway, but hesitates. It’s now or never.

Turning on his heels, Sam watches Murphy and Alexander battle for control. Murphy’s gun slides across the floor to the door and in one swift move, Alexander takes control. As he raises his gun to kill the unarmed officer, he hears the click of Murphy’s Remington behind his head. Alexander opens his mouth to speak, but Sam hits him with the gun, knocking him out cold.

“Thanks.” Fred says, doubling over.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Sam turns to find Ben stepping through the broken door. His eyes show a brief flash of emotion. Disappointment? Confusion? Sam hands the gun to Ben, walking around the corpse on the floor. Maybe when Alexander comes to they will get some answers.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Elias Matthews. I reckon we will have to wait to call the wagon until the crowd clears downstairs.” Ben says stroking his moustache.

“You know him?” Sam responds.

“He’s part of a gang wanted for robbing coaches from Apache Pass. They used to hit Butterfield’s passengers before he quit transporting them through the Territories. Real son of a gun. They say he killed his own mother. Sick son of a bitch. Lucy says he’s a regular, but Alexander isn’t. I figure he saw a change to take over the business until Anna caught him in the act.” Ben turns to Murphy, “You good? I don’t want to have to give Miss Ella bad news. Why don’t you go home to your girls. I’ll take care of the mess.”

Fred nods, too exhausted to argue. “Thanks again for saving my hide,” he says holding out his hand to Sam.

“Anytime,” Sam replies with a firm handshake.

As Fred walks out the door, Ben realises that if he wants to save Flintwood he is going to need all the help he can get. Times have changed and even Donley realised that it is no good having a family man by your side. Ben’s mind wandered to Catherine. What would Donely want for her? Remembering he isn’t alone, Ben looks over to Sam who stares wide eyed at Elias’ body. Maybe he was wrong about Sam after all.

Ben breaks the silence, “You still want that badge?”

Sam looks up surprised, “But I thought...”

“Do you want the badge or not?” Ben repeats.

“Of course.”

Ben reaches into his pocket and tosses a metal star to Sam.

“Don’t make me regret this.”

“You won’t.”

“I better not. Come see me at the jail tomorrow to pick up your gun, Deputy.”

chapter twelve

Corinne Morier

HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS of First National Bank, two figures leaned against the wall, scrutinising passing foot traffic.

“Where in blazes are we right now?” the man demanded.

“Flintwood. Used to be a mining town,” his companion replied.

“Flintwood, eh?” The man spat on the ground and glanced sideways at the woman. “Sounds like something you’d use to start a fire. I’d like to set this town ablaze, in more than one way. This here bank pro’ly has some nice cash for us to plunder, but the rest of it...” He shrugged and rummaged in his pocket. “Not worth the dirt it stands on.”

The man pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. He put the cigarette in his mouth and lit it, bringing the lighter to eye level and watching the flame burn. “This here baby could start a nice big blaze. We could burn the entire town to the ground and take this God damn forsaken land for ourselves. Sell it back to the government at a nice profit.”

“Don’t you dare!” the woman scolded, slapping his wrist; the lighter fell to the ground and the flame went out. The man shrugged and bent down to retrieve it.

“Don’t go knockin’ my favourite light to the ground,

darlin'. I'm just foolin' a bit."

"Don't forget why we're here in the blazing sun," the woman replied. "We're the lookouts."

"I know, I know. But I should be allowed to at least have a smoke while we look out."

"Damn, but I hate you triplets." Cole downed the last of his whiskey and held his glass up for a refill. "Gimme another one."

Michael slammed his hand down on the bar. "Why won't you believe us?"

"Do that again and I'll have to ask you to leave," the saloon-keeper said, approaching with Cole's refill.

"Apologies."

Cole sipped from his full glass and grimaced as the saloon-keeper walked away to tend to other customers. "You triplets say ye heard a heist being planned at First National? No way Marshal lets that happen. I'd bet my share of our last... ahem, paycheck, on it."

"Then you'd be a poor man," Michael replied. "The two we saw were only a lookout, but who knows how many they've got working this heist? And if First National closes, so does the town."

"Damn. You triplets with yer bleeding hearts." Cole took another sip of whiskey. "I don't suppose ye overheard these lookouts say when this heist is apparently going to happen?"

"I don't think even they know," Will replied. "It sounded like they've only started lookout recently."

"The mind of a thief." Cole grinned. "Well, I can at least respect them, if they're not just a figment of yer sun-baked imaginations."

"Don't plan a heist until you know the scene," Will recited,

quoting the rule that all of their gang used as a mantra. The youngest of the triplets furrowed his brow as he thought.

Cole grinned. "I know what's on yer mind there. Their heist goes through, we're out a job."

"A job?" John's grin outshone Cole's. "I'm not so straight-laced, Mr. Cole. I like to call it an endeavour."

"Call it whatever ya like," Cole replied, waving his hand dismissively. "But how are we to stop this heist from occurring?"

"We could tell the Marshal." Will suggested, earning him a glare from his brothers.

"Tell the Marshal? Are you insane, Will?" Michael replied. "We don't know when it'll go down, or even if. How many of them bandits are there to participate in the robbery? Marshal'd just laugh us out the office."

"Just because you're nineteen minutes older, you think you know everything." Will sulked, slinking down in his chair a bit.

"So how are we to go about stopping this heist?" John asked, ignoring his brother's comment.

"Aye. If only we knew what day they'd do their heist..." Cole lamented, speaking half to his glass of whiskey.

"I have an idea." Michael said.

"This is yer idea?" Cole demanded. "Stand out in the blazin' sun every day, fer hours on end?"

"That's the point," Michael replied. "We'll steal their lookout. If they actually do a heist, we'll be here to stop them." He hoisted the rifle he held a bit higher on his chest, adding, "And if we get lucky, they mistake us for security guards and never do the heist at all."

"So when do ya reckon we can stop this lookout business and get back to our jobs?" Cole asked. "We can't just stand

around here every day for the rest of our lives, ya know. And where'd you get that rifle?"

"Bought it fair and square." Michael grinned. "And I taught Will and John how to use it, just in case they're on lookout when it happens."

Indeed, they had already been on the lookout for almost a week, trading off every few hours to make it fair. A few times, they had seen the man and woman pair from before, but otherwise, all seemed normal.

Cole yawned. "I haven't seen that couple that you claim to have seen. Maybe they were just a figment of yer sun-baked imagination."

"They were real." Michael insisted. "My brothers all saw them, too."

Cole dug out a cigarette from his pocket. "Got a light?"

Michael handed him his lighter with one hand quickly and adjusting his grip on the rifle. "Maybe they decided not to do the heist after all."

A few moments passed in which Cole took a drag and let out a big breath of smoke. He stuck it back in his mouth and let his gaze wander over the foot traffic passing in front of the bank.

"Well, I'll be damned." The cigarette dropped from Cole's mouth as he gaped in awe. "That's them, all right. Wearin' black in this heat... how conspicuous can ya get?"

Three figures dressed all in black, with kerchiefs tied around the bottom half of their faces, stood a ways away, scrutinising the First National Bank.

"Hey!" Michael approached them, brandishing the shotgun. "Y'all better move along out of here. We don't want you in this here town."

The figures glanced at one another warily. The middle one

growled, "Out of our way, boy."

"I don't think so." Cole stepped forward to stand beside Michael. He put his fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle.

The three mysterious figures exchanged confused glances.

"We won't let you get away with robbing First National!" Michael declared. "Y'all better skedaddle on out of here."

"And if we don't?" the figure on the left challenged.

Michael raised the shotgun into the air and fired it once. The three figures flinched, but did not back down. For a moment, bathed in the hot Arizona sun, they stared each other down: the three unknown versus the two local bandits.

"Hey!" John, Frank, and Will came running over to them, having heard Cole's signal. "These them?"

"They've got reinforcements," the figure on the right murmured, her voice a bit higher and smoother compared to her companions'.

"A woman doing a heist?" Cole muttered. "That's rare."

The woman's dark eyes glittered as she looked at him. "Not any rarer than sanctioned bandits performing heists with the Marshal's permission."

"You know about that?" Michael demanded.

"Forget this," the middle figure growled. "Let's go, you two."

The three turned and began to walk away.

"Yeah, and don't come back!" Will shouted. "You know what'll happen if you do!"

Cole pointed his chin at their retreating backs. "Let's follow 'em."

"Follow them? Why?" Will asked.

"To make sure they leave for good."

From a safe distance away, Marshal Wright watched the black-clad figures walk away, followed by the Flintwood group. Another heist successfully foiled. He smiled and strolled away, ready to go enjoy a celebratory drink at the Red Boot Saloon.

“That Marshal is a piece of work,” Seth remarked. “He saw that heist about to go down and did nothing.”

“Yeah. Now we know what’ll happen when we actually move in with the heist.” Jimmy laughed and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Marshal won’t do a dang thing to stop it, and we can just deal with that gang of bandits somehow so they don’t bother us.”

As he turned to follow the group to the outskirts of town, Seth added, “Your little darlin’ is quite an actress. I think she’s captured the heart of that brown-haired, blue-eyed young’un.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t act with me,” Jimmy remarked as he caught up. “We’re the real deal.”

“We’ll take Flintwood by storm,” Seth declared. “Come on, Jackson.”

Blinding their eyes against the bright sun, the two leaders of what would soon be the new gang in town followed a distance behind the Flintwood bandits into the dry Arizona desert.

chapter thirteen

Coral Russell

JIMMY AND SETH'S HORSES galloped away from Flintwood along the flat trail leading northeast to the surrounding mountains in the direction of the New Mexico border. Clouds had rolled in and the warm part of September had passed. The terrain turned rough a couple of miles out of town which slowed them down. As soon as the trail became steep the riders loosened the reins to let their horses choose their own path up the mountain. Small stones knocked aside by the horse's hooves clattered down the slope.

"How far away do you think they'll get?" Seth asked.

Jimmy turned sideways in his saddle. "It's a little more than eight miles to those old stone Indian houses set in the mountain. I figure we'll tie the horses off and come up along the right side of the ridge on foot."

"I can't believe they'd stay up there. That old place is haunted."

The corners of Jimmy's mouth drew back in disgust. "You turning superstitious after all we've seen and done during the war? You die and that's the end. There's nothing after this life." Jimmy said under his breath. "After what we've done I hope there's nothing after this life."

“Still I’d just as soon sleep under a tree. Those boys ain’t that bright staying up there. A full moon shines just right and lights the place up. I don’t care what you say, it gives me the willies.”

“Well we ain’t aiming to stay there now are we?”

“No we sure as hell ain’t,” Seth said. “It’s two against six. You like them odds?”

“Yep, those boys are just riff-raff. Try not to hit one of the Lacey boys if you don’t have to. One of them goes down, it’ll be harder to keep the rest in line.”

Seth grunted. “Fair enough. You already got your mind set on who you’re gonna take out?”

“You’ll know when he falls.”

The Lacey gang settled down for the night in what was left of an Indian community built out of an existing natural cave in the side of the mountain. Different sized communities like this were scattered throughout the mountains of Arizona and New Mexico. Frank could only guess at the manpower it took to haul enough rocks up the side of a mountain to form the walls and fire pits. Thatched roofs used to cover the small square dwellings. Disintegrating wooden beams jutted out at odd angles where time had pulled them down. Pieces of clay pots littered the floors.

The Indians had abandoned them, no one had lived here for hundreds of years. All that was left were crumbling walls that hinted at how big and bustling with life the place had once been. Frank dropped more firewood on top of a good sized stack in what was left of a house at the farthest corner in the back of the cave dwellings. Here a hole in the ceiling carved out by water and then enlarged by the Indians allowed them to light a fire at night with no one the wiser. It got a little

smoky at times but that was worth it for the warmth and ability to heat some water.

