



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

Ryker Hayes

THE WHEELS OF THE cart bounced continuously, shaking and jerking the occupants mercilessly. Michael shifted his weight on the unsanded wooden seat for the tenth time since they'd started out to John's house.

"Stop moving!" William snapped. He pulled a pinch of snuff out of his pocket and shoved it into his cheek. He was as uncomfortable and his temper was already bubbling under the surface. The hot afternoon sun beat down on his back and sweat dripped onto his shirt collar.

"Why don't you make me you son of a bitch." Michael's hand flew to his colt revolver hanging on his hip. The smooth metal felt cool against his calloused fingers.

"Knock it off!" John shouted. His hold tightened on the lone horse's reins causing it to slow down. The harness jingled as the horse shook its mane. "We'll be at my house soon. Anyone who doesn't like the cart can get off and walk." He looked away from the blurry dirt road to let his eyes relax.

"How did you get this infernal cart anyway?" William spit a thick glob of brown onto the dusty ground. He rubbed a dirty finger against his nose and left behind a brown sweaty smudge.

John muttered under his breath and snapped the reins. “It was the only thing I could afford and you damn well know it.” He lifted his arms to pull the shirt away from the skin on his stomach.

William reached into the back of the cart and brought the trunk into the front. He snapped open the lid and riffled through it. His face twisted into a grimace. “Damn! We grabbed the wrong trunk. It’s just full of women’s clothing.” He held up a pink lace covered corset in disgust.

“Hey,” John said as he inspected the corset. “Keep it. I bet Catherine would like it.”

William slammed shut the trunk and tossed it into the back. “Don’t you get it? All our money was in our trunk.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Michael growled. “John’s up to his neck in debt to half the town. How in the hell did we let him get so far into debt anyway!” He fingered his moustache and stared off at the passing cactuses and tumbleweeds. “If he doesn’t start paying them back I bet old Hank Elliot will whip all the men of Flintwood into a frenzy. There’ll be a hangin’ for sure and I’m not sure we could stop it!”

John let go of the reins with a hand and ran it across his neck, feeling the phantom rope closing around it, choking the air out of his lungs. His tongue felt thick and gummy in his mouth and his hands went cold and clammy. Mama had always talked about religion when they were kids, though he never bought into it. Suddenly, her words didn’t sound so dumb anymore.

“We could leave the state.” William said under his breath half heartedly. He licked his dry lips, his thoughts on the last beer he had. It was too hot and stuffy to be worrying about something like a hangin’. He waved an annoying fly away from

his face.

John was shaking his head before William had finished. “We can’t. Who’s going to buy my house and my shitty land?” He spit over the edge of the cart. “Nah, we need a better plan than that and quick.” Michael jostled his arm and he jumped. “Stay on your side of the seat!”

“I’ve got our plan right here.” Michael pointed farther up the road. Against the horizon in a cloud of dust, a stagecoach was heading their way.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do.” William said sitting up straight, a crooked grin on his face.

“Hey there, stop!” John scrambled to his feet next to the ‘broken’ cart and waved down the passing stagecoach. Next to him, William and Michael stood up and stopped pretending to reattach the back wheel to the cart’s axle.

The driver of the stagecoach reined in the four brown horses and let John approach. “What happened here boys?” “The wheel came off its axle about an hour ago.” John waved at the wheel and ran his sleeve across his brow. “We’ve been waiting for someone to come across us.” He noticed that the stagecoach was painted in the distinct red and gold of the Wells Fargo stagecoach. Across the top of the door, painted in gold, was the stagecoach name. Perfect.

Next to the driver, another man leaned over to see the brother’s cart. “Is there anyway to fix it?” He was no blacksmith and couldn’t tell what was wrong with the cart other than the wheel was not where it was supposed to be.

John looked back at the wheel. “I don’t think so. At least not without tools.” He kicked at the dirt and spit. “How far away are we from the nearest town?”

“About four miles are so.” He pointed in the direction of

Flintwood. The town could just be seen as a hazy black smudge on the horizon.

“Hmm. I don’t think we can get there and back before the sun sets and you know, we’ve been hearing about bandits in this county.” John sensed his brothers close in behind him, readying themselves for the ambush. “We’ll be needing more than just the one horse we have.” He whipped out his colt and pulled the hammer back until it clicked. His brothers followed his lead with their guns. “Step down from the stagecoach and keep your hands where I can see them if you want to live.” He ordered the two men.

With three guns pointed at them, the driver dropped the reins and along with his partner, stepped down from the driver’s box without arguing with the men.

“Now, why don’t the two of you slowly remove those halters and toss them into the cactus patch then move your sorry asses over there.” John motioned with his colt to a spot away from the stagecoach.

The men complied, though somewhat grudgingly.

“You two! Get in there and see what you can find. This things from a bank, there’s gotta be some money in there. Hurry, before someone else shows up!” He ordered as he kept the gun trained on the two. Behind him, he heard the sound of goods being removed from the top of the stagecoach. “What do we have?” He turned to look.

“Two barrels of flour, a barrel of wheat and two locked trunks.” William rattled off as Michael threw the two brown trunks into the back of the cart.

“Leave the flour and wheat, but keep the trunks. Those should have the money.” He turned back to the two men. “Do the trunks have money? They better have the money!” He looked them up and down as they refused to answer and then

pointed at their feet. “Take your boots off and throw them into my cart.”

“Shit! Don’t make us do that!” The driver protested. Next to him, frozen with fear, his companion was already pulling his boots off.

John nodded, thinking to himself. Then he shot at the ground near the driver’s feet.

The driver jumped and a very unmanly screech erupted from him. He fell to the ground awkwardly and removed his boots.

John roared with laughter at his success. Shaking his head, he tossed the men’s boots into the cart. “Let’s get moving boys. Put the wheel back on the cart.” With his knife, he cut one of the stagecoach horses free and climbed onto it.

“What are you doing now?” Michael demanded. He had finished putting the wheel back on the cart and was seated with the reins in his hands.

“I’m not riding in that damn cart again.” John turned the horse’s head around and set off at a gallop towards his house.

William cut another horse loose and climbed onto it as well.

“What the hell?” Michael protested. He stood up on the cart seat and glared at his brother. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’ll meet you back at the house.” William took off in a cloud of dust after John.

“You Bastards!” Michael shouted after him. He slapped the reins of the cart horse and chased after his brothers.

Back at the stagecoach, the two men watched as the Lacey brothers left with their cargo. The heat of the ground bit deep into their feet. They threw open the stagecoach door and sat

inside. With two horses left and all the cargo gone, they sat there thinking about what to do next.

“We need the marshal.” The driver ran a hand across his forehead and walked over to the horses they had left. He unharnessed one from the stagecoach and climb on.

“What about me?” The other man asked as jumped out the door.

“You stay here and guard what’s left of the coach. See if you can get the guns out of the cactuses to protect yourself.” The driver pulled the horse’s head around to face Flintwood. He spurred the horse and took off for the town.

chapter three

Kimberlee Gerstma

HIS HEELS DUG INTO the horse's sides as he leaned forward, his thick glove gripping the harness. He yelled commands, urging the animal to go faster. He could feel the horse's muscles working as they raced toward town. He knew that he was pushing the poor beast hard, but he would reward him once they had gotten the situation under control. Dust and pieces of gravel sprayed around them creating a moving cloud that filled his nostrils as they sped into town. The sooner they got help, the better chance there was to catch up to the robbers.

As they neared the Marshal's office, the coach driver pulled the reins to halt the horse. He didn't even wait long enough to ensure that the horse had stopped before sliding off of the sweating animal. He stumbled as his feet hit the ground, but he steadied himself and ran to the door.

Marshal Wright had been appreciating the relative quiet of the day and looking forward to getting some of his paperwork done and filed, but stood and circled to the front of his desk when he heard the sounds of a horse racing down Fremont Avenue toward the building. Curiosity grabbed him and with just a few steps he reached the door and met the dusty rider there.

“Help,” the man coughed. “I’m with Wells Fargo. Our coach was just robbed. I need as many men as you can spare to help. They got a lead on us, but I think we can catch them. They took two of our horses, but they had a pretty rickety cart. We just need to hurry.”

Ben ran his hand through his brown hair before pinching his hat off the rack behind the door. This definitely changed his plans for the day.

“How many men were there?” Ben asked.

“Three. They just came out of nowhere,” the coachman replied. “I’m going to get my horse watered while you get your men.” He stepped out the door and pulled his horse to the corner trough where he pumped some water.

Ben stepped back and caught Fred’s eye.

“Got that, Fred?” he asked.

Fred nodded.

“Get the guys ready while I see if I can get some extra bodies to help.” Ben crossed over and picked up his shotgun and rifle from the gun case.”

“Will do, boss,” Fred responded.

Ben headed out the door onto Fremont.

“My deputies are getting ready, and I’m going to check around to find a few more men. You can start off with Fred, Bob and George, and I’ll be right behind you.”

Ben unhitched Kate and down the street, he saw his three deputies and the coachmen mount their horses and take off, heading out of town. He tipped his hand to them as they rode by. Ben’s first stop was the Red Boot Saloon.

He stepped into the saloon and called out to the few occupants inside. “I need to form a quick posse to get after three armed robbers who took down a Wells Fargo coach just a little while ago. My men are on it, but we could use some

help.”

A few men looked up from their drinks, but none seemed interested.

“Hank? Paul? Jeb?” Ben called out three of the men he recognised.

Jeb shook his dark head and went back to his beer. Paul looked at Hank and Jeb. When he noticed Jeb’s decline, he too shook his head. Hank was the only one to actually speak up.

“Not my money. Not my problem. I got kids. The missus wouldn’t want me to be riskin’ my hide for somethin’ I ain’t got nothin’ to do with,” Hank replied. “Sorry, Ben.”

Ben tried to make eye contact with the rest of the patrons. No one would meet his gaze. He left the saloon in disgust. He understood Hank, but he also knew that there were a lot of single men in there, Jeb included. He met with the same response nearly everywhere else. The only one willing to help was Billy, the barber. Billy was always up for some excitement. Billy pulled a rifle from his closet, turned the closed sign on the door and met Ben outside.

They headed out of town and tried to make good time as they kept their eyes on the horizon for any activity. Farther outside of town, they could see the deputy group ahead of them. Ben was relieved to see that they wouldn’t be that far behind the rest of their crew. Soon they caught up with the rest.

“This is the posse?” Fred asked.

“Bunch of cowards in town,” Ben replied. “Wait until it happens to them. They won’t be so happy then.”

Soon they came upon the stagecoach. The other driver had unhitched the last remaining horse and was waiting for them. They rode off, leaving the coach behind. Once their small group had combined, they all sped up, hoping to catch the

robbers. The second coach driver had kept his eyes on the bandits as they departed. He knew the general direction they'd gone and led the group after them.

The men were quiet as they rode, each looking out for any sign of the three men. No sooner had Ben begun to think that they weren't going to be able to catch up with them after all, the coach driver pointed.

"I think that's them," he called to the rest.

There was something ahead of them, but Ben couldn't tell what it was. He kicked Kate's sides, and urged her forward, taking the lead. A few seconds later, his focus was a little better and he could make out what looked like a cart and several horses. He looked back and saw that the coachman was pulling his shotgun.

"Wait," Ben shouted. "We need to be sure it is them and not some happy family riding to town."

The coachman ignored Ben and raced past, spewing a cloud of dust up in Ben's face. Ben kicked Kate's sides again and tried to catch up with the coachman.

"Calm it down, buddy," Ben yelled.

"My neck is on the line for this one," the coachman called back and kept speeding toward the group.

The thunder of horses nearing caused the three men with the cart to take notice. The cart kept going and the two men on the Wells horses turned and started to fire on them. The coachman returned fire and kept speeding toward the two men.

"Damn fool," Ben muttered.

The coachman continued and Ben heard another round of shots. One of them hit the coachman right in the chest. He bucked backward and fell off of his horse, blood blooming across the front of his vest as he hit the ground.

One of the two men jumped from his horse and took cover behind a shrub. The second man continued ahead on his horse.

Ben ducked down, smelling the sweat in Kate's mane as he steered her around the coachman's body. Ben realised he was running straight into an ambush situation and yanked roughly on the reins, turning Kate sharply. He rode back toward his deputies who were about 100 yards behind him. They slowed down immediately.

"The cart is still on the move, and the man on the second horse is behind it, but the third guy is hiding behind some shrub up ahead."

"Let's flush him out, boss," Fred said. The rest agreed. George and Fred rode ahead, spreading their paths apart so they could try to circle the group of shrubs and get a visual.

Ben kept a watchful eye on the shrubs and his men. They slowly approached, hoping to draw out the third man. George closed in on the group of shrubs, but no one could see the third bandit. The rest of the group joined Fred and George. The horse remained, milling around and eating a tuft of grass, but the man was nowhere to be found.

Where did he go? Ben wondered. It wasn't the kind of place where someone could just disappear, but it seemed that he had.

Ben jumped down from Kate and checked on the coachman. He was dead. At least he hadn't suffered long. He remounted and they took off at a run, trying to catch the cart and the other horseman. They split into two groups, Fred and George leading and taking the far side, while Ben, Billy, Bob and the second Wells coachman remained central. Ben didn't think that the bandits had gotten a good look at the group and wouldn't know how many men they had. It might provide

them the element of surprise if Fred and George could get ahead of them and then close ranks to surround the cart.

They did just that. Ben's plan worked. Ben's group got the attention of the cart driver and second bandit. While the second guy took aim and tried to ward them off, Fred and George came at them from the other side. They surrounded the cart. The second bandit raced perpendicular and shot at them as he rode off. Ben took chase and followed him out into the brush.

