

Strangers in Gilead

Listening to the German wall clock clack away in the near-empty saloon on an overwarm Nebraska summer day might cause her to fetch a gun and shoot the dear old thing, so Marie-Rose waited on her balcony. It ran across the front of the Gilead Astoria Saloon and Hotel, and standing on it always put her in mind of standing on the prow of a sailing ship, the ship being her establishment, the ocean being the unboundaried prairie, the salt air replaced by the arid wind and loamy earth. Highest point in the town, but for the water tower. Folk such as had never seen an ocean would say the prairie must be like the ocean, rolling in waves, or lying flat, or spread to forever beneath the cloudless sky. Marie-Rose thought that kind of ornamental talk silly, but she had seen the ocean, and would admit the similarity.

The road came in from the west through the two-saloon frontier town, and back out the other side, to larger and wealthier places, St. Joseph and the branch rail, Omaha and the main line. South was the state of Kansas and the occasional war parties of the Cheyenne, north the Pawnee. Gilead was a little flotilla of hard-put but respectable structures companionably gathered for security and society, a little nub of what passed for civilization in the endless sea of sage and scrubwood, tallgrass and bottlebrush, and damned little else under the blue-white sky.

Saloon and card parlor and six rooms upstairs, three occupied by Marie-Rose and the girls in her employ, one a bunk room. From her vantage she surveyed the road running through the center of town. She and the girls paid dearly when the wind rattled the windows during winter. Spring now, though, and the noonday sun was plenty hot, though a westerly breeze crossing the prairie drew the sharp scent of a rainstorm through the bouquet of manure and creosote.

Should have been beehive busy this time of year, horses and people moving past her hotel and about the town, but

traffic was slight. She could hear the rattle of a wagon round by the feed store, and one or two folk were out and about, but that was all. Her cuff caught a splinter in the railing, and she twitched it free with irritation. The sorry lot of women in the world, to be always waiting. Watching the menfolk come and go. Sometimes going with them, sometimes wondering what happened to them when they never came back.

She looked down the road to the west, past the pine skeleton of what was going to be Cade Belrose's new hardware store, where it was Gilead to the east and prairie to the west. The heat made the spindly windmill out by the bean fields look like it was about to float away. Thankful she was that it wasn't a new saloon Belrose was putting up, though the fat bastard will likely come after her business next. Shading her eyes, she could just make out a rider coming in through the waverings of heat. So the waiting was to be interrupted, praise be. She touched about her face with her handkerchief.

He came alongside the German's dry goods store, and she could make him out proper. Saddle-sore and trail dusty, tired of beans and rabbit and cactus and the hot prairie wind and gullywasher storms and no other body in sight. That's what he looked like from a distance, if Miss Marie-Rose Dumaine was any judge, and she was, but then most of them did. Not a ranch hand, no, his horse was a Badlands mustang. Needed a shoe on the left hind, too, from the gait. So a plains drifter, then, paying one of those rare visits to civilization, and Gilead, Nebraska, population eighty-five (unless that was a gunshot coming from the Crystal Spring Saloon down the other end of town, then eighty-four) was just going to have to do its best to be civilized. She adjusted her collar where the lace was overly starched.

He reined up to talk to the German's wife sweeping the porch. The woman turned and pointed east, then gestured south. A visit to the blacksmith, yes, indeed. The rider nodded, touching his Union cap. A polite one, well, that's going to be a blessing to whichever of the girls he ends up with tonight. Lisabet, Marie-Rose decided. Clara needed a night or two off, that Burlington fellow had got strange with her.

His horse walked along, moving toward the hotel. The rider arched his back in a deep stretch and rolled his head in

lazy circles. Been on the trail for a while. Youngish, she judged, a creature of shimmering heat and dust. Second stranger come to Gilead this week.

So new shoes on the horse, or a new horse. Good saloon whiskey, a hot water bath, a room with a bed, a bed with a woman. Might be cash poor, though, unless he carried gold dust. Didn't look like a prospector, though, not enough kit. As she assayed, Lisabet came out onto the balcony, adjusting the lacings on her violet bodice.

"This corset is just on its last legs, Miss Rose. And don't tell me I've been eating too much, neither."

Marie-Rose murmured a murmur.

Lisabet sighed the deep sigh of the young and the bored, and leaned up on the rail.

"You should teach me those cards of yours, Miss Rose. The Gypsy cards? I could tell fortunes down in the saloon. It would be all mysterious and alluring," Lisabet said.

"I use them for solitaire, girl, I'm no Gypsy. Besides, it might give cause for the good Reverend Hilliard to speak badly about us from the pulpit, and we wouldn't want that, now would we?"

"For we are abominations unto the Lord... Well, now, who's that, then?" She'd noted that Marie-Rose's attention was directed down the road. "Doesn't look familiar. Recognize the fellow, Miss Rose? Hey, Clara!" She primped her hair, so the blond curls would catch the sun.

Clara, dark hair and pale skin, joined them from inside, flinching at the sky. "What, and is it worth being out in the noonday heat?" She fanned herself with her handkerchief.

Marie-Rose hummed noncommittally. Strangers in Gilead were something to be noted, for good or ill. Could mean business, but of late they just meant trouble. Regular travelers were avoiding the area, and the stage had bypassed them once, went missing a second time. Folk were leaving, folk gone plain missing. So they'd give this arrival the proper welcome, but she'd have her guard up sharp. They all leaned forward to evaluate the newcomer.

As the man approached, Marie-Rose saw the Union Army cap was battered and faded. No badges on it, so not a soldier, maybe formerly. Prairie pony, not government issue. Brown-yellow buckskin jacket with beaded

decoration and pants of once blue denim faded bone gray. White man's jeans with a red man's coat. Once-red kerchief knotted about the neck. Rifle in the saddle holster, irons on both hips. Wore his Peacemakers butt to front for the fancy cross-body "border style" draw, meant he knew how to use them. A tomahawk swung from the saddle horn to just at the knee by a slack strap, ready for use, not just a prize or souvenir. A frontier trader, maybe a half-breed scout.

"Now, Clara," said Lisabet, "You have your Pinkerton man to keep you a-twitter, do you not? So you can leave this one to me."

"I do not, as you well know," said Clara. "He's a mystery, that's a fact. I am vexed and dismayed, and in no way satisfied with the situation."

"You mean you're damp in the dainties, 'cause he's handsome and polite and either a gelding or don't take to women..."

"He's neither of those. He's got all the necessary urges, to that I can attest. He's just tetchy, and—"

A throat clearing from Marie-Rose put the girls on notice that the rider was coming within earshot. He slowed the horse as he came abreast of the hotel, angling to the water trough at the front of the Astoria. The horse set to drinking it empty, and the rider looked about, taking in the town. He dismounted stiffly, stretching out his legs. He joined his horse at the trough, and pulling off his dust-coated cap, plunged his head in the water. He came back up, spraying water sparkling into the sunlight. He gave his head a shake, ran his hand over his hair.

As his face turned upward, his bright eyes, from under his cap, encountered the three ladies in their dresses of calendared cotton and lace. They smiled down, eyeing him like professional horse traders at auction, evaluating for health, temper, and value. Clara gave her handkerchief a birdlike flutter.

The rider blinked, shook his head to clear his vision. Water sprayed in the sunlight. His sandy hair was sun-bleached and glittering, knife-blade-cropped short, his cheeks nicked with knife-blade-shaven stubble. He looked full up with shining eyes, his dirt-smudged, strong-jawed, unlined face blossoming into a smile, a beautiful smile, a smile that spoke clearly and honestly of the manifest delight at the sight of a beautiful woman and the promise of twenty-four

carat sin entirely unfettered by the strangling cant of the Sunday sermon. The rider drew in a deep, full breath as if to draw the scent of them down to him. Marie-Rose considered charging him for taking that much satisfaction from just directing that look at her girls and equally thought she should pay him for directing that look anywhere near her.

Marie-Rose said, "Well, well."

Clara said, "Land O' Goshen, all his teeth."

Lisabet said, "There's a kissing mouth."

They spoke behind saintly-sin smiles, not speaking loud enough to be heard below.

It was Marie-Rose's privilege to first address the customer, for a customer this was, all men were, unless they were Indians (rare), preachers (observant preachers anyway, rarer), or nancy (nicest fellows but poor for business), so the girls communicated with their eyes. Their eyes and their breasts.

Marie-Rose called down. "Hello there, stranger. I don't believe the Gilead Astoria has had the pleasure."

The rider held his cap at his breast. "Hello, ladies! Oh, my, oh my hello..." He just regarded them a moment, and Marie-Rose feared he might be simple. But he was just drinking them in like his horse was drinking in water.

"No, and I haven't had the pleasure of the Gilead Astoria, either. An oasis in the desert." His voice was clear and rich, with the smoky warm timbre of one of those big, rosewood Spanish guitars, the kind that thrummed under the skilled hands of a virtuoso of the *rasgueado*.

Lisabet leaned on the rail and spoke soft, "Clara, love you like a sister, but..."

Clara leaned right up next to her. "Not if I throw you off first..."

Marie-Rose spoke over them. "Have to make up for lost time, traveler. Now shall I and my young ladies make time for your company this evening?" Rhetorical, but proper etiquette and Marie-Rose did hold with form.

The rider's expression swelled, and perhaps something else, too, but then went winsome, and the pang of regret was palpable even at a distance. He was taking in every bit of

them, all three, their hair and faces, their bosoms and bodies, yet his eyes only left Marie-Rose's eye for a hummingbird flicker.

"Now, ma'am, not a thing in this world would be more agreeable and I would dearly love to, for I've been on the trail a good long time. But I got my trusty steed here to look after, and must find lodgings for the night. I don't think my funds will extend to... to keeping company with you in the custom to which you are, uh, accustomed."

He slapped his horse's flank fondly, who ignored him, and the rider sighed a sigh mournful to wring tears from a stone. It rang a low, lascivious purr from Clara, anyway. Marie-Rose was not made of stone, but she had several stones in her immediate family, and was thus defended against the man's well-deployed charms. Entertained, but defended.

Lisabet murmured, "Go ahead and push. I'd fuck him with my neck broke. That is one finely-made creature."

"Might be worth it to see if he can raise the dead with his pecker." Clara fanned herself.

The girls laughed softly together, exchanging a look that said they would gleefully yank each other's hair out over this one if it came to it. They rarely squabbled, having different likings and neither being fussy anyway, but this one... Clara trailed her handkerchief along the balustrade, and leaned into Lisabet and made to whisper in her ear, one hand on the other's exposed shoulder, one lock of her dark hair falling against Lisabet's sunny blonde, their breasts delicately and intimately brushing together just so. Whatever the rider had been about to say was lost to a low, throaty rumble that was admiration, starvation, and prayer. Lisabet made a little noise herself, and Clara breathed happy agreement. Problem solved. If he could afford it. They were in danger of a fit of giggles.

Marie-Rose slid a foot under her skirt over to give a kick, a reminder about professionalism. "Oh, now, young sir, don't you fret, no, not one bit. As it happens, there are rooms right here in the Gilead Astoria, for as you see this is the Gilead Astoria Saloon and Hotel. A room for the night, you say? And perhaps a hot bath?"

The girls both inhaled slowly and deeply, so as to underscore Marie-Rose's tempting suggestion, put so to set a man in mind of being comfortably warm, wet, and naked.

He coughed a little, and cleared his throat before speaking. "Oh, that does sound like heaven, ma'am, indeed it does. But, well... Blackie here needs new shoes..." It surely pained him greatly to make this concession.

Lisabet and Clara glanced at the sorrel he stood beside, brown-red as Marie-Rose's own russet locks, and Clara murmured "Blackie?" but one doesn't ask importunate questions in frontier country in 1871, statehood or no statehood.

"Shoes for the horse, you say? Well, now, I might be able to have a word with our Mister Johansen, the blacksmith in these parts, on your behalf. I have no doubt a suitable arrangement can be made. No doubt at all."

"Couldn't accept favors on such short acquaintance, ma'am," he said and lowered his head, sadly, regretfully, yet his eyes still stayed with hers, and allowed a little dove of hope to escape those lowered lashes and flutter up her way on delicate white wings. Marie-Rose let that little dove settle on her shoulder before answering. Boy was good.

"Not a favor, no. Mister Johansen owes me a favor or two himself, you see and— well, never you mind. You go see him right now, round the corner there, and let him get Blackie there properly seen to. Then you return to us and we'll get about having *you* properly seen to."

Marie-Rose returned that little dove of his with one of her own, a most beatific smile of agreeability and understanding, with a promise of perfumed delights tied to it with a silken lilac-scented ribbon, a bargain made.

The rider bowed, actually bowed. "You are too kind to a lonely, uh, hungry and tired traveler, ma'am."

"You speak to Mister Johansen directly, not his man Ivan who is a sweet creature, but can be dim. Now when you come back, you just come to the stairs at the side there, if you please. Don't want to lose you to the lure of the demon alcohol of Mister O'Malley's bar or to the card tables before we've had a chance to meet you proper. You just knock at the top of the stairs."

Clara and Lisabet were both surprised, but continued to waft the downy soft promise of indulgence downward.

"Well, I'm powerfully honored, ma'am, truly I am. Yours to command." He smiled back up at her, eyes a-sparkle. That smile would send Preacher Hilliard grabbing for his prayer

book before the seizures took him to the floor. The rider sprang into the saddle, trail weariness vanished, and flicked the reins. Blackie made one last desultory tail swat at the noonday flies and ambled forward, sloshing water.

"We await your pleasure, traveler." Marie-Rose raised her hand in a small wave, and the gesture turned into a tapping of a finger on her mouth.

The rider's voice could be heard muttering "pleasure, awaiting, pleasure, oh, Lord..." then singing a trail ditty through those pretty lips as he rounded the side of the hotel.

Once out of sight, the girls turned to look at Marie-Rose, whose finger-tapping signaled concern. The invitation up the back stairs was reserved for special, known and trusted customers, never new arrivals, even young, polite, wicked handsome ones.

Clara said, "Hope to God he's got money."

Lisabet laughed. "Got that look about him that says 'I got a six-inch tongue and can breathe through my ears.' Green or hazel?"

"Need to see up close, but I say green. Talks kinda funny though."

Marie-Rose was thoughtful, however. "Clara dear, just run down and see if your Pinkerton man is on the premises."

"Thinking trouble, Miss Rose? That'd be a shame, he's wicked handsome." Lisabet asked.

Her rosebud mouth making a small "o," Clara exchanged a look with Lisabet. "I think he rode out to Hebron. Tully said so."

"Wicked handsome is one thing," said Marie-Rose, "but trouble is another, and deleterious to the financial fortunes of our establishment and therefore to be earnestly avoided. See if Tully's seen him."

Clara moved to obey. Lisabet asked, "That green-eyed devil got your thumbs prickling, Miss Rose?"