The Lacey brothers stood off to one side talking amongst themselves about the events that lead them here. Charlie sat by the fire pit arranging sticks and sipping rot gut from a flask. Cole was seeing to the horses. Frank knew he wouldn't hear Cole as he made his way back. The man carried himself so silently it got on Frank's nerves.

Frank didn't regret hooking up with the Lacey gang especially since the deal they'd worked out with the Marshal didn't include hurting anyone. Frank could live with that. Learning what you could and couldn't live with doing out here in the badlands was an important thing for a young man to know.

"Can't light the fire yet Charlie," Cole said.

Frank startled at the sound of Cole's voice.

I know, I know," Charlie sighed. "Horses?"

"Fine. Tired but other than that they're fine."

"Just like us," Charlie said as he poked the twigs in the fire pit with a stick.

The sun hung low in the sky. After it slipped behind the mountain ridge across from the cave the temperature would quickly drop by fifteen to twenty degrees. The Lacey brothers drew close to the fire pit and everyone settled down to wait for dark.

Charlie prodded Frank's leg with his stick. "Come on Frank you know what we're waiting for."

Frank hid a smile of satisfaction. "Alright where was I?"

Charlie leaned back and took another swig. "You was getting to the good part where Coloradas decided to surrender to the commander of the Fort."

"Okay, I got it." Frank cleared his throat and glanced

around to make sure everyone was listening. “Coloradas had washed his horse of all it’s war paint. He’d scrubbed himself clean and dressed simply. Having been chased across Arizona and New Mexico with no food left and winter fast approaching the Apaches knew they needed to make peace with the soldiers. Coloradas donned a white flag, left his weapons behind and rode off in the direction of the Fort.

General West heard the shout from one of the sentries and left his quarters. Armed sentries had taken custody of Coloradas and brought him bound hand and foot to stand before the General. Coloradas searched General West’s eyes and knew right then and there he was done for. He didn’t bother to speak, to ask for mercy for himself or his warriors.

General West told Coloradas he’d set him free if he told him the whereabouts of the rest of his men. Coloradas’ word meant nothing. The Apaches had made war against the soldiers for too long. General West would only accept their surrender if all the warriors riding with Coloradas stood before him and gave their word.

Coloradas stood tall and silent. It was a trap. It was a lie. One of many lies the white man had strung along his tongue when speaking to the Apaches.

General West drew close to Coloradas and told the armed sentries. See what information you can get out of him.

Coloradas was drug away and although they tortured him for hours he never gave up where the rest of his warriors were waiting for his return and promise of peace with the soldiers. General West became so enraged when he found out the Apache chief wouldn’t talk he had the soldiers kill him, chop of his head, boil it and sent the skull back to Washington.

From that day on the Apaches swore to fight to the death over the desecration of their leader Coloradas.” Frank dug into

his pocket and brought out a package of matches. "I think you can light that fire now Charlie."

Charlie slapped his knee. "I got no love for Indians mind you but that Coloradas, he was a good leader." He took the matches from Frank and lit the fire.

"How much of that is true?" Cole asked.

"Most of it. It was four or five years ago and even though the Apaches fought they're pretty much gone now along with the Navajos."

John Lacey stretched and stood up. "Nice story Frank. Glad someone can read in this gang, huh Charlie? Gonna take a leak."

Charlie threw a stick at John as he walked off. "I can read. I just don't have time to read. Where do you find the time to read this stuff Frank?"

Frank pulled a newspaper from his bedroll and tossed it at Charlie.

William Lacey leaned forward with a grin. "Uh Charlie, you're supposed to read it before you use it for toilet paper."

Charlie chuckled flipping the paper over. "So that's what I've been doing wrong?"

Footsteps crunched behind the group. "What'd you forget John?" Michael Lacey called out. "You need the newspaper after all?" Michael and Charlie exchanged a grin.

Frank's eyes widened. With his back to the wall he was the first to see John stumble into view. A streak of blood ran red between John's fingers and down the front of his pant leg. Frank shot up which sent the rest reaching for their guns.

"Easy boys," a low voice drawled from behind John. "He ain't hurt bad. Just a little nick to slow him down." James 'Jimmy' Jackson stepped to the side with a revolver in each hand pointed at the group.

“What the hell is this?” Charlie yelled as his hand inched toward his gun.

“Go ahead, draw,” another voice spoke stepping out from behind a crumbling wall across from John and Jimmy.

Frank felt his stomach drop with a lurch. Seth Madsen had a revolver in one hand and Frank’s shotgun in the other. He’d left it in the holster on his horse. That left both Frank and Cole unarmed. Charlie was the only one who’d made it to his feet. Michael and William were on one knee in no position to draw down.

“Go on John. Tell your brothers you’re alright.”

John grimaced more from embarrassment than pain. “I’m fine.”

“But you’re bleeding,” Michael said.

“That he is and he’ll need tending to so we should settle this right quick,” Jimmy said.

“Settle what?” Charlie asked his voice low, his hand still hovering over his weapon.

“We saw what you did back there at the bank. The bank we were robbing. So we thought we’d drop in and make you an offer. Join us. We’re friendly enough, we can put this little incident behind us and carry on making money, split the shares up equally.”

There was a tick of silence then Frank spoke up. “We’re not doing this... I mean there’s a plan. We were sorta hired.”

“Hired?” Jimmy and Seth exchanged a look. “By who?”

“Marshal Wright.”

“The Marshal put you up to this?” Seth snorted and shook his head in disbelief.

Jimmy squinted his eyes and cocked his head to one side. “Why?”

Frank glanced around at the members of the Lacey gang

and then continued. "After the Wells Fargo bank closed down Flintwood's in bad shape. Marshal Wright is trying to stop the First National from closing so he hired us to do small robberies around the area as long as we don't hurt anyone or put anyone out of business." Frank watched as Jimmy processed the information.

"And the Marshal's cut from this public service?"

John answered, "None."

Jimmy shook his head. "You fools. You don't see what the Marshal is doing here?" When no one answered he went on. "He's using you. I look around at this gang and ain't none of you have a stake in Flintwood. John might but that's it, everything else is drying up along with that copper mine. If the Marshal decides, no, when he decides to round you up and paint himself as the hero. Who's going to believe a bunch of riff-raff? They'll string you up and the Marshal will have a front row seat."

Seth said, "Which one of you Lacey brothers is the leader here?"

Frank saw John pull himself up to respond but Charlie jumped in. "I am."

"Of the Lacey gang?"

"Well it sounds better than Brown. And no, before I have to hear any more of the wind whistling between your teeth we are not joining your gang. We've already been hired out and how it ends up is between us and the Marshal. Now that we all know the score you stay out of our way and we'll stay out of yours."

Seth took a step closer and Charlie took a gunfighter stance and faced him. "Enough of your bosh. I know where you hail from. Missouri, ain't it? Like that James gang and those Confederate Quantrill Raiders that's been robbing and

killing all across that state for a year now. Yeah, we may be riff-raff but we ain't murderers."

Seth took aim at Charlie and cocked his gun. "I'm damn proud of those Quantrill Raiders and all the fine work they did during the war."

"Mighty proud of losing are you?" Charlie sneered while his thumb tapped the handle of his holstered gun.

"Seth," Jimmy said low and smooth like a breeze passing over a pond. "In case you've forgotten we have a man standing here, barely, with his life slipping between his fingers. Lets wrap this up. I like you John and your brothers, I really do. Frank, Cole, you've had your share of run ins with the law and held your own. I have no problem with either of you. Now Charlie, all I know of you is the drunken brawls you get in every night you're in town, but—" John flicked his revolver at Charlie to cut him off. "I propose a duel to find out who leads what. Just you and me Charlie. That way there's no messy shoot out and all but one gets to walk away from our meeting tonight."

All eyes focused on Charlie. Frank looked at Charlie and shook his head, no. Charlie winked at Frank, drew back from Seth and smiled wide at Jimmy. "I look forward to putting another Confederate dog in the ground where he belongs."

Jimmy used the end of the revolver in his left hand to push John toward his brothers then tucked it in his belt. "Patch him up good boys. I don't want him to suffer too much down time from a little nick." Jimmy rolled his shoulders and backed away holstering his weapon.

Seth motioned for Charlie to move with his revolver toward Jimmy. Then he stepped in to cover the rest of the gang. Charlie passed the rest of the Lacey gang and out into a small open area. Jimmy and Charlie stalked around each other

in a tight circle.

Jimmy leaned in with the corners of his mouth pulled back in a toothless grin. His eyes held a dangerous gleam. "Where do you want it?"

"Want what?" Charlie asked through tight lips his body tense.

"The bullet. Where do you want it?" Jimmy stuck a finger out and pointed. "Stomach, chest, head?"

Charlie flung his head to the side and barked out a laugh toward the rest of the Lacey gang. "Listen to this gump talking bosh!" Charlie wiped the back of his hand across his mouth still grinning. "Stomach, chest, or head... I tell you what, gump, how about right here." Charlie took his index finger and pointed right between his eyes.

Jimmy's grin never faltered and if Charlie hadn't been sipping hard from his flask he might have noticed the dead eyes staring back at him. "Alright then," Jimmy said. "Frank, say when."

They circled once more and came to a stop. A "Wh" sound passed Frank's lips and cut through the air like a knife. The dueling guns slipped from their holsters and roared to life. Both men stood still for a beat. Then Charlie's knees buckled, his gun hand went limp and he sunk to the ground on his side as if he was laying down to take a nap.

Jimmy walked up and looked down at Charlie. A trickle of blood ran down Charlie's nose and dripped into the dirt. "There you go. Right where you asked."

chapter fourteen

Greg Ray

MICHAEL LACEY WAS SWIGGING them back and kept the jug going round, but he wasn't really drinking. The house at John Lacey's place was small, so most of the men were camped out back. Evenings were cold enough to make a campfire good, and a good campfire was mostly good for playing and drinking. John Lacey was over playing cards on a stump with Madsen. Jimmy had dragged a chair out the house and sat by the back door watching over the proceedings.

"Why don't you sing something for us, William?" Michael pretended to take another swig from the jug — just enough to wet his lips which he then wiped on his sleeve.

"Dammit! How you always winning?" Madsen grabbed the cards and started shuffling for the next hand. "Jimmy, I swear, John is cheating over here. Nothing else makes any sense."

Jimmy kicked his chair back against the wall. "Well, I can think of one other reason, Seth."

"What the fuck you talkin' about, boy?" Seth was no card sharp, but he knew when he was being messed with.

Jimmy tipped back his glass. "Forget about it and just beat the man, for heaven's sake."

Michael handed the jug off to Cole. "Frank, whyn't you put

down that 'Hohrner' of yours and play some real music?"

Cole swilled from the jug. "Will'm. Sing that pretty one."

Frank pretended offence, but really liked nothing better than to play his guitar. It was a small thing and pretty beat up. No one rightly knew where he got it or how he learned to play on it. Once he said he got it off a black boy who wouldn't give it to him, so killed him for it. But mostly no one believed him. He treated it right special — called it his "acquisition". Frank took up the guitar now, and played the first strains of "Pretty Saro".

Down in some lone valley,

In a lonesome place.

William had a fine voice. He had had several music lessons, before he and Michael had followed John out West.

My love she won't have me,

So I understand,

She wants a freeholder

And I have no land.

The jug went round and a while after that, when Madsen was out of pocket money, John brought out his whiskey bottle and joined the group. Michael goaded John into singing one and sent the bottle round.

So write me a letter to my grey-haired mother,

And write me a letter to sister so dear,

And there is another who's dearer than mother

Who'd weep if she knew I was dying out here.

The bottle going round then and more of them singing and more of them singing louder. And the night wore on with more liquor coming out and the jokes cruder. Madsen, who had also joined in and quickly became more inebriated than the rest, insisted that Frank play the tramping song — for the second time. Cole had nodded off already. Even Jimmy who

was mostly quiet was obviously only feigning composure.