Kate was getting tired. Ben could feel it. He pushed her anyway. They raced ahead, Ben confident that his deputies would secure the cart and driver. He wanted the other guy. They came upon a steep grade hillside with nothing but rock on his left side. Kate did her best to keep Ben within sight distance of the escapee. He hoped that the narrow trail would slow his man down, but it didn't seem to do much in deterring him. The Wells horse was much younger and stronger than Kate.

Ben felt a surge of adrenalin when they came around a curve and reached the crest of the hill that seemed to end in a dead end. He didn't see the man anywhere. He slowed Kate and was wary, realising he was in a dangerous position without cover. As he glanced around trying to figure out where the man could be, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. The guy had taken his horse down the side of the cliff and they were sliding near the bottom.

He slid his rifle from the holster, aimed and took a shot at the bandit. He thought he might have hit him, but with the distance, he couldn't tell. Not to mention that even if he did hit him, from the distance, it likely wouldn't have been a fatal shot anyway. He just wanted to make a point.

There was no way he could get Kate down the side of that

cliff. He turned and watched the man on the horse riding off in a cloud of dust. Ben slid out of the saddle and took great pains to turn Kate slowly around on the narrow trail. He couldn't imagine having her hurt or falling to her death. They rode back to join the rest of the group, and as he suspected. They had the cart secured and the third man in custody.

Billy, the barber, had a black eye and a shit-eating grin across his face.

"What happened?" Ben asked, surprised.

"Crazy Billy rushed the cart and got a sock in the eye from the guy. Billy caught him off guard, but ol' William here gave Billy a story that he can tell for the rest of his days. Billy on Billy action," Fred laughed.

Ben gave Fred a questioning look.

"This here is William. William Lacey. The other two jackasses are his brothers. He's the baby of the family."

"My brothers will not let me go down for this," William spat.

Fred had the young bandit handcuffed and on the back of his horse. The guy didn't look like he was even old enough to shave, much less rob a stagecoach.

"We'll see about that," Ben stated. "They sure didn't mind leaving you holding the bag now did they?"

William sneered, his light brown eyes conveying all of the anger he held.

The group rode back to town and Ben escorted William to his cell. He always loved the sound of the iron bars slamming shut with a criminal inside. There was definitely an intimidation factor in that sound. Ben twirled the keys on his finger and took a long look at William.

"Dumb kid," he said.

"You don't know who you are dealing with," was William's

retort. “My brothers will come for me. You just wait and see.” He said the words with such force, spittle flew from his lips as he spoke.

“So you say,” Ben replied.

“You just wait. They will be here.”

“I hope you are right,” Ben said with a smile.

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

M. Peyton Culbertson

THINGS HAD STARTED TO get interesting around here. In law enforcement, interesting was the last thing you wanted. The Marshal pushed open the doors to the Red Boot saloon, grateful that he could count on a nice boring evening with a bit of whiskey to help him unwind. He walked to the far side of the bar, as far away from the gamblers as he could get, and dropped down into his usual spot. From her he could keep his back to the wall while keeping an eye on the door and of course, the gamblers.

He was surveying the room when one of the young ladies that worked there dropped his usual down in front of him.

“Thanks Cloee.”

“Don’t mention it. How’s business these days Marshal?”

“Oh, been a bit better than I’d like, but hopefully things will slow down a bit for the rest of the evening.”

“I hear you there,” Cloee said with a tone of frustration in her voice. “Things around here could stand to be a bit more calm tonight.”

“Really?” Marshal Wright smiled mischievously. “These gamblers giving you trouble? Just say the word and I’ll run ‘em all in.”

“Nothing like that, at least not yet.” She motioned for the Marshal to look towards the bar.

What Marshal Wright saw made his blood boil.

“Jasper’s back in town and he’s treating miss Donley like she’s one of the working girls again.” Cloee waited for the Marshal to say something. “Ain’t you gonna do nothin’ about it?”

“Nope. Not a thing I can do until he breaks the law. Right now, all he’s doing is being rude. Nothin’ illegal about that.”

“You got more patients than me Marshal.”

“Just the same, you might want to give the Doc a call. You know? In case this goes badly again.”

“Will do.” Cloee walked away, shaking her head.

Marshal Wright sat there, watching the situation with Catherine unfold the only way it could. She kept shooing him away like the pest he was. Unfortunately, he kept coming back undeterred.

One of the traits of Catherine Donley that he liked the most was that she had the patients of saint. The thing he absolutely loved about her though was that she tempered that patients with an Irish temper to beat all Irish tempers.

He could see it boiling up inside her and was utterly baffled that Jasper couldn’t. Finally, she’d had enough. As quick as lightning, her temperament went from saintly to that of a barroom brawler. With a solid left hook, she planted her fist straight into his right eye. She didn’t seem strong enough to have packed that much power into a punch. None the less, Jasper went backwards into the gambling tables, spilling cards and chips alike onto the floor. The deed done, Catherine snapped back into her more saintly persona almost as quickly as she had snapped out of it.

Looking up from the floor at the angry faces staring down

at him, Jasper tried to apologise, but the fuse was already lit. In a defunct mining town like Flintwood where most people were dirt poor and yet had known better days, tensions always ran high. It didn't take much to get people riled up. Fists started flying.

Marshal Wright downed the last of his whiskey a bit faster than he would have liked. He walked slowly over to the bar to set his empty glass down. "Here, you might want to put this somewhere safe," was all he said to the bartender.

Sure a little property was being destroyed and sure people were getting hurt, but the Marshal wanted to wait until the crowd had blown off exactly the right amount of steam. He figured it was better to let off a bit of steam here and there rather than to allow it to build up to more dangerous levels.

The Marshal and every one of the fighters froze in place when a single shot rang out in the saloon. Marshal Wright turned to see Deputy Bell holding his smoking revolver over his head. The Marshal gave him a look of frustration, motioning for him to lower his weapon.

As a general rule, people didn't come to the Red Boot to get shot. The crowd calmed right down and began to disperse with somewhat sheepish looks about them. All, that is, except for two men he didn't recognise. They had stopped fighting, but they kept their eyes locked on each other as they slowly moved apart.

Marshal Wright hated seeing that look in men's eyes. It never ended well. He motioned for Deputy Bell to cover him as the rest of the customers cleared out. He approached the two strangers. "Pardon me gentlemen, allow us to introduce ourselves. My name is Benjamin Wright, my friends mostly just call me Ben. And this fine upstanding gentleman pointing the revolver at you goes by the name of George Bell."

Deputy Bell silently tipped his hat to acknowledge his introduction.

“We mostly just call him Bell. Now please excuse the interruption. We couldn’t help but notice that you two, obviously civilised gents, looked like you where about to draw down on each other, right in this here establishment. Now you both look new around here, so I’m thinking you might not realise that the citizens of Flintwood and most especially the patrons of the Red Boot tend to frown a bit on duels.”

The less well dressed of the strangers spoke first. “Do we look like we care what this mining town trash thinks? Now go climb back into your little hole and leave us to settle this like real men.”

“Well, I’d like to do that, surely I wood, but you see, I have it on good authority that the City Marshal really hates this sort of thing happening in his town.”

The other stranger, obvious a professional gambler, chimed in. “Look. This man’s accusing me of cheating and I can’t let that stand. Now run along or we’ll shoot you first before we draw on each other. Got that?”

“Oh! Right.” Marshal Wright tended to be a bit sarcastic when dealing with criminals. “Did I forget to mention that I am the Marshal and this here is my Deputy? Sorry about that. But you see, now we have the little matter of you threatening an officer of the law and for that I’m going to have to insist that you be my guest in our local jail. Just for the night of course or however long it takes to get this whole thing sorted out.”

“You can’t be serious,” exclaimed the first stranger, “you’re no law man.”

“What, I don’t look the part?” Marshal Wright feigned offence.

“No,” said the second stranger, “it’s more like you don’t act the part.”

“Oh really?” The Marshal’s interest was peaked. “Do you have a lot of experience dealing with law men?”

The look on the professional gambler’s face made it clear that he knew when to stop talking.

“Alright then. You two fine gentlemen leave your weapons on the bar and Deputy Bell here will escort you to your lodgings for the night.”

Both men complied quietly and moved toward the door under the watchful eye of Deputy Bell.

“Jasper!” Marshal Wright yelled the name out in no particular direction. “Do you really think I don’t know you’re hiding behind the bar.”

Jasper slowly came up from his impromptu shelter. “Sorry Marshal, I’ll be moving along now.”

“You’re darn right you will.” Marshal Wright was clearly not in the mood for Jasper’s games. “You’re going with Deputy Bell to spend the night in the slammer with these two other reprobates.”

“Come on Marshal. What did I do.”

“Jasper.” Marshal Wright didn’t mind letting the anger in his voice come through loud and clear. “You know full well that none of this would have gotten started if you hadn’t been pestering Ms. Donley and treating her like she was a working girl.”

“But Marshal, all women are whor...”

Marshal Wright wasn’t about to let a sentence like that be finished, especially not about a lady like Ms. Donley and especially not by a worm like Jasper.

He pounded his fist into Jaspers left eye as hard as he could. He grabbed the disoriented Jasper by the collar and

pulled him over to his side of the bar, dropping Jasper onto the floor. “You might want to consider it a kindness that I hit you when I did. If I’d let you finish that sentence, I would have had to do far worse to you.” Marshal Wright had a malicious grin come over his face. “Beside, now your eyes match.”

Deputy Bell picked Jasper up by the collar and proceeded to escort him and the two other prisoners out of the saloon.

Marshal Wright reached behind the bar for a bottle of whiskey and a glass. He set them on one of the remaining tables. Picking up one of the unbroken chairs and placing it at the table, he proceeded to make himself comfortable. He poured himself a glass, raised it up to the empty saloon as a toast and said, “finally, some piece and quite.”

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

Chris Lozac'h

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

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

“Bob!”

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

“Fred!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have your orders. Git!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You ready, Deputy Wilson?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a wet rag in circles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

centre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Much obliged."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your deal.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

is...we want to deputise Cole here.”

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

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

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

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

“I don’t mind danger.”

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

“What’s the job?”

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

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

“I think maybe I am, Cole.”

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

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

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

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

Charlie slumped back into his chair, seething this time.

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

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

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

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

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

any man.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frank considered this potential slight, then nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

chapter eight

Jaysen O'Dell

“MARSHAL...?”

“IT’S BEN.”

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

“I get that, but...”

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

“What’ll I call you?”

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

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

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

“You know we have this conversation every time?”

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

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

few more times.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mmmm.”

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

“Craven’s place to the north.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Deputy, keep sharp.”

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

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

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

“Hello. You are looking for them.”

“Three men.”

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

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

“The men you seek continued on.”

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

“Tobac?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yup.”

Kate resumed her way down the tail.

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

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

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

“What’s the problem then?”

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

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

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

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

Kate started and took several steps back.

“Hello. Now you are looking for me.”

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

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

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

“Mmmph. Wait here.”

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

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

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

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

“I understand what you are saying.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dang it! Was it the horses?”

“Nope. Fire.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sheriff ...”

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

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

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

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

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

“Agreed.”

“Works for me.”

“Can I sleep here?”

“No. Let’s go.”

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

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

Only Frank said anything. After thinking a few moments

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

“You’d make a perfect dep’ty, Frank.”

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

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

Damn that woman.

chapter nine

Sue Cowling

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to do what you got to do, understand?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

back in his belt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, lad thats part of the job, we need to clear the town of the bad influences, and seems to me you don’t agree with that?”

“Well, Marshal I have strong opinions about hanging, but if you're asking me if I would shoot down a man in cold blood, I am telling you I can do that,” he hesitated, “I mean I could do that if he deserved to die, if you just give me a chance to prove myself.”

At that moment there was a shout and they both turned as a man run out of the Red Boot Saloon, closely followed by another man shouting, “Stop, thief.”

Seeing an opportunity, Sam stepped out onto the street in front of the man just as he reached him, causing him to falter, seeing the size of Sam he smirked, and at that moment Sam brought up his fist and hit him under his chin, knocking him to the ground, then quickly pulling his gun from his holder he knocked him senseless with the butt of it.

The Marshal was right beside him and grabbed the man by his collar and hauling him to his feet led him of to one of the cells, followed closely by the man who was explaining to him what had happened.

Marshal called back over his shoulder, “ThanksSam just

wait there, and we will finish this talk.”

Sam walked over to his mare, and looked around him, except for that bit of excitement, it was quiet, almost too quiet, the calm before the storm maybe?

At that moment Marshal appeared, followed by the man who had been calling out thief, Sam did not recognise him, but recently there had been a few strangers in town. He looked at Sam, nodding his head, “Thanks” he muttered and walked back to the saloon.

Marshal come over to him, “Sam well done back there, you did a good job stoping him.” He paused, “But lad this job is not for you, I need a man with the guts to do what needs to be done, and I don’t get the impression that you do have the courage to do the job.”

In a raised voice Sam spoke “I stopped that man, I can use a gun, is that not good enough proof that I can?”

“No lad it's not, when it comes down to it you're not the right person for the job, sorry Sam but thats my decision.”

Sam pulled the reins free of the post and jumped up on the mare, who kicked out at the rough treatment, “You're a cussed fool, Marshal, thats all I can say” and turning the mare he rode away back towards Gila Ave.

chapter ten

Linda Weeks

“COME ON FRANKIE BOY, get a move on!” Charlie swayed in the saddle as his mare pranced her two front feet in the dust outside Frank Brown’s front door. His horse exchanged mutual glances with the young colt already saddled and tethered there. It had been a short ride from Charlie’s house, but she’d been having a happy time in the barn eating her hay and hadn’t taken kindly to being suddenly disturbed, saddled up and ridden out into the sweltering sunlight.