"Green eyes always make my thumbs prickle, and they're usually right, my thumbs. We're going to tread cautious."



The man everyone had taken to calling "The Pinkerton Man" had arrived five days earlier. He had never identified himself as a Pinkerton man, of course, but then he wouldn't, and he was what Marie-Rose's *maman* would call "offish." Had given his name as Cartwright, no Christian name mentioned, and beyond that had said little of himself or his business. Youngish and tall enough, he wore a fine, long coat of black worsted with a silver-threaded waistcoat, sporting a silver pocketwatch chain, black fur felt derby hat and a scary polite manner. Boots were well-used and regular enough, but his guns were polished to a fine gleam and his shirt and starched collar were the whitest things in all of Nebraska. He'd hitched a ride on Lindqvist's buckboard, returning to Gilead from the train depot at St. Joseph after a delivery. Lindqvist was a typical taciturn Swede and asked no questions. Damned irritating.

An Old States bounty hunter or Federal Marshall would have called on Sheriff Buell on arrival, so his business was private or questionable. He came not at the behest of either Cade Belrose, Jace Hughes, or any of the concerns with branches in the town, such as the telegraph or stage line. He moved about the town, speaking with people here and there, watching and waiting. May have been refined and polite as a preacher, but Marie-Rose could smell dangerous, and this one had dangerous spilling out of his pockets and forming little pools of dangerous on the floor around him. Deep waters and storm clouds, this one.

He'd taken a room at the Crystal Springs Saloon, but came by the Astoria every day.

His quartering at the Crystal Springs, which boasted no kitchen and no female companionship, was noteworthy. His nosing about without clear association with any of the big dogs of the yard was troubling. His polite declining of tobacco in any form was curious. Though obviously a big city fellow, he knew the etiquette of a frontier town. Stood for drinks at the bar once a night, but declined to accept drinks for himself, admitting right out loud he didn't hold his liquor that well, which in the minds of the clientele of the Gilead Astoria was the last straw. He could be nancy, an unrepentant sheepfucker, or most kinds of religious type and folk would let be (Quaker he clearly was not, but Mormon was a ticket for a drubbing), but the mood of the town was such that suspiciousness overrode the general

principle that questions were not asked lest you carried a badge or a bible. Thus demands were made.

Those demands had been made at the bar of the Astoria, much to Miss Rose's distemper, by a gadabout gang of rowdies who felt the man's refusal of liquor to be a high insult. They also perceived his sweet-natured face to mark him as an easy bit of sport, and had Marie-Rose not had her own measure of the Pinkerton Man, she'd have stepped in with smiles and good whiskey to keep the peace. Or O'Malley would have taken steps much less salubrious to the cheerful spirits of the evening, which were none too cheerful anyway.

However, no intervention was needed by herself or O'Malley; the Pinkerton Man had come up right sharp, showing he had more than enough spine to stare down a few flea-speck ranch hands looking for a scrap. At any rate, Sheriff Buell had chosen to come by to make the young man's acquaintance before the loss of any furniture, and sat them down at a corner table to have a little pow-wow. The ranch hands took themselves off for other pleasures.

Salt of the earth, Sheriff Buell. King of Swords, according to her thinking by the cards. Just and ethical. She appreciated him no end; between him with his badge and her with her businesses, they shared a desire to keep things peaceful for herself, her establishment, and her town. Of course it wasn't really *her* town, but she lived in it, she loved it, and she was an indispensable component of the local economy.

It was not Sheriff Milo Buell's practice to run strangers out of town just out of hand, as was common in other towns where the law was stretched thin and the custom was to shoot first and ask questions never. Gilead was a stagecoach waystation, and hoped to be a train depot one day, so efforts were being made to slap a coat of paint the color of civilization here and there. A monkey in a velvet jacket is a monkey yet, Sheriff Buell said, but damned if Gilead was going to lose the rail because the local yahoos picked fights with a government agent here on the quiet. As had happened when the rail company men came through a time back.

The paint didn't stick well all over, of course. Some of the old-time ranchers were used to being kings of their castle, and brooked no interference. The immigrants got on

everyone's nerves, excepting the German and his frau, and they might as well be Swedes, though to hear the Swedes tell it a German might as well be a Hottentot. Mister Jace Hughes, he of the many landholdings and cattle concerns, was the most obstinate in the adopting of amiable ways of dealing with one's fellow man. He had never taken well to statehood, lo some four years back. Interfered with his habits in dealing with the townships, the law, and the Indian. Mister Cade Belrose, transportation and mercantile, was much the same, though he spent more time in church. Small comfort, that. There had been trouble aplenty lately, and Marie-Rose worried for Sheriff Buell's continued health. You'd think they were in some lawless Territory. New Mexico or God-blasted Utah.

No one was uncouth enough to eavesdrop or gawk as Sheriff Buell and the man had spoken quietly for a few minutes, but there was no small amount of shifting around in case things went south. But after a few minutes, the Sheriff had risen from the table, nodding and offering his hand, which signaled a guarded but positive conclusion towards this fellow and his business.

Sheriff Buell and Marie-Rose often put their heads together to confer on the business of keeping order.

"You giving your stamp, Sheriff?"

"Provisionally."

"He have a given name?" The sheriff had a badge, and so was allowed to importune.

"Benjamin. Been here the week, as he says?"

Marie-Rose nodded. "Five days. Polite as a schoolmarm."

"Hasn't seen the girls?"

"Clara's near to using a lariat."

They had watched young Tully, her gallant and passionate Page of Wands, carry a tray with pots of stew past them to the table where Cartwright sat. Cartwright had smiled, and they had spoken a few words, familiar-like, as Tully brought a plate of stew to his table. The Sheriff had given a sideways glance at Marie-Rose. Tully was fifteen, blond like a field of summer wheat, and them as ain't fussy had been known to notice, least when the girls were busy.

Marie-Rose had shaken her head. "Not Tully, either, he's just friendly to the boy."

The Sheriff told her Cartwright had said he was waiting on the stage. In the sheriff's opinion, Cartwright was waiting for someone to arrive. Marie-Rose has scanned the room, spare of the usual level of custom, and murmured her agreement.

"Private hire? Out for revenge? Not his own, I don't think. He's fretful, but not nursing anger."

"Don't know, don't care, less'n he's Hughes's. Or after Hughes. Or Belrose. Or damned anybody."

"That your thinking?"

The Sheriff hadn't answered direct, but veered. "Riding out to the Lancaster place. Something bad."

"Bad like what?"

"Bad like I don't know. Sol came across three horses with no riders."

"Damnation. Louisa coming in to town?" The Lancasters were real nice folk, the rare churchgoers who didn't look sideways at her and the girls.

"Could be."

"Not a good time to be gone from town, Sheriff. You come back in one piece."

"No, not a good time to be gone from town. Might do to keep our friend there in sight, should that be convenient. I'll alert Randall. Good evening to you, Miss Rose."

Not a good time to be in town either, Marie-Rose had thought to herself as he moved off. She tapped her lip.

Later that same evening, in a moment of idle mischief, Clara had supposed aloud to others in the saloon that the mysterious Mister Cartwright was a Pinkerton agent. Feared and respected, depending your allegiance to the straight and narrow, the Pinkertons had Federal authority, and that made him something to be very wary of, but were privately contracted, which made them unpredictable. This had the desired effect of having Mister Cartwright avoided by everyone but Clara and Tully, distrusted by the rambunctious, and, as Marie-Rose crossly pointed out, at risk of one of those same rambunctious shooting him in the back. Clara had glowered, and made it her job to mind the man's back. As business was slow, she had time. As he was

apparently well-funded, she had interest. That he was handsome and had fetching sideburns was gravy.

Over the next days he had loitered about the town, trading off between the Crystal Spring and the Astoria for dinner. He read the old newspapers at the Wells Fargo office, though the telegraph had been silent for a month prior, and then Mister Wilkins of the Western Union Telegraph Company had up and disappeared. Had hired one of Johansen's horses to ride out of town, one day west, one day north. Just looking about, as far as anyone could tell. He'd been included in the posse searching for the missing stagecoach, found abandoned between Gilead and Harbine, with no sign of passengers.

He had been right sly about not asking questions direct, but getting folk to talking about the recent troubles, people missing, people behaving strangely. Those that were willing found him an easy ear, but people already skittish got more skittish. That was most everyone, except the German and his wife, who had a grand time of him as he seemed to be able to say a word or three in German. Of himself he gave out little but a well-hidden apprehension. He was friendly with Doc Abernathy, the old turtle, and with Tully, but Abernathy had nothing to add and Tully could only second the suspicion that the Pinkerton Man was looking for someone. On those occasions Miss Rose saw him being still, unawares, he was working his jaw and staring into the long distance.

So when Clara returned to report to Marie-Rose that there were a few locals drowsing about, some ranch hands in from Cross Creek, and a cloth salesman waiting for the next stagecoach, should one deign to arrive, she was once again anxious. Sheriff Buell might be long afield, and his scarecrow of a deputy Eldin Randall was dutiful enough, but dutiful wasn't spine. No sign of Mister Cartwright, and even if the card tables in the back room had bodies around them this early, he would not be among them. Tully said he'd ridden out first light, though no destination had been mentioned. It had been slow of late, with regular custom dwindling. The big Belrose spread was closer to Harbine, so his hands took their leisure there, but Belrose had been buying up property around Gilead of late, and so his boys were seen more often. Hughes kept fewer men on payroll, but those he did came to town only irregular. Troublemakers, one and all.

But as none of them were today present, perhaps she had time to take the measure of this new arrival, and make sure that if he was looking to shoot anyone or if anyone was fixing to shoot him, that shooting would happen elsewhere than her hotel. Setting out a bottle of whiskey and the bathwater kettles to heating, Marie-Rose set to putting the premier entertaining room in order.



Her table clock had struck one chime when the stranger mounted the rear stairs, and she was prepared. She had sent Lisabet downstairs to fetch a plate of stew, for Marie-Rose knew menfolk, and told her to take her time fetching it, for Marie-Rose knew womenfolk. Best she have a chance to talk to this fellow a bit first. She opened the back door to his knock, and there he stood, cap in his hand, bag on his back. The tomahawk's feathered head looked out over his shoulder, poking out of the bag.

His smile for her was easy and agreeable, and up close it was as much a prairie fire as from a distance. But he was road-wearied just the same, showed a few crow's feet around the eyes. Beryl-green eyes, which caused her a twinge. He smelled of horse and dust and of worn leather smoky from sleeping on hard ground beside campfires of pinyon and juniper bark. His face showed signs of being quickly scrubbed with tough water and Marie-Rose did admire the effort.

"Afternoon, ma'am. William Anders Carlyle reporting as ordered." He gave a flourish with his cap.

"Welcome, Mister William Anders Carlyle. I am Miss Marie-Rose Dumaine, Miss Rose to all, your hostess for as long as you choose to grace our fair town. Do step inside, though I am pleased to make that a request, not an order."

He moved past her, and she closed the door behind. She gestured down along the short corridor to the front of the building. Four doors at this end of the hotel, four more along the mezzanine that overlooked the saloon. He walked a saddle-bowed walk, rough and ready, and she followed.

"I took the liberty of setting the water to heat, Mister Carlyle, should you be desirous of your bath straight away."

"You read my mind, Miss Rose. I'm not in a fit state for the company of ladies."

"I believe I correctly surmised the presence of a well-groomed gentleman wearing an ill-fitting coat of travel. But I think if I had read your mind, I would be slapping your face for the next hour." She observed him with arched eyebrow.

Then kissing on that rosebud mouth, she thought to herself. At which thought it entered her mind that she might be coming down with something.

He ducked his head, glancing back a look that allowed her correct assessment. At the top of the staircase that lead down to the saloon was the guest room with the bath. She stepped beside him to open the door, and he made only the smallest move to make way. She felt her neck prickle from the heat of his eyes on her hair, and she would swear he leaned forward to breathe in as she had her back to him.

They entered the room, and he let his bag slide to the floor.

Sunlight filtered through the lace curtains and across the walls, making the lower wooden panels glow richly and the upper gilded wallpaper sparkle. The great brass tub was the pride of the Astoria, along with the big old grandfather clock down in the saloon. Wood-shod, the tub was, and curved like a big coal scuttle. It sat near the center of the room, aligned so the bather could face the door and still have a hand out of sight over the side, customers often being jumpy about company. A pair of tall brass buckets waited by the fat iron stove, stocked wood box, towels on the highboy beside it. A table and chairs sat against the other wall, and a thick mattress bed, brass head and foot, with quilted blankets. A china bowl and a pitcher were on a commode in the corner, a shaving mug with a razor and strop hanging on the wall beside a small mirror.

He breathed in deeply, letting his eyes flutter closed. "Ah, honeysuckle and rosewater. Your scent, Miss Rose? Or is yours the lilac?"

"Where you coming in from, Mister William Anders Carlyle?"

"From points west, ma'am, been a long time on the trail. Looks like a fine town."

"That it is. What manner of business brings you to us?"

"When I saw the Astoria, Miss Rose, I completely forgot." That sparkling smile again. Those emerald eyes. Evading so prettily.

"I trust you reached a suitable arrangement with Mister Johansen?"

"Yes, we did, ma'am, and I'm in your debt, truly."

Not yet, you aren't, my boy, thought Marie-Rose.

"Will you be playing cards this evening, Mister Carlyle?"

"Well, I wouldn't say no to a friendly game, but..."

"Are you well supplied with tobacco?"

"Not a regular indulgence of mine, thank you kindly." Seeing those teeth she felt the fool for asking.

"Bath water is on the boil, Mister Carlyle. I'll have a plate brought up for your supper, if you'd like."

"You have read my stomach, Miss Rose. I fear there's no part of my anatomy safe from your—"

He reined up as Lisabet swept into the room, plate of stew and cornbread in one hand, bottle with cup on top in the other.

"Well, good afternoon, sir." She spoke with a lilt, and let her skirts rustle as she moved across the room to set the plate and fork on the side table. "I take it you're feeling a bit peckish? And you look right parched." She artfully arranged the plate, the fork, the cup, and herself on the table.

"Thirsty... and starving..." He was looking at her as he'd lick a honeycomb.

"We'll have to fill you up, then..." Lisabet gave the smallest toss of her head.

Marie-Rose rolled her eyes just a mite, and stepped over to take Lisabet by the arm.

"Let us leave Mister Carlyle to his supper and bath, Lisabet. You said yourself he's trail beat and parched."

Lisabet produced a moue of displeasure, but allowed herself to be led out. She paused, framed in the doorway, and turned her head to the side, preparing to say something of a fetching nature that might give Marie-Rose indigestion.