*In the battle front we stood
when their fiercest charge they made,
and our soldiers by the thousands sank to die;
but before they reached our lines,
they were driven back dismayed,
and the Rebel yell went upward to the sky.*

That was Madsen belting it out with all the pathos that liquor could muster. And finally, Jimmy could not stand by, but was up there swinging in the breeze with him — comrades in arms, singing their sad tale of war once again. Though it was not really their tale. These men down from Missouri, these were not soldiers; these were bushwhackers. And that's a different kind of man altogether; a killer of a man — who'd rob you blind and knife your mother as soon as anything.

Michael announced he was hitting the sack and lumbered off to where he usually made his berth under the trees.

The fire was just smoulders when Michael slipped away from their encampment that night. Everyone would be good and slugged out. Still, he could not risk his horse to be found missing, so he set out on foot. That would be a couple hours journey each way to town and back and time to roust the marshal and tell him what was going on out there. Long way and a nervous long time to be gone. He figured there were a few farmhouses on the way where he might rightly quietly "borrow" a horse. For the innocent always sleep less guarded than the outlaw.

He came first to the Echols place, but gave it a wide berth — though a horse from there would have been convenient — because sometimes old man Echols had pee-posh in there — extra hands living in his stable in exchange for work.

When Marshal Ben Wright with shotgun across his lap, rode up with his two men to the Lacey homestead, Frank Brown was up on the porch bench with his guitar again, playing for the benefit of a couple of girls.

My pal was as straight a young puncher,

So honest and upright and square.

He wound up a gambler and gunman

A woman it was sent him there.

Ben recognised one of them as Sutton's girl, Linzie. Her older sister Ila would be there with her. Back in the house, he figured. Sutton had best start keeping that younger one shut up at least. He wasn't sure of the other girl sitting next to Linzie. Could have been the Rymer girl down from Three Way. But all grown up. Name was Daphne or Delphine or something.

Michael Lacey was also there, sitting on the edge of the porch with lineament and cloth. He was just reloading his pistol. Michael looked up when the three rode up, but gave no other sign. His place off to the far right side of the porch was a good one — a strategic turn would give him a good line on both doors of the house.

On the bench between those doors, Frank had left off his song and started picking out "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair".

Ben pulled up short of the house, Wilson on his right hand, Caldwell on his left. Caldwell just dismounted like he had come to see his granny. The boy was going to be a liability here, Ben realised. He stayed in the saddle, shotgun in hand and his trusty Spencer in its long holster at this side.

Frank plinked idly at the guitar. "Morning, lawman. What brings you out this morning with all your possé?"

"Maybe I came to talk to Charlie."

Frank said something to the girls and they both rose and went into the house.

"Charlie ain't here just now."

"Charlie's dead", said Michael.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Frank. How did poor Charlie get dead?"

Frank pursed up his lips. Then he struck up his guitar, singing "I dream of Katie with the light brown hair." He repeated it again; apparently it was all he had.

Left door of the house swung open then and Jimmy Jackson strode onto the porch. He did not look about but stepped down and out onto the open ground between house and lawmen. Jackson looked up at Ben, smiled his most unsmiling smile and struck a pose — leaving Ben to size up the situation himself. All he could think about at the moment was this man with his button-up shoes, his leather jacket that never saw an honest day's work, his goatee and trimmed moustache — this one insolent son of a bitch who had taken charge out here.

"You tell us, Jackson, how Charlie wound up dead."

Jackson's smile only broadened. "Why, I don't think Charlie's dead. That old drunk probably just stumbled into a hole somewhere."

It was supposed to be a joke. Frank made a chuckle then strummed a chord.

"Killed in cold blood. You'd no cause to take Charlie down like that. Man deserved better."

"You're a sentimentalist, Marshal. Did you come to grieve with us?"

"There's no place for your kind around here. Now, you and your buddy just gonna clear out of here."

"Well, well now, that would be hasty. We are just warming up to this town."

Seth Madsen appeared just at this moment, walking round from the left side of house. He took up a position against the tree there.

Both of these bad actors were out now — one in the open, another with only partial cover near. Frank was unarmed, but one had to assume that at least one other gunman would be inside at the window or at the other door of house. Counting Michael that was four for the Marshal, three for the outlaws and one guitar. Though Caldwell had made himself fodder by dismounting, so the odds were more like just even-up.

"Charlie was a souse and you know it. And he was no kin to you. So what you really here for, Marshal?"

"You and Seth got no business here. You two just shove off, because the next sort of trouble out here is going to be your trouble.

"No!" Jackson waved fists in the air. "The only trouble here is trouble for you!"

Ben's shotgun grip tightened. If Seth's fingers had tensed any closer to his pistols just then they would both have been out and someone eating bullets.

Ben still liked the odds, if it came to that, Caldwell notwithstanding. Jackson was wide open and distracted. Michael would take out Madsen. If only Wilson could handle whoever is behind the door.

"These men are guests in my house." It was John Lacey. His figure blocking out the other the doorway, revolver at his side.

Ben hadn't counted John out until that moment, but maybe it figured. Still, sometimes you just have to play your cards. "I'm the law in these parts and these two bushwhackers gotta

clear out of here or else we'll clear 'em out."

"You and what army, yankee?" said Madsen.

Jackson smiled his thin-lipped smile. He gambolled at Caldwell. "Are these the troops that're gonna shove us off, then? Just look, your Nancy-boy here seems to have already fallen off his horse."

"There's just two of you, by my count. These men here know me", Ben said. "Your kind of mayhem; no man is going to take that lying down."

Jackson smoothed back his moustache with his thumbs. "Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he called out. "The marshal has asked to see you all so that you may take your stand and be counted.

With that Cole Vaughn cornered round the right side of house up onto the porch behind Michael. William, on horseback, clopped up along the line of trees that bordered the house on one side. His hand fidgeted at the rifle he was holding.

There was also a rifle barrel sticking out from the window. Ila or one of the other girls in there. That must be Frank's rifle or, God knows, maybe they stole that right out their mama's kitchen.

Frank strummed gently on his guitar.

"The South shall rise again!" Jackson cried. "Until justice!"

"Justice!" said Seth.

Frank strummed louder.

"The agony good men have endured that a nation might be born." Jackson swaggered back and turned sharply before the marshal. "And what are you but schemers? Impostors. Men of the crooked law that is breaking the back of this land!"

This was not ground on which the Marshal was prepared to debate. The two men faced each other in terrible silence as

though there was nothing left for either of them but for people to start shooting each other.

Frank hit his guitar chord again, sang out loud, "*Oh, I dream of Katie with the light brown hair*" and beat out a rhythm on the guitar body then, chanting

Between her knees, her knees,

It grow just where it please!

Jackson broke and laughed at Frank's antic. He cocked his head, stroked down his goatee, smoothed the moustache again. "Oh, Marshal, Marshal. Let me make this really clear for you." He held his hands down at either side. "Now watch carefully. Nice and slow."

Very slowly he reached for his pistol, drew it from the holster. Then, arm held straight, he raised it out to the side. Very slowly, not pointing it at anyone, until he had the gun held straight over his head. He pulled the trigger.

The loud report flinch through every man and woman with their hand on a trigger, but not a one lost their head. But when the psychological moment had passed, Ben realised that Madsen had drawn both his pistols while their attention was on Jackson. Vaughn had followed suit and his rifle was up.

Jackson smiled exceedingly. "What can I say?" He shrugged and held up his empty hands like a stage magician. The smile on this face twisted hard then. "*Boomback!!*"

Then he smiled again. "Now you just better clear out of here, marshal, before these boys get too anxious about what you might be planning to do with that shotgun."

Ben saw everything plainly. It would be bloodshed now or bloodshed later. No way it was going to go any easier. And he had to stop this thing. But he had Caldwell there who was as good as dead, and maybe Michael already been branded a turncoat, so he was also good as dead. So, it was just him and

Wilson for sure. Then they'd both be dead and none taken with them.

"This isn't the last of this, Jackson." Ben reigned up his horse which took a step backward. "Sam, get on your goddamn horse."

Then the men stepped their horses carefully back away from the house.

"You should hope this is the last any of these boys sees of you or your men," Jackson said, "because, brother, next time we will shoot you dead. But you tell Catherine, we'd sure like to see her out here, now. Isn't that right, Frank?"

Frank beat the rhythm on his guitar again. They turned their horses and galloped off. The strains of 'Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair' seemed to haunt the wind as they rode away.

chapter fifteen

Jake Bennie

SAM CALDWELL LOOKS AROUND the Red Boot Saloon, knowing that trouble must be close-by. Trouble and the Red Boot Saloon are like two inseparable twin boys. Now that Caldwell has been made a Deputy, he is on track to his goal of becoming a Town Marshal one day. He wants to make his mark. So he goes looking for trouble. Not to start it, but to end it. The gambling tables have a few sad men loitering around. They are a popular spot for men who came to Flintwood during the boom years, wanting to find prosperity. Now they attempt to gamble their way to wealth, but deep down they know it won't happen, and Caldwell can smell the disappointment that their bodies exude with acrid sweat.

He notices two men at the gambling tables who look different to the usual down-and-out hopeless men. And when the bearded one laughs a muffled laugh, Caldwell immediately realises the men are gang leaders Jimmy Jackson and Seth Madsen. He starts to walk over to them. But he stops at the memory of the depth of the brutality of these two men. As much as he would love to take them out alone — the glory would be a massive boost to his ambitions — he knows he can never be Marshal with twelve bullets in his body. He needs

backup.

He slips out of the saloon and walks the short distance to the Marshal's office. The Marshal and a few other Deputies are in quiet conversation.

"Marshal Wright, during my patrol I have found Jackson and Madsen, they are gambling at the Red Boot Saloon. We should move fast," he reports, making sure to use his official voice. He needs to compensate for his youth.

"Who were they with?" the Marshal asks.

"It's just the two of them, they were gambling with some vagrants. None of the Laceys or anybody else from their gang."

"You and Murphy will come with me. Wilson will stay to guard the jail."

They formulate their plan as they walk the few minutes to the Saloon. It's a simple plan. They know they can't out-draw Jackson — he is a fast shot — but if they go in guns drawn they should be able to take out both men before they've even looked up from their card game.

Bursting into the Saloon they run toward the tables, but not only does Deputy Murphy fall over his own feet, there is also nobody at the gambling tables except senile old Bobby Tarpley, who often gambles with himself. Tarpley, seeing the guns aimed at him, points upstairs.

"Those boys, ripped me off in the game. Conned me. You wanna get them up there. They are up there courting the girls in the rooms. Get me my money back Marshal," he says.

This complicates things. The men will be in two separate rooms. They will have to knock down both doors at once to avoid alerting the other. One Deputy will have to go in alone. But the men might be naked, and so might be unarmed. Luck could play in their favour. But Marshal Wright is nervous.

They might use the girl as a shield and this reminds him of a failed attempt at an arrest a few years back that left both a Deputy and an innocent girl dead.

Marshal Wright decides that he will take one room alone, with Murphy and Caldwell jointly raiding the other. Upstairs they quietly approach the two rooms used by Lucy and Anna for their services. Hearing rocking and moaning from one room, Caldwell notices that the man the Marshal is going to take out conducts his business much more loudly than their guy. There is only silence behind their door. He hopes this means that their man is asleep. He quickly wonders how he would feel about killing a sleeping man, as he is morally troubled about killing at the best of times, but he tries not to leave too much room for compassion for vicious outlaws.

On the Marshal's go Murphy kicks down the door and Caldwell runs into the room with gun raised. On the bed lays Lucy, groggily awoken by the sound of the door flying toward her, but there is no man. Lucy was asleep alone. There is one gunshot, then yelling from the next room. Running out onto the balcony, Caldwell sees Marshal Wright struggling to get back on his feet, and two shirtless men moving down the balcony stairs.