Charlie could smell coffee and heard movement inside Frank’s house but there was no reply. Cursing, he swung down out of his saddle and threw the horse’s reins carelessly over the wooden rail outside the porch. His horse shook her head and blew through her nostrils, then settled her weight comfortably onto her back legs. The other horse swung his head round to acknowledge her presence.

“BROWN!” bellowed Charlie, thumping on the door. “We’re going to be late!” The door opened slowly, and Charlie swiftly pushed it further inwards with his foot, the latch catching Frank on the back of his hand as he did so.

“Keep your voice down!” grumbled Frank, rubbing his hand in annoyance. “The whole town will hear you!”

“What do I care? We’re just going out for a little ride, ain’t we! Nothing against the law in that, not so far as I know. What’s taking you so long?”

“I’m having second thoughts about this whole thing. I don’t trust that Marshal to turn a blind eye to whatever we’re going to do, and I’ve no wish to go back in that jail. I’ve got a job now; barman’s given me a chance and I don’t want to mess it up. Have the Laceys said what the plan is?”

“Nope, John said nothing to me. C’mon, let’s go and we’ll find out. Cole said he’d meet us there.”

Frank had planned to offer Charlie some of his freshly made coffee - Lord knows, he looked like he needed it this morning - but one glance at Charlie’s stubbly face decided him against it. They might as well go and get this over with. The Laceys would be waiting; no point aggravating them. He grabbed his hat, came out and fastened his door with a bolt attached to a piece of string, though there was hardly anything in his cabin worth stealing. His horse nuzzled his shoulder as he walked past and Frank responded automatically by scruffing the colt’s mane just behind his ears.

The two men swung into their saddles almost simultaneously, but though Charlie had his foot in the stirrup first the younger man was already seated by the time Charlie landed heavily in his saddle, causing his horse to shift and snort in annoyance.

“You could do with losing a couple of pounds!” Frank grinned, cheekily, and Charlie replied with something unprintable.

The men turned their horses’ heads with a practised one-handed movement of the reins and set off towards John Lacey’s house, pulling the brims of their hats down to shade their eyes from the glaringly orange sun. They were dressed

alike, and seen from a distance they could almost have been mistaken for brothers, but close up it was obvious that they were made in different moulds. Charlie was the shorter and stockier of the two, and Frank had an easy grace, and brighter eyes even though he'd worked late into the night after chucking out time at the Red Boot saloon.

He wasn't averse to alcohol but hardly ever drank it. "I've seen what this gut-rot stuff does to you!" was his usual retort, though usually only when the bar owner wasn't around to hear him. He'd rather sell it than drink it, and this morning he'd woken refreshed and with a clear head. Unlike Charlie, who was now slumping and lolling in his saddle, with his chest and stomach making rumbling burps and belches.

Half an hour later after traversing what some people called desert but which was full of scrub, shrubs and flowering cacti, they arrived at John Lacey's place, where three other horses were already tethered to a water trough in the shade of a tree, cropping the short grass.

"See!" growled Charlie, shooting a look of annoyance at Frank. "We're late!" Frank shrugged.

Frank and Charlie's horses had seen the grass and quickened their pace, neighing a welcome to the other horses, who briefly looked up and then resumed their grazing.

Once their horses had been given a drink and tethered with the others, Frank and Charlie made their way up the two steps to John's little veranda. It wasn't a big house, but it was easy to see that John had come to Flintwood at just the right time and done quite well for himself in the early days. Now that things were in decline, however, he'd had to look around for other ways of making money. And the Marshal's plan was just the thing. He'd made coffee, and Charlie grabbed the pot, poured out a mugful and downed the hot drink in three gulps, as

though it hardly touched the sides. Then he filled up his mug again and drank the liquid more slowly, while Frank sipped his. The others had finished theirs already.

“What are we doing, then?” Charlie asked John.

John had a natural air of authority that had nothing to do with the fact that everyone had come to his house and it was his idea. Well, the Marshal’s idea, but John had jumped at the chance to make some easy money and had been quick to share it with the others.

John glanced at Frank and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Yep, we’ve decided already. We’re doing the Red Boot”, he said firmly, in a voice that brooked no argument. But Frank argued, and Cole grunted in surprise.

Frank’s eyes widened. “No!”

“Oh yes! It’s perfect. You have the keys, you know where the safe is. Heck, you can open the safe! Your boss will be out of town this afternoon, those girls will be upstairs asleep, or getting themselves beautified ready for when these two pay them a visit tonight—“ he broke off to point his thumb at his brothers, who smirked and grinned “—and you’re going to go right in there and come out with the easy money.”

“No! I am not! You want me to take all the risks, lose my job, land back in jail? They’ll know it was me!”

“He’s right, John” said William, while Cole and Michael nodded in agreement. “This whole thing could be a setup. What if Wright double-crosses us? He’d probably get some kind of reward for catching the lot of us and throwing us in jail.”

“Well, that’s why we’re testing his plan. This way only one of us gets caught if it all goes wrong.”

“Yeah, me! No, I’m not doing it.”

John took advantage of his extra inch in height to glare

down at Frank. He wasn't used to being thwarted, and especially not in front of others. "We already talked about this before you got here," he said, "and we decided."

Charlie slammed down his mug.

"You can see his point," he said. "What about one of the banks instead?"

"Rob a bank!" John was incredulous, and Cole looked nervous. "For our first job? You crazy or drunk or both?"

"I ain't neither," replied Charlie, sticking out his lower jaw, though clearly that was not true.

"Look," said William, "let's all just simmer down."

John took a step back and Frank leaned against the door frame.

William outlined his plan, which was that three of them would walk into the bank with masks over their faces and demand a sum of money from one of the tellers, whoever was nearest the door. The other three would keep watch, just in case the Marshal had set a trap for them. They wouldn't use guns unless absolutely necessary.

"I still vote for the store", said Cole.

"We already decided against that earlier", replied John, but looked as though he was re-considering the idea.

"Well, maybe," he said slowly, "I reckon that would work. We'll watch until it's quiet. Frank and Cole can keep a lookout and hold all the horses round the back of Fremont and Third. Call like a pack of coyotes if you see any trouble. You -" looking at William "- and you two -" gesturing towards Charlie and Michael "- come in with me. We won't take risks, we won't take everything, just like the Marshal says. Then back to this place to divvy up whatever we get."

"And nobody gets hurt," added Frank.

John's hand moved involuntarily to the knife that he kept

strapped to his waist. "Not unless absolutely necessary," he said, moving towards the door. "Come on."

The men followed him outside, mounted their reluctant horses and headed back to town.

"Must go to the bank in a bit, Bethie!" Steve Mason called to his wife, as he heaved the last barrel of flour off the back of the wagon and expertly rolled it into the storeroom. "Can you watch the front of the store?"

"I sure will, honey" his pretty young wife replied, coming into the counter area from the kitchen behind. She was holding their ginger cat, who was purring contentedly. Steve went to the front door and turned the sign from Closed to Open.

"I'm a lucky man!" he said, smiling at her, and looking forward to later when they would eat the hot apple pie which he could already smell in the oven. "My wife's still beautiful after all these years AND a good cook!" he joked. Mary-Beth smiled back at him. They'd only been married a few months since April, not years, and already she was carrying a secret which she would tell him about that evening. She'd wait until -

"Give us the money! Now!"

Steve whirled round from the front door to face four masked men. Mary-Beth clung to the counter as the cat jumped out of her arms and ran back into the kitchen.

"And nobody gets hurt!"

Steve realised that he was looking at three Colt Army Revolvers. He also saw the glint of metal in the hand of the man who had spoken. The fourth man had no weapon but had big fists, and Steve knew that he'd never be able to take him on and survive.

"How did you get in?" Steve demanded, though realising

that he'd stupidly left the double back doors to the storeroom open. They must have been watching him unload the supplies, and then crept in behind him.

"No!" shouted Mary-Beth; "please don't shoot us! Please don't take all our money!"

One of the other men stepped forward from behind the leader, and just touched the brim of his hat.

"We're right sorry, Ma'am," he said. "We don't want to hurt nobody none."

"And we won't take it all," said the third gang member. "Just a hundred dollars, maybe?"

"Bethie," said Steve. "Stand aside; let them take the money."

Mary-Beth backed away as the man in front of the others lifted the flap at the end of the counter and walked round towards the till. He counted out some notes and threw in some coins and went back into the store. All four gang members looked up as what sounded like two coyotes fighting came clearly from outside across the street behind them.

"Our thanks, Ma'am," said the leader, as he put his gun and knife away. He took the bag and followed the other men out of the rear door. John glanced up and saw Marshal Ben Wright watching them from the corner across the street, but he didn't call out or try to stop them.

With hearts pounding, the men ran to their horses and mounted up, John still clutching the bag.

Ben walked slowly round to the front of the store and in through the door.

"They're in a mighty hurry," he remarked, casually, as twenty-four hooves kicked up a dust-storm as they clattered down the street.

Steve was comforting his distraught wife, who was

trembling in her thin summer dress. “Marshal! Did you see them? We’ve been robbed!”

The Marshal walked calmly up to the counter. “Get away with much?”

Mary-Beth’s quivering fingers pointed to the till, which was still open.

“Did they take the lot?”

“No — about a hundred, they said.”

Ben sauntered around the counter and looked in the till. “You got more than that left. Did they hurt either of you?”

“Well, no — but — aren’t you going to go after them?” Steve asked. “I’ll come with you — we can catch them if we’re quick.”

“And each get a bullet in the head for our trouble?” said the Marshal. “No. I reckon you’ve got off lightly. Whatever they took, letting them keep it is cheaper than getting shot would have been. Best leave things be.”

chapter eleven

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

Raymond Xander

JIMMY-BOB THORNTON AND his younger brother Billy-Joe set their eyes on Flintwood for the first time, and Jimmy-Bob proclaimed that it was a shit-hole.

“C’mon, we’ll leave the horses down there.” The two headed down 4th street and dropped onto the ground. After tying the horses up, Jimmy-Bob motioned for Billy-Joe to follow him to the corner of Tucker, opposite the First National Bank. They quietly arranged a couple of wooden crates next to the door of an old shack. Jimmy-Bob peeped inside, saw nobody, and the pair sat down on the crates confidently.

“You got the cards?” asked Jimmy-Bob.

“Ah sure do,” replied Billy-Joe, taking out the playing cards from his knapsack. “Looky-here JB - only four cards missing last time I checked.”

“Keep it quiet, we don’t wanna attract no attention. As far as anyone else is concerned, we own this place. And all we’re doing is having a good ol’ card practice.”

“Sure, JB.”

Jimmy-Bob Thornton looked up underneath his straw hat and peered across the street to the bank. He stared harder, his

brain trying to make his eyes look right through the walls to see inside. Billy-Joe finished shuffling the pack and coughed at his brother.

“What have you got?” asked Billy-Joe.

“It’s just a building,” thought Jimmy-Bob out loud, “Same as any other building.”

“There must be a reason Seth and Jimmy chose us to do this, JB.”

“Yep.”

“I’m thinking it’s because we’re the brains of the operation. They’re just... they’re just the planners. We’re the doers.”

“I’m thinking you keep your wild fantasies to yourself, little brother. Seth and Jimmy just don’t wanna get their stinking hands any dirtier if they can avoid it.”

Jimmy-Bob looked away from the bank and took the cards given to him. A local on horseback galloped past, nodding hello to them as he did so.

“Wow, we must have blended in real good already,” remarked Billy-Joe.

“I’d say it’s not that difficult, given everybody around here wears the same colours, and all men have their faces covered in hair. We’re not exactly from the Moon in comparison.”

“And you say I have wild fantasies,” said Billy-Joe.

“I didn’t say I wanted to live on the Moon.”

“One day we’ll all be living on the Moon, Jimmy-Bob.”

“Is that so.”

“Yessir, I can see it now big brother. We’ll all be on the Moon living in harmony. There’ll be no fighting because nobody talks to each other, y’know, face to face. It’s all done in the air.”

“In the air?”

“Y’know, like using airwaves or something like that. We’ll

be able to communicate our thoughts onto ... I dunno, onto something like these cards. Everybody has a little card, with shapes on them that you can press and it sends messages in the air to anyone - anyone in space, on the Moon, and even here in Flintwood.”

“And what do you think they have on the Moon that we don’t got here?”

“I don’t know ... probably cleaner drinking water for a start.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re insane, little brother?”

“Every day. But until a doctor tells me, I’ll ignore you thank you very much.”

“I’d say, sitting there, you’re very much insane,” said John Lacey, standing tall above the two men. Billy-Joe threw his cards down and jumped up to his feet.

“Relax, little brother,” remarked Jimmy-Bob. The older Thornton placed his cards calmly to the ground and stood upright slowly. Billy-Joe positioned himself behind his brother then, remembering he was supposed to be confident, stood alongside Jimmy-Bob and puffed his chest out.

“You two ain’t from around here, are ya,” said John Lacey from four feet away.

“We’re new, that much is true,” confirmed Jimmy-Bob.

“Well you must be from far, far away. Nobody around here talks about living on the Moon. We got enough troubles right here.”

“Forgive this man,” said Jimmy-Bob, pointing to his brother, “His brain isn’t wired the same way as ours.”

“And what makes you think ours are, friend?”

“Looky-here,” piped up Billy-Joe, “If anyone is insane around here it’s you, coming up and interrupting a nice quiet game between men. Two men. And, if I’m not mistaken, you’s

is just one man. So back off, mister.”

John Lacey raised no smile, keeping his eyes on both men.