All part of the game, but it bordered on the cruel. He was trapped halfway between the women and the table, and Marie-Rose thought he might just fall in half as he was equal famished for both. He put up a brave front, though, and Marie-Rose took pity. She gave Lisabet a shove, who squeaked a little, but moved.

"You take your time, Mister Carlyle, and come downstairs when you're good and ready. We'll be near at hand should you need anything at all."

"Thanks, Miss Rose, and thank you, Miss Elizabeth. You are angels to a weary wayfarer." Damned if his voice did not convey a husk of unvarnished sincerity.

You are a dangerous creature, you are, she thought as she smiled politely at him, and we are just going to enjoy the hell out of every waking moment of you before some galoot gives you a bad case of lead poisoning and that had best not goddamned happen in my establishment.

The ladies stepped into the hall, and Marie-Rose pulled the door closed behind her. She waited till she heard the click of the lock and the sound of his boots moving away from the door.

Lisabet hummed happily. "Well, if he don't take the rag off the bush. He's a right fine-looking man, Miss Rose. Right fine. He sure wants entertaining, don't he? He is living, breathing 'wants entertaining'."

"That he is, girl, for a prairie wolf, so you keep your head about your shoulders. Men that pretty are trouble. Mark me. You go downstairs and see to the saloon a bit."

"You got a suspicion, Miss Rose? Talks awful nice.

"I'm forethoughtful, as you well know. Nice is fine, if you like 'slick as an ice patch.' Don't you go all fluttery. And no, I'm not giving him over to Clara." She led Lisabet down the stairs.

"Damned if you couldn't start a fire in a rainstorm with how bad he wants entertaining..."

Marie-Rose frowned. "Get. I'm just going to look in on him, see if something suspicious comes out of his war bag."

Lisabet nodded and took herself the rest of the way down the stairs. Marie-Rose returned to her own room, just beside this one, grumbling. Last thing she needed was her girls going all dandy-lion over a honey-mouthed saddle tramp.

Marie-Rose's room was the most richly outfitted in the hotel, of course, and in all of Gilead, truth be told. Filled with fine furniture and appointments, brocade velvet curtains instead of gingham, lace on every surface. A toiletries table to do a music hall proud and a glittering

clock from Europe ticking away under a glass dome to keep her company on long nights. Instead of the usual armoire in the corner of the room, Marie-Rose had an actual built closet, which was unusual, but served a further purpose. In that closet, against the wall shared with the entertaining room, there was a small stool. Marie-Rose entered, pushing past her hanging dresses, sat herself on the stool, and removed a cloth-wrapped plug from a spy hole in the wall just at eye level. A cunning bit of work, looking through a bit of painted silk covering the hole on the other side. It gave a full view of the room where her women would entertain. Trusted patrons could be entertained in the girls' own rooms, but not questionable customers and certainly not strangers. On such fellows Marie-Rose kept an eye so she could take action in case things got unpleasant. She kept a derringer handy in the closet, in case the gun in the dresser was too far away. Usually didn't have to use it more than two or three times a year, though more than one of her regular customers had to be spoken to sharp about irregular treatment of the girls in the last months. Luckily Lisabet was sturdy farm stock and could put up a fight if need be. Clara was no shirk, but a slight thing. That Burlington agent had been through several times last year, ordinary as a hen house egg, but just the other night he got strange and had to be ejected. The Carlyle fellow was just going to use the bathtub, but times being what they were she'd rather know about anything suspicious sooner than later.

His coat was a pile on the floor atop his bag, gun belt hung from the bedpost. He was sitting at the table, spooning up stew. His tomahawk lay at hand it. Taking all of a minute to empty his plate, he tossed back a beaker of water, took one swig of whiskey, and set to stripping for his bath. He sang to himself in the manner of them as spent long days alone.

"You're as stiff as my smoking barrel,

You're as dead as a desert night."

She didn't recognize the song he hummed and the words weren't making her feel partial.

"You're a notch and I'm a legend,

You're at peace and I must hide."

Boots came off awkward, and he banged his heels on the footstool and wiggled his toes through socks that sorely wanted darning. No women in his life at all, Marie-Rose

ascertained. He shucked his jeans, and in a patched and well-worn union suit gave them and himself a good shake. The kerchief knot took a struggle to get undone; the leather lanyard with a curious brass bit remained on. He let his union suit fall to the floor.

He was every bit as pretty in his skin as dressed, nicely made and compact, lean-muscled like a mountain lion, and Marie-Rose would hazard he was fast and had the endurance of a chaparral pony to boot. Baby's bottom on a pair of tree trunks. Those sturdy legs told of time spent in the saddle; they'd frame a church window. Just a nice Lutheran church, though, not a cattle-driving cowboy Methodist window. He picked up his jacket for a shake as well, and Marie-Rose noted an impressive collection of scars scattered about his skin. Some straight, some ragged, some old, some new, all well-healed but this body had seen fighting and then some. Nasty fighting, too. Tanned oven-biscuit brown from top to tail, so cold-river bathing and sprawled-on-a-sunny-rock drying. Foursquare solid muscles, Mother Earth strong shoulders ready for any burden, from the weight of the world to his sweetheart's sleeping head. All his parts of proper size and weight; other than trail dust and grime he looked a right healthy specimen. No scabs or sores on any bit that might come into contact with someone in her employ. Must have come from back east originally – that habit eastern folk had of butchering up a little shaver's pecker was a damned crime. Still, it was a pretty piece to go with the rest of him, hefty and serviceable. In true man fashion, he set to some serious scratching in that neighborhood, setting the cropped but sizable cob to happy dog-tail wagging.

Much as she enjoyed the view of a well-constructed male of the species, and he was that in spades and clubs, she was more interested in the contents of his bag. Alright, a most prime and finely-constructed male of the species, which would in no way distract her from attending to the contents of his bag. Alright, he wasn't going to do much with his saddlebags, so nothing for it but to admire the unshucked flesh. A washerwoman could do her laundry on that belly. He put a finger in the bath, and then looked to the water kettles. As he hefted one off the stove with one arm, Marie-Rose took a moment to appreciate the workings of the healthy muscles. He emptied the one into the tub, and set the other on the stovetop. He went to the window, which was open to allow such breeze as there was to allay the

clawing heat. He leaned a shoulder against the wall, letting the dry breeze play over him. Sunlight dappled him through the curtains, and he stood a while, looking thoughtful, hand moving absently along his jaw.

His eye fell on the shaving razor, and he rubbed his stubbled chin. He leaned into the mirror and the light from the window set those green eyes to sparkling. The wing of a dark bird crossed her heart. She was right to warn Lisabet to be distrustful. Green-eyed quicksand rascal.

She quietly replaced the plug, as she would learn little from watching him shave. Nothing suspicious, but nothing to set her at ease either. Not a waste of time, though, not that she paid mind to such things generally, as damn, that's a sight for a widow woman to keep herself warm with on a cold night for years to come, and there's a truth.

She left her place in the closet, and made her way downstairs to the saloon to see to things.



O'Malley, her dependable Knight of Coins, prudence, loyalty, responsibility, was at the bar, silent and watchful as usual. Two or three gadabouts, Tully sweeping. The summer heat made the room oppressive, though a breeze was moving dust around. Rain coming for sure. She went back to check on the kitchen, stuck her head in the pantry to enumerate eggs and bags of flour, scribbled a list for Tully to take round. She was lost in thought till the sound of raised voices caught her attention. She stepped out of the larder, cocking an ear.

A scream jolted her: Lisabet's distinctive opera singer voice that she wasn't afraid to use when inconvenienced. Marie-Rose ran back through the kitchen and into the saloon. The loafers were gone; O'Malley was gone from behind the bar. She ran for the stairs, but the door to the tub room was still closed. Not him, then. She held quiet for a moment, listening. Looking about, her eye fell on Tully's broom, abandoned on the floor by the saloon entrance. She hiked her skirts and ran outside.

Just off the boardwalk that ran in front of the Astoria she saw Lisabet picking herself up off the ground. There just beyond her was Carlyle, kneeling astride a sad lump of someone flat out in the road. He was wearing nothing but

his unbuttoned jeans, his lanyard, and a very angry face flecked with shaving lather. Carlyle had a hold of a grimy shirt collar, and the other arm was reared back to deliver a blow that made Marie-Rose wince even before it hit. Two other men, scraggly ranch hands by the look of them, had their hands on their guns, but were looking respectfully at O'Malley's shotgun aimed at their bellies. Tully was on the ground between them, eyes wide, blood on his face.

Belrose Ranch boys, if Marie-Rose were to guess. If they were looking to altercate, it would be fast and bloody. No one spoke a word. O'Malley stepped well clear of Lisabet, shotgun ready. Carlyle looked up, becoming aware of the little gathering of guns around him. He stayed his blow and slowly rose to his feet, wary.

There would normally be a crowd of people out and about, horses and wagons moving up and down the road, but with the strange days upon the town, there were only a few folk to be seen. The German's wife was watching from down the road, and Old Man Brubaker had come out from the feed store. He took one look and went right back inside. *Weaned on a pickle, that old bastard; screw him.*

Marie-Rose pulled Lisabet further out of the line of fire. The Belrose men took cautious steps back, but moving apart from each other. Tully scrambled to his feet and stood fists before him, set for a fight, but Carlyle put a tense, gentling hand on the boy's shoulder and drew him back and away. The two roughs grabbed their woozy man from the ground and dragged him off toward three horses tied up by the feed store. Marie-Rose fought the urge to grab Tully and pull everyone inside.

Lisabet was in a fit and swearing to fry bacon. "Son of a sheep-fucking shit! Just reached right over and grabbed my tit! Just like that! I was givin' him a what-for and the sidewinder just shoved me right down! Knocked me clean over!" She seemed as much surprised as outraged, oblivious to the cocked triggers around her. She beat dust off her skirts.

Her assailant was thrown up onto his horse, where he managed to keep his seat. The other two mounted and turned their horses north, riding right between the narrow gap between the feed store and the laundry. As they left, they directed baleful and threatening expressions over their shoulders, met by the stony and resolute faces from

O'Malley and Carlyle. They gave a glance to Tully, exchanged a look with each other, and rode off. Still not a word had been spoken.

Lisabet was unharmed, just steamed. She sucked air, pulled out her kerchief, and stepped over to the hard-breathing Tully. "That was real brave what you did, Tully. Stepping up to those sons-of-snakes three to one." She reached for his face with her handkerchief. He shied away from the embroidered linen, wiping his nose with his sleeve instead.

"It was Carlyle saved you..." His voice was thick, and a serious swelling was forming on his jaw.

They all looked at Carlyle, who was looking like he was wishing himself elsewhere. He cleared his throat, making quick work of buttoning his jeans. Marie-Rose looked at him, then looked up at the open second floor window directly above the shingled awning of the Astoria, yellow gingham pulled out past the sash, fluttering in the wind. She looked back at him. He wiped his face a bit.

"He landed right on the crowbait son-of-a-bitch still pulling on his pants, Miss Rose," Tully said. He grinned at Carlyle, and winced in pain. Marie-Rose studied Tully's bruised jaw.

Carlyle glanced at O'Malley. O'Malley hefted the shotgun and gave a flick of his eye. Carlyle nodded at the ladies and took Tully by the arm. "You're the hero, kid, I just dropped in for the mopping up. Let's get you cleaned up." They hustled inside, Carlyle giving a last concerned look towards the now-distant riders.

"We'll go have a chat with the Sheriff right smart. Want to check on Tully first." She scanned the street as she went through the doors. Assaulting women in the streets in full daylight now. She feared for her town.

O'Malley resumed his place behind the bar, pouring a drink for Lisabet. She downed it and set to complaining about the uncouthness of menfolk these days to the professionally sympathetic O'Malley.

Marie-Rose took herself up the stairs. The door to the tub room was ajar, and she heard Tully's voice from inside.

"That was some jump, Mister Carlyle! Never seen the like!"

"Let me see that arm. That sumbitch gave you a good yank."

She stepped quietly to the door, close enough to see in but not to disturb. Tully was sitting on the bed, Carlyle filling the water basin from the ewer. He set the basin on the floor, knelt in front of Tully, and carefully helped Tully remove his shirt. He wet a cloth, and careful as a mother cat with a kitten, set to cleaning the boy's face.

"Nah, it's not bad hurt. I—ow—" Tully winced, and Carlyle leaned in to look close.

"Got your lip, pawdner. Let me look." He put his hand behind Tully's head, and gently turned it to the light. "Little split, nothing more." He carefully brought the wet cloth against it again.

"Let's hold this here a minute." Tully put his hand over Carlyle's, and Carlyle slid his out from under. He picked up another cloth, wet it, and dabbed at the back of Tully's head and the shoulder away from Marie-Rose. Must be a scrape there.

"Got reach on me, the wharf rat." Tully's voice was muffled.

"Wharf rat?"

"Miss Rose says that. She's from river folk down south."

"Gotcha."

"You got kids, Mister Carlyle?" asked Tully.

Carlyle blinked at him. "None that I know of."

Tully just smiled, shrugging slightly.

"Got a brother," Carlyle said. His voice was pitched low. "He needs patching up all the time, too."

"I got a brother, too. He's a horse doctor. "

"I'm no horse doctor, but I'll do my best."

Tully smiled wider.

"Where's your brother, Mister Carlyle?"

Marie-Rose sighed at his youthful indiscretion. Fifteen was still between hay and grass, but old enough to know not to ask questions that might bring painful answers.

Carlyle didn't answer right away. "We got split up a while back."

"That's a shame, Mister Carlyle. You got folk?"

"Just him and me. Let's see that hand." Carlyle lightly pressed Tully's bruised knuckles between the wet cloth.

"You two ride together?"

"Since we lost our dad. A better trail partner you couldn't find."

"Same as Willam and me. But he leaves me behind."

"You'll be grown enough soon, I'll bet."

The boy's eye had been observing. "You in the army? That's an army cap."

"Nope, just like the fit."

"You leave proper? Not on the run, are you? Anyone on your trail?" Marie-Rose pricked up her ears; Tully's indiscretions weren't as accidental as she figured.

"No, on the move, not on the run. Tracking down some lost city folk."

"So you're not an outlaw, are you? That's an Injun coat."

"Seen my face on a poster somewhere?"

"I wouldn't turn you in if you was." Tully's cornflower eyes were big as saucers and guileless as a rabbit. Wicked child. But Carlyle seemed unaffected. She was impressed.

Carlyle laughed lightly. "Thanks. Nope, not an outlaw." As he said it, a strange look passed over his face. "Not around these parts, anyway. I don't think." *So, not hiding among the willows, as the saying goes, Mister Green Eyes Carlyle?* she thought. *Do I believe you or don't I?*

Tully waited a moment before speaking again. "What's his name?"

"Sam." The saying of that name was a conjuration. It pricked her ears.

"He ain't dead, is he, Mister Carlyle? I'm powerful sorry if I'm treading heavy. Miss Rose always tells me—" *Yes, I did, and you go right on ignoring me,* she thought.