By the time the Deputies check on Marshal Wright and make it to the street they realise they have lost Madsen. They see Jackson making his way along 2nd street and Caldwell thinks that he's planning on finding somewhere to hide in an abandoned building on Gila Ave. Caldwell runs hard and prays even harder that the chase won't end in the now decaying half-built construction site he calls home. He desperately needs the respect of the other Deputies, and fills with shame at the thought of them coming into the ramshackle place he stays in.

Seeing the filthy old furnishings he has pulled together and the dirt on which he sleeps.

Jackson does avoid Caldwell's place, but enters an empty building close-by. This one is a completed commercial construction, but never occupied. Unlike most of the sites on Gila Ave, this building's wooden walls are fully intact, and there is no light entering the building. Caldwell calls back the others from entering. He knows it will be so dark inside that they will be making themselves easy targets when first entering. The Marshal sends Murphy to guard the rear while he and Caldwell stake out the front.

"You should come out now, you're surrounded," Caldwell yells.

"I ain't coming out for you pigs. You'll have to come in here an' get me."

"It's over. You've lost. Good's triumphed over your evil." At this the Marshal gives Caldwell a confused look. His youthful idealism has often been a joke among the Deputies, and Caldwell realises he shouldn't try to get too philosophical in a stand-off.

There is a single gunshot. Then the sound of Murphy's yells from the rear. Murphy, although sometimes clumsy, is athletic and strong, and is gaining on Jackson when the others make it to that side of the building. But as Murphy looks behind to check his backup, Jackson darts into another abandoned site. The Deputies decide the camouflage possibilities, as well as the ambushing potential of the convoluted construction sites are too high to risk trying to find him. Anyway, Madsen is still at large.

Alone at the office, Deputy Wilson sits at his desk watching the jail cells. He's bored. And pissed off. The Marshal never

takes him seriously. He respects that annoying young upstart Caldwell more. Wilson fought in the civil war. Has the scars to prove it. What's that bitch Caldwell ever done? Leaving him to "guard the cells." There's only one damn prisoner. And it's a woman! He gets up, slams his hands on his desk and then paces the room.

Today's sole prisoner — a girl providing her services at the seedy Blue Bull Saloon — had been involved in a fight over stolen money. On hearing the noise, many men had left their girls and started an all-out brawl. The Deputies told the men to move on, and brought Sally back to the jail to "pay a fine." Wilson is considering letting her go as he's not really interested in enforcing the fine. He sometimes frequents the Blue Bull Saloon, but the girls at the Red Boot Saloon are more to his tastes, especially Lucy, who always treats him as if she is the wife he doesn't have. Other girls sometimes flinch when they see the ugly jagged scar on his right bicep, refusing to touch it. But Lucy always kisses it gently, admiring the size of his muscular arm, telling him how brave he was for fighting in the civil war, for taking the bullets and the beatings.

"You gonna let me go Bill? I been here all day now," Sally pleads. Wilson gets up from his desk, slowly walking to the bars of the cell.

"You call me Deputy girly," he says.

"Come on Billy, we got history, you know me. Please let me go, I gotta work."

"I said don't fuckin' call me that," Wilson spits.

Sally is scared. The Bill she knows was always shy and quietly kind. This Bill — Deputy Wilson — is loud and angry and fearful.

"Anyway, first you gotta pay your fine," Wilson says, opening the cell door.

Over the sound of his own animal grunts, Deputy Wilson does not hear Seth Madsen enter the Marshal's office. Madsen walks past the empty duty-officer's desk and looks beyond the wall towards the cells. He smiles. It seems one of the Deputies is putting on a show for him. Sally is pushed against the wall, and by the time she sees Madsen over Wilson's shoulder he is standing inside the cell with arms raised, pointing both of his Colt Dragoon revolvers towards Wilson's back. He shoots. He doesn't think any bullets will go through Wilson and into the girl, but he doesn't really care if they do. Madsen has maimed plenty of women and children in his time. He keeps shooting until all twelve bullets have left his guns.

Marshal Wright returns to his office, fuming that he let both men get away. He wanted to end this feud once and for all. He walks through the entrance closest to his office, but goes past it, wanting to check on Deputy Wilson. But there is nobody at the duty-officers station and rounding the corner he sees that neither is Wilson at his own desk. He turns to his left and sees Wilson's body face down in the wide-open cell, his uniform red with blood that has flowed onto the floor. As well as the bullet holes covering his back, his head seems to have been beaten with a pole or plank. Next to the broken body is a piece of blood-soaked fabric ripped from a lady's dress. Not for the first time, Marshal Wright feels hate burning in his heart.

chapter sixteen

R. Dale Guthrie

“I OUGHT NOT HAVE left him alone,” Marshal Wright said, staring at the dead man on his jail’s floor. “I ought not’ve deputised him in the first place.”

Deputy Murphy shook his head. “Head strong, he was. Like a mule—tough too. Nothin’ you could’ve done to stop this—there’d just have been two bodies instead of one..”

The Marshal grunted, but didn’t argue the point. He plucked a blanket from the first cell, still rumpled from William Lacey’s abbreviated stay, and laid it over Bob Wilson’s corpse. The edges of the grey wool settled onto the blood-soaked floor, darkening in spots as they wicked up what hadn’t already drained between the boards.

“It’s not your fault, Marshal,” said Caldwell. The bare-faced young man swallowing hard, his face flushed and sweat beading on his forehead.

“You alright there, Deputy Caldwell? Maybe you should take some air,” said the Marshal.

Caldwell nodded and stepped quickly out the back, a hand clamped over his mouth, just as George Bell arrived at the front door.

George stopped at the entrance, taking stock of the

situation. “They got Wilson?” he nodded at the blanket-covered body.

Ben nodded.

“Caldwell?”

Deputy Murphy hooked a thumb toward the back door, “Feeling poorly. Stepped out back.”

Bell glanced at the corpse, then smoothed his perfectly trimmed moustache. “I can’t blame the kid. Doesn’t get much worse than this. If he had any sense, he’d keep stepping right out of town. Ya’ll should ponder doing the same. I haven’t seen it this bad since I was keeping the peace down in New Mexico. Little town two days outside Santa Fe so small it never got a proper name whilst I was deputeing there. Two families owned half everything and everyone there, were always posturing over some thing or another, till one day young Roberto Montague takes a shine to the Old Leroy Capulet’s favourite granddaughter, Jewel...”

He paused for a moment, catching the dour expressions of the other two men. “A tale for another time. Another time and another place, I reckon.”

Marshal Wright crossed to the front door and squinted into the sunlit street, his gaze far away.

Murphy shook his head. “Another place? Easy enough for you to say. I’ve got roots here. A family, a little land. What’s mine is mine, and I’ll be damned if I let that snake chase me outta my home.”

“Way I figure it,” George replied, “You got a lot more to lose than your roots by staying. Jackson’s out for blood, and these,” he tapped the deputy star on his own chest, “might as well be targets. We’re out-manned and out-gunned.”

“Is that how you managed to be a deputy in so many different towns? Run out of town with your tail between your

legs like a whipped dog at the first sign of trouble?” Deputy Murphy sneered.

Bell stepped closer to Murphy, his fists clenched at his sides, “Watch your mouth, or I’ll teach you the meaning of the word ‘whipped’.”

“Deputy Bell, Deputy Murphy,” Marshal Wright said, stepping between the men, “that’s enough, both of you. We have a man to bury and outlaws running rough-shod over our town. George, I’m sending you to get a wagon and arrange for a coffin. Fred, why don’t you go check on Sam. He’s been out there for a while now.” He nudged Fred Murphy toward the back door.

Murphy turned and walked stiffly out without a word.

“Let me get some money, you can borrow or rent a wagon, see if the preacher can arrange for a coffin,” Marshal Wright said, digging into the drawer of his desk.

Deputy Bell followed him to the doorway of the Marshal’s private office and watched him rummage. “Yeah, alright. I’ll see to it that he gets a proper funeral. But I’m thinking we may be at a crossroads here. Towns like this just don’t last; I’ve seen it more times than I care to recount. Soon as the mine closes up, and that ain’t long spell from now to then, this town is just gonna whither and die. The likes of Jackson are just buzzards coming to pick the bones clean. Mark my words...”

The Marshal rounded on him, eyes hard as flint, “Mark *my* words, George. James Jackson is headed for a noose whether he knows it or not. Whether *you* know it or not. ” He stalked toward Deputy Bell, backing him up to the wall.

“Marshal, I...”

“I’m bringing him to justice, one way or another. And you,” he said, grabbing his deputy’s hand and shoving the money into it, “are gonna stop flapping your gums. One more

word out of you about skipping town and I'm locking you up."

Deputy Bell's expression transformed from round-eyed surprise to red-faced anger, but before he could muster a retort, gun fire drew their attention to a growing commotion outside their argument had masked.

"Law man!" shouted an all-too-familiar voice from outside. "Why don't ya'll come out and join your man here."

Deputy Bell drew his revolver and Marshal Wright grabbed his rifle from the gun case.

The Marshal opened the front door an inch to peer out and cursed. He levered a cartridge into the rifle's empty chamber and then nudged the door the rest of the way open and stepped out into sunlight.

Jimmy Jackson stood across Fremont Avenue, right next to Deputy Fred Murphy, who looked teetered on his feet at the end of a taught noose.

The rope looped over a horizontal post jutting out from the building fifteen feet overhead. A wooden sign had once hung from the post, advertising the now abandoned "De-Lux Hotel and Boarding House", but had been cut down and nailed across the broken lobby window a year back. The other end of the rope was tied around the horn of Seth Madsen's saddle. He sat tall and relaxed atop his horse, a sadistic grin on his face. The Lacey brothers and Cole Vaughan flanked the entrance to the jail, but there was no sign of Frank Brown. Every man but Jackson had guns at the ready, but not aimed.

"You all on your lonesome there, Marshal? I recall four deputies."

"Three," Madsen said, spitting on Deputy Murphy's boots. "Two, before long."

"Fred, you alright?" Marshal Wright said, ignoring the

threat as best he could.

Deputy Murphy swayed on his feet and grunted, but didn't speak. It looked as if the rope around his neck was the only thing keeping him upright, and while his hands were free, he didn't seem to be much in control of his limbs.

"I'm afraid," Jackson said, "that your man here got a nasty bump on the head. We caught him sneaking out the back. You really oughta find braver men to deputise."

Careful boot-steps beside him announced Deputy Bell's arrival next to Marshal Wright, his pistol drawn and aimed at Jackson. Atop their horses, the Lacey brothers raised their weapons and aimed at the two lawmen. Vaughan just scowled, and Madsen's grin took on an eager, ghoulish aspect.

Jackson draped an arm over Deputy Murphy's shoulder, like they were the closest of friends sharing a drink, but he projected his voice to the Marshal and his deputy, "You think you can hit me and not your friend here? Seems to me he wouldn't appreciate your adding to his predicament, would you Deputy?" He patted Murphy on the cheek.

Marshal Wright laid his hand lightly on Deputy Bell's outstretched arm and gave a gentle nudge down.

Bell relented, lowering his pistol, but didn't holster it. "What do you want, Jackson?"

"How about your badge in the dirt? It's gonna end up there one way or another."

"I thought we was here to shoot the rest of them dead!" Madsen said, no longer smiling.

"Patience now. Me and the Marshal are having a nice little chat."

"But when're we gonna get to the killin'?"

Jackson sighed, "Hold your tongue, or I'll cut it out and feed it to you, Seth."

The two men's eyes met, but Madsen looked away first, his jaw clenched.

Jackson continued, "Toss your badges in the dirt for all the fine, brave folk peeking through their windows at us to see, and I'll make your deaths quick and painless."

Madsen guffawed, but Jackson ignored him and locked eyes with the Marshal.

"There's a thousand ways to die, lawman. Only a handful are easy, less are quick." He patted his holstered revolver, "What do you say Marshal? Personally, I'm hoping you opt for the slower, less easy way."