“I’ve played every card game there is to play. That wasn’t no game. In fact, I’d even say you was making the whole thing up as you went along.”

Jimmy-Bob motioned for his brother to keep quiet. “Sometimes you have to take liberties when four cards short, friend.”

“What were you really doing?”

“I’m pretty sure you already know,” said Jimmy-Bob. “Question is - what are we to do about it?”

John Lacey took a slow, short step back, followed by a second one. The Thornton brothers stepped forward.

“Look,” said John, “We can be civilised here. I have no intention of seeing that Remington you have in action, as much as I admire it.”

“We have a problem then,” said Jimmy-Bob, “Because the way I see it, you’ve butt your nose in where it don’t belong, and we’re gonna have to fix it.”

Michael and William Lacey simultaneously placed their revolvers into the backs of the Thornton brothers.

“Problem fixed,” said William. The Thorntons lifted their arms slightly, away from their sides. Jimmy-Bob let off a predictable sigh.

“You two are lucky Charlie ain’t here,” said Michael, “or else this’d be a whole lot worse.”

“Now,” said John, “It’s swell to have visitors, but your time is up. Next time you have eyes on our town, you’ll do well to carry out your spying from further afield.”

“I hear the Moon is a nice place this time of year,” said William, into the ear of Billy-Joe Thornton.

“Be some good boys and get back on your horses,” said

John. "We're going for a ride."

"You see that? The Marshal isn't doing a darned thing."

Seth Madsen and Jimmy Jackson stood forward, leaning on the balcony barricade overlooking Gila and 4th. Seth handed the binoculars back to Jimmy. They watched Town Marshal Wright at the corner of Fremont and 4th observing the confrontation between the Laceys and the Thorntons.

"This would never happen back home," said Jimmy. "Our Marshal would have lunged in head-first and given himself a hard old time cleaning up the mess. This guy... this guy is passive."

"Or just a giant pussy," replied Seth. Through the binoculars, Jimmy Jackson watched Marshal Wright smirk at the altercation and walk west towards the saloon, out of sight. Jimmy guided his sight south towards the corner of the First National Bank, where the three men escorted Jimmy-Bob and Billy-Joe Thornton onto their horses, near ready to head down Tucker and out of town.

Seth takes the binoculars back and places them into his sack. "This contraption is great. You were right, Jackson - the war was good for all sorts of things."

"Where do you think they'll take our boys?"

"That's the great thing about JB and his nut-job brother - they're clever, they just don't know it. We'll find out."

"Can you be a genius and an idiot at the same time?"

"Those two manage it just fine, my friend. C'mon, let's see where they go."

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

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

MICHAEL CREPT QUIETLY, THE sound of the dry ground breaking under his boots. The light of the moon above him is the only way he can see where he is going. There aren't many places to hide, except a few Saguaro cacti, not that they would offer him any shelter, and it would only take someone peering out the window at the right time. Getting caught would surely mean death for him. They killed Charlie. Who is to say they wouldn't kill him. Even if he is a Lacey and he has his doubts his brothers would be able to help him. If they even wanted to.

He untied his horse, a black mare he hasn't bothered to name, and after taking one last peek behind him at the house, satisfied that everything seems in order, he led it down the path. He's taking a big risk going into town. A bigger one by going to the marshal, but he's not liking the way things are heading since Jackson and Madsen took over. The plans they are putting in motion, it goes against what the gang used to stand for and what he is willing to do. Jackson and Madsen are going to play by their own set of rules and Michael doesn't want any part of it.

He peaked behind him one last time, seeing the yellow hue

in the only window facing his direction. If he strained hard enough, he's pretty sure he can hear the drunken voices of the gang inside. He thought about waiting for everyone to pass out, but most of them, especially Jackson, are light sleepers. A creak in the floorboards would surely alert someone to what he's getting ready to do.

He stuck one booted foot into the stirrup, and hefted his leg over the broad back of the horse. Grabbing the reins, he tapped the side of the horse's belly and in turn, she started to gallop. The stench of the heavily overripe melons filled his nostrils. The flowers from the Saguaro cactus and if he looks hard enough, he's surely to see the long nose bats flying about.

It's a 30 minute ride to Flintwood and Michael kept his eyes and ears alert. He didn't have a plan when he reached town. He had his doubts Wright would still be at the Marshal's office, but he had to start somewhere. He didn't risk his ass to come this far to give up now. Someone will know how to reach him. Or maybe Wright can be found at the Red Boot Saloon. There's talk among the townspeople that there's something going on between him and the Donley woman. One of the reasons why she shoots John down every time he asks her out.

Michael decided to head in through the far south side of town, using Gila Avenue. It's not as developed, he can sneak through the abandoned construction lots unseen. He tugged on the reins to slow his horse down, eventually to a stop, before climbing off. He tied her to one of the broken wood posts, giving her a good rub before walking away. The crunching of his boots disrupted the silence of the evening, although he can hear the vague sounds of someone yelling from the saloon. He wouldn't mind a beer to wash away his dry mouth, the heat of the evening stifling him. He turned right onto Third Avenue, dodging into one of the

construction lots to help shield him better. It's then Michael spotted someone lying on the floor. At first he couldn't tell if he's dead, sleeping, or just a pile of crap someone left behind. Not wanting to get ambushed, if by chance it is someone, he decided to venture closer for a better look.

Michael recognised him immediately. If his memory serves him correctly, he hasn't been a deputy long and spotting the revolver sitting on the makeshift table not far from him, he's a stupid one at that. It didn't disturb him when Michael walked towards it, picked it up, and balanced it in his large hand. It doesn't get better than this, Michael thought. I'll have this kid fetch Wright for me.

He knelt beside the kid and pushed on his shoulder with the revolver. Sam Caldwell's eyes snapped open. He quickly started to reach for his weapon, but Michael held it up.

"Looking for this?" He gave him a grin, standing to his feet. It's now he realised the kid could have another stashed underneath his pillow. "I ain't here to hurt ya. I just need you to do me a favour."

"A favour?" Sam spied Michael cautiously, sitting up, running a hand through his brown hair. "And what's that?"

"I need you to go and fetch Wright for me. We got some discussing to do."

"Why don't you go fetch him yourself?"

Michael lifted one bushy eyebrow, tugging on his moustache.

"Since I'm the one holding the gun, you might not want to back talk me, kid." He said after a brief pause. "Now go on. I'll wait here."

"What is it you want to talk to him about?"

"Not your concern." He waited for Sam to stand to his feet. Only he remained motionless. "Listen, Kid. I ain't got all

night.”

Sam finally stood, brushing the dust from his trousers.

“Marshal Wright may not be so willing to come if he doesn’t know what this is about.”

“He’ll see me.” Michael grabbed a wood crate and propped it up on one end, taking a seat on it.

“I need my gun.”

Michael cracked a small smile.

“I don’t think so, kid.” He motioned with a wave of the revolver.

Sam hesitated for a moment before heading up Third Avenue.

“What is it, Sam?” Ben asked when he pulled the door open, setting the shotgun down.

“Sorry to disturb you, Sir, but Michael Lacey would like a word with you.”

That didn’t surprise him. He figured one of the Lacey brothers would come to him eventually to discuss Charlie Evan’s death. He’s not happy about the developments there and he has a pretty good idea he’s not going to like how this will turn out. Jimmy Jackson and Seth Madsen are trouble. Big trouble based on what he’s learned from the federal marshals.

He grabbed the shotgun again, his hat from the coatrack, and stepped out onto the front porch, resting it on top of his head.

“Where is he?”

“In one of the construction lots on Gila Avenue.”

That explains why he didn’t see Sam’s horse. It’s a short walk from here and he decided to fall in step beside Sam. They didn’t talk, Ben didn’t have much to say.

“What do you want, Michael?” Ben asked when he stepped

into the abandoned lot, spying him on the wood crate.

Michael's head snapped up. Ben thought he may have caught him dozing and one hand running across Michael's face told him his assumption is correct.

"Why haven't you done anything about Jackson and Madsen?" He demanded, standing to his feet.

Ben glanced down at his hands, spying the revolver he held.

"Go on and set the gun down." His own grip tightened on his shotgun.

Michael sighed in frustration, setting the revolver where he found it. He's not here to start trouble. He's here to end it before it begins.

"Well?"

"I'm working on it."

"Working on it?" Michael stared at him in disbelief. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means just that."

"They're planning somethin'. You gotta take 'em out before they do it."

"And what are they planning to do?"

"I don't know." Michael said in frustration, tugging on his moustache. "You put the gang together, I figured for sure you would be out there, throwing your weight around."

"Right now, they haven't done anything wrong that I know of."

"They killed Charlie."

"You sure about that?"

Michael didn't answer, averting his eyes away.

"Look. You told us what we can and cannot do. I'm here to tell you that they ain't going to listen to some marshal."

"Unless you can give me something to go on, Michael..."

“I heard Jackson say somethin’ about the First National Bank. Is that enough for ya? That place closes shop and we can kiss this town goodbye.”

Ben sighed this time. With the copper mine gone and Wells Fargo Bank closed, it’s the only thing keeping this town on it’s feet.

“All right. I’ll go talk to them.”

“Good.” Michael gave him a curt nod and headed down the street. “Don’t mention my name. You and I never spoke.”

Ben waited for Michael to get on his horse and ride away before turning to Sam.

“Something tells me he’s not supposed to be here.”

“I reckon not.”

Ben gave him a silent farewell, making his way back to his house. Once he arrived, he headed to bed, thinking what he’s going to say when he does stand face to face with the Lacey gang. Maybe tell Jackson and Madsen to leave town. Ben didn’t want any trouble. Other than the occasional bar fights, Flintwood is exactly how he likes it. Quiet.

Catherine invaded his thoughts as he dozed off and when he woke to the bright sun filtering through the window, the room felt stifling hot. He prepared himself for the day and headed out.

He stepped into the Marshal’s office. Sam’s already in and he caught sight of Bob. A couple of drunks are sleeping it off in the cells. He started to remove his hat, but changed his mind. Might as well get it done and over with.

“Bob, Sam, you’re coming with me.” Ben called out.

“Where are we going?” Bob asked, standing to his feet.

“The Lacey Place.”

All eyes are on him.

“Maybe you ought to take a couple more men with you.”

Ben shook his head.

“We’re going to talk. That’s all.”

“From what I hear, they aren’t much for talking.”

Ben didn’t pay him any attention, stepping out into the dry heat. Kate, his mare the color of chestnuts, stood beside three other horses. He gave her a good rubdown before hefting himself onto her back. He spotted Catherine walking the street in front of the old Wells Fargo Bank. She caught sight of him, showing off that pretty smile of hers. He tipped his hat at her before returning one of his own.

“Ready?” He called to his deputies, received nods, and with a swift kick to Kate’s side, they rode off.

Thirty minutes later, Ben climbed off, holding the reins in one hand, and grabbing his shotgun in the other. Their presence is already known. Two of the Lacey brothers stepped out from around back and the slam of the wooden screen door that has seen better days, caught Ben’s attention.

“If it isn’t Marshal Wright.” He gave him a tight smile. A smile that didn’t reveal any teeth. “What can I do for you?”

The rest of the gang started to file around, some behind Jackson, Madsen took his side, and Ben saw Michael standing off in the distance. Ben handed the reins of his horse to Sam, but keeping a hold on the shotgun.

“Just thought it was time to talk.” He answered, keeping his tone light. “Since Charlie is dead and if you’re taking over, we should go over the rules.”

“Rules?” Seth Madsen laughed. His clean shaven face made him appear younger than he is. Except the wrinkles around his eyes gave away his age. “We don’t follow your laws.”

Ben glanced over at his two deputies. Bob’s hand is resting on his revolver, Sam stood perfectly still, holding the reins to his horse.

“Why don’t you get back on your horse and ride your ass back to town.” Jackson said. “I run the show now.”

Perhaps Michael has reason to be concerned.

“Is that right?” Ben’s eyes travelled over the other members. “Is there anyone here that would like to speak up and be heard?” He waited, but silence filled the space between them. Based on their expressions, no one has the guts to say anything.

“They’re scared.” Bob whispered.

Ben shot him a dirty look. He didn’t need to say that. He’s more than aware of the fear on some of their faces. Excitement on the others.

“Looks to me like no one has anything to say. Get along.” Jackson turned around to head back into the house, the Lacey brothers stepping aside to let him in through the door.

“Hold up a minute.” Ben waited for him to turn around. “I think it’s best if you and Madsen leave town. Before something happens...”

Jackson spun around to face him.

“Listen here, asshole. If you think for a second I’m gonna listen to you, you’re stupider than I thought. You’re as corrupt as they come. You and every deputy under you. Frauds. That’s what you are.” His hand rested at his right side. “Get the hell outta here.”

Ben mentally took count. He didn’t have enough manpower to take this gang on. He didn’t have any worries about Bob. He served in the civil war, but Sam here. From the gossip he’s heard around the office, Sam freaked out after witnessing a hanging. Ben had his doubts he would even pull his gun let alone know how to use it.

“You’re making a big mistake.”

“No! You are. I’m not your bootlicker!” He pointed a

finger at him. “And if I ever see you again, I’ll kill you.” He waved his hand to the other two. “Every last one of you.”

Ben grabbed the reins to Kate, and after running his hand along her side, the temptation to grab his other shotgun overwhelming, he started to lead her down the dry dirt road.

“Don’t fuck with me, Wright.” Jackson called out. “Or I just might pay Ms. Donley a visit.”

Ben paused in his tracks, the anger festering in him, but taking a deep breath, he expelled it out in a rush. He wanted to put a bullet between his eyes for even saying her name, he can do it from here, that he has no doubts, but he’s outnumbered. Getting him and his deputies killed will destroy Flintwood.