"No, he's... I'm sure he's fine." He concentrated on Tully's shoulder, seemed satisfied with what he saw.

"I'll bet he sore misses you just as much, Mister Carlyle."

Carlyle turned away, and then sat on the chair opposite, setting to pulling on his socks and boots. "Where's your brother, Tully?"

"He was riding up – Willam his name is – he was riding up by the Hebron ranches and then Alexandria. He's a week late. I'm thinking if you'd met a horse doctor along your way you'd have said when I said he was a horse doctor..."

Carlyle spoke soft. "Sorry, no, Tully. I came in off the range from the west. Last people I was around were Arapaho."

Tully must have twitched.

"Just traders, nothing to worry about," Carlyle said.

"Wish he'd send word. He always sends word. He'll thank you for caring for his brother like your own."

Marie-Rose couldn't see Carlyle's face, but he stopped moving briefly.

"Brave of you to take on three against one, Tully. Dumb, but brave."

"You come to the defense of womenfolk. Like you. Bet you taught Sam that."

"Our dad taught us, yeah."

"He teach you to fight?"

"That he did." Carlyle's voice was falling softer, and Marie-Rose had to strain to hear.

"Riding and shooting?"

Carlyle stood, thoughtful for a moment. "He taught us firearms, combat..."

"Poker and women?"

Carlyle was startled out of his reverie. "What? No!"

"No poker? Reverend Hilliard wants to outlaw poker. You ain't Presbyterian, are you?"

"No, we're from Kansas. Nothing wrong with poker. "

"But not women?"

"Sam never liked poker. I love it. In fact, I hear there's a game downstairs... Gimme that cloth." Carlyle seemed strangely distressed by the turn of conversation. "Our dad told us what we needed to know and didn't ask questions."

She smiled as that warning shot went far wide.

"Don't remember my pa. So you took Sam his first time?" Tully asked guilelessly.

"Took him where? First day at school? Yeah, I thought he'd cry, but he ran off—"

"First time with a woman."

Carlyle sputtered with a mix of shock and laughter. "No! No, God, no, we... It, uh, it was different where we grew up. Anyway, Sam didn't know women existed. Till college, I guess."

"He got schooling?" Tully asked.

"Yeah, a little brainiac. Okay at sports, but other kids would be playing ball or chasing—He's a bookworm." Carlyle handed Tully his shirt. "That jaw may be stiff for a day or so."

"That where he is now? In some fancy school back east?" *Take more than a stiff jaw to quiet this one, Mister Carlyle,* she thought.

Carlyle didn't answer.

"And you didn't teach him about women? What kind of brother are you? Bet those high-class city hookers bleed him dry for a sucker. Ain't right."

Carlyle smiled, winced at a memory, smiled again. "How old are you, Tully?"

"Sixteen," Tully said. Carlyle wrung out the towel and picked up the basin. He paused.

"Fifteen," Tully said.

"Well, plenty of time for that sort of discussion a few years down the line. When Willam thinks you're ready."

"You sure you ain't Quaker? I was ready last year."

Carlyle about spilled the water out of the bowl as he set it back on the commode. He turned to Tully, with a look on his face that had Marie-Rose near to laughing out loud.

Tully grinned cheerfully and patted the bed beside him. Little goatling was incorrigible. Never asked for favors, either, but always ready. Carlyle turned to the window and muttered, then burst out laughing and turned back, giving Tully a soft chuck on the head.

"Things sure are different here. Good for you, kid. Damn, dude, if I'd have been born—"

He saw Marie-Rose standing at the door. Tully followed his look.

"How's Miss Lisabet, Miss Rose? She hurt?" he asked. She noted the earthworks going back up around Carlyle.

"She's fine, Tully, just wet-hen irate. Now what all happened?" She advanced into the room and looked Tully over, approving of what she found, and turned to Carlyle to favor him with a look of thanks and considerably improved regard. Carlyle nodded, self-conscious.

Before Tully could start his recounting, Lisabet called from down below.

"Miss Rose! The law's here, wants words."

"Both heroes will be down presently, tell him!" Marie-Rose called back. "Let's get you buttoned up."



Carlyle set to finish dressing. Marie-Rose steered Tully to the door, and gave Carlyle a look as she passed him. The curtain still fluttered in the open window. He returned her look, his green eyes looking evenly into her gray, and said he'd be down in a moment. *By way of which exit*, she wondered, and she led Tully downstairs.

She found Sheriff Buell waiting along with deputy Randall. Lisabet was telling her tale again. The saloon was vacant of custom, and Marie-Rose couldn't say she was surprised.

Tully was down the stairs three at a time. "You going to go after them, Sheriff?"

"Not sure I can, boy. Got other troubles, more than a case of disturbing the peace." He nodded an apology to Lisabet, who twitched an unsurprised eyebrow. "You say they were Belrose men, Miss Lisabet?"

"Wouldn't Bible swear, but yeah, I think so."

"Which way did you say they rode out?"

"North out of town, Sheriff," Marie-Rose answered.

"Peculiar." The Belrose ranch was east and south of Gilead.

Buell tugged his moustache. "Eldin, you best get back to the office. Be along presently. Tully." The deputy touched his hat toward the ladies and departed.

Marie-Rose followed Randall out front while the Sheriff spoke to Tully. A couple of men were loading up a pair of wagons by the Crystal Springs at the other end of town. The

storm clouds were a wall of dark now, coming fast and cold from the north. Relief from the dreadful heat was going to be a short-lived pleasure when the cold night storm rolled over them. Wherever those folk were heading, they'd best unroll the tarp.

"Eldin Randall, what is going on,?"

"Don't you fret now, Miss Rose. Sheriff's got it all in hand." She smiled back at him, wanting to grab and shake him. *Think I can't handle it with the bark on, boy?* She was obliged at least for his attempt at reassurance as his eyes darted around the street and fingered his gun belt.

"So just get back to my sewing?" She hadn't intended that much rasp in her voice.

"Now don't go at me like that, Miss Rose, it's—"

"Here's Mister Carlyle, Sheriff!"

She turned back toward the saloon at the sound of Tully's voice. Randall forgotten, she stepped back inside. Coming down the stairs was Carlyle, in his full kit, guns and tomahawk, cap in hand. He looked at her, she looked at him. *Well, well*, she thought.

Carlyle came to stand by Tully. Tully grinned up at him.

"He jumped from the upstairs window, Sheriff, it was somethin' to see."

And he didn't jump out of it again just now, she thought.

Buell looked Carlyle over. "I hear tell we're in your debt for—"

Carlyle flicked his eyes to the towhead just in front of him.

"—helping out Tully here with a rescue."

"Just happened to be handy."

"Thankful of that. Miss Rose, you acquainted with this gentleman?"

"Newly arrived, Sheriff, but I've a decent opinion on short association." She spoke true, but Buell, who knew her mind, would hear some qualification in what she said.

Carlyle thanked her with a bare nod.

"Well, then. Miss Rose is an admirable judge of character, so if she speaks for you, I'll allow as you're on good standing." The Sheriff's voice was polite, but his eyes held

admonition. Carlyle acknowledged his look with a measured look of his own and nodded.

Buell nodded in return. "I need to borrow O'Malley, Miss Rose, to mind the jailhouse if you would so oblige me. Need Randall to ride the fence, see if those coyotes circle back or come upon someone else and make more trouble.

"Where are you going to be?"

"I'm out to see Niles Lindqvist. He's been telling some mighty strange tales about what he saw on the road to Alexandria yesterday."

"Telling tales? Lindqvist? As in more than five words strung together?"

"Yeah. Worrisome. Sol and Louisa Lancaster have come into town. They're over at Doc Abernathy's."

"You riding out alone?"

"Yep."

"Where's Morgan? Johansen?"

"Mister Morgan has packed up. Seems a lot of folk have." Buell's voice was controlled, but grim.

"Are you telling me the town is empty of decent menfolk?" She felt a knot in her stomach. She wasn't going to bring up the Pinkerton fellow, him still a cipher.

Tully spoke up. "I'll go, Sheriff. I can—"

Marie-Rose spoke up sharp. "I need you here, Tully—"

"Mister O'Malley and Mister Carl—"

"Best you stay here," the Sheriff said, and Tully made to interrupt further, but Carlyle cleared his throat and cut them all off.

"You need back-up, Sheriff?"

Everyone turned to look at Carlyle. Sheriff Buell gave Carlyle the up and down: rangy and half-wild, scuffed boots and weatherworn buckskin coat, six-guns on hips, tomahawk across the back. Looked a bit surprised himself, but was steady on his feet, had fire in his eyes.

"You can handle those?" Buell was looking at the eyes, not the guns.

"I can."

The two men measured each other in that way, and then Carlyle turned to Tully. "The Sheriff was being polite, Tully, but I'm thinking he can't leave the women here with a stranger. Sheriff is shorthanded, we all have to do our part."

"You ain't a stranger—"

"To everyone else. You know the town, I don't, sport, and the people know you."

Tully looked at him, searching Carlyle's face for pretense, but Carlyle met his eyes straight and true.

"I'll be on the lookout for lost brothers, too."

At that, Tully nodded. Buell had no more expression than a Pawnee in a poker game, but she thought he might well be favorably disposed. Carlyle pulled on his battered army cap, and nodded to Marie-Rose as he passed.

"We'll keep your bathwater warm, Mister Carlyle." She was plumb surprised him offering himself up like that, she had thought it more likely he'd want distance between himself and lawmen. Though maybe he had got wind of the Pinkerton man was on his trail, which may or may not be the case but she was suspicious that it was, and so he was befriending who he could.

"Thank you kindly, Miss Rose."

"Come back to us in one piece, Sheriff. You, too, Mister Carlyle." She put a hand on his arm as he passed her.

He smiled nice at her hand, not the sassy one, but a genuine smile as he tugged his cap to her and moved out. She hadn't decided if this Mister Carlyle was a Knight or a Knave, though it would assuredly be wands or coins; fire and earth he was, that much was plain. It came to her mind that she had not laid a card down for the stranger Cartwright. It tasked her to be unsure of anyone, good or ill.

To her surprise, Carlyle stepped back in. He poked the handle end of the tomahawk to Tully.

"Keep an eye on this for me, Tonto." And out he went.



Randall returned to the sheriff's office, and everyone else went about their business. Lisabet groused her way through the rest of the afternoon, Clara had gone off somewhere before the set-to out front. Marie-Rose sent Tully round with a list of goods for the pantry. No new customers had arrived, and the emptiness of the place made the clock tick doubly loud.

She forced herself to keep busy, not watch the road. She fussed in the kitchen a while, tried to do something with the laundry, but in the end accomplished nothing. After an hour or so, she finally gave up wondering and marched out the rear door to look up Johansen in his smithy and the stable beside the Astoria. As she exited into the side alley, Tully flashed past on the main road, legs pumping with exuberance. He skidded to a halt as he caught sight of her.

"Can't find no one, Miss Rose. Brubaker is all shut up, Howland and the Mercers are loading their wagons, looks like they're fixing to leave town. Benedict's boys are down at the Crystal Spring." He was all out of breath.

"Let's hope they stay there. Never mind, Tully. Seen Clara? How about that Mister Cartwright?" She tried to act casual.

"Miss Clara's at Doc Abernathy's. Haven't seen Mister Cartwright. You want I should find him?" She could feel him winding up. "I'll go fetch him back here!"

"No, no need for that, just asking. Go see if O'Malley needs you, why don't?" She smiled a pleasant, calm smile. Wasted effort as boys thrive on excitement. He bolted off, fortunately to the front of the Astoria, rather than back down the road. She continued on back.

She found two horses in the stalls. The rising breeze wafted the sooty smell of the forge through the slats. She looked about. The irons were still warm, but not red. The hammer was on the anvil, the coals still glowing in the fire pit. Not a soul to be seen. She thought to call out, but her voice died in her throat.

She returned to her room. Stepping out onto her balcony, she looked over the town. A wagon was heading east past the water tower, piled with belongings. She watched it round the post office, twining her fingers in the fringe of her overskirt. She glanced toward her cards, wrapped in their blue cloth, but she didn't want the advice. Or the bad news. She settled on her bed for a bit of napping to rest her nerves.



The clock said half past five when she awoke, surprised that she'd actually slept. She gave herself a good stretch and stepped out onto her balcony to assess the weather. She drew her shawl closer. The weather had cooled, the Chinook wind bringing rain from far out in the west. Storm would be on them within the hour. There was no one else on the street. Looking away to the Crystal Springs, she could see there were horses tied up in front. There were horses tied up in front of the Astoria, now that she looked down; must have arrived in the last few minutes and where did they come from? Blackie was among them.

She turned her ear towards the open door behind her. There was raucous laughter. Unpleasant laughter, not the sociable kind. That no one had informed her of arriving customers was an impossibility. The sound of breaking glass meant trouble.

Down the street she spied Clara moving quick toward the Astoria. Marie-Rose waved frantic, hoping Clara would see and head for the Sheriff's office. She didn't stop to see if her signal had been understood, but hustled back through her room, taking a pistol from the dresser drawer as she passed.

Voices from the saloon carried up the stairs. Hooting, yelling.

"Hit 'im again, Spinks!"

"Get up, polecat, I ask'd you a question."

Spinks. That weasel. Buell had gone hard with that one recently, surprising he was back in town so soon after. Must have picked a fight with one of the ranch hands. Please God, not Tully again. But O'Malley would not allow that, so O'Malley might not be able, and that thought gave her a true fright. The laughter subsided, letting an angry, unsteady voice be heard.

"Pull a gun on me then hit me from behind. That's pretty low. How many of there are you?" Carlyle's voice.

"One's all you got to worry about, *coyote*, and that's me."

"Just want to know if I'm going to have to use both hands... *ughh—*"

Another heavy smack. If Spinks had decided to pick a fight with Carlyle, it may not bode well for Carlyle's pretty face, if Spinks had enough rougths with him. Too few and it didn't bode well for Spinks. Now she was praying for Clara to come back with the sheriff, or at least Randall. She further prayed to the dear Lord that Tully had skit out, and the Pinkerton man, where might he be? Him walking into the middle of whatever Spinks and his goons were doing for fun didn't bode well for the Astoria. Whoever took whose side, it would be ugly.

"Answer me polite, *coyote*. Where's the fuckin' sheriff?" There was the smack of fist on flesh and another round of mean hoots and whistles.

Marie-Rose went cold at that. *Asking* for the sheriff? This was serious, not just some yahoos getting roostered up and looking for payback from earlier affront. She stepped carefully to the railing to get a look below.