Marshal Wright pondered the odds for a moment. All the men with pistols drawn were on horseback, the animals shifting under them, their arms swaying from the fatigue of holding their weapons out. The open doorway was behind him, a quick step or two back and he'd have cover, a steady floor beneath his feet and a rifle ten times as accurate as any pistol. He didn't like the odds of getting out of this alive, but, they beat the hell out of the alternative Jackson was offering. And then he noted the scrape of boot soles on wood behind him. *Finally, Caldwell's back from the outhouse.* He eyed the rope threatening to strangle Deputy Murphy even before the horse hoisted him off his feet. Now they were three to the six outlaws, and if the younger man kept himself hidden, the element of surprise could tip the balance.

"Counter-offer. You and your men surrender now, unwind that rope from my deputy, and you'll each get a fair trial. Most of you may even avoid a noose yourself."

Jimmy Jackson laughed, but a gunshot sounded from inside the jail house, interrupting the tableau.

Marshal Wright glanced down at his chest, expecting to see an exit wound and blood pouring out, but a heartbeat later, he

felt neither pain, nor the numbness of shock. Frank Brown, the missing man from Jackson's gang, stumbled out from the jail's front doorway, his revolver hanging from his limp arm. They locked eyes as a red stain blossomed from his chest, and then he fell forward into the street.

The Marshal glanced back into the jail house to see, smoke curling from the barrel of Deputy Caldwell's gun. His eyes were wide but his hands remained steady.

Silence fell for another heartbeat, and then John Lacey fired, his brothers following suit. The door frame next to Marshal Wright splintered as bullets flew past him. He dove into the building for shelter, Deputy Bell cursing and firing his own pistol as he leapt into the jail and took cover behind the stout, half-closed door.

Deputy Caldwell was staring dumfounded, framed in sunlight shining through the doorway, until the Marshal grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the line of fire.

The volley of bullets pelted the outside of the building, a few digging furrows in the ceiling and opposite interior wall. When the gunfire paused for a second, Marshal Wright peaked around the doorway and cursed. Seth Madsen's saddle was empty, the uncontrolled horse cantering back and forth, raising and lowering Deputy Murphy by the neck. The deputy at least seemed to have regained some of his senses, but the noose was cinched tight around his neck, his face a bright red and his eyes bugged as he clawed at the rope. Jackson wasn't in plain sight either, but the door to the old hotel was bashed in. The Lacey brothers were struggling to reign in their startled horses, Michael clinging desperately to his mount's mane as it reared.

"Bell, Caldwell, keep them occupied," the Marshal said, and knelt inside the door frame, steadying the rifle on his knee.

"What are you..." Bell said, but let the question die on his

lips as bullets started flying again. He took aim and started squeezing off careful shots at different targets.

Marshal Wright took aim at the rope where it draped over the horizontal timber above the old hotel entrance. He took a breath, centred his sights, let the breath out in a long sigh, and fired. The bullet severed all but one of the twisted rope fibres just as Madsen's horse bolted in a panic, hauling Fred Murphy back off his feet and almost ten feet into the air. Just before his head collided with the timber, the final strand of rope snapped. He fell, landing hard on the wooden steps of the defunct hotel.

A bullet flew past Marshal Wright's ear and he ducked out of the path of a second shot. From outside, one of the Lacy brothers cursed. A peek around the doorframe showed one man being dragged by his horse, his boot stuck in one stirrup as the other brother tried to catch the reigns of the panicked beast. He scanned the hotel building for signs of life, and caught the furtive motion behind jagged shards of broken glass clinging to a first-floor window frame. He took aim and fired. Seth Madsen leapt back and out of his line of sight. He shouted angrily, something about his favourite hat, and then fell silent. A miss, but only just.

A shrill whistle from further down the street caught the attention of John Lacey and Cole Vaughan. They squeezed off a couple of rounds toward the jail house and then spurred their horses in that direction. They joined up with the Lacey brothers, including a bedraggled, dirt-encrusted Michael Lacey, and they rounded the corner at a gallop.

Before the hoofbeats had faded completely, Marshal Wright dashed across the street and knelt beside Fred Murphy. He loosened the rope around the man's neck and pulled it off, and Murphy sputtered and coughed up blood. His shirt was

soaked through with blood along his back, the blood pumping weakly from the wound.

“Hang in there, deputy,” Marshal Wright said, “We’ll get you a doctor and patch you up.”

Deputy Bell sauntered over to them, his gun drawn but his stance relaxed. They exchanged significant looks, but didn’t voice the obvious.

“Ain’t gonna last that long, Marshal,” said Murphy, his voice rough and weak. “You look after my girls,” he grabbed the Marshal’s vest his eyes urgent even as they began to lose focus. “Promise,” he gasped, “me...” his grip loosened and his head drooped to the ground. He went still, and a moment later, his last breath wheezed out of his throat and past his lifeless lips.

Deputy Bell, took off his hat and held it over his heart for a moment, and maybe a silent prayer. Then seated back on his head and addressed his boss.

“They’ll be back any minute, Marshal. I’m sorry, but there ain’t no point in dying for no reason.” He tossed his star in the dirt next to Marshal Wright. “Live to fight another day, that’s my advice to you. And you,” he said, pivoting to address the ashen-faced Samuel Caldwell. “There ain’t no shame in not being cut out for this line of work, kid. It may be time for you to find another line of work.”

Sam Caldwell just nodded, and absently rubbed his throat, unable to meet Marshal Wright’s gaze.

George Bell turned back to the the Marshal. “Come with us, Ben. Those boys are hell-bent on killin’ you. Us too. Who knows, maybe with us outta the way, they’ll calm down a bit, do less harm. What do you say?”

Marshal Wright stood up, his knees stained with the blood of the second man he had failed that day. He thrust his hand

out. “I say good luck, and Godspeed.”

Bell gripped the proffered hand firmly. “Good luck yourself, Marshal. You’re gonna need it.”

He watched the two men’s backs as they galloped their horses down the empty street, folks just beginning to emerge from their hiding spots. They all stared at him, expectant. He squared his shoulders, nodded at a scrawny, wide-eyed boy and said, “Go find a preacher, tell him there’s two dead men that need proper burying.” He flipped a coin to the kid, who caught it two-handed, nodded and ran to do his errand.

The Marshal of Flintwood headed back to the jail for another blanket, and for time to ponder his next move.

chapter seventeen

Eric Christiansen

MARSHAL WRIGHT BURST THROUGH the mayor's front door into the waiting room.

"Mayor, we need some - what the damn hell?"

His brow furrowed and he poked his head into the office proper. Nobody was within. Not here in the ante room. Not here in the Mayor's office.

"Damnation." He sighed into his chest.

The office was as good a place as any to hold up for a while. He doubted the Jackson-Madsen gang would come looking for him here, and the Mayor's chair did look mighty comfortable.

Settling his sore bottom deeply into the chair he leaned back and already wished he's never sat down... maybe he'd never get up again.

He knew that he was in a fast moving river that was twenty feet deeper than he was tall. The events lately moved by so fast - rapids to crush his bones against the boulders. Political rocks, mean rocks with guns, and scared rocks that only wanted him to protect them from the others. Analysing his predicament Marshal Wright dozed. A deep fast sleep that drove dreams of drowning of pulverisation away. Dreamed deep he did.

“Get your bony-assed ass off of my chair!”

The Marshal snorted awake, wide eyed and pawing for his gun. His gaze was met with the Mayor’s fuming face. Angry as a freshly branded mule, but also frightened. The Mayor’s eyes darted to the guns, still holstered, but the Marshal knew the Mayor kept a single shot up back-up boy up his sleeve, so he slowly let his hands drop.

“Mayor, I-“

“Marshal, you are in my chair. Do you know how much I hate sitting in a warm chair? Knowing someone else’s ass has cleaved itself to the folds I’ve spent years building into that leather sets my blood to boil!”

“I-“

“You know what’s going on out there?” the Mayor’s hand shot out and encompassed the town, “People are going to bed scared. They’re waking scared. I can’t even look them in the eyes because I don’t have the salve to cure their festering wounds.”

The Mayor paced his office - caged animal in a shrinking net.

“Good men died under your watch. Damn fine men.”

“I know they were, dammit. Don’t you know I’m dying thinking about them being taken down like they were?”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but maybe you need to think about what the town needs.”

“It needs reinforcements.”

“Or a new Marshal?”

Marshal Wright almost spit in his eye for saying that.

“I’m the rightful Marshal, and by all that I know is true and holy, I’m the one that needs to get this town straight.”

“You just said-“

“I know what I just said. I need help. *I need help!* I can’t take

these men on by myself, and I need you to order me some soldiers.”

The Mayor stopped moving and just stared.

“You’ve proven you’re not up to the job.”

“Bull. Bull and shit! You can’t stop me, but no matter what I’m going to get some people to clean the filth from our streets.” The Marshal jumped out of the chair. “Whether it’s lawfully sworn Deputies, or this great Union’s soldiers, I will go forth as our Lord did before us and gather a great following!

He headed towards the door.

“You stop right there! Stop I say!” Mayor Bird yelled.

The Marshal paused, and turned back to face the man.

They stared at each other for such a short time, but an eternity flashed between them.

The Mayor took a deep bellyful of breath and released it so that the Marshal, across the room felt its gently touch on his stubble.

“Marshal, find yourself a safe place and get some good rest. I’ll head down to the Deseret office and get the wires buzzing. Maybe I’ll find me a man with a fast horse that can see if he can beat the telegraph. You come on back tomorrow morning, and we’ll see what we can see in the day’s early light. Yes?”

The Marshal couldn’t believe his ears. This man was willing to drop him down a hole and fill it with snakes not two minutes ago. He wasn’t going to waste the good will with words, so he nodded once to the Mayor and stepped out of the office.

“They’re looking for you,” the mayor called out.

“I know it,” the Marshal said as he closed the office door.

Ben Wright looked up and down the street. For once it was

more empty than not. One of the last things he needed right now was the stir of a crowd. He could already feel the itching between his shoulder blades where a jagged-edged knife might find its way. Or perhaps a long-grain rifle bullet. He'd never hear the shot ring out. God's saving grace for that at least. He headed up Second street and disappeared among the buildings. There were a few people willing to loan him a horse, day or night, and he was going to call in one of those favours, gather up a simple bedroll and head out to the foothills. Sleep may be long in coming, but when it did, he'd feel safer knowing there was five, maybe ten miles of brush between him and town.

Between him and Cathy.

The morning came sudden and fierce. Dew and the night's cold embrace chilled Marshal Wright to the bone. He flexed his fingers. His hands were stiff. If he were in a fight this morning he'd be in a very rough patch. At least he had one thing working in his favour. The gang of killers were late night drinkers and early morning sleepers. He felt safe enough to swing by the inn and borrow a biscuit and bacon, and enough coffee to keep his hands loose. The Mayor could wait, for there were some things that needed doing, and a healthy breakfast was of paramount importance.

Feeling better than he had in days, Marshal Wright found the Mayor staring out his window with a cheroot's ash lengthening in forgotten misery.

Mayor Bird shook his head and smiled over to the Marshal. "Listen Ben, I feel like an old baby for letting things get so knotted up yesterday."

"That goes double for me, Henry."

The Mayor's hand was extended and immediately gripped by the Marshal's own calloused grip.

“Sit down a bit, Ben.” The Mayor gestured to the chair after releasing his hand, “I have a little story to tell you.”

“Did you get that telegram off?”

“Yes, yes, just wait a minute.”

The Mayor settled himself into his chair with a wince, “I feel like a stubborn ass kicked my lower back region something fierce.”

The Marshal nodded, he’d had that kind of pain himself once in a while.

“So, last night, relaxing after our... talk, I went for some liquid relaxation.”

“And... other relaxations?”

“Anna is so lovely, isn’t she?”