“Let’s go.” Ben said to the other two.

They didn’t climb onto their horses until they were away from the house, out of range from getting shot. Ben shuffled his foot to scare away a gila monster that crossed his path. It’s not the biggest he’s seen, but he didn’t feel up to getting bit. It’s orange and black banded body moved slowly away from him, it’s dark forked tongue sticking out of it’s mouth.

“What’s the plan, Ben?” Bob asked hefting his muscular body onto his horse.

“We’ll regroup back at the office and go from there.”

chapter fifteen

Ron Ward

SAM FINGERED THE BADGE on his chest still unfamiliar with the extra weight. The deputy turned to head back to the jailhouse. While walking the boardwalk he imagined riding up to the homestead just before dinner time. Ma would be busy with the family dinner. Pa would still be out working. Sis would be setting the table with a frown on her face.

Sam pictured knocking on the door like a visitor. Ma would scream. “Who could that be at this hour, get your lazy hinny over there girl, see who it is.” Sissy would have to come to the door grumbling all the way. The door would open. Sam planned to stand sideways so the sun coming out of the west would light up the star on his chest.

The gleaming star would not stop Sissy from hugging him hard. Then she would tell him to never run off again no matter what. Sam would kiss her on the forehead just where he always did; stepping back to let the gleaming badge convey his answer. Sis would run past him out to the barn, busting to tell the old man that Samuel was a real life lawman.

A rough tug at his sleeve woke him out of his reverie. Stinky Mort slinked around the corner leaning up against the Wells Fargo window away from Fremont Street. Stinky was

waving him over obviously agitated. A single crow let out a call from its perch atop the building. Sam forced the nursery rhyme out of his head while walking toward the obviously drunk man.

The mocking crow cawed once more then flew off across the street out of sight. Deputy Caldwell smelled danger. The light on the street was brighter. The breeze caught the torn canvas sign on the bank, causing it to make an unfamiliar snapping sound. Samuel watched a man he did not recognise slip into the alley halfway down Fourth Street. Sam called the place Cottonwood alley; he was having trouble getting the name to catch one. Mort looked like a pack of devil dogs was hunting his very soul. Sam slowed his breath, not much he could do about the pounding in his chest.

“Got something you wanna to say, Stinky?” Sam said

“I bring you a treasure and first thing you do is insult me?” Stinky said.

“Sorry Mort, you got something to say or not?” Sam stood closer to Mort and leaned in a bit, fingers in a loose fist. “Because I would very much like to spend all day on this corner with you but the Marshal is expecting me to report back in about now.”

“Bet you would like to know where Jackson and Madsen are. So if you can find an apology in your prideful heart there Sammy boy I might tell what I know.” Mort slipped back a step further down Fourth Street. The old miner looked back down at the boardwalk, all his bravado exhausted. “I could also use a pint.”

“If your story checks out I will put in a word with Marshal Wright about leaving a marker at the Red Boot with your name on it. The sun keeps moving and so must I, spin your tale or leave me alone.” Sam said, the odour coming off the derelict

evaporating his patience.

“Mighty convenient then,” Stinky said chuckling to his own private joke.

“What is,” Sam said

“The Red Boot, I was in there spending my hard earned when Jimmy Jackson said I was offending his delicate sensibilities. The snotty little whelp kicked me in the ass. Seth and Frank busted up laughing.

That preening peacock stood there stroking his precious beard looking mean as Ole Smoky Pants himself. I could have took em all, but I know the Marshal wants em all legal like. So I left without shedding any blood.” Mort straightened up to his full height which left him taller than Sam. “I am not scared son, understand? Still I am not staying around here anymore.”

“What about your pint?” Sam said surprised the man would leave before getting his whiskey.

“This one time the story comes without price. Be careful boy, there is a dark soul in that man’s heart.” Mortimer shouldered past Sam then walked across Fremont slow but tall, a limp in his left leg. Was the wound from the war or the mine, Samuel wondered? The answer to that question would remain untold. The old man climbed up on a dark grey mule, kicked twice reining the animal toward the east.

Sam waited until the miner was a few steps away then ran west. The marshal’s office was practically next door. The jailhouse door banged against a wall. Fred Murphy pulled his pistol crouching and dropping his right leg back in one fluid motion. Deputy Caldwell stopped short, eyes wide, hands up in surrender. Marshal Wright stepped out of his office with his scattergun levelled, a scowl deep as god’s disappointment on his face.

“Step easy boy I almost shot you.” Fred said.

“Best knock from now on till all this hullabaloo blows over. Everyone hear that, we all got the jitters, let’s not do the outlaws work for them.” Deputy Murphy said. The scowl on Ben’s face cut Sam with more ferocity than Murphy’s dressing down.

“Jackson and Madsen are both over to the Red Boot whooping it up like there is nothing going on at all. Jackson put a boot too Stink, uh, old Mortimer. Sent him packing out of the bar on account of his unpleasant odour. Frank Brown is there too.” Sam blurted out in less time than it took his mom to call the family to supper. “Sorry for startling you boys, I will be more careful next time.”

“What about the Lacey brothers?” Fred Murphy asked.

“I don’t know, Mort didn’t say.” Sam said

“That is information I would very much like to have in future Deputy.” Marshal Wright said through his moustache, the scowl even deeper now though Sam could not countenance how that was possible.

“If we are going to save Flintwood we need to know where all of those miscreants are. Talk to the store keeps and the barmaids, even some of the brighter kids might know more than you would think. However if we can take out Jimmy and Seth both today the others should crumble. We might be able to put a stop to all this tomfoolery right now. I say let’s strike and lop off the head of the beast. Murphy, Wilson you come with me, Sam you hold down the fort.”

Fred Murphy just stood in place for a beat then said, “Can’t protect the kid forever Benjamin. It is time he earned his spurs. If the Lacey’s come for the jail who do you want alone Sam or Robert?”

“Fine, Deputy Wilson you have the jail. I would like to find it just like it is when I get back. Unless you can fill it up with

dead Lacey brothers. Sam what are you carrying in that holster? I am not familiar with the shape.” Marshal Wright asked.

“Smith & Wesson Model 1, Bob and I have been out plinking cans.” Deputy Caldwell said.

“I can vouch for him Marshal. The boy is not as fast on the draw as I am but he is better on a target. The boy blew a hole clean through a silver dollar last Tuesday, from twenty paces too.” Deputy Wilson said. The two friends exchanged glances remembering last week’s day off together.

“Sounds like I can reduce your wages if you have enough extra to be shooting holes in your coins.” The marshal’s scowl lessened a bit but came nowhere near a smile.

“It was a bet” Bob said quickly, “we won a free bottle from Doc Halverson. His medicine had us feeling better alright I can tell you true.”

“Stay away from that quack,” Fred piped up. “I hear he killed three men over in Tucson, with his healing potions.” Sam and Bob exchange another glance both smiling like raccoons on a night raid.

The Marshal decided he might need to nip this friendship in the bud if he wanted the boy to be the man he was capable of. Deputy Wilson already had his fun and refused to give up his unsavoury ways. Sam Caldwell had a real future if he could instil a little more discipline into his life.

The plan was clear, there was no way to sneak. The Red Boot was just down the street, everyone would know they were coming. The Marshal wanted Fred to go in first, he would follow. Sam was tasked with watching the doors once they were all in. The boy would be watching for any no account cowardly backshooters.

The music stopped before they got all the way to the door.

Deputy Murphy dove through the double doors. Inside Frank Brown had a girl by the arm. He was whispering something unpleasant in her ear by the look on her face. Fred didn't come in very often so he did not know the girls name. The girl came sidling over rubbing her bruised arm still trying to look sultry.

The effect was as false as the card game going on in the corner. It was clear that the men in the room preferred the wild town the gang wanted. Going to church, hard work, and fair business were far from the minds of the gamblers and get rich quick miners this bar attracted. To a man they all wanted to hit the big one, and then lay around drunk and lazy spending their fortune.

The young lady came close and said. "What is your pleasure sir, me or whiskey? Both are free today for a big strong lawman like you." The girl drew a line, with her fingernail, down the deputy's arm, somehow ignoring the gun in his fist. Fred vowed not for the first time his daughter would never set foot in a place like this.

The Marshal stood at the door. He looked over the room then sauntered in, both hammers pulled back on his shotgun. Behind the bar Frank Brown rang a bell twice quick then once more. Sam watched from over the swinging doors as Ben Wright run across the room. The big man grabbed the whore that was talking to Fred by the chin before anyone else could react.

Deputy Murphy yelled "don't move" pointing his pistol at the barkeep. No one moved. Sam pulled his pistol out, feeling like he should have thought of that sooner. Sam pushed through the doors. The young man split his focus between the card game in the corner and the door in case of bushwhackers.

From the corner of his eye he saw the marshal hit the girl

in the gut with his loaded gun. The child groaned then retched a little but kept it down. The Marshal asked just one question, “which room?”

“Ten, they are both in Ten with Lucy and Anna. They are all in there together.” Marshal Wright dropped the tart’s face and she crumpled on the floor. Frank Brown threw a pickled egg at the girl his glare explaining that some real pain was coming soon.

“Sam with me, Murphy make sure that no one comes up the stairs after us. If Frank moves use him for target practice.” The barkeep reached up ringing the bell loud until the beater came off in his hand.

“Lizzy you better leg it out of here before Frank gets loose.” The Marshal yelled to the girl on the floor as he took the stairs two at a time. “Deputy Murphy will try to keep him occupied for a spell. Head for Denver or Omaha, a girl of your talents needs a better clientele.”

Fred moved a step back to let Sam pass then followed up the stair. A smile crossed his face. The Deputy liked having a bird’s eye view of the whole room. Sam cast a glance back to the door one last time. A crow was stealing a bit of potato out of some baked spew on the sidewalk. The happy bird flew away with its prize. Sam tried once again to block out the children’s tune embarrassed by his superstition.

Marshal Wright did not stop running until he had burst through the door of Number Ten. The door frame splintered from the assault of Marshal Wright’s shoulder. Sam followed five steps behind running full bore into the cacophony of the ‘entertainment’ room.

Both whores were screaming. Deputy Caldwell just caught a bare ass dropping out the window. Marshal Wright let loose with one of his barrels, trying to stop the outlaw from making

his escape, too late. There was a crash out the window. Sam ran across the room to get a look. Marshal Wright bumped him off to the right side of the window. Sam stumbled grabbing for the window frame, shards of wood peppered his hand.

“Silly pup, you almost ran right into an ambush.” Ben Wright said with some heat in his voice.

Sam leaned against the wall. The young man stretched so his gun was generally pointing down and started shooting into the street. “Stop it fool, are you trying to kill someone”

Sam sniggered “Yes, I guess I am.”

“Who is down there?” Ben asked.

“Jimmy and Seth, the two outlaws we came up here to shoot.” Sam said his face wrinkling in frustration.

“You sure, have you seen them with your own eyes?” the marshal asked.

“No, they are shooting at us so I wanted to stay under some kind of cover.” Sam was beginning to wonder about the marshal.

“What if Sally or Cindy Franklin are taking the short cut home from school. Or Granny Hester is out gathering chicken eggs? What if your bullet goes through one of those darling blonde heads how would you feel then? Don’t ever shoot unless you know where the bullet is going.” Ben said

“Something bad happen to you in the war, Ben,” Sam asked.”

“No, it is just common sense. Use your head son.” The marshal said

“Watch out Ben” Sam hollered.

Marshal Wright turned to look where the boy was pointing. Lucy was naked sitting up in a tub full of bubbles. The woman was pointing a Derringer at the Marshal. “Who you going to

shoot Lucy, best put that thing down before you cross a deadly line.” Marshal Wright said.

“Let her pull the trigger it won’t matter. See the water dripping off the barrel? Her powder is all wet. Sam stood up then walked over to the tub the whore pointing her weapon at him the entire way. “Give me the peashooter girl.” The deputy said, taking the gun from her hand.

“Don’t those little guns use cartridges now?” Ben asked letting his breath out in a rush.

“Good thing Lucy is ignorant of modern firearms.” Sam said smirking while dropping the little gun in his shirt pocket.

“You little whelp. Jimmy is going to kill you, kill you all, one at a time. Kill you all dead as a magpie. When he lays you out kid I am going to spit on your corpse.” Lucy’s squeaky voice jabbed at the deputy’s head.

Sam looked at Ben, “What do Magpie’s got to do with death?” The marshal shrugged. Another bullet flew through the empty window, burrowing into the ceiling.

Anna piped up “I got nothing against you and the kid marshal. In fact he was near kind the other day when he came in with your other deputy. They were loopy but the boy was nice, even fun to spend a few hours with.” It was Sam’s turn to shrug. The boy felt heat rise all the way to his ears because Ben now knew he was not a virgin. A bullet tore into the base of the chandelier causing the cut glass to dance.

“You ladies should get out of here unless you want to be the ones laid out. Anna took the sheet off the bed and scampered out of the door. Lucy was more brazen standing up dressed only in bubbles. The older whore sauntered out the door, leaving a trail of water and bubbles. Another bullet tore into the window frame where the lawmen waited. The Marshal rose up and shot into the alley below.

“That was four, two more shots and we are clear to go after him.” Marshal Wright said.

“There are two of them.” Sam said

“Nope only one, it is Jimmy. Listen when his gun fires. There are two pops or a click and a pop. He is still using his army guns that use caps to fire the round. That sweet little gem you carry is faster to fire but the lead is small. You have to be dead accurate with those small bores if you plan to put someone down for good. Seth uses even older guns. Those Dragoons roar like hell hounds and pack a wallop.” The marshal said.