In the saloon's main room, she could see several men, mostly gathered towards the middle. O'Malley was nowhere to be seen, nor was Tully. Belrose men, she was sure. Two of them she recognized from earlier in the day. The one that gave trouble to Lisabet was not among them, but the other two were there, standing quietly by, watching the proceedings. Spinks stood all a-swagger before a sagging Carlyle, arms pulled up hard behind him by two louts. His guns were gone. Carlyle's jacket was stained wet and dripping, and he was licking a trickle of blood from his lip. Carlyle had a look in his eye that Marie-Rose thought should have made Spinks think a bit, but thinking and Spinks never really spent time together. Sitting on the bar was a runty little fellow, gun in hand, playing with Carlyle's tomahawk.

And they were drinking her liquor. As she moved to the top of the stairs, raring to give hell, her arm was grabbed from behind her.

"Nothing to concern you, Miss Rose." A seedy and cold-eyed ranch hand from the Belrose spread stepped out of the tub room doorway, gun in hand. He stayed just out of sight of those below and shoved her back toward her bedroom door.

"Albert Juke, you damned fool, what the hell is—"

"Just take yourself back in your room, woman. Not your quarrel."

She glared at him, horrified. Over his shoulder, she could see the door to the room at the end of the passage move slightly, and Lisabet's face was briefly visible.

Another crash came from below, and more raucous noise, and Juke and Marie-Rose both turned their attention below. Carlyle must have dodged a fist; one of the men holding him was painfully twisting Carlyle's arm up behind him.

She was afraid to move, or breathe much. Juke hadn't seen the gun she held; she was holding it low against her dress.

"Juke, you crowbait fool, what the hell is this?" She spoke as quickly and quietly as she could. "That drifter just rode in this afternoon. Just 'cause he stood up for one of my girls—"

"We got our orders, woman. Now get."

"Orders? From who? Belrose? *In my saloon?*"

"He got his own orders."

Juke shoved her behind him, stepping up to the railing. His attention had been drawn down to the entrance to the saloon.

The fading light from the doorway of the saloon was blocked by a tall figure. The enigmatic Mister Cartwright, in his black coat and bowler hat, one hand on the swinging door, had come to a dead stop as he took in the scene before him. Spinks glanced at him, but paid him no mind. Amazing and stupid little man.

There was only a clock-tick to take in the whirl of expressions that played over Cartwright's face right then, like a lightning strike dancing across the prairie at night: surprise, anger, relief, and more, all in instant succession. Cartwright mouthed a word, looked like "*damn*," and as the lightning flicker faded, what remained was forged-steel anger. In the space of exactly one heartbeat, Marie-Rose allowed for a touch of hope.

Carlyle spat blood and grinned up at Spinks. "My baby brother hits harder than you."

Spinks smiled broadly back, an insult to the eye, and laughed loudly into Carlyle's face, an insult to the nose. He called over his shoulder to Cartwright. "We'll attend to you presently, Mister Pinkerton Man," and reared back his fist.

Not a week went by that Marie-Rose didn't see punches thrown, and she'd seen men move fast, but when Mister Benjamin Cartwright crossed the length of the saloon entire in a blink and sent Spinks boots-in-the-air onto the table beyond with fist like a freight train, she was mouth-open amazed.

There was a moment of utter shocked stillness. The clock ticked twice.

Carlyle said, "Hey there, Sammy."

Cartwright said, "Ow."

Spinks was a heap on the floor by the collapsed table, and raised up a howling of pain. Cartwright spun and backhanded the slack-jawed runt who'd been holding the gun on Carlyle, sending him and the tomahawk flying clear off the bar. The other men shook off their surprise, and the brannigan began in earnest. The two that held Carlyle found themselves holding air as Carlyle twisted out of their grip, then were gasping for it when a fist and an elbow found belly and jaw, one and two. Cartwright grabbed the closest man to him and tossed him like a sack of feed into one beside Carlyle. Still it was two against six or seven.

Juke shoved Marie-Rose aside and took aim below, lining up a shot into the flurry of bodies. She put her pistol in his kidney, but he was too close, and Juke twisted into her, elbowing her hard. She grabbed at Juke's gun hand. The gun fired wild, high into the far wall. He cursed and grabbed Marie-Rose by her hair, and she screeched a curse of her own. The ruckus below froze at the gunshot. Cartwright was holding one man face down on the bar by a painfully twisted arm while fending off another with a bottle; Carlyle was dodging two by spinning one around by the arm.

"*Hey!* Let go of her, you crowbait skunk!" Carlyle hollered. He shouldered one opponent in the ribs and made for the stairs, ignoring the other.

Then Juke hollered himself as Marie-Rose returned the favor and grabbed his greasy beard, yanking his head forward over the railing. Clara bolted from the back stair and Lisabet from her room rushed him from behind and, grabbing an ankle each, tipped him full up and over. His bellow got as far as the letter "f" before there was a wet feed sack sound and a crack from the floor below. The women exchanged grim looks, Lisabet white-eyed and pale, Clara

still out of breath from her dash and angry. Lisabet ran for her room.

"Thank you, ladies," Carlyle called up prettily, and changed direction, diving out of sight toward the card parlor, carrying one of his attackers with him.

"Thank you, ladies," Cartwright echoed, yanking the arm he held hard upward and twisting. The little man had the tomahawk, but Cartwright's long arm just batted it away. He gave the one in hand a powerful yank, bringing up a real shriek of agony from the other.

Cartwright wasn't even looking at the man whose shoulder he'd just dislocated; he dropped him, spun, and moved on to the next two. Marie-Rose had seen her share of fights and she'd seen her share of fighters, but these two were eye-poppers. Carlyle rolled back into view and sprang to his feet. He kicked the leg out from under one of the sons-of-bitches Cartwright was tussling with while still attending to his own opponents. He was spitting blood.

"Dean!" yelled Cartwright, and Carlyle dove sideways to dodge a flying bottle. He was grinning a fool wolf-pup grin, skittering and jabbing, and he leapt back out of sight with a war whoop.

Not "damn," she noted.

Cartwright was a different kind of fighter: fast and accurate as a rattler and punched like a full throttle locomotive. Powerful and graceful, every move was clean, economical, and lethal. For all that, he was pitiless, and took no joy from it, if his stony face was any gauge. A table crashed into splinters from where Carlyle had disappeared. Marie-Rose looked frantically for her gun. Lisabet came back carrying her own derringer.

"Clara, get the sheriff," Marie-Rose barked.

"Tully's doing," Clara gasped. Marie-Rose found her pistol by the stair, took Juke's as well, and directed Clara to watch from the balcony. She and Lisabet advanced down the stairs side by side.

They found the battle had already ended. Carlyle was dragging a wall-eyed galoot by the shirt collar to add to a pile of bodies. Seven bodies either sleeping peaceful or moaning painful, plus the lump of Juke. The two left standing were breathing heavy and grinning at each other. No one had drawn a gun. Cartwright had a grip on the

sleeve of Carlyle's jacket. His eyes were shining. Carlyle was rubbing his jaw, getting his breath.

He looked Cartwright up and down and gave a low whistle. "Look at you, Sammy. Straight out of *Tombstone*."

Cartwright snorted and made a sour-apple face, but didn't let free his hold. Carlyle didn't appear to notice, but for all his smirk had quite a shine in his own eyes as he looked around. He wiped his lip with his free sleeve.

"You fine ladies alright up there?" he called to where Marie-Rose and Lisabet had taken position, firearms aimed at the troublemakers still moving.

"We're just dandy, thank you kindly," Marie-Rose said. "Sheriff should be along right smart. Where is O'Malley?"

"Behind the bar, took a knock on the head when they pulled a gun on me."

Marie-Rose came down to the bottom of the stairs and Lisabet disappeared behind the bar. She reappeared helping a woozy O'Malley to his feet. He had his hand on the back of his head.

"Tully came down to the Springs, Miss Rose," Cartwright said, his eyes not leaving Carlyle's back. "He said you were looking for me." She looked at him, standing tall amidst the bodies, impassive as a train tender but with as much boiling inside.

"So I was, though the why of it has gone right out of my head. I'm sure it will come to me presently," she said. She kept her voice even.

Carlyle grinned. "What're you doing here, Sammy? No library in this burg." He called over to O'Malley. "You okay, Irish?"

Carlyle gave Cartwright's shoulder a quick squeeze, moved over to the bar. Cartwright's hand fell away from the sleeve it held as Carlyle moved to retrieve his tomahawk. She noted how that hand took its own time lowering to Cartwright's side. O'Malley had both hands on the bar, steadying himself. He glared angrily by way of an answer to Carlyle's question. Lisabet ducked around to examine the back of his head.

"How'd they pull a gun on you?" Marie-Rose directed the question at either Carlyle or O'Malley.

The men exchanged a dead-eye look. "They got lucky," Carlyle said. Neither of them would meet Marie-Rose's narrowing eyes.

"Where's Spinks?" Lisabet asked.

"Ran out the back, the fink." Carlyle spat into the spittoon, sounding the brass pot like a ship's bell. He stepped back over to Cartwright, who suffered Carlyle to take his chin in hand and move his head from side to side for examination.

Marie-Rose would put money that Cartwright hadn't been touched once, but maybe this familiar behavior was about more than the fight. Satisfied of no damage, Carlyle glanced about.

"Let's gather iron," he said.

Lisabet, pistol at the ready, moved to stand in sight of the open rear door. She waited there, glancing in the kitchen, eyes alert.

Cartwright set to divesting the ornery of what firearms and cutlery he could find. His hair flopped over his eyes.

Marie-Rose addressed herself to the both of them. "I do believe introductions are in order." She still held her own pistol, and no one was collecting that.

Carlyle looked momentarily surprised, but met her eyes. "Dean Winchester, Miss Rose. This is my brother, Sam."

The former Cartwright stepped to stand just behind his brother. They were unlike as frogs and goats, manner and look, even in their clothes, one sky white and deep-water black, the other sunrise red and Great Plains brown, but the way they stood side-by-side, in that way that says distance is only too far, never too close, spoke clear of blood and bond. They both looked abashed, for some reason. She gave them both an appraising look.

"All right, then. Mister Dean Winchester and Mister Sam Winchester. We are much indebted for your efforts on our behalf, and that's the truth of it." She surveyed the wreckage. At least two of the fallen had pulled themselves over to hang on the boot-rail of the bar, though they hadn't tried to stand. Shifty eyes moved from the brothers to the women's guns and back.

Moaning came from behind the bar. That would be the fellow that Sam Winchester dropped after twisting his arm

near off. O'Malley lifted his head from his hands and delivered a vicious kick. There was a thud and silence.

"Sorry about the names thing, Miss Rose. Long story," said Sam Winchester.

"Kind of a habit..." Dean muttered.

"You can call yourselves the Grand Dukes of Zarostinia for all I care. I just wanted to know what the hell was going on in this town. What's your business with Cade Belrose?"

"Who?" asked Dean. He appeared relieved.

"Local bigwig," Sam said. He addressed Marie-Rose. "No business, ma'am, we're just passing through."

"Just passing through. Separately or together?" So different. Same white teeth. She wondered that she hadn't marked that, but Cartwright had smiled little.

"We were separated a while back, ma'am. I promise we'll be no trouble..."

She stopped him with a raised hand.

"Don't fire up those pretty eyes on my account, my lad. I've had the best try to charm me. Anyway, none of my business. But the Sheriff will be here presently so you'd best be ready to answer him."

"No worries, Miss Rose, we'll be heading out of town right away," said Sam.

"We will?" Dean asked, turning slightly.

"We won't?" Apprehension tightened Sam's voice.

"Having a good time here, Sam."

"Dean, we need to talk. We have to get back."

"Unfinished business, Sam."

"I know, Dean, but—"

"Something we can handle, Sam."

"I *know*, Dean, I think I have a line on it, but there's no *time*."

She watched this back and forth a moment, wanting to laugh despite the seriousness. Buell's job to sort them out. The brothers set about relieving conscious and unconscious bodies of firearms and knives, making a presentable pile of iron on the bar top. Marie-Rose stood in

the center of the room, surveying the damage and watching the brothers try to carry on furtive conversation as they went about their business. She caught snippets.

"Dean, I waited as long as I could."

"Wait a while longer. I can't find the Sterners."

"It may be too late for them. I had to find you."

"What? Why? Risky and dumb, Sam, it's a big country... *dreams stay with you...*" Nice singing voice had Mister Dean Winchester. He laughed a bit.

Sam wasn't mollified. "Dude! Three weeks!"

"Three weeks? No way. Wait..."

"...But I found something out—"

They noticed everyone was looking at them. They continued the disarming in silence, but looks went back and forth that argued just as loud.

Clara came down the stairs, shrugging. The bodies on the floor were stirring; everyone standing had a gun in their hands.

Dean wagged a gun barrel toward the door. "Rise and shine, boys, last call's early today." O'Malley dragged a body from behind the bar.

Dean spoke to Sam. "Sheriff?"

Sam went out front, eyes alert. Shook his head. Lisabet went over to check out Juke. She gave him a nudge with her booted foot and shrugged at Marie-Rose. Bones broke, but not his neck. Marie-Rose was nonplussed, but just as well; Clara and Lisabet might take it bad if they'd killed someone. Well, Lisabet might. She glanced at Lisabet and decided she needn't worry.

Dean indicated the door with his pistol. "No offense to the first-rate Astoria, Miss Rose, but I think the F Troop would prefer other accommodations." The rowdies looked at each other, but gutless won out. They started moving.

"We shall endure the disgrace with what dignity we can muster," said Marie-Rose.

He flicked his chin toward the men on the floor. "Your chum needs a hand."

Sam stood to the side of the door, clear of any line of fire.

The gang still had numbers over the brothers, but the two silent ones, the ones what had given Lisabet grief earlier in the day, seemed to be willing to take their medicine. The rest of the sorry herd followed their lead.

Dean and Sam conducted a heads-together of their own outside. Sam returned to Marie-Rose.

"Dean'll take these guys down to the jail, Miss Rose, but can Mister O'Malley go with him? If you're okay, Mister O'Malley? Probably better if a local went along."

She looked to O'Malley, who nodded, and he took his shotgun in hand.

She murmured to him as he passed her. "Mind those two, the galoots from earlier. They're up to something."

Clara came up behind her as he moved out.

"Tully fetched Cartwright?" Marie-Rose asked her.

Clara nodded. "Hollered into the Crystal Springs where we were, said you were asking after him, and was he acquainted with a gun slingin', poker-playin' Kansan with a smile for the ladies as such a fella was getting his ass whapped at the Astoria. Cartwright left a hole in the air. Tully seemed right pleased."

Marie-Rose nodded. "So he should be."

Sam had taken up a position in the doorway as Dean and O'Malley led the limping and ornery men off down the road to the Sheriff's office at the other end of Gilead. Further along, she could see Tully running toward them full tilt. He skirted around the gang being shepherded down the street and ran over to Dean Winchester. They said a few words, and Dean put his head back and laughed a big laugh, then shooed him onward toward the hotel. Rain spatters chased him the rest of the way to the Astoria.