The Marshal nodded. Although, truth be told, Anna was by no means a woman he’d ever be with. Even though his love life was slow as a race between molasses and a tortoise, he knew in his heart that waiting for the right one - *Catherine* - would only make the joy of it - of life - all the better.

“She was exactly what the doctor would have ordered if he knew what he missing, mark my words, Ben.”

Marshal Wright smiled, hoping that the Mayor wouldn’t start going into every, specific hairy detail.

“It was quite late when I left the Boot. The glory of God’s creation rose above me to infinity, and I wandered down the street, following a star. And then it hit me, Ben, it hit me hard. I had to pee.”

The Marshal let out a guffaw. “What?”

“I tell you now, there is no greater fear in my life than the need to pass water.”

“Go on,” the Marshal said with a wave of a hand.

“I find the need to be such a dreadful experience that I wish to share it with those things in life that I hate most.”

The Marshal's eye-brows furrowed at that statement.

"Did you know that Wells Fargo owns my house?"

"They aim to own half the country I'm sure."

"Yes, but these two... these two bastards of fiscal conservatory and savings that make Hades liken himself to the lord Jesus Himself I swear I know not where I find the words to put into phrase about the dearth and depth of my hate to Mr. Wells and Mr. Fargo. Needless to say, let us say, never the less, ha!, that they own the home I call my own."

The Marshal could only nod to this exponential sputtering.

"To close out the thought - I hate them so. Hated them for coming to this town. Hated them for coming to this state. But, they do own my home. So I took my suffering... my agony of need - to pass water - to their building."

"I'm not sure I understand your... *suffering*."

"Pain, my dear Marshal, *PAIN!* It flows from my inner bladder out through my member... My member, do you see? The pain, it flows like a log in the river. Through... my own log. Do. You. See?"

"I'm beginning to, yes, my dear Mayor, please I'm sorry what? I'm sorry? Please, continue your story, I am but a late comer to the meeting it seems, what are we talking about?"

"Jackson and Madsen you dunce! Jackson and Madsen, I know their secrets, I know it deep within me, as though I was trying to pass them through the small and tiniest of holes from my, if I may, if I may I say, if I may say my large member. It's true, you know?"

The Marshal laughed aloud at this statement, "I will take your word for it, yes indeed. Please, don't rise, I have faith, as God ever-lasting comes to me in prayer, that you are indeed large."

"As I was saying, Ben, as I was saying, there can only be so

many words to discuss the absolute horrible feeling that travels from my internals out through my large member. But I digress, I do indeed digress. There I was, holding the wall of the damnable Wells and damnable Fargo building when I let loose a stream of urine that I can only discuss with the men of town. The stream was mighty and full, I tell you, I tell you completely that this was a life's work in a moment of perfect clarity that came to me. *This* stream of urine, that which contained so much... so much incredible hardship... pain, my dear Marshal, pain! Tears formed upon my eyes and the heaven I marvelled at, not five minutes before, faded to the deepest depths of hell.

"You know the Doc can fix your pecker up, Hank."

"Have you seen that corn-holer lately? I sure as shit am not whipping my rattler out for him to salivate over."

The Marshal shook his head. "You were a fool as a boy, and you're a fool as a man. Do you want your pecker to shrivel and fall off?"

"Do you not want to know what I have gleaned, as God gave us life and God came to us, there can only be one truth, and the truth I tell you now is that the Doc will not ever see my member!"

"As you say, but I fear for you if you do not."

"Do you want my story, or are you going to be as my sweet Anna, and minister to my large and oh so beautiful *tree of life*?"

"Please continue, please forgive my interruption. I can only assume what you're about to say."

"As you say, you can only assume, for I'm about to give you the news that Mr. Jackson and Mr. Madsen are deep within the Wells and Fargo Bank!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

“No!”

“Yes! Do not mock me man, I tell you now, I heard voices, saw a lamp, and I did press my ear against the wall.”

“What did you hear?”

“Truly, I’m not sure, but the voices were none but those that you wish to... how shall I say it? That you wish to see silenced?”

“It’s true, I would gladly see them with frozen faces beneath the ground.”

“Then look no farther than what was the yonder bank! They are within it, I am sure.”

“Are you?”

“I am.”

“Yes.”

“Yes!”

“Have the Doc look to your member.”

“He can look to it if you are with me.”

“I’ll be there.” The Marshal knew that the Mayor’s wife shouldn’t have to bear the burdened disease that Anna had passed to the Mayor. “Truly, I will be as Cain to your Abel, standing beside you. Then I shall deal, indeed as the faro dealer, I shall see to Mr. Jackson and Mr. Madsen, as you say.”

“Good. I give you this burden, this holy burden - rid us of these dreadful creature, Marshal. Remove them.”

chapter eighteen

Waleed Ovase

FINDING OUT THAT CATHERINE was his boss's daughter, years ago, had been hard for Ben. There's always a line, whether you're working on a ranch or you're saving Flintwood from the worst boys and men west of the Mississippi. But, thankfully, Marshal Donley hadn't seem too worried, if only because he smiled and said that his thoughts were the least of Ben's problems. And how true that had been.

Why his thoughts were drifting to Catherine, when his remaining deputies had quit, was troubling. She was hurt, physically and probably emotionally, but he needed to keep his head clear and ready to take down these boys. And for that, he would need his own posse back together.

If he knew George Bell, and he knew him damn well after working with him the last few years, he would either be at home, his legs propped up on the table, drinking his worries and sorrows away. Or, he would at the Red Boot Saloon, his legs propped up and telling a tall tale of his former worries and sorrows.

Former Deputy Bell's house was a few miles outside of town, and as the Marshal rode Kate out, he turned around and looked back at Flintwood, the town that he would and could

possibly die for in the next coming hours or days. Windswept, barren, the winds of New Mexico mixing with the starkness of Arizona. The multicultural background made it a beautiful place to live, and always exciting.

Kate kicked up dust as he pushed her to get there faster, because every moment that he wasted was a moment that Catherine or any of the town's inhabitants were in true danger. A part of him hoped that he could fix this mess, if only because if a Federal Marshal or County Sheriff came out to fix it for him, it would look even worse. He would lose every respect from the townspeople, from the bandits in the area, and although he kept pushing it from his mind, he could just lose his life in this ordeal.

He pulled Kate's reins, stopping her. He could see George's house. His horse wasn't there. It had been a waste of a precious hour because George must be at the Saloon. After losing Fred and Bob, trying to convince George seemed like too much of a burden – and he still had to find him. He turned Kate around and rode back towards town.

He patted his Spencer rifle in its holster, and took out his shotgun, putting it under his arm, just in case. Riding away from town was one thing. But the Marshal was sure that the fugitives were in the Wells Fargo Bank building, and he would have to be ready for anything.

Although uneventful, the ride back into town had heightened Ben's nerves, and as he rounded the corner of 2nd Street and Fremont Avenue, he spied George's hat in the window of the Red Boot Saloon and automatically yelled out his name. But thankfully no one heard him. His voice had almost cracked, like a schoolboy, because the pressure of the remaining

bandits was getting to him. He needed to get his posse back together. He let Kate meander her way towards the Saloon, before finally getting off, tying her up, and entering rust and dust coloured building.

From the outside, the Saloon was always bustling, but the sheer noise was masked by the thick wood construction and glass panels. From the balcony to the inside front step, it was two different worlds. The Saloon was full and he spotted George's hat at the bar. He had brought his gun and let it hang by his side, his finger still on the trigger. He was anxious, and he was going to make sure everyone knew it.

“Marshal,” a strained voice from above spluttered. Ben looked up and found Kenny Lorimer – or “one-eyed Kenny” - languishing on the stairs. His black eye patch had fallen off, revealing the Civil War injury.

“How may I help you Kenneth,” said Ben, trying to catch George's eye. George, however, was engrossed in telling one of his tall tales to a unbeknownst patron.

“Who's gonna take care of Ann?” he asked.

Ben's grip on his shotgun tightened, but he took his finger off the trigger. There would be no more deaths, except for the boys hiding like cowards in the bank. “I'll see to her and her mother in due time. I have a small affair to finish with, first.”

One-eyed Kenny nodded, got up, and went to order another drink from the bar. Ben followed him and slapped George on the back, interrupting his story.

“Now, Marshal, I was just telling—ah, uhm, I apologise, what was your name again?” asked George, looking pointedly to his new friend, a young, round faced, cowhand. Ben could tell simply from the smell of cow manure and sweat on him.

“Actually, I was just leaving,” said the cowhand, looking skittish and ducking for another part of the saloon.

“Now, look what you did Marshal,” George said.

“I need you, Deputy.” The Marshal dug into his pocket and offered George the old metal star. Until recently, it had proudly sat on George's chest.

“I knew you were going to do this,” said George, sighing and removing his hat, revealing his balding pate. “Marshal, I need to tell you a story.”

Ben breathed deeply, knowing where this was going – one of George's tall tales of some sort of heroic nonsense that happened in some far away town. “Save it, George. I need your—”

“No no, Marshal. This one is important. For you, I'll even shorten it a little bit. I've been shot many times, over the many years I've worked as a lawman. And in all those years, the only true injuries I ever got, ever, weren't from bullets.” George paused and took another shot of whiskey, finishing the bottle in front of him. A bartender put another on the table. George offered Ben a shot, but he politely refused.

“Get on with it,” said the Marshal, his patience running thin.

“Alright. I was working in a small town outside of Santa Fe. Town much like this one. I was riding around the outskirts, unsure of what exactly I was looking for, but something in me told me I should be out there. I found a boy, badly beaten, maybe 10 or 12. He needed help. I took him back to town, got him treated. He got better, and healed in a few days. No worse for wear.”

The Marshal checked his pocketwatch. The story was going nowhere, he was sure of it. “George, I'm going to need an answer.”

“Hold on Marshal. The next day, as soon as he was healed, he bolted, right quick too,” said George, slapping his hands

together, mimicking the boy running off. “The next week, he rode back in town with his father and their posse: The Red Hound Boys. They shot me and several others in town, before disappearing, and finally getting caught somewhere out here in Arizona.” George took two shots in quick succession. “No good deed goes unpunished. The boy pretended he didn't recognise me as his father shot me in the side. Every damn thing hurt like hell.”

“Alright George,” said the Marshal, tucking the badge back into his pocket.

“My arm hurts like hell, I've been fighting against the lawlessness for ages. I've been fighting the good fight. And now, I think it's time to leave town, find somewhere else. Maybe I'll get the lawman bug again, take up another badge. But not now. Not after I saw our boys die that way. I've done enough.” He took a wad of cash out of his pocket and showed it to the Marshal, flipping through it. “For Ann and her mother. Gotta make sure they're taken care of.”

Ben took off his own hat and wiped his brow. There was only one other chance. “Thank you for your time George,” he said, turning about face and leaving the bar, his shotgun still pointed towards the ground.

As he got outside and untethered Kate, George staggered out. “Marshal,” he spluttered, grabbing his Colt Dragoon out of its holster. “You're gonna need this,” he said, handing him the gun, butt forward. Ben took it, nodding his thanks, and tucked it under his saddlebags. Before George went back inside, Ben took out his own wad of cash, from inside his jacket pocket, and handed it over. “For Ann. I will avenge her father.” They shook hands and parted.

Ben knew that his other former Deputy, Sam Caldwell, would

be drinking alone and possibly sleeping, wherever he could find a safe berth. Some people liked houses and the like, some people could afford houses and the like, but Ben had a suspicion that Sam was neither of these people.

Ben saw Kate feeling his own anxiety and emotions, in the way that she began to wobble and meander as she walked. They were connected, which usually made Ben feel better, but now all he wanted was to calm his mare. Maybe it would make him feel calmer too. He got off his horse and decided to walk the lots along Gila Avenue, where Sam would mostly like be camped.