“Why do you know so much about their guns Marshal?” Deputy Caldwell asked.

“You have to know your enemy. I look at guns when they pass me on the street. I might not know everyone’s hair colour but I know what they might try to kill me with.” The marshal replied.

Another lead ball tore into the window frame. “I think Jimmy must have gone out first, maybe even while we were heading this way. They are smarter than I hoped setting up an ambush like this. I saw Jackson’s hat in McAllister’s shipping crates across the alley.

Another blast of wood splinters covered the men. “Six,” Sam said. The window came crashing down. The last bullet finally tore away the clasp keeping the window open. The broken window smiled with jagged teeth.

“You sure he has a Remington, if he has one of these,” Sam patted his gun, he will have seven shots.

Marshal Wright hesitated, hating every moment of the sensation. Cursing Ben cleared the rest of the broken glass from the window with the barrel of his revolver. “I already told you, it has to be a big bore gun to tear holes like this.”

With a grunt Marshal Wright jumped out the window onto the awning below and then slid off that onto the street. The Marshal was already running when his feet hit the boardwalk. From the room Deputy Caldwell heard horse's hooves booming on wood then the quieter sound of hooves on dirt.

Sam made it down to the street in time to see a dejected Marshal Wright turn back into the alley. "I made it to third in time to see him turn left on Tucker. If I had Kate I could catch him but not on foot. I wager if we rode out to the mines we could get shot in another ambush. Feel like walking into another ambush today Deputy Caldwell?"

"No sir, one a day is my limit for ambushes, I promised me mam." Sam said deadpan as a Calvinist.

Marshal Wright smiled, patting the kid on the back. "You made me smile kid, which is not an easy thing to do. Together we will make this town safe, come hellfire or warbling harpies."

The walk back to the jailhouse was pleasant enough considering that part of the discourse was used up in a lesson about the maladies a lady of the evening could pass on if one were not careful. By careful Ben meant just stay the hell away from the whores altogether. Find a nice girl like Fred Murphy had, make a life worth protecting.

The Jailhouse was still. "I expected deputy Murphy to be here waiting for us. Maybe he is stuck in the Red Boot?" The marshal broke open his scattergun pulling out the one spent shell and slipping a fresh cartridge in its place. The door squeaked open in the hot breeze.

"Bob come on out, it is the Marshal and I." Sam yelled to the empty doorframe.

"Maybe there will be one more ambush today. I will apologise to your mam personally. You better get that cute

little spitfire out of its holster.” Ben said trying for all he was worth to see though the wooden walls.

Both men approached the jail. No need to urge caution. Ben motioned with the barrel of his shotgun to the left side of the door. Sam made a move to the right side thinking the older man was going left. Ben waved violently to the left. Sam looked into the dark hall then skittered across the gap running all the way to the wall expecting gunshots at any moment.

Marshal Benjamin Wright worked up his courage and stepped through the door. Not a sound came to his ears from inside the usually bustling jailhouse. Crouching he stepped forward staying low so that anyone in the cells or near the Deputies desks would not see him. Sam stepped over the threshold. The floorboard complained. Ben jerked firing off one of his barrels by accident. Both men crouched further down hiding behind the hall wall, waiting for bullets to fly their way.

Nothing, Ben looked back to Sam the deep scowl in full force. The Marshal put a finger to lips. Sam froze, meaning to not make another sound until he was encouraged to do so. The back door flew open, both men fired toward the aggressor. Fred stood in the doorway, “It me, it’s me, don’t shoot it’s me.”

“What happened to knocking Fred?” The marshal asked serious as yellow fever.

“Oh Ben, Ben, I almost had him, then I tripped in one of those Dad Blessed ruts in the cussed road. I went splay as a two-bit harlot. I had to watch him rounding the corner no chance for a shot.”

“What are you going on about Fred, who were you chasing?” Sam asked.

“Seth Madsen that vile snake in the grass. That Dad cursed

scallywag.” Sam had never heard Fred curse before.

“Fred calm down tell us what happened. Where is Deputy Wilson?” Marshal Wright asked.

“Oh Ben I nearly had him I was so close.” Fred fell down to his knees, pointing toward the deputies desks. Tears erupted clogging his throat.

Marshal Wright took the last two steps up the hall, turned; he already knew what would be there but seeing it took a toll.

“What happened here Deputy Murphy?” Ben said.

“Only one of his guns is fully drawn.” Ben whispered.

“How did this happen?” Ben asked.

“I cannot tell you Marshal, I heard it was all, coming back from the Red Boot Saloon. Twelve shots one after the other, like a drummer in the army. The shots kept pounding like the clocks of hades ticking off death. I broke into a run. I came in through the front door and saw Seth go out the back door. I almost caught him. I knew his guns were empty so I wasn’t scared at all. I was gaining on him, and then I tripped.”

Sam began to inch forward to get a look at his friend, wanting to help if he could. “Don’t let him see it Ben. Make him go back. No need for the pup to see this.” Sam looked down. His boot was in a pool of red-brown ooze like spilt pudding seeping under the rough wall. Sam lifted his boot to get it out of the puddle. The blood stuck little stringers snapping one by one back into the pool.

Then smell hit his nose. Every farm boy in the world knows the smell of drying blood. Sam ran out the door. He fell to his knees raising both fists to curse god. All that came out of his mouth was a mournful howl. In a rush his guts convulsed leaving a fresh feeding for the crows.

chapter sixteen

Stila Webb

“WELL, SHIT.” MURPHY SAID, the hat in his left hand tapping rhythmically against his thigh.

Sam swallowed convulsively, face pale and glistening with sweat as he looked at the dead man on the floor.

“Don't boot on my floor, son.” Wright said, nodding toward the back door.

The boy looked up, shook his head, swallowed again.

“This ain't gonna blow over Wright, he's crossed the line.” Murphy put his hat on, looked down at Wilson and took it off again.

“He has,” Wright said.

“No family, so that's good. Working girls are gonna miss the gold, though.”

“That's enough Murph. He was ours,” Wright said. “That matters.”

Murphy nodded, tossed his hat on Wilson's desk and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah and his fate's gonna be too if we don't do something.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Do what? There are seven of them and three of us.”

“Four of us, boy, four.” Bell said, coming up behind, hat

held to his heart with his good hand, pate gleaming through the thin hair at his crown.

“For how long?” Murphy spat.

“Murph.” Wright glared, set his own hat on the desk. “Sam, go tell the old man we’ve got a body for him to take care of.”

Sam nodded and hurried out.

“What do you think?” Wright asked, eyeing George as he put his hat back on.

“I think we need to put Jackson and Madsen down. We take them out, the gang disbands.”

“You hope.” Murphy said, about to spit again, but Wright shot him a hard look and he swallowed.

“I hope,” Bell agreed. “but we’ve been reasonable, given them chances.” He gestured at Wilson. “They’re done talking.”

The door slammed shut.

“They’re coming!” Sam squeaked.

“Who?” Wright asked, walking around to pull his shotgun down from the rack.

“The gang!”

“Who in the gang, boy?” Murphy snapped.

“All of them!”

“Goddammit.” Murphy snapped his hat up.

Bell looked grim, pulled Wilson’s belt off , the models 1’s still holstered, and handed it to Sam. “Don’t shoot yourself in the foot.”

The boy nodded, taking the belt with a mix of excitement and disgust on his face. He wiped at the blood still staining the leather with gummy darkness, then grimaced and put it on over his own. Wright put a hand on his shoulder, squeezed once.

“Murph, guard the back. Sam, you and me cover the front.

Bell, you keep your head down and keep us all in ammo.” Wright pulled out a box of shells and his rifle, slinging it over his back.

No one spoke as they took up their positions, grim and cold. Then they waited.

It didn't take long.

The lazy clomp of horses hooves carried low over the hard packed ground of the road.

“Marshall! You like my present?” Jackson's gloating tones rubbed raw nerves. “I warned ya. This is our town and you aren't welcome. One last chance to leave.”

Wright closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath to calm his racing pulse. He looked at Sam, nodded to the heavy wooden deputy desk, jerked his head.

Sam, looked, licked his lips, nodded and they carefully moved it in front of the door, cover for the coming firefight. Wright crouched behind it, nodded and Sam opened the door, staying behind the wall.

“You know my answer.” Wright called.

“Or die. Had to give you a gentleman's choice.” Jackson said. “Boys.”

Wright curled into as small of a ball as he could behind the desk as booming hell sounded in the street. Bullets sang past and splinters exploded from the door frame, the floor, the edges of the desk. He felt the impacts of each metal ball through the wood of the building, felt the stings of bits of wood hitting his exposed flesh.

They waited, dust and gun smoke filling the air with haze. Wright listened, waited for the lull as a few guns ran empty, then popped up, the haze keeping him in shadow. The gang shot from horse back, which made their revolvers even less accurate. Not that they were really aiming. A bullet caught his

hat and sent it flying, but Wright held his ground, carefully looking at the members in sight. Jackson was not among them. He decided to take out the easiest target first, setting the butt to his shoulder.

And saw the torch arch through the air and disappear to his right. He dropped back down.

“They're gonna burn us out!” Sam gasped, face going white. He started to jump up, gun still in hand, the look of a bolting animal on his face.

“Stop!” Wright barked, but the boy kept going.

Burning to death was a bad way to go.

Murphy caught him but not before the back door swung open. Murphy wrestled the boy back down the hall, away from the open door.

A shot rang out from the back lot. Then two.

Murphy pushed Sam back, toward Wright and his overturned desk. A third shot. Murphy turned the corner as the fourth shot sounded.

Murphy grunted and fell the rest of the way clear.

“Murph!” Wright called, and crawled across the floor, grabbing Sam's shirt front and shoving him forward. “Get in my office, go!”

Sam scrambled on all fours and helped pull Murphy through, Bell on their tail, both hands full of ammo boxes.

A trail of blood smeared across the floor as they hauled him into the marginally greater cover of the office. The sound of gun shots from the street slowed to a few here and there. They were waiting.

Murphy gasped, groaned and the sound of air whistling through his chest made Wright's blood freeze. A chest wound.

He tore Murphy's shirt open.

“God's teeth.” Bell breathed beside him.

“Give me your jacket,” Wright said, cold fury chilling his voice. “Sam, your belt.” He tore Bell's coat down the back seam and folded one half into a neat square. “Sit him up.”

Bell, dropped the ammo with a clatter and pulled Murphy into a sitting position, wincing at the pained sound his friend made.

Wright pressed the square of cloth to the hole in Murphy's back, then pressed Sam's hand to it. “Hold this.”

The other half of the jacket went over the chest hole, the belt over both and tightened until Murphy cursed breathlessly.

“We're trapped Ben.” Bell said, his face pale and sweating

“We're going to burn to death.” Sam whimpered.

“It's not fire. They're smoking us out,” Wright said. Curls of it were starting to seep through the floor boards, the smell of wet, smouldering hay distinct and cloying. It filled the front of the building and was slowly moving toward the back, thick and black and acrid.

“Here,” Wright grabbed the jug of water he kept on his desk and dipped his kerchief in it, passed the jug to Sam. They all covered their mouths but their eyes still watered from the growing smoke.

“We're...oh god, this hurts...fucked.” Murphy said, face grey with pain and blood loss.

Wright shook his head. “Only one covering the back door.”

“One was enough.” Bell said bitterly.

Wright bared his teeth in a feral grin, pulled his rifle close. “He'll take 4 shots. I'll take one.” He dropped to his stomach and crawled out of the office and toward the back door. Smoke wafted around him, up in lazy tendrils as the smouldering spread.

Outside the day was bright, the sun sharp and clear. It

would make the shooter out there easy for him to see. Wright would be hard to find in the smoke.

He scanned the back lot, caught movement from a stack of barrels. Frank Browns face, with its unmistakable moustache peered around the sides, waiting for them to bolt out the back door.

Wright popped up to a crouch and moved forward, clear of the worst of the smoke. Frank saw him, stepped out of cover and fired. The shot went wide, hitting the wall behind Wright as he wrapped the strap around his forearm and took careful aim. Another shot zipped by with a pop and sizzle, then another.

He exhaled smooth and steady and squeezed the trigger.

His rifle cracked, jumped, tapping his shoulder like a playful lover. Frank crumpled.

Wright waited, heard shouts from the road, angry voices raised in argument but no other shots came at him. He slung the rifle over his back and crawled back to his office.

“Let's go,”

Bell crawled out on three limbs, Sam and Wright half carrying a wheezing Murphy between them. Horses pounded along Fremont, more shouting, up and down the street. Wright ignored it all, listening to the soft whistle of Murphy's breath, getting more and more faint. They made it to the back of the Wells Fargo, and set Murphy down.

Wright knelt, but knew it was too late. His friends eyes were glassy with death.

No one said anything for a long time, just flopped down on the ground, guns ready.

No horses came around the building, no guns fired. They waited, tense and ready for Jackson, Madsen or the Lacey brothers to come around the corner, guns blazing. The

shouting rose and finally resolved itself into the fire brigade arriving carrying, shovels, rakes and buckets of water.

Wright set his rifle down with a sigh. Sam's hands shook as he holstered his new weapon. They sat in silence as they watched the brigade dig out the smouldering hay and smother it with dirt then douse it with water.

At last Bell stood. "I'm done Ben. I can't do this anymore. I quite. I'm sorry." He looked at Murphy, shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Wright clenched his jaw, then nodded. "I understand."

Bell twisted his lips into a shadow of a smile. "No, you don't but I appreciate the words all the same." He turned and walked away, shirt covered in dirt, blood and smoke, hat firmly in place.

"Sam?" Wright asked.

"Sir?"

"Staying or going?"

There was a pause, then Sam looked down at his hands. "I'm going."