"Trouble all over town, Miss Rose," he gasped out. Then he grinned up at Sam. "I guessed right, didn't I, Mister Cartwright?"

Sam nodded, with a provisional smile.

She pulled Tully inside.



The air was sharp and electrical, and so were nerves. The mountain of looming dark clouds looked as torn paper across the sky. They set to putting up the storm shutters over the windows. Sam introduced himself to Tully proper, and Marie-Rose about lost an ear listening. Sam said only that he'd been searching for his brother and was grateful to the end of his days to Tully for putting them together. Tully said he knew from the way they talked. Sam had his hand on Tully's shoulder as they spoke, and Tully glowed. The snippets of conversation she caught as they went about their business was regarding the nature of older brothers. Sam took up watch at the entrance; Tully was stationed at the kitchen door. Not a horse or citizen was seen on the street. It was dark enough for lights to be seen from windows, but none showed except down towards the Crystal Springs and the buildings beside it. So all of Gilead wasn't a ghost town just yet, just this end of it.

After a few minutes, Sam called to them from the street. Sheriff Buell and Dean were riding up at a gallop.

Sam stepped outside, meeting them beside the water trough. Marie-Rose watched them from the doorway, still holding her six-gun. The sky was intimidating, no real rain yet but wind and lightning flashes. Buell spoke a few curt words, glancing at the Astoria and pointing back down the road. Sam nodded. Dean pulled his rifle out and checked it over. Sam stepped close, putting his hand on Blackie's bridle. Dean leaned down, spoke hurriedly, but as Sam raised an objection, Buell and Dean exchanged nods. They put heels to horse rode off, Buell to the south, Dean to the north. Sam drummed a fist against his hip, staring hard at their backs, brow furrowed, mouth tight.

"Born worrier, that boy," Lisabet opined.

"Hard to part with him so soon after finding him," said Marie-Rose.

Sam exhaled and came back to the ladies. "Let's get back inside."

"What's happening, Sam?" Marie-Rose stood where she was, and Sam nearly walked right into her. There was a rumble of thunder from the sky, matching his expression. As she stood unmoved, thus did everyone else.

Sam considered, and spoke carefully. "O'Malley is down at the sheriff station with Deputy Randall, guarding the gang that attacked Dean. There've been a few other incidents."

"Incidents?"

"Well... other disturbances, in town and around the area. We'd really better get inside. Please." Trying so hard not to upset them, wasn't that sweet?

She granted him that much, and turned back into the saloon so fast her dress caught on the swinging door.

Tully ran in from the back. "I heard horses."

Once inside, she turned right back to Sam.

"What is going on? Where is Beull haring off to alone?"

"To see Cade Belrose. Look as though he's responsible for all this. He's going to deal with it." Sam sounded right unhappy.

"Deal with what? Deal with it how? Why was that crowbait Spinks after your brother? Juke said something about 'orders.'"

"I think that was just an accident. I don't have all the answers, Miss Rose. The missing people, the recent acts of violence, it's all connected."

"Recent acts of violence?' You mean people acting crazy?"

"Yes, it's part of Belrose and Hughes fighting a private war."

"They've been going at each for nigh a year," Tully said.

Marie-Rose said, "But that was all commerce and competition, nothing to do with the rest of this strangeness. It's been more than just heat crazy all summer."

"Like I said, I don't have the answers, Miss Rose. Look, we need to board up the saloon. They think there's going to be an attempt on the jail, there may be gunfire."

"To let loose Belrose's men?"

"I don't know, just what they said just now."

"An attempt on the jail in the offing and Beull is heading out to corral Belrose alone?" Marie-Rose wound her fingers in her dress.

"Looks that way."

"Pumpkinhead mule! Why wasn't your brother going with him?" *Why weren't you?*

"He's going to stop the jail break, he says."

"Oh, all on his lonesome, too?"

"Yeah." He looked fretful out the saloon door into the purpling evening. "Same breed of mule."

They both looked angrily into the distance for a moment. As she had more practice at being left without answers, she gathered herself up and shook off her anger.

"And what are you supposed to doing?"

"Sheriff Buell says we should get you packed up and on the road to Harbine."

"Does he now?" In his distraction, he didn't hear her voice drop a good bit lower in pitch.

"Yes, with all this trouble, and he'd feel a lot better if you out of harm's way." He nodded to include Clara and Lisabet, leaving out Tully, considerate in the same way his brother was. He looked so solemn, and then troubled as she was so unperturbed.

"Well, that's right nice of him. There's stew on, when did you eat?"

"This is serious, Miss Rose." His earnest and emotional eyes pleaded with her, and she understood how Dean was unsusceptible to doe-eyed Tully.

"So's that stew," said Tully from the doorway, earning a loving scowl from Marie-Rose.

Sam's jaw was fixing in a way she recognized. *Men*. She sighed. Glanced at Lisabet and Clara, who were observing Sam indulgently, Tully standing by the door, watching the road, one ear on the conversation inside. Sam looked to be hiding his concern, and being stern, and wasn't he a precious thing for it?

"Tell me, Sam, is Sheriff Buell heading for Harbine?"

"No, but... it would be safer—"

"In a buckboard on the open road?"

"Well..."

"In the pouring rain? No, thank you."

"If you get on the road now—"

"We'll be in mud ruts three miles out of town, easy pickings for God knows who."

The wind was going out of his sails. "We should at least get the girls and Tully..." He stopped. Sam looked at each of

them in turn. Tully smiled back and gave a tiny shake of his head. Sam worked his jaw.

"And the King won't leave," Sam said with resignation.

"Beg pardon?" Marie-Rose said.

"Nevermind." Sam sighed, and then nodded to her. "We'd better batten down the hatches." She looked askance as he moved into action. *Boy has a strange way with words.*

He and Tully secured the shutters over the windows and the barn-door panels behind the ornate swinging gates of the saloon entrance. Once set to work, Sam suffused the air with assurance and confidence, and had a hand for each arm, a quiet fortifying word for each ear, and for Tully, a wink. He surveyed the building, noting each door locked, each window bolted. He suggested lights be kept to the absolute minimum and everyone gather upstairs for safety in case gunfire in the street came close.

As they regathered in the saloon, Tully asked, "What did you mean about a king, Sam? Gilead don't even have a mayor."

Sam smiled. "During a war in England, they wanted to send the princesses out of the country to safety. The Queen said 'the children won't leave without me, I won't leave without the King, and the King won't leave.'"

Marie-Rose looked up from where she was putting bottles down under the bar, and met Sam's eyes for two ticks of the clock. No one had laid a card on her since she was a girl. She'd never laid one on herself. Gave her a chill. They finished securing the building as best they could in silence. The back door only had a simple throw bolt, but she wasn't about to nail shut a door they may need to run out of.

At last Marie-Rose, Clara and Lisabet beside her, stood by the bar. She checked the clock, then looked at Sam. Thirty full minutes it had been since his brother had ridden off alone, and here Sam still stood. He was staring at the door, looking away, then right back to it. Marie-Rose was impressed at his fortitude.

Tully came in from the kitchen wearing hat and coat, cinching a gun belt that hung low on his thin frame.

"Tully?" Sam asked. "You going somewhere?"

Tully looked surprised at the question. "With you, to find your brother."

"I wasn't..." Sam looked dismayed because of course he was, and then tried for strict. "I need you here to protect the ladies..." He looked to those ladies, the women of the Astoria, waiting patiently for this show of gentlemanly honor to play out, each holding a firearm, Lisabet holding two. Marie-Rose was wiping down the bar with her free hand.

He chewed his lower lip, looking at Tully.

"I know the town and the people," Tully said, "and you don't. And he's going up against a war party." He settled the gun belt and pushed his hair behind his ears before snugging his hat to settle the matter. He went towards the door.

Sam, with that troubled brow, glanced at Marie-Rose, but she jerked her head toward the door.

"Come back in one piece, boys," she said. She held Sam's eye, extracting a promise.

Sam thanked the ladies with a heart-melter of a look and followed Tully. As they pulled the storm door aside, he turned to give final instructions about securing bolts and dimming the lights and Marie-Rose shoved him outside.



They should have barred the door behind them, but Marie-Rose was more concerned about good folk looking for safe harbor from the troubles or the storm than of more trouble arriving on her porch. The heavy clouds had arrived, like a buffalo herd on the plain, endlessly loud and hugely wet and roaming just right outside the town.

She went round the building again, checking the lamps, the doors. She set herself to work in the kitchen, making up supper for whosoever might appear. From the saloon, the clock rang out seven. Set the stew pot to simmering, made up some biscuits. She burned her fingers twice for being distracted. At last, hating every bit of it, she gave in and went upstairs to her room to collect a thing or two. Then with a bit of chalk and a bit of camphor went about the building making the marks she remembered on the walls and doors. It made her queasy but if she really had wanted to eschew those ways she wouldn't have kept vetiver deep in that drawer, now, would she? Finally she came into the saloon, where Lisabet had called her urgently but quietly.

Lisabet was standing just inside the saloon entrance, the storm door opened, looking into the street, black clouds blanketing a bloody sunset, her face filled with horror. Marie-Rose came up beside her, and looking out, saw two horsemen riding slowly into town. One was the odious vermin Spinks, the other was Mister Cade Belrose. Trailing behind them, pulled along by a rope wound about the saddle horn of Belrose's horse, was Sheriff Milo Buell. Hatless, covered in mud, guns gone, hands knotted together by the rope, he looked battered but riled as a wet badger. Could have been rain, hard to tell in the storm-shrouded twilight, but it looked like blood on his coat. Lisabet grabbed and clung to Marie-Rose's arm. Belrose, stern and thick about the middle, wearing a sateen gray coat and vest, dismounted heavily outside the German's dark storefront. She would never sully her cards by naming one for Belrose. He unwound the rope from his saddle, and gave it a good yank to keep Buell moving. He tossed the rope to Spinks.

Marie-Rose moved forward, but Lisabet wouldn't let go, holding her in place. Marie-Rose was about to push past, but Lisabet gestured, and Marie-Rose saw what had caused her to hold her back.

A hand count or so of yards down the road to the east, in the center of the road, stood Sam Winchester. His long legs were planted firm, his shoulders back, pine straight and oak sturdy. Marie-Rose wanted to bawl, because his face looked so young and his eyes so old. The wet wind set his coat tails to crow-wing flapping to expose his gleaming Peacemaker, and his hair, as he'd lost his hat, but it didn't cover his eyes, so he didn't pay it any mind. It was as if the cold wind and dark water were part of him, or he of it, and he rose out of the earth to deny passage. Belrose stepped round his horse, hitched his horse's bridle to the post. Sheriff Buell leaned on his knees. The streets were otherwise deserted. She cursed her fool self for leaving her gun in the kitchen.

Belrose deigned to countenance Sam.

"You seem to be in my path, stranger. Best you not be." He had a voice like a wheelbarrow in a gravel pit, mostly from smoking cigars.

"Best you untie the sheriff." Sam Winchester's voice was stone.

Belrose affected surprise. "Well, now. A stranger comes to Gilead and starts giving orders. You have been causing much talk of late, Mister... Cartwright, is it? Mister Spinks, have you made the acquaintance of this fellow that's been causing so much talk?"

Spinks spat. "Yep."

Belrose's head turned slightly toward Spinks.

"Yes, Mister Belrose, I have had occasion to make this man's 'quaintance, sir."

Buell started to call out something, but Spinks kicked him sharp in the shoulder. Buell fell to one knee. Sam's jaw tensed, but he held steady, not letting his attention waver from Belrose. For all his being pent up, his lanky body was relaxed and ready, knees locked, hips tilted, shoulders sloped and slack. Lisabet had a grip on Marie-Rose's arm, and Marie-Rose herself was clutching the door frame. Both women were shaking.

"Let the sheriff go. Now." Sam Winchester didn't waste breath with ornament.

Belrose glanced around, his eyes lighting on the door of the Astoria. He smiled a reptile smile at the women,

"Good evening, Miss Rose, I mean to pay you a call, once I have—"

"HEY. Over here, creep!" Sam snapped Belrose's attention back to himself.

Belrose eyes widened, the interruption alone causing him grievous insult, never mind the epithet.

"Impertinence! Seems this stranger's of a mind to be troublesome, Mister Spinks. Step over yonder while I deal with this transgressor." Belrose spat into the dirt.

Spinks dismounted, apparently unarmed. He yanked the rope and moved to the porch. He reeled Buell in towards him, winding the rope around a post. Belrose stepped away from his horse, lining himself up middle of the roadway across from Sam Winchester, following the form in the traditional way of men and guns.

"This is a God-fearing town, boy, and we don't take to insolence. So you'd best pull in your horns. You're the one with the feisty brother, aren't you?"

Sam said nothing.

"He got himself into some trouble down at the jail, I hear. Clever cuss, but not clever enough. Condolences to your mother." Belrose smiled his viperish little smile from out of his fleshy jowls.

Marie-Rose shot a look at Sam, and from where she stood she could see his jaw was rigid, but he didn't flick an eye. She hated gunfights. She hated watching them, which was stupid dangerous to do anyway, she hated the waiting while the tomfool men measured each other's peckers and dared each other to go first. She could feel it, his need to turn and run to put his eyes on his brother, but he did not let his gaze waver. A lightning crack painted the scene silver and she jumped; she tasted copper from biting her lip.

Belrose may have looked like a hound dog in a fancy blanket, but he was good, very good, and she feared. Belrose set himself at an angle, flicking his coat back, gun hand to the side. And the women waited.

Belrose was done with waiting. "Last chance, boy. Shame for a mother to lose both sons—"

A gunshot rang out so close to her ear Marie-Rose and Lisabet both screamed and ducked. When she looked up, Dean Winchester was standing beside her, smoke rising from the silver six-gun he held straight-armed over the swinging door. He was gripping the door frame with his left hand, and had a look on his face that turned her soul to water. She looked out to the road. Belrose was flat on his back.

Marie-Rose's ears were ringing. Sam had leapt to one side at the gunshot, his own gun drawn, but when his eyes found the hand that held the gun that fired that shot, he straightened.

"DEAN!" Sam yelled. "The *fuck?!?*"

Sam looked at Belrose, cooling in the rain-spattered dirt, then turned back to his brother and produced a truly monumental glare.

"I can *SHOOT* a *GUN*, you know!"

Marie-Rose glanced at Dean. He was breathing shallowly, she noted, and still tightly gripping the door frame.

"*Jesus*, Dean." Sam's further consternations were lost to the wind as he stormed over to Buell and Spinks. Sheriff Buell's hands were still tied, but the rope that tied them

was now also wound around the porch post and Spink's scrawny neck. Buell had one foot hard against the hitching post and was leaning back. Spinks' legs set to spasming.