There were always people camped in the empty lots, and as the Marshal walked along, nodding and tipping his hat to the people in the lots, he tried not to notice how most were badly in a need of a bath, and some were even busy pulling fleas and ticks off themselves. His heart went out to the children and the few horses and mules in the lots. Most of the people were former workers for the mine company, and if they were here that meant they hadn't saved enough to get out of town. That would change, hopefully. Something had to come into town to turn these people's lives around.

Ben spotted Sam, his hat over his eyes, sleeping with an empty bottle fallen over by his side. Ben moved amongst the people, pulling Kate along gently, and finally stopped in front of Sam. "Samuel Caldwell," he intoned, trying to get Sam's attention in the most authoritarian way possible.

Sam opened his eyes and pulled his hat off his face. "M-m-m-marshal," he said. "What do you need from me?"

"What I need, Sam, is your assistance in helping get rid of the last of those boys."

Sam pulled his legs up against himself, becoming even younger in Ben's eyes. Sam was only 19 and he acted like it.

But Ben was sure that one day that Sam's dream of becoming a Marshal, or even a Sheriff, would come true.

“Gee Marshal, I dunno. It's a lot to ask, seein' as how yer other deputies been killed and all,” said Sam.

Ben had to take another tactic, otherwise he would lose Sam like he'd already lost George. He sat down on the ground, loosening his grip on Kate's reins. “Ya know, I left home too, like you did. It was a long time ago,” he said.

“Yeah, I heard mention of that,” said Sam. He tipped the empty bottle into his mouth, hoping for one last drop.

“And, I was in Texas when the war broke out. Heard the news of the fighting, in the bars, even before I read it in the newspapers. People were rushing West. I understood why they were leaving because I think I was doing it too.”

He had Sam's attention. Sam's back arched forward, his hands on his knees. Sam's past had been checkered with misfortunes, and even after seeing a hanging at a young age, and being frightened, he had wanted to be a lawman. He had wanted to help make sure people did the right thing. He wanted to help.

“Sam, I realised that, that was not my fight. The war, the Northerners and the Southerners bickering, and the pettiness that started in the saloons and the dinner tables that caused ruckus amongst families. Big issues, sure. But they became small, and they ripped people apart. And it wasn't my fight. This, Sam, is my fight. And I believe it is our fight.” He stood up and took out George's dragoon. “George thought we could use it. That is, if you'd join me.”

Sam looked up at the Marshal, standing above him, gun outstretched, and grabbed onto it. “Marshal, I think it is my fight too. Because of Fred and Bob.”

Ben nodded. “Because of Fred and Bob.”

“Because this is our fight,” finished Sam, getting up on his feet.

Finally, the Marshal had his posse. However small, and young, it was.

chapter nineteen

Pete Becker

“SURE IS QUIET IN there, Marshal.”

“Yeah, quiet. Too quiet.”

Caldwell looked at Wright. “I wonder what they’re up to.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out. We’ll just have to get in there and see.”

Wright looked at Caldwell and saw fear in his eyes; it echoed the fear that Wright felt. Neither man moved.

“Maybe we could use some help,” Caldwell whispered, “Did you ever hear tell of Sweet Betsy from Pike?”

“Isn’t she the one who crossed the wide prairie with her lover Ike?”

“Yep, that’s her. And him. Do they still live here? We sure could use their help right about now.”

“They didn’t stay in these parts.”

“Well, what about that guy I saw at the hotel, you know, the one with the big chin? He looks like he can take care of himself. Do you think he’s any good?”

“He sounds loco. Keeps asking if anyone’s seen an ‘orb’, says it’s a big silver ball with rounded spiky things sticking out of it. And when he’s not talking about that orb he says he’s looking for the Next Big Thing™. No, we’re better off

without the likes of him.”

“Okay, well, what about that whatshisname, McCain? He was always pretty good with that fancy rifle of his.”

“Nope, ever since his son went off and joined the Senate he can’t shoot straight; always misses his mark.”

The silence stretched on as the two men continued to look in each other’s direction but not meet the other’s eyes, both silently debating what to do next, and postponing the moment when they’d have to commit themselves to a battle that they might well lose.

Their silent tableau was broken suddenly by raucous singing: “Oh the Wellth Fargo Wagon ith a comin’ down the thtreet, oh pleathe let it be for me.” The voice was followed quickly, as voices often are, by its source: a tall thin man gangling energetically and inefficiently down the street. Wright grabbed Caldwell’s arm and pulled him deeper into the shadows, hoping that the singer would move on and not call attention to their presence.

“Hey, guys, what’re you...”

The Marshal clapped a hand over the interloper’s mouth and pulled him into their dark corner.

“Be quiet,” he whispered. The interloper nodded his agreement and the Marshal removed his hand. “What’s your name?”

“Yates, sir. I’m sorry I was so rowdy. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble, I was just walkin’, and that bank building brought a song into my head.”

“Mister Yates. When you’re not singing, can you use that sidearm that you’re wearing?”

“Yes, sir. Best shot in the county. Just ask anyone. Well, anyone from back home in Howard county, that is. I just got into town, so folks around here don’t know me so good.”

Wright looked at Caldwell, and Caldwell nodded. Better than nothing.

“Okay. Raise your right hand.” He did. “Do you swear to uphold the laws of this great nation, this great state, this great county, and this great town?”

“Well, I reckon ...”

“That’s great. You’re a deputy. I’m Marshal Ben Wright, and this is my deputy, Sam Caldwell. We need you to do some scouting for us. There are two men in the bank, and we need to know where they are and how they’re armed. Sam, do you see a good route for him to get over to the far side of the building so he can peek in through the window?”

Sam looked around, then looked at Yates and said, “Yep, you could get some cover if you duck behind the Marshal’s little wagon over there.”

“Wait, I’m supposed to go past Ben’s cart, right?”

“Right. And then over to the hitching rail, the one with the big hoss.”

“Okay. But before I go, do you have any coffee? I could use a little joe.”

Wright handed Yates his canteen. “Sorry, it’s just water.” Yates took a long pull. “Now get going.”

Both men watched as Yates slinked awkwardly past the wagon and over to the hitching post. He paused a moment, then ran, knees and elbows going in all directions, out of their sight around the corner of the bank. A few minutes later he was back in view, following his previous course in reverse. He pulled up in front of them, huffing and puffing. When his various limbs had settled down and his breathing had slowed a bit Wright asked him, “What did you see?”

“Well, it was a bit peculiar, Marshal. There was this horse, kinda slumped over and leaning against the wall right next to

the window. It had its head down, and its eyes were half closed like its head hurt, and it kept moving its head back and forth just a little bit and staggering, like it was dizzy. But that wasn't the oddest thing."

Both men looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

"Well, there was this cat up on the horse's back, and maybe it was the light, but I swear that cat was blue."

"That's all well and good, son, but what did you see in the bank? And where did that awful smell come from?" Wright asked.

"Oh, sorry. Anyway, I peeked into the bank, and there were three guys in there: one had brown hair and a beard and a moustache, one was blonde and babyfaced, and the third guy was dressed all in black and had a pencil-thin moustache. Then the horse threw up on my boots, and buffeted me with its head, and I figured I'd better high-tail it out of there."

Wright handed his canteen to Yates again. "Better clean those boots up a bit or those guys in the bank will smell you coming. So there are three of them now? Where are they?"

"They're in the lobby, sitting at a table, about a rod from the door."

Wright was getting impatient. "What's a-rod?"

"About fifteen feet, according to the yankees."

"Okay, now that your boots won't announce our arrival, let's see what we can do about Jackson and Madsen and their new friend!"

They walked across the street to the door of the bank and drew their guns. Wright nodded to Caldwell, who applied his big boot to the door. The door burst open, and all three men ran inside and fanned out across the lobby in front of the table where their prey was seated. The three men at the table didn't move, but there was the unmistakable sound of

handguns being cocked. In the darkness of the lobby behind the table the three Laceys had drawn their guns. The front door slammed shut; Cole Vaughan stood next to it, also with his gun drawn.

Jackson spoke first. "Welcome, Marshal, Deputy. I don't know your friend, there, but he's welcome, too. Mayor Bird gave us the word that you'd be coming. So, again, welcome."

Wright looked at the man in black. "Nice suit."

"Oh, where are my manners?" Jackson continued. "I'd like you to meet my friend Wire. Wire, this is Marshal Wright, his deputy Sam Caldwell, and I still don't know who their friend is."

The man in black stood up and reached into the breast pocket of his shirt. He pulled out a business card and handed it to Wright. Wright looked at the card: "Wire Paladin" "San Francisco".

Paladin looked at Jackson and hissed quietly. "You told me you were bankers. You didn't tell me you were going up against the law. I'll have no part of that." One moment he was standing next to the table with his hands at his sides, and the next moment he had taken two steps back and had his gun pointed in the general direction of the Laceys. At the same time, Yates spun around toward Vaughan, but he was too late; Vaughan shot him through the chest, then fell to Caldwell's bullet. Paladin kept his gun on the Laceys as he said "Wright, you get him out of here. Caldwell and I will deal with these folks." Wright hesitated. "NOW."

Wright picked Yates up by the shoulders and dragged him out through the front door, across the street, and into a small copse of trees that hadn't yet fallen to the blight of urban renewal. He heard the gurgling of Yates' breath and knew that Yates wouldn't last much longer. He knelt at Yates' head,

unscrewed the stopper from his canteen, and gave Yates a sip of water.

“Marshal, I know I’m not gonna make it,” Yates coughed. “But do me one favour.”

“Of course, son.”

“You know that girl at the millinery store?”

“You mean Laura?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.” Cough. “Tell... Tell Laura I love her.”

“I’ll do that, Yates. And don’t worry, she’s a frontier woman. She’s strong. She won’t cry.”

As Yates’ head drooped and he passed on, Wright heard several shots coming from inside the bank, followed by the sound of a door slamming behind the bank, then hoofbeats slowly fading into the night. He looked down and saw a little rabbit looking up at him curiously; a flower had fallen onto its head and rested incongruously between its short pink ears. It blinked twice, turned around, and made its way silently through the underbrush, shaking its head in wonder at the silliness of men.

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

Ioa Petra'ka

PEACE WAS NEVER A dog you could train gentle, thought Mayor Bird. The swinging and twitching corpse of the deputy, as seen through the dusted panes of glass in the Wells Fargo bank, did little to sway his mind otherwise. Powder smoke had accumulated around the deserted bank, glowing across the billows, as numerous windows from residences around the building went from black to tallow yellow. Even from here, he could hear shuffling and muffling behind curtains. "Get down!" a woman husked out loudly, and Bird's shoulders twitched, a quarter mile and a good spot higher away.

Unsettled, but still feeling the dark cloying of confidence and resolve, Bird put the little spyglass back in his satchel, and shifted on his knee, turning to eye the whole of Flintwood. Yes sir, peace had been made, but not lightly. The night was warm and oddly still. Bug, horse and wind alike had all taken to ground in the aftermath of the gunfire.

Grunting (more than he'd like to admit to himself), Bird got to his feet and looked out across the empty black curtain, a carefully chosen shadow through which a path he'd marked out earlier would squirrel its way through and among the various hazards that occupied a blackened desert. The unseen

cactus, always a silent and spiteful foe.

Bird grimaced. He wasn't even sure about coming out here, he had originally intended not to. But in case he couldn't wait it out at home, he made plans. Earlier, whilst making a show of touring the Tanner's property lines (they were having some dispute with an individual, writing well and overly winded letters from the city. These'll be the end of us, they are carving up the wilds into choice cuts, in their oily smelling offices, while we the fighters and the scrabblers push against the wilderness with our grit), he'd marked out this path. Nobody would be out in that desolate stripe, this time of night, and by taking this route, he'd end up back home without passing a single residence. Every other house would be lit up with news of the tussle, but if he made good time, before the hollering could make it up the hill, he'd be up through the back cellar, and inside his modest little home in time to hear firsthand the tragic news.