Wright nodded.

Sam stood up, fumbled with the gun belt at his hip but Wright waved him off. "Keep them. Wilson can't use them anymore. You'll need them."

Sam nodded, then said, "You should go too. Let the gang have the town."

"I can't do that."

"Why? It's not like they're helping. They just hide while we do all the work. There's nothin' here for either of us. We can go to another town be a deputy somewhere else. This town is already dead."

Wright just shook his head again.

Sam looked about to say more but shrugged and left.

Wright just sat next to Murphy and watched the sun set in a blood red sky.

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 reigns. "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 dagoon. "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

Dave Scheffler

BEN WRIGHT WATCHED THE spider and wondered how the night would end. Likely not well for any of them, he decided, took his eyes off the spider and squinted again at the dark sky. Spiders must have a short life after all, despite their apparent predatory superiority and men, whether hunter or hunted, often died well in advance of nature. He looked again for the spot where the web had glistened in the shadow but could not find it. He cocked his head back and a rain drop exploded into his left eye.

"Shit!" The cry came from behind Wright's shoulder.

"Quiet, damn you!" Wright spat at Caldwell who was huddled against him. "You want them to know we're here?"

"Awww, they know."

"Maybe. But they don't know where. If this rain lasts a bit, we could use it. So shut up."

Sam Caldwell rocked back against the rough wood wall and his guts spasmed with fear and regret. Impressing a whore seemed a good idea when, with a heroic flourish, he donned again the Deputy's badge, but now he wished he were back in the Red Boot or at the least underneath a pile of rubble, dry except for bourbon spittle.

"It don't rain here," Caldwell moaned, "Why the hell's it rainin'?"

Wright strained to see into the building across the street but could only make out the facade, fading now into haze thanks to the night and the rain.

"Well?" Caldwell whimpered.

"What?"

"I asked you why it's rainin'.

"I don't know, Sam. How the hell would I know that. It's rainin' that's all."

"Well, you're smart. I know that. I've seen them books you got."

Wright said nothing but he could feel the rain beginning to work its magic. He wished it was already done - one way or another. The spider had disappeared. The web remained invisible.

"I can't read, really, but I can cipher enough to see those books ain't the bible or even normal. I mean, maybe I can't read too many words but I know what English looks like and half of them you got there ain't even English. What the hell is it?"

"German," Wright mumbled. He stuck out his tongue and drank some rain.

"German! You can read that?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Wright couldn't stop himself. Pearls before swine. The rain was too strong. "My mother taught me," he began, "I know it good enough to read with it. The books you saw are about philosophy. Now you know. So keep your muddy mitts off them or I'll have to kill you."

Sam Caldwell stared at the back of the Marshal's head and

wondered if this was the same man he knew. He felt his sphincter loosen. "Ben, I gotta go back for somethin'. I forgot somethin' back home. I'll be right back."

"Hold it!" Wright clamped a hand on Caldwell's arm and pulled him close. Caldwell could feel the heat of the Marshal's breath on his nose. "You ain't goin' nowhere. Home? What home? You live under a pile of trash like a rat. You put that badge on and you'll keep it on til this is finished. Sit down and shut up!"

"I gotta go!" Caldwell broke free and spun out of the range of the Marshal's grip. He ran in full panic down 4th toward Gila. The heavy rain had turned the streets to mud and soon he was sinking deeply with each stride. Halfway to his goal, the mud took his right boot and swallowed it. "Fuck!" He fell to his knees, wallowing in the wet, doughy earth, frantically searching. "No! No! Please! No!"

Ben Wright leaned into the wall, lifted his chin to the black sky and drank the rain.

"You hear that?" Seth Madsen whispered to Jimmy Jackson.

"What? I didn't hear nothin'. Just that damn rain is all."

"I thought I heard voices. I dunno. They'll be comin' for sure though."

"I know. But I know somethin' they don't."

"What?"

"Bird told me what to expect. He also tipped off the boys. That Marshal's gonna have a nice surprise."

"The Mayor?"

"Yeah. He ain't no friend to Mr. Marshal Wright."

"Well, he ain't no friend to us neither."

"I know. He'll get his surprise soon as we finish the Marshal."

Madsen smiled and looked around the shadowed, hollow grandeur of the Wells Fargo Bank. "Wish we could take some gold," he said.

"Be patient," Jackson breathed, "We're holdin' the cards now."

The rain pounded the rear wall of the Red Boot Saloon. The Lacey brothers and Cole Vaughn stood ramrod straight against it in a failing bid for shelter. They watched as a dark figure slowly skulked around the building's corner and disappeared.

"Who the hell was that?" Cole Vaughn asked.

"The Mayor you dummy," spat John Lacey.

"How'd you know? He was wearin' a hood. Coulda been anybody."

"You see his boots? Only the Mayor wears snakeskin boots around here."

"Snakeskin?"

"Boots made from snakes. Jesus! You are an idiot," William Lacey chimed in."

Snakes?" Vaughn asked, "Real snakes?"

The Lacey boys turned their backs to Cole Vaughn and huddled. They had just been told where to find Marshal Wright and his newly-minted Deputy and were joyously engaged in planning an ambush.

"Hey! What you talkin' about?" Vaughn coughed out, "I'm part of this gang, too!"

John Lacey took a step toward Cole Vaughn. "What the hell's eatin' you? You'll get your cut. Haven't you had enough fun yet?"

Vaughn rolled his eyes and grinned. "Yeah, I have been havin' a time of it for sure! Now that I got a good taste of killin', I want to keep on. I like it!"

"Who'd you kill, Cole?" Michael Lacey broke in, "That Mexican? That cat? You didn't kill nobody else that I know."

"It was an Indian. Not a Mexican."

"Well. It was a damn cat. Not a cougar!"

"Killin's killin'," Vaughn laughed, "And I like it!"

Marshal Wright sensed the rain's end before it began to abate. Damn rain, he thought, it's always the same for me. He remembered years of herding, having to find excuses to avoid human contact when it rained. If he had the fortune, good or bad, to have lived in the tropics, his life might have been quite different.

"I might be a professor!" He laughed out loud. He spun and leveled the Spencer at the noise behind him.

"Ben! Don't shoot! It's me! I'm back like I said!" Caldwell whispered hoarsely, "What did you mean there? Who are you talking to?"

"Sam," Wright lowered the rifle, "Nobody. Nothing." Then, looking at the soaked, abject, mud-clotted young man, he softened. "Look, Sam. It's not you, it's the rain. I don't know why but every time it rains I get, well, funny. Not bad but just different. I talk different, I think different. That's when I read those German books. When it rains."

"Oh. It's over. It's stopped now."

"Yeah. I know. What the hell happened to you? Why the hell did you run like that?"

"I got scared I guess. Scared of you and of dyin and..."

"You ok now?"

"Yeah. 'Cept I lost my boot. Damn it. Walkin' in this mud with one boot is tough!"

"Well, try to be strong, Sam, it's time we went over there."

Sam Caldwell felt the wet shotgun Wright had given him. It

felt heavy and dead. He wanted to cry again and turned his head so the Marshal couldn't see his face. "Ok," he managed.

Ben Wright petted his Spencer rifle like it was a cherished animal. He inhaled the last whisper of moisture from the air and smiled grimly. "Geist," he whispered to the gun, then, "Let's go, Sam."

Both men stepped carefully around the corner, stopping to look into the dark, muddy street.

"What's that, Ben?" Caldwell whispered, waving the coach gun toward a small mound in the center of Fremont Ave.

Wright squinted. "It's a body. Looks like a dead Indian. Damn it!"

They stepped into the street, aiming for the front door of the Wells Fargo Bank.

"Far enough, lawmen!" John Lacey shouted, his voice coursing across the night. Wright swiveled but saw no one.

"Yeah," came another voice from the opposite direction, "We've got you dead to rights. Lay down them rifles. Now!"

"Down!" Wright yelled and dropped to the ground, pulling Caldwell with him. Covered by the night, they began to crawl back to the building whose shelter they had recently abandoned. Shots shattered the silence. Wright could see the fire from the muzzles. Three or so of them, split on two sides. Time to run, or fight, or die. "Get back behind the walls, Sam!" He hissed. But Caldwell was on his knees, heading into the street.

"Look!" Caldwell pointed, giddy with the delirium which sometimes blinds the cowardly in battle, propelling them into the midst of that which they most fear. "The moccasin! I can get it! I can!" The young Deputy was fixated on the footwear of the street-center corpse. One moccasin had dislodged and its siren call had hypnotized the solo-booted boy.

"Sam!" Wright shouted, but Caldwell couldn't hear him or didn't care. A bullet hit the ground in front of the Marshal's face and, brushing the mud from his eye, he slid behind the building.

"Yee-haw!" Cole Vaughn rejoiced, "I got me one!" His lariat tightened on Caldwell's naked ankle.

"Good ropin', Cole!" John Lacey hollered. "Come on, boys, lend a hand!"

William Lacey stepped from around the Wells Fargo Bank and pointed his Colt at the building behind which Wright had disappeared. "We got your boy, Marshal!" He rejoiced.

The others pulled Caldwell across the street. He grabbed at the moccasin but missed.

Vaughn kicked him in the back as he slid past.

Wright, cursing and spitting mud, watched from a slender sanctuary and thought of the spider.

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

Wolf Baginski

“WHEEAR 'AST THA BIN sin' ah saw thee?”

“Catherine!” Wright stopped dead on the sidewalk, took a deep breath, and slowly turned. “I didn’t expect to see you.” He knew it was a banal line, but what else could he say? And it was true. Catherine McCarty just stared at him for what seemed like an eternity. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

She glared at him. “Tha’s flayt,” she accused. He wasn’t sure just what that meant, she could be almost unintelligible sometimes, so he just nodded abruptly. “Tha’s gangin’ to Santa Fe?”

He blinked. He could figure out what that meant. “I’m getting out of here, but not that way. There’s too many men died already, and ‘tis ‘cause of me. There’s too many sobbin’ women in this town.”

“appen tha’s reet,” she conceded. He was almost sure she was looking on the slightly less-faded badge on his frock coat where he’d worn his badge. “Tha stays, us’ll ha’ to bury thee. Then t’worms’ll come an’ eyt thee up.” Was that tears? Before Wright could be sure she turned and strode away, with a trace of savagery in her motion. She was, he thought, angry. Catherine McCarty had been too often angry, and he hoped

she didn't take it out on her son. Harry didn't deserve that.

"Catherine," he whispered, before he turned and looked along Fremont. For a moment, he almost shivered, despite the heat, and then he started walking across Fremont, sidestepping a still-steaming heap of horseshit between him and the Red Boot. It wouldn't cost much to get drunk, though he didn't want to be too drunk to ride. There were too many dead men because of him, one of them still unburied.

He didn't want to face the eyes that would be looking across the coffin at him, with their mute accusations.

The Red Boot's doors were still off their hinges after last night's brawl. He'd still been Town Marshal then and, before he'd thrown his badge at the Mayor, he'd made sure to let Eriksen out of the jail. He might have been forgotten otherwise, and that wouldn't be right. It was over, finished, and maybe the town was headed the same way, but at least he would leave tidy what he could leave that way.

Wright didn't say anything. The bartender was sweeping the floor with a broom that had seen better days while Lucy and Anna were trying to make a difference to the dust on the tables. There was always dust in Flintwood.

"Whiskey," he said. It was what he always said, and he did not much care about the details. Sometimes, he was sure, the colour had never seen the inside of a distillery. The bartender walked over and took a bottle from the shelf. Wright laid a dollar bill on the counter. That was enough to buy a lot of whiskey, even at Arizona Territory prices.

The bartender set out two glasses. One, slightly dirty, upside-down on the dollar bill and the other, still clean, in front of Wright. "Do I leave the bottle, Ben?" He paused. "It's early."

“I know.” Wright looked up. “Do I look like I care?”

“Nope.” The bottle was maybe a third full. It was not going to stay that way.

The Deputy Mayor was sitting slumped in his chair, behind his desk, when Charlie Bellman knocked on the door. Acting Mayor, he supposed he was now after the previous days events. He wasn’t sure if that was just his job in the Mayor’s absence, and Henry Bird was more than just absent now. No point being slow to get used to it. He was the Mayor now, at least until an election could be called.

“Enter!”

The carpenter walked in, still carrying his bag of tools. “Boss,” he said, “I think we have a problem.”

The Mayor looked up, and then back at the badge that lay there. “You think we’ve got a problem? Well I know we’ve got a fucking problem!”

Charlie winced, and looked at the badge.

“Want the job?”

“No, boss.”

“You were in the British Army?”

Charlie sighed. “Not the British Army. I was in India, with the Bombay Sappers and Miners.” He grinned for a moment. “You always make that mistake.”

“And it wasn’t the same sort of mining. I guess I’ll learn. But at least you can shoot better than Ben could. You’ll maybe have to start carrying that damn Limey gun of yours if there’s no Marshal.”

“It kept me alive a few times in India, during the Mutiny.” There was a certain vacantness in Charlie’s look, and then he sort of shivered and straightened slightly. “I don’t want any of that again.”

“Not an Indian fighter?”

“Different sort of Indian, boss. They were organised, not a tribe of savages. Not stupid, not lazy. Their blood and guts look the same as a white man’s when you stick a bayonet in him.”

The Mayor looked uncomfortable.

Charlie shrugged. “I reckon it’s the same for anyone that’s been in a battle.”

“We’ve too many of those Confederate bastards in town. I wouldn’t trust any of ‘em as Marshal.”

Charlie shrugged again, as if the whole question meant nothing to him. “Might not be wise,” he agreed, “but what choice do we have?”