"So could he," Dean said, very low and Marie-Rose and Lisabet heard him say it, and he noticed them hearing him say it, and released the door and set to the very complicated business of reloading one bullet which meant he didn't have to meet their eyes.

"You ladies okay?" he asked.

They nodded, though he still wouldn't look up, but they didn't mind. He stomped outside, shouting now into the wind. "We don't have time for you to play Wyatt Earp, Sam, town's being invaded!"

Sam said something in return; the tone was waspish but the words muffled as he was bent over Buell's wrists, working out the knots. Buell, flinging the ropes from him as Sam untied them, shrugged off Sam's attempt to appraise injuries.

Dean was scanning the street up and down, gun at the ready. He called to the women. "Looks like Belrose and others were aiming to make some changes in the town. Lock up and get upstairs till we set things right."

"Where is Tully?" Marie-Rose demanded.

"He's on look-out on the water tower. *Get inside!*" he called back. "Please?" he added. He wasn't looking right at her, so her expression must have just winged him.

The sheriff lurched over to Belrose, took a good look at the hole in the center of his forehead. Wasn't like Buell to spit on a corpse, must have been rain. Belrose's guns were summarily appropriated in the name of the law. He surveyed the street, unmoving Spinks hanging against the upright, and the Astoria, and then fixed his eye on Dean Winchester. Dean let a few raindrops spatter dark spots on his buckskin before he holstered his gun and walked over. Sheriff Buell stood, checking bullets. He assayed Dean with a heavy regarding, spoke a few words. Sam came up to stand in that accustomed post, one step behind and beside his brother. Buell gave Sam the same review. A thunderclap washed over the words Buell spoke to them, but Marie-Rose reckoned she knew what was said. Buell set off at a stride down the street towards the jail and the Crystal Springs. The boys looked at one another; Dean broke out a grin and

an incredulous shrug. Sam's answering smile was taut and concerned as usual, but he shrugged in return. Gilead's two newest deputies set off to follow the Sheriff.



They waited. The clock struck the half hour and they heard a spatter of gunfire from down the road. They waited some more, in the saloon, watching, feeling like hens too stupid to avoid a stampede till it thundered right over them. Light from the Crystal Springs lit the front of the jailhouse, and they could see figures gathered outside the Sheriff's office. They could make out Buell and O'Malley. Doc Abernathy was running at a waddle from his house, bag in hand. Two silhouettes broke away, one tall and rangy, one tall and bowlegged, and set at a trot back to the Astoria. A slight figure sprang jackrabbit quick out of the jailhouse door and followed. Even at this distance, where she leaned against the door in relief, she could hear Tully's excited voice, and she had to admit that voice had lost its squeak. The rain came down with a purpose.

They were in full campaign as they arrived, the brothers exchanging quick words as Tully told a tale.

"There were three of them, but the one fellow was strong as two mules."

"Everything good here, Miss Rose?" Dean asked.

"And he was yelling something weird?" asked Sam.

"Yeah, something foreign. Sounded high church." Tully was still wound up.

"We're fine," said Marie-Rose, thinking she might have to yell herself to be heard.

"Not good," said Dean, looking at Tully.

"Randall swore he put two bullets right into his chest, but the man just laughed."

Sam and Dean exchanged a glance.

"Said Jace Hughes was dead."

"Who did? Randall?"

"No, the one with the eyes."

There was a cessation of breath.

"Eyes?" Dean asked, treading careful. "Where's Randall now, Tully?"

"Shinned out. Said those black eyes put the fear of God into him. He was shook."

"Probably a smart move, Tully," Dean said. "The guy was probably sick with something." More looks between the brothers.

"Did you see where the sick one went, Tully?"

"He rode off north. I stayed hid. I could have taken a shot..." Tully admitted, shamefaced.

"You did right, Tully, couldn't get a good shot from up there. Your intel is more valuable." Dean set a fist on Tully's shoulder. Tully looked appeased.

"My what?"

"So Belrose wasn't the biggest frog in the puddle," Dean said to Sam, heads together.

"Has to have a base somewhere nearby, it was controlling all those men."

"And the other big player, Hughes, is out of the game, if we can believe the, uh, the..."

"Yeah, the 'uh.' That must be why the big push now. So where's the victorious big bad hiding out?"

"The Belrose Ranch? Too far off and—"

"And no Belrose. So where?"

They were now more wound up than Tully. Marie-Rose intruded. "Sheriff Buell was wondering why those Belrose men went north earlier instead of east."

They jumped, reminded others were present. Yet another shared glance, apparently an agreement that her inclusion would be beneficial. She was relieved to be thought unfeeble.

"I rode north the other day, there was the church and a chicken farm and a house. Anything else?" Sam said.

"McAlister's place, then the Lancaster house and then the Platte," said Marie-Rose.

"The Lancasters are at Doc Abernathy's," said Tully.

"McAlister's the chicken rancher. Regular customer."

Sam looked thoughtfully into the northerly long distance.
"Miss Rose, what do you know about Reverend Hilliard?"

"That he looks at me and mine like we were ticks on a dog."

"Er... 'Kay, well, has he been here long?"

"About two years. Been on a tear for the last year or so about cleaning up the town. Getting people riled."

"Have folk been heedful—" Sam coughed. "Have people been paying attention to him?"

"Some, but mostly people in these parts keep their dogs out of their neighbors bean patches."

Tully laughed. "Mrs. Aushenbrenner said he's bad for the town's business, him going on about Miss Rose and the girls."

Dean and Sam looked quizzical.

"Miss Rose is everybody in town's best customer," he explained.

Dean snorted, and Sam nodded in understanding. A great deal of money passed through her hands.

Marie-Rose nodded. "Belrose took to him. Hughes didn't, those two been at each other something fierce. You say he's dead?"

"The sick cuss did, Miss Rose," answered Tully. "Want me to ride after him, Mister Winchester? I can catch up, if he's sick he'll be slow. What sickness is that, give you black eyes?"

"It means you skin out fast as Randall did, boy, don't look back," Marie-Rose said. She locked eyes with Dean. He was rubbing his chin, trying to duck, but he knew and she knew and now they both knew who knew what. She wrapped her arms around herself to keep from wrapping them around Tully.

During this, Sam had been pondering.

"Reverend Hilliard been in town lately, Miss Rose?"

She shook her head.

"What are you thinking?" Dean asked Sam.

"That many a scarecrow has served as a roost for an enlightened crow."

Dean stared at him for a moment.

"We gotta get you out of here." He shook his head, turned to Marie-Rose. "How are you fixed for salt, ma'am?"



The men took to horses in the dark of the goddamned night. Sheriff Buell arrived, and O'Malley, with horses. Buell had a glare for Marie-Rose, her still being present. She glared right back. The Winchesters had consulted, packed a few things, including candles and bags of salt, ash and things that gave her cause to chill something fierce. The thunder was loud enough to make a body jump, and rain came straight down.

"What are you thinking?" Marie-Rose demanded. "It's full dark and the storm is on us."

Sam looked solemn and fretful, but Dean answered her with confidence as he checked Blackie's cinch.

"Just a quick ride out to the Gospel mill. Sammy here's been working on his Latin for the priesthood."

"You think the Reverend is in danger?" Not that she much cared, but still, humanity.

Sam chewed his lip. Dean nodded down at her and his smile was all fox. "Yes, ma'am, he is. If we're right."

She didn't like that grin one bit. Buell and O'Malley wheeled their horses impatiently in the road while the Winchesters mounted.

Marie-Rose addressed them all. "You're damned fools, the lot of you."

That got a somber look from Sam, but an affable smile from Dean. He touched his cap to her.

She looked hard at each and every one of them. Sam awash with worry and courage, Buell looking forbidding, stolid O'Malley. And Tully, which made her take her breath sharp, but he was of an age not to be left behind, her shave-tail Page now a Knight. She wanted to extract promises, but held her tongue.

Dean gave her one anyway. "He's got money in this pot, too, Miss Rose. Sucks that he can't be a kid tonight, but... we'll keep him close." Tully was watching them.

She glared, but couldn't argue. "Come back to us in one piece, boys."

She was glad Buell concurred with her that they had nothing that needed saying beyond a mutual promise of words to come when the dust had settled. Buell turned his horse and set out. O'Malley followed. Tully, unsure of whether to grin or not, decided not and reined up a few yards off to wait on the Winchesters.

Dean mounted up. "So much for my night of pleasure awaiting. My life is cursed."

Sam pulled up a wan smile.

Dean finished strapping down the satchels on his horse. "Don't wait up for us, ma'am," he said. He sent a look at Sam. Sam met that look. They were ready.

"There's one thing we gotta get, Heyes!" Dean called out as he mounted.

"What?" Sam was baffled.

Dean's eyes glared, but the rest of him smiled.

"There's one thing we gotta get, Heyes!" he demanded.

Sam's expression went tart, but he dutifully asked, "What's that, Kid?"

"*Outta this business!*" Dean laughed and spurred his horse.

"Such a dork," Sam muttered darkly.

They wheeled their horses northerly, spurred hard directly toward a spear of lightning lancing down in the distance. The women stared after them till the rain drove them inside.



The rain was coming down hard when the clock struck nine, and the Astoria waited. They cleaned up a bit of wreckage, which wasn't too bad, and listened to the thunder and rain, then closed the storm door at last. They might have been the last people alive in Nebraska for all they could tell.

They idled in Marie-Rose's room, with the lamp turned down to a flicker and the windows tight shut and firearms at hand beside them. Lisabet tried to darn stockings, ended up making a tangle and cursing. Clara couldn't sit at all,

kept going near the window to look out, though with the full dark and rain it was hard to even see the road. They talked about the Winchester men, how different they were from each other, and yet similar, whether they were of the breed to come in from a fight in a high lather. The way menfolk dealt with facing their mortality was good for her business, but that turn of conversation cast a pall.

They talked of how one seemed the wandering type, which suited Lisabet, who hankered for the wide world she wasn't likely to see, and how the other seemed the settling type, which suited Clara, who wanted a man to find her worth putting down roots for. Neither was wanting to spend her days staring at ceilings till the Calamity took her livelihood or her life, but how there weren't much to be done for it. Marie-Rose kept her peace, thinking neither future was in the cards if the girls were just going to wait and hope.

She polished the brass candlesticks and thought of those women who did not wait. Women who sat on wagons, following their men into a vast empty future. Women who sat at home, wondering if they were widows. Of women who put on men's trousers and strapped on guns, some to pass as beardless boys, some as just crazy old birds, but either way out of sorts with the world. She admired them, though. She thought on the Pawnee, where the women didn't sit around wondering what their braves were up to. They stood side-by-side with the men in running things, and what's more if a squaw's man came back without meat for the pot she found herself a new man. Civilized women did about as much, of course, just didn't do it so obvious. She thought on that noisy gaggle of geese in Omaha stumping for votes for women. Might as well wish for the moon. Anyway, no use complaining. Though Marie-Rose Dumaine was finding that in her old age, her patience for waiting had run bone dry.

So they passed the time. Marie-Rose would call Clara away from the window, Lisabet would draw blood and swear, and eventually they were bickering like broody hens. Clara gave up and went back to her room, Lisabet shortly followed.

She listened to the ticking clock and the dripping water and the fraying hope. Reaching into the silk bag on the dressing table beside her, she chose a card. Seven of Coins. Which meant something about something. It meant she was sitting in her God damned room in her God damned saloon in her God damned town waiting for momentous things to happen

somewhere else and for someone to God damned stroll by and tell her how it fell out. It pissed her off mightily. Truth was she was sick and fierce mad at herself for getting the vapors when Sam Winchester faced down Cade Belrose. She had a gun, it was sitting on the bar. She hadn't thought to shoot the fucker in the head herself. Last time that was going to happen, you can bet on that. In disgust she shoved the cards back in the bag then into the inlay box where they lived, and slammed the lid sharp.

It was near eleven when a clatter from below in the saloon roused her. She took her gun in hand and hurried to the stair, keeping to the shadow. The lights were out in the girls' rooms.

A voice floated up from the saloon. "Well, buckaroo, looks like they forgot about us." Dean Winchester's smoky rumble. She let some fear fall away, but only some. She went down. In the low light, she saw Dean and Sam Winchester closing and barring the door behind them.

Dean surveyed the deserted saloon. He shook rain water from his jacket.

"Good evening, Miss Rose," Sam said.

"Or not," Dean said. "Didn't see you there, Miss Rose. Forgot to ask if there was a late check-in rule." He eyed the gun she held. "Which I'm guessing is kinda strict?"

Her relief at seeing them had stiffened her arm. Must not have occurred to the boys that she had feared it wouldn't be them entering. She put up her pistol and looked at Sam, tall and gaunt and pale, blood and ash and rain on his face and hands and coat. He looked grim. She moved toward him, but he smiled a wan smile and waved her off. Not his blood, then. She hid a shudder. She looked at Dean, who looked much as he always did: either just out of a fight or on his way into one. They looked to be tuckered, but had that hum about them that says a man's been in a good knuckle-up: Death rode up close and passed him by, and that brush with mortality lit a fire in them.

Dean moved heavily toward the bar. "Miss Rose, as your barkeep is presently down at Doc Abernathy's, might we do the honors on his behalf?"

She hiked her skirts and strode forward, pushing past him.

"Day of Judgment will come and go before a customer serves himself in my place of business. Or services himself."

She banged two glasses on the bar top and went for the good stuff. He grinned at her.

She thought about smiling back, but her face just plain refused. She just poured. Sam was carrying an oilskin satchel she didn't recognize, dripping water, and a leather grip hastily packed with a bright white shirtsleeve hanging out. He must have brought his belongings from the Crystal Springs.

"How bad was it and where is Tully Bodiene?" Her voice was fiddle-string taut.

Dean answered her seriously. "Tully took a bite to the leg, Miss Rose, but not bad. O'Malley has a bullet crease in his side. They're both with Doc Abernathy."

"Sheriff Buell?"

"He's back at the jail. Fully in charge again. Randall took a bad hit to the head, so he sent his *deputies*, that's us, to make sure everything was all right here. Which it is, I see."

She nodded once, curtly. "You said Tully was *bit*."

"He just got a cut on his leg, the Doc is wrapping it up. He'll be fine in a day or so, won't even scar."

Marie-Rose's forbearance was running very thin, and when it came to Tully, she let it show in her eyes.

"He wouldn't stay back like I told him, the little..."

Sam had opened the bag he carried onto the nearby table, checking books and papers for water damage. He'd found a towel and was dabbing. Marie-Rose jerked her chin at a table. "Sit. Did you stay put when you were his age?"

Both men fell gratefully into chairs. Sam was fussing with the satchel, and had set two large books on the floor beside him. He didn't look up, but said nothing very loudly.

"Not always, I guess," Dean said. "He saw his brother's horse and was off like a rocket."