It seemed simple when he sketched it out, but now, staring into the complete lack of vision before him, he wasn't so sure.

Bird looked back toward the flickering window of the Wells Fargo, behind which, Deputy Caldwell had finally stilled. Reassuringly a distinctive shadow, with its ledge of a moustache, danced on a wall, being cast from none other than the gang leader himself, Jimmy Jackson. That angry old knot came back in his stomach, and once again he recited his litanies; a pity it was about Marshal Wright. Not a bad man at all, really, save but distinctinctly misfortuned by time and place. One day a man wakes up, pulls on his trousers, whistles and walks straight into the bear that ends him. Can't say that's the fault of anyone or anything, it just had to happen. Someone had to fight to protect what they were doing out here, and he saw it now like never before. If he had to be the one to coerce

nature into a peace, then he'd do it, nothing gentle about it.

Beyond the diminishing clouds of gunsmoke, the knocking of a horse in flight fierced the mayor back into the moment. With a frown that had deepened into habitual folds of his face, Mayor Henry Bird, Protector (and by all rights) Progenitor of Flintwood, dared into the shallow dark of the night.

All was quiet yet, and dark, when Mayor Bird crept up on his home. Although the town had lit up, those folks living up the road were only gradually awakening. Worryingly, the geography and wind occasionally parted to reveal the sound of a thundering horse. At times it seemed all around him, but that was some minutes ago. Now he was back. Relief, and a sense of success, brought a sigh out of him as he crossed the clearing to the back of the house.

The cellar door erupted upward with avian suddenness. The mayor felt the ground sweep away and all his air huffed out, flat on his back as the attacker's silhouette blocked out the stars. Bird's thoughts came dimly, made senseless and fleeting by the shock of the attack (and perhaps a bit of a bang on the old egg?). That hat, he squinted around the shape made by obscured constellations, the Marshal's hat. The Marshal's voice? "Ben?" He couldn't hear his own voice. All breath was loud, hostile.

Then he was fumbling and lurching into the rocky (but fortunately cactus cleared) territories behind his home. Ben was alive! Alive, and the warm maw of that old shotgun of his was burning a mellow pair of loops into the back of his neck, pushing him away. Away from his home. Away from the dull but now distant murmur of a growing frenzy, from the town below.

“I know”, Ben had said from the black form hovering before him, words thick, only just recognisable, breath laced with the feral musk one gets from murder. Mayor Bird twisted and squirmed beneath a shaking fist knuckled deep, somehow between his lung and ribs, twisting up clothes painfully, pushing out his breath in shuddery, messy fits of spit and shouts.

No, Bird shook his head, that was moments ago. Minutes ago? His lung still throbbed in anger. The stars were gone, the sharp tooth of the horizon making itself known. A dark blue sky, dappled up with small clots of high cloud. Still they stumbled and trudged forward.

His mind raced with futile explanations, rejecting one after the other as they all fell wanting. Inconclusive. Illogical. All of his reasons, none of them would please the man who had to be sacrificed. It was in moments like these that this happens, he thought. The sharp lines of the horizon went blurry and watery with released grief. “It’s true”, he sagged to a stop, letting the barrels of the shotgun ride up sharp in his neck. “You wouldn’t let the war end!” he barked out Jackson’s words before thinking, thoughts just spilling out, “it was the only way to end it, Marshal, Ben, please...”

Marshal Wright laughed a little too sharp, a little too loud. Hat in hand. Something in the dark skittered, metal on pebble. “It wasn’t very difficult to put together, Henry.” The moment grew quiet and long, “And you can keep the Marshal, and the Ben. I resign my post out of respect for it, and you have no business calling me ‘Ben’,” His voice dropped to a low rasp, “This is just me, all that’s left of Benjamin Wright.”

The shot felt unexpectedly gentle, Bird laughed to himself as consciousness was whittled down to its rarest, most desperate point. Here it grows frantic, sparking down to utter

incoherence until it finds a moment of peace, not tamed gently, and only a silky awareness of one's own limbs and tongue. Without even a remorseful pause, all vanishes. The habitual frown carved deep into his face, and like a squatting pumpkin, melts in on itself as it prepares for the long rot.

chapter twenty-two

Montréal Whiles

I REMEMBER THE DAY.

The door slammed behind me. Hard. The blaze of the sun overhead extended a hand to shake. I ignored it. There I was, Marshal Wright, stopped at the edge of the boardwalk in front of my old office, rocking back on my heels, then forward before I stepped off into the hard, sun-baked street. My attention turned in the direction of a patch of pale yellow as it swished back and forth down the street toward the Red Boot.

Cathrine.

Plop!

Something hit my hat. I reached up to remove whatever it was, thinking it was still stuck in the crater of the bowl since nothing fell to the ground. I pulled away a handful of goo. Looking up at a sky so white-blue it hurt the eyes, I saw nary a bird a in sight. I spat then, spat hard and wet into my hand and wiped spittle and doo on the seat of my trews. When I continued on my way, the yellow bit of skirt was no longer to be seen.

The hard baked clay of the street absorbed the sound of my boots as I crossed it. I could feel the sweat trying to form on my brow only to be robbed by that too hot and too white

sun. Stepping up onto the wooden sidewalk, my boots announced my arrival. The wind moaned down the street, finding only tumbleweed to usher before it. The doors creaked as the hinges swung in at the bidding of the newest arrival, me, ex-marshal. The sound of my boots pounded out a pensive rhythm across the floor.

“Ben.” The barkeep clonked a shot glass down on the bar in time with the greeting and filled it.

“Give me the bottle, wouldja,” I returned for a greeting.

My foot found purchase on the brass bar below, knew its way there, and my fingers found the glass. The barkeep returned to whatever he had been doing before my arrival. I swallowed hard, refilled the glass and pivoted around on one elbow to survey the room. Surprised to find I wasn’t alone in the empty silence of the dim saloon, I returned to thoughts more silent and even darker as I pivoted around again to face what the doctor ordered for my state of mind. I slammed another and refilled it.

I was reaching for another refill when the doors slapped against the wall on either side of the door frame to admit another visitor. The stink of ‘em preceded the sound. No one jumped. This time there was more than one new arrival. One, with a slight stutter in his walk, the other was just this side of silent, almost invisible to the ear. More curious about the source of that almost nonstep heading towards the bar, I pivoted again, but on the other elbow. I quickly pivoted back and hunched down over my drink.

“I’ll have whatever the marshal’s havin’, or should I say ex-marshal?” A loud voice sneered to the barkeep. “Well, well, well,” it started.

“Well, well, well, well,” another voice plucked out testily on Ben’s left.

I watched from the corner of my eye as a dirty hand with chipped nails and evident crud beneath them removed the glass from the line of my peripheral vision then returned it to the same spot, empty.

“Now boys, we don’t want no trouble in here,” the barkeep reminded the recent arrivals as he punctuated the statement with the sound of wood contacting wood from behind the bar.

“No trouble,” the voice sneered again. “Just a bit of a talk with the ex-marshal here.”

“Yeah, the *ex*-marshal,” the voice plucked again.

“And, soon to be dead ex-marshal,” he tossed back the amber liquid then set the glass down real easy like. “I reckon we should get this over, Madsen.”

I swirled the liquid in my glass around before setting it to my lips. Wished I could ignore ‘em for the stink alone. I looked up at him, moving only the slightest bit to catch him in my sites. Wished there was a trigger to pull.

“I’m comin’ for you, Mr. Ex-marshal,” he smiled, keeping his teeth a secret, and reached for my bottle.

I let him. I was glad he couldn’t see me sweat, glad that the sweat had followed the tumbleweeds down the street. I grunted.

“Course, he knows that, don’t he, Seth?”

He looked over my head at the stink behind me. He slid my bottle in that direction. I caught it.

Dirt-and-grime to my left plucked out a chuckle. Kinda what you hear when Stupid-drunk tries to get up from the floor he’d been kissing after meeting an unfriendly fist. He reached for my bottle. I didn’t let him have it. I resisted the urge to introduce him to a fist.

“Bet he’s gonna do his best imitation of that mutt we

turned inside out that night outside of Sierra Vista. Remember, Seth?”

“Yup, the mutt had his tail between his legs first sight of us.”

“Think I’ll call you, Mr. X. Can me an my buddy Madsen here call you, Mr. X?”

When I didn’t answer, he went on.

“See, we’s ‘bout ready to get what we came for - your bird-shit covered ass.”

I figured it was time for me to say something since they obviously couldn’t read body language. Every fiber in my body was screamin’, *Leave me the fuck alone!*

“Okay, Shit-for-brains. You, me, outside in three hours.”

I turned back to the business of getting drunk. That ought to do it.

“Whoa, the man has stones. Dudn’t’nee, Madsen? Just to show him I’ll be there. Gonna loan him one of my guns and ask him to return it to me real nice like.”

I heard a plucky chuckle behind me at that. Next thing I knew I was looking at an ugly bit of black metal sitting next to my bottle. It kinda thumped right down as it made its presence known. I didn’t move. Instead, I knocked back two more as the nonstep and the stutter step cut a pas de deux to the door. Half an hour later the hard heals of my boots cut a pensive step to the exit. I had dance practice looming ahead.

So, at about two and a half hours later, there I was pounding hard clay thinking more and not sweatin’ a drop as I headed down towards my curtain call, that turn on Fremont avenue which would take me to my next appointment. My horse’s hooves were doing a bit more loud thinking at double my time. Some appointments a person does well to be fashionably late for. This one, on the other hand was best got

over and done with. I had other things I wanted to do, a bucket list kinda. I saw a pale yellow dress drift across the street ahead of me in the distance, so I picked up the pace and my feet stopped thinking so much and took up the horse's cadence in about a quarter of its meter. I got up to the intersection and turned to make my appointment. The yellow dress was gone.

I could see a fair large crowd standing there on either side of the street.

Shit, looks like the party was about to start and here I was almost late to my own send off. Guess I needed to get closer. All the uglies were there waiting, Jackson, Madsen, Vaughn, Lacey, Lacey and Lacey. I let my boots think my way up to a safe distance in front of them. Jackson smiled and looked me hard in the eye. The ends of the lip weasel sitting above his toothless smile did a couple of twitches then settled down.

The crowd did what crowds do and moved a step closer, then moved three steps back when my hand moved slowly to my hip. Oh, wrong hip. They leaned in as I took my hand away, then leaned back when they saw my other hand go for the other hip. My nerves were steel. I knew what was coming next, there would be no surprise element, or so I thought. I was just about to give in to the twitch that would find the gun in my hand and pointed at Jackson when all of a sudden, I heard a click behind me from the crowd on the right side of the street.

WHAT THE FUCK?

I was ready for the lead I knew was heading straight for my back. Then there was another click and another and another all coming from either side of the street from the crowd. It was more than surprise I saw on Jackson's face just before he heard the final click. He couldn't argue with Michael Lacey's

gun pointed not even an inch from his head. His fingers stopped twitchin’.

One by one, the uglies dropped their weapons to the hard baked clay. Someone, I don’t remember who, stepped from the crowd and gathered them up. Lacey turns to me, his pistol still pointed to Jackson’s head.

“Go ahead, Marshal. Haul ‘em in.”

“That’s ex-marshal, Mr. X, Michael” I said, moving my hand slowly away from the gun on my hip. I lifted the hat from my head with the other hand, once it remembered it had a purpose, and ran the fingers of my gun hand through my hair.

Somewhere in the crowd, I thought I saw a hint of pale yellow. Wiping the sweat from my brow, and blinking my eyes cured me of that notion. Slowly, I turned on one of my hard clay pounding boots and let them stroll me over, unthinking to to Kate, where she waited for me, faithful, nonchalant, and yes, uninterested in the tumbleweed blowing past. I mounted, heeled her flank, and turned. Didn’t stop until I ended up here, where ever here is.