“No Marshal, and if First National follows Wells Fargo, the mining soon ends. But if I appoint an ex-Confederate as even Acting Marshal, the Federal government will come down on us.”

“Most of ‘em have the vote anyway. They could elect somebody easy enough.” Charlie shrugged again. “We need summats now. No time for an election. And no, I don’t want the job.” He set his bag down on the desk with a substantial thump, opened it, and took out a sheet of paper. “Anyhow, here’s my bill for that coffin.”

The Mayor took it. “The town is paying too many of those bills.”

“Truth...” Charlie closed his bag. “The last time I saw Wright, I recognised the look in his eyes. I still see it in my shaving mirror.”

“He’s fuckin’ yella’!”

Charlie said nothing, but picked up his bag and walked out.

“Seth?”

“Yep. Thought of something, Jimmy?” Seth rained in his horse and looked over the broad, arid, valley.

“Was wondering what next. After all this. Folk are starting to drift away. Where would we ride on to?”

“We’ll have money. Won’t need to ride on. Folk with money can do what they want.”

Jimmy Jackson took off his hat, looked at it, and shook off some dust. “Yeah, but remember those guys who stole that Army payroll in ‘63.” He glanced over his shoulder at the Lacey brothers, back up the trail. “How many of them walked off with the money?”

Madsen nodded. “First, rob the bank.”

“Maybe second. Kill the Marshal.”

Madsen agreed. “Yep, Second. And best not be like Lawrence. Ain’t enough of us to do that.”

They grinned at each. There had been good times in Kansas and Missouri.

Cole Vaughan appeared from behind the roadside rocks, still buckling his belt, and mounted his horse.

Jimmy smirked.

Seth spoke as the others rode within earshot. “We just want to take a look-see. The Marshal doesn’t have any reason to do anything. We don’t give him one. He thinks we did all those things, but he don’t have no eveedunce.”

“We did do all those things,” said Vaughan.

“He let you go, too,” observed Jimmy. “Big mistake.” Jimmy grinned.

It takes time to get drunk.

Wright had had more than enough time, and the bottle was empty now. He didn’t care whether there was anything left of his dollar. Neither the dollar bill nor the whiskey seemed to be

there any more. He blinked, and tried to count the bottles in front of him. Whiskey, why did it always have to be whiskey? He thought he could remember beer. Why didn't the Red Boot have any. They had it back East, but not here.

He looked up, and opened his mouth. What was it he was going to ask? Something about beer, or was it whiskey. He slowly closed his mouth. What was it?

"More whiskey," he slurred. That had to be it.

A hand plucked the empty bottle from his grip. "Nope," said the voice. "Just doin' as I'm told, Ben." Ben looked up at Lucy's face. There was something wrong with her, he was sure, something about her that didn't fit with his memories of her. She looked intently at him. "Ben?"

"You're beautiful," he managed to say.

She didn't quite laugh. "I bet you say that to all the girls," she answered. "Fer sure you've had too much to drink."

"Don' say that."

"You don't know what you're sayin'," she explained. "I am not beautiful."

He tried to figure that out. Nothing about the world seemed to be what he thought it was. He didn't quite catch what she said next, but the look on her face changed, and she backed away. Something was scaring her, and he turned around to see what it was, the motion almost making him throw up. With near-impeccable timing the bucket of not very clean water struck him full in the face.

He swayed.

"That's all you're good for now," jeered Jackson. "You'd not a Marshal any more, just a no-good cheap dish-clout to mop the floor with."

He tried to stand, failed, and slid off the stool to his knees. He said something that might have been, "I'll kill you!" It was

some phrase full of anger, hatred, and whiskey, and it hardly mattered what the words really were.

“No, I’ll kill you. And it’ll be over. That’s what you want, ain’t it. There’s just you left. Well, there ain’t no fun in killin’ a man who can’t tell what’s comin’ to him. And you ain’t the Marshal any more.”

With fake solicitude, Jackson set the bucket in front of Jackson and watched as he threw up into it. There’s wasn’t much, just foul-tasting gut-acid-diluted whiskey. It hadn’t been good whiskey when it went down, and Wright’s digestion had done nothing to improve it. Wright spat the residue from his mouth. “I’ll kill you,” he snarled.

The other man grinned, a wild a slightly frightening, uncaring, grin. “You all heard that!”

“I’ll fucking kill you, you fuckin’ reb!”

Them’s fighting words,” declared Madsen. “You all heard him.”

Jackson nodded. “I’m an honest man,” said Jackson. Nobody in the Red Boot believed that, but it would sound good to the Judge. “It’s just turned one o’the clock.” He glanced towards the clock on the wall behind the bar. “You can see that, folks.”

Wright tried to look at the clock and almost fell over.

“You want to kill me? I’ll be waiting, outside on Fremont, at four.” After a moment Jackson delicately lifted his left-hand revolver from its holster and laid it on the floor. “And I know this gun works. Come from the direction of the Marshal’s office. It’ll be as fair a fight as you could want. Or you can get on that horse of yours and start riding.”

“I’ll kill you...”

“Git yoursen sobered up. You can try. At four.”

Jackson turned and walked out of the bar. There was

silence, and then Madsen made a brusque gesture and led the others out after him.

“He never could shoot straight with a hand gun,” said Charlie Bellman to the Mayor. “It wouldn’t be a good idea to stand anywhere near the Red Boot at four.” After a momentary pause he went on, “He’s sober enough that if he turns up they can get it called Self Defence by a judge. And I’m wondering who taught them a trick like that.”

“So he’ll stay?”

“He told the stable-lad he’d be collecting his horse at a quarter-hour past.” Bellman shrugged. “He’ll stay for six foot of Flintwood ground, nothing more.”

“Damn!”

Come sunset,” said Bellman, “he’ll have it.”

“You’ve got your gun,” noted the Mayor.

Bellman nodded. “Reckon this could soon be a town where a feller needs one, but I ain’t going up against that gang. I make coffins. I don’t want to fill ‘em.”

The Mayor grimaced. “I hear it’s a dying trade.”

Bellman winced.

“You could still get your horse,” said Catherine Donley.

Wright nodded. “More coffee,” was all he said.

“You figure they’d come after you?” She poured coffee. He’s already called her “Catherine” twice, not “Miss Donley”, and she knew of at least three other women in town with that name, and one horse.

“I’d vanish,” he said, “And it would be blamed on Indians.”

He drained the mug. She said nothing. He picked up the gun that Jackson had given him. Charlie Bellman had insisted he fire it at a target, so he had. He had missed. There’s been

something of a change in how Charlie Bellman had spoken, calling him “sir” in a way that was rather uncomfortable. Bellman had reloaded. Wright had fired again.

The target was still unmarked.

Bellman had loaded the gun for one last time. He had left without saying anything

Wright doubted that he was going to get the chance to fire the six shots. He’d never been any good with a handgun. He looked at his pocketwatch, and tucked it back into his waistcoat pocket. At least he could do that one-handed without fumbling.

She passed him his hat.

“Miss Donley, best stay home. It’s not going to be a nice thing to see.”

She nodded, and blurted, “I’ll be at the stable.” After a moment she added, “The horse...”

“Kate and Catherine,” he said. “Folk will be able to tell you apart.” He didn’t smile. He stepped to the door, looked back over his shoulder, said nothing more, and was gone.

Catherine Donley said something very unladylike, muttered low under her breath. It didn’t make her feel any better.

Wright had stayed off Fremont, not wanting to take that long lone walk towards where Jackson would be waiting. He would be coming from the direction of the Marshal’s office when he turned from 3rd Street onto Fremont, and that would have to do. It was just a few steps from there to the Red Boot, but it would be enough. No holster, so Jackson would shoot him down with a gun in his hand.

He’d heard stories from a few maimed veterans. He might be dead before he had the chance to feel anything. The veterans had been of older wars than the late Rebellion. There

were not many from this far west. So they were alive? He figured he would be better off dead.

The town was silent, almost too silent. He stopped, and looked at his watch again. It was as if everyone was waiting, at just open doors and hidden by window curtains, to hear the shots. Five minutes, he made it. He looked at the pistol he carried and slowly, carefully, cocked the hammer. He doubted he would fire a shot. It would be more likely that they only shot from the gun would come as it struck the ground.

Bellman had insisted that all six chambers be loaded, "Just in case, sir."

Wright looked at his watch one last time, closed the cover, and tucked it back into his waistcoat pocket. He took a deep breath and started walking.

"What are they all here for?" Michael Lacey spoke barely above a whisper, almost into his brother's ear. It was hardly a crowd, but the sidewalks of Fremont seemed almost crowded. All men, many of them respectable seeming, most of them older than he was.

"Reckon they've come to see a man die," said John.

Michael glanced at his other brother, who tried to smile, and failed.

John didn't look all that cheerful. "William," he said. "Go watch the stable. Let the bastard run if he wants to, but tell us which way he rides out of town." He said it loud enough that some folks would hear. He saw Madsen looking at him. John shrugged. After a moment, Madsen ever so slightly nodded.

"Who wants to watch a man die," wondered Michael Lacy.

"Not anyone we ought to care about," answered his brother, carefully trying not to hint at why they were there.

There was silence.

It was a long silence.

It was a very long silence.

It was the sort of silence that made a man wonder if he was already dead, and then there was a faint whir before the clock on the wall in the Red Boot started to chime.

“He ain’t coming,” declared Jackson, and it was maybe hard to tell if there was gloating or relief colouring his voice. It seemed that folks were agreeing with him. There was going to be no show today.

Michael scanned the crowd, counting slowly. It seemed that everyone who was anyone had turned out to see Wright die. And what would they be doing tonight, he wondered. Would some of them be packing their bags to leave? What could they carry in those bags? A copper mine share certificate was, he knew, easy to carry, but he also knew what it was worth.

He had started on the far side of the street when everything changed. He could see it in the way people looked to the East, and for a moment, even though he looked, he didn’t see the reason. He could see that it wasn’t the army riding into town, and whatever else it might be, that was a relief.

Then he saw Wright.

Wright almost plodded, keeping to the centre of the street except for a sideways step to avoid that pile of horseshit that had been there all day. He didn’t like the crowd, too much chance of somebody getting hurt. He stopped, about a dozen paces from Jackson, and tried to stand up straight. His head was throbbing in the same old way. That would end soon enough. This was a lousy headache cure.

“You’re here,” said Jackson.

“Yep,” said Wright. “Now’s your chance.” He made sure

his gun-laden hand was visible. "Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!" He was concentrating on Jackson. He knew he was going to see death coming, and he was determined not to flinch. Jackson was staring at him. Very slowly he started to raise the hand with which he held the pistol. Oddly he was hearing an echo of Charlie Bellman's voice in his ear, something about shooting slow if you had the chance.

He was so focused on Jackson that he didn't really see anything else. Jackson just stood there, staring. And then he saw a movement on the sidewalk. It was Charlie Bellman, wearing some sort of dark blue coat. It didn't look like any army tunic he had ever seen, and enough had passed through the town during the Rebellion, but the strips of braid had that look, looping back and forth between the buttons. And it wasn't really the coat that Wright noticed anyway. Charlie Bellman was pointing a revolver at Jackson.

It was that which shocked Wright out of his focus. He stood stock still, but his eyes flickered from side to side, maybe not all that different from the way Jackson's eyes moved. Both were looking at the guns. Not all were revolvers. There was a coach gun, and a couple of carbines, and old deGrasse had a pair of single shot pistols that looked almost elegant. Didn't matter, every hammer he could see was cocked, and most of 'em looked at be pointed at Jackson. Though a few might as well be pointed at him,

He hoped the cobbler was a better shot than he knew himself to be.

He had a dreadful feeling that Jackson was going to do something really stupid. His hand kept twitching towards his holstered pistol.

It was Michael Lacey who broke the tension, and it almost went the wrong way. There was something frightening in the

smooth motion with which he drew his pistol and set the muzzle against Jackson's ear, thumbing back the hammer as he did, and somebody should surely have pulled their trigger. Jackson hardly moved, but his eyes flicked sideways.

"Enough, Jimmy," said Lacey.

Very slowly, Jimmy Jackson raised his hands.

It was Charlie Bellman who stepped off the sidewalk. He looked suddenly rather older than Wright had thought, but you couldn't think he wasn't a soldier. He called Jimmy Jackson "sir", and it didn't at all sound friendly or polite. Wright slowly lowered his hand, still holding Jackson's other pistol. It was feeling very heavy. Wright wasn't really sure how it happened, but now Lacey's gun was back in its holster. There were all those other guns, and Bellman was still in the centre of the probably crossfire. He didn't seem to care.

"Well, come on, Marshal, arrest them!"

That was the Mayor's voice.

Wright blinked. He was alive, but his head still hurt. It throbbed. "I'm not your fucking Marshal," he shouted. He felt oddly not angry. "Do your own dirty work," he snarled.

Kate—the horse, that is—was waiting. So was Billy Lacey.

"There was no shooting."

Wright checked the girth. "There wasn't. And I'm not minded to start any."

"My brothers?"

"Maybe I owe 'em something." Wright thought back over all that had happened. "I'm leaving town, heading for California. No promises, but without me there isn't much case against your brothers. I owe them that chance." He mounted. "There's nothing worth staying for."

Lacey looked up at him. "I didn't figure you for somebody

who'd ride at night."

Wright grinned. "True enough," he said. "Riding off into the sunset is usually a lousy idea. But I ain't staying."

There was a long silence.

"Well, thanks, I guess."

Wright nodded. "Don't waste you chances, not like I've done." Wright nudged Kate with his heel, pulled lightly on one rein, and turned her towards the low Western sun. He wasn't going to look back. He was done with Flintwood, and good riddance.