Sam may have been smiling. She put whiskey down in front of them, and stood ready with the bottle.

"Willam Bodiene's horse? At Hilliard's church?"

Dean emptied his glass, and Sam picked up the tale.

"The Reverend Hilliard wasn't who he claimed to be, Miss Rose. His dog was trained to attack people, and it went after Tully. Hilliard had been poisoning people's minds for

some time. Belrose was one, and the men that worked for him. Poisoning them literally, in fact. Tully's brother was being held captive there."

Dean picked up Sam's glass and downed that, too. He smiled at Marie-Rose, who refilled both.

"Held captive? The hell are you saying?"

"There were several people that wouldn't see things the Reverend's way, and he tried to persuade them. Willam wouldn't be converted."

"Dear God in Heaven," said Marie-Rose.

"He mostly just needs food and sleep, the Doc thinks. Tully was supposed to stay outside—"

"Came in like an Apache war party, Miss Rose, that little scrapper took out two—" Dean froze at the look on her face.

Sam stepped back in. "Sheriff Buell already tore us a strip, Miss Rose. But it was his brother—"

"You needn't explain to me how well you understand *that*, Sam Winchester." He nodded, and Dean occupied himself with his drink.

Marie-Rose set the bottle on the table with a thud, went back to the kitchen. She returned with a pair of plates with potatoes and beef. The boys looked up with big eyes and boundless gratitude. She dropped forks for the both them. "Just tell me who is alive and who is dead and the rest can come out in the morning."

A looked passed between them, weighing and sifting.

So it was as bad as she feared. The rest may never come out.

She brought a pitcher of water from the bar.

"There were about a dozen people there in all, Miss Rose. Most will recover in time, but there were bodies. We don't know the names, I'm sorry."

"And Belrose's men?"

Dean spoke through a full mouth. "Taken care of. Sheriff Buell is back in control. He's one tough *hombre*." She heard a tone in his voice that suggested he did not often admit to admiration. "Gotta tell you, though, Miss Rose, you're going to need a new holy man. Mister Hillaird wasn't preaching from the Common Book of Prayer."

From where she stood, she could see the spines of the books beside Sam's boots. He slid his foot over to try to hide them, but her eyes were fine, thank you, and what she saw gave her a deep, cold chill. She locked eyes with Sam, who met her look gravely while protecting his plate from Dean's fork.

"Those come from the church?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nudged the books carefully back under the sack.

"That the source of our troubles?"

He looked at his plate, then back up at her, earnest and chary. He looked to be herding words that weren't willing to go through the gate.

Dean spoke up instead. "You're upsetting the lady, Sam."

Marie-Rose shot a look right back at Dean. "Do I appear as I am required of smelling salts, Mister Dean Winchester? I am sore troubled about my people and my town. You didn't strike me as one who thinks women delicate."

Dean blinked at her and pulled in his glass like she might take it away from him. He grinned that sunbeam grin at her, and she nearly slapped the rascal for nearly getting her to smile back.

"Sorry, ma'am, I don't. No offense."

He looked up mournful over his sad, empty plate. Picking it up, he said, "This is fantastic, Miss Rose. Could we put another helping on our tab?" He sent up his charming smile.

She looked at each one a moment and then stood, taking Dean's plate. She was too wound up to be forgiving. "I shall tell you this, Misters Winchester: when I ask a question of import I do not appreciate being told to hang fire for an answer. Not about my folk. In my own saloon."

Dean's hopeful expression flickered wanly and his plate wavered as he held it out. She swept back to the kitchen and set to refilling his plate. She'd banged two ladles full out when shadow fell from the doorway. The Winchesters stood there. Dean spoke first.

"We're sorry, Miss Rose. Most times people are happier not knowing."

They looked proper contrite. Still going to be cagey, that she could tell, but sorry of it for all that.

"I know more'n I want to, that's the unpainted truth. Left the city of my birth to be shot of such business. Anyhow, 'happy' don't enter into it."

"You're not most people, Miss Rose," said Sam.

She handed Dean his plate. They followed her back into the main room, where she looked at them. The fire still smoldered in Dean, and the earth wouldn't be moved. She might have better luck in the inky depths of the other one. She held Sam's eyes and said, "We'll discuss this in the morning."

He nodded, looking grateful for the reprieve. Then the guarded look left his face and he smiled at her so sweet she thought she might jump over the bar to hide, so fast could he change.

She gave a long look at Dean. Dean flicked a imploring signal to Sam.

"Miss Rose," Sam asked politely as a convent schoolgirl, "Dean never got his bath and he smells. Is the water still on?"

Dean bobbed his head happily at the notion.



Sam had gone up first, taking the satchel and his dinner with him. Dean took his plate back to the table, cleaning it again while she barred the storm doors. She suspected him of wolfing his food to avoid further talk, but he thanked her well enough and went up himself. She left the single lamp on low in the saloon and took herself upstairs after him. The clock insisted it was half ten, thunder rumbling or no. The Astoria Saloon was closed, a rare thing.

Clara and Lisabet were in their respective rooms, both dozing. Marie-Rose considered rousing them, as the warriors had returned, but decided to forebear. The wind rattled the shutters. They were trusted guests and then some, now, but still they teased her like a cat with a feather and by God why wouldn't men just speak straight out? She stepped into the closet and sat down on the bench.

The lamp was turned down low, the room lit gold by the stove. Dean was lolling in the tub, a wet cloth over his head. Sam must have been in and out right smart; he sat between the tub and the stove, a blanket around his bare shoulders, chin on arm, arm on tub rim. Big as he was with his wet hair and wrapped in the blanket, she had the notion she was looking back in time, seeing them as they had sat when they were pups, the Knight of Wands soaking in the water, the Page of Cups bathing in firelight. Sam was speaking with the kind of tense that made her suspect a tiff was brewing.

"The Millers and the college kids came through, and you didn't."

"Took a while to find the Walters guy. Still can't track down the Sterner couple."

"You found Walters?"

"Dead. I think the Sterners must not want to be found."

"Dead? Damn. You said you'd check back in."

A pause.

"I got a little sidetracked. A man could get to like it here, Sam. Rough and ready. The Wild Frontier."

"The Millers said you were heading south."

"You got scared sitting all by yourself in a ghost town? With no ghosts?"

"To Topeka."

"I wasn't going to *Topeka*..."

"I wasn't sitting, I was keeping the park rangers out of the way, protecting the portal, and dealing with the people you sent back through. Learned some things about what was going on. And I got worried."

"Okay, okay."

"So you were just having a good time."

"Hell, yeah. Lots of positives. Sex is fun. Guns are legal."

"There are minuses, Dean. Disease is everywhere. Guns are legal. Fleas."

"Those girls need some attention."

Sam snorted. Marie-Rose almost did.

"You going to make me do all the work myself? C'mon, Sam, that Clara was sizing you up like a prize side of beef."

"Life is short and brutal. Average age of death is—"

"Makes for a shortage of handsome men in these parts. It's not like the girls got any options in this day—"

"There is no shortage of men. And the vibrator was invented in 1869."

"You *cannot* frickin' know that! Jesus!" Dean bellowed a laugh. "And *everything* is legal, sort of."

"You want to think about those girls' life chances? This isn't the Ponderosa, Dean."

"Still a damned sight better than—"

"Did you want to be found?" So quiet and intense, that voice. Damnation. "You want to stay."

A somber peal of thunder had time to roll across the prairie before Dean answered.

"Been thinking about it."

Sam inhaled. "Okay." Marie-Rose heard the click of ammunition being loaded in that voice. It was going to be a fight, then.

"Anyway, job's not finished. Taking time to smell the cow pies, that's all." Dean idly poured water through his hand.

"Okay."

"I said 'thinking.' I wasn't going to just—"

"It's okay, I get it."

"Get what? Damn it, Sam, quit making it like—. You could go back to school. You could be free of me sucking you into my troubles."

"*Our* troubles, Dean. Remember?"

The firelight had him in silhouette, but she could see Dean turn his head away from Sam as he spoke.

"I wasn't going to just take off."

"I know."

"I guess you wouldn't like it here. Everything is dirt."

"...I'd manage."

"You shouldn't have to *manage*." Another thunderclap rumbled over the town.

Dean spoke up with newfound enthusiasm. "We know stuff! You could invent Pez. Be rich. Or find cures for things."

"I don't think that will work."

"We could find Samuel Colt."

"Died in 1862." Sam's voice was deadly matter-of-fact.

"Oh, damn," Dean said softly. "Oh, God. I wasn't thinking about..." The timbre in his voice had changed.

"You forgot."

"No! Jesus, no, I wasn't going just leave you to—"

"I know."

"Wait—"

"That's what I meant, Dean. It's this place, this time."

"What is?"

Sam cleared his throat. "Remember the fight in the saloon? What did you call that guy?"

"What? Who?"

"The one the girls tossed off the balcony."

"Those girls are something, huh? Uh. A skunk?"

"A *crowbait* skunk."

"Just picking up the local lingo, what about it?" Dean was puzzled. Sam continued.

"What name have you been using?"

"William Anders Carlyle. Great name, huh?"

"Who's that?"

"Dude, a pop quiz? Would you pick a ques—"

"Not Clint Eastwood? Hannibal Heyes?"

"So you *do* remember *Alias Smith and Jones*! And 'Ben Cartwright' is fuckin' hilarious, so what?"

"Ben Cartwright is fictional. Who's William Carlyle? Where'd that name come from?"

"Hannibal Heyes and Kid Curry, one for gunning and one for cunning, just like us—"

"It just came into your head, didn't it? Why'd you even use an alias?"

"Um..."

"When did you learn to saddle a horse, Dean?"

"When did you?"

"Answer me."

"I don't know, it... Um. Shit."

Sam's shadowed head nodded. "I think the longer you're here, the more you become... like you're from here. Those people that are still missing? I think they— I think they forgot who they were and became someone else."

The frontier does that to people, boys, thought Marie-Rose, *away from civilization and easy living.*

"Honeysuckle and lilac."

"Uh?"

"I could, um, identify those smells..."

"kay, yeah. Like that."

"I can remember who I am..." Dean said. "Damn, that's weird. I can remember other stuff..." He became more agitated. "I remember remembering. It was when I was talking to Tully, and he asked if I had a brother. I had to think..."

"Thanks."

I had to think. Dean Winchester's voice quavered. That was something to hear. His jaw was working.

"It sneaks up on you, I think." Absolution from Sam.

"Damn. Damn. I went native. That's why it's been hard to find some of them, they blended in. How long does it take?"

"Don't know."

"How... What if I had forgotten everything? The way home. Would I have forgotten—"

Sam didn't let him finish that thought. "Don't know."

Another pause.

"How do we get back?"

"It's in those books."

"How much time have we got?"

"I'm not sure."

"What's two plus two?"

"Bite me."

"So what *do* you know?"

"I think... I think the moon phase is important. I've got to go through those books to figure out how Hilliard opened the portal from this side." There was a small sloshing of water.

"*You* didn't forget anything."

"I was watching out for it."

"Why'd *you* use a phony name, then?" She'd known Indian trackers that would get lost on the trail of their conversation.

"So I wouldn't have one picked out for me. And less embarrassing if I found you in jail."

Dean snorted. "So as long as we keep sharp we'll stay 'us'? Okay. But you can get back, right?"

"You like it here that much?"

Dean laughed. "Are you kidding me? It's been frickin' great, man. Fought stand-up gunfights. Was chased by a herd of buffalo so huge I couldn't see the end of it. Rode with an Ogallala Sioux war chief. And the U.S. Cavalry. Saw more stars in the night sky than I would have believed. Whiskey and poker and horses and women. Having the time of my life, Sammy."

Sam managed a smile, but said nothing.

"Well, not women yet, been on the move. But once we find the Sterners, it's Miller time!" His voice had a gleeful chirp that promised a bonfire for Clara or Lisabet. "Why don't I have a harmonica? I should have a harmonica."

"So it's just the job, right?"

"I'm okay, Sam. Can't a guy just have some fun?"

Sam was silent, but she suspected there was a look being given.

Dean's voice picked up again, softer. "Yeah, okay, it's not just the job. Well, it is, but it means something. Being something."

Sam straightened up. "What? You are something." *Nobody insults big brother, even big brother.* She smiled.

"No, I mean... *somebody*... Nevermind."

"Tell me," said Sam softly.

Dean cleared his throat.

Then Sam spoke, declamatory, as though quoting.

"Around Dodge City and the territory out west, there's just one way to handle the killers and the spoilers, and that's with..."

"Shut up! You freak."

"...a U.S. Marshall that smelled of gunsmoke." There was a silence long enough to be meaningful.

"Laugh it up."

"I'm not laughing."

And he wasn't. Sam continued: *"I'm that man. Matt Dillon, United States Marshall. The first man they look for and the last they want to meet. It's a chancy job, and it makes a man watchful and a little lonely."*

Dean splashed him. "I'm not looking to be the new sheriff. Not the big hero type."

You don't think you always been that to Sam? She wondered whereabouts Dodge City might be.

"I'm that man. Dean Winchester, United..."

"Shut up." More splashing. Okay, maybe a little laughing there. Must be one of those Books for Boys.

"But this isn't *Gunsmoke*, Dean."

Dean's voice went dead serious. "I shot a man today, Sam."

"Yeah, I was there."

"Sorry, but when I saw him... With Hilliard's mojo, it wouldn't have been a fair fight."

"Okay, yeah. Thanks. Either way, he had it coming. Does it—"

"I know it had to be done, and yeah, it bothers me. And you know what? The Law said it had to be done. Looked me in the fucking eye and said so. No hand-wringing, no bullshit *system* to appease, just 'it had to be done.' *Finito*."

"That's... yeah."

Dean sighed. "So you think we can't invent things out of order, huh? Well, you still have that big, big brain full of useless facts. When things happen, who wins what war, history buff heaven, right?"

"That's what Hilliard was doing."

"What?"

"Trying to use information from the future for his schemes. Hilliard or Belrose, which ever." The knot in Marie-Rose's stomach tightened.

"He was evil! You'll be the Great and Powerful Sam!"

"Okay. Okay. It'll be great," said Sam quietly.

"We can do everything we always do, but without having to look over our shoulder, without having to worry about credit cards and license plates and crap."

He spread the washcloth over his face and leaned back.

"The Winchester Brothers, Legends of the Wild West. Except we don't make it into the history books. You'd think with the name 'Winchester'... Well, history is weird. Wild, Wild West. You'll make a great Artemis Gordon."

He sighed contentedly. Sam was silent.

"Fits you, too, that's a girl's name. Why'd he have a girl's name?"

Sam was silent.

The cloth came off Dean's face. In the shadowed room it was hard to see their expressions, as Sam looked away, and Dean reached out and poked him.

"So what aren't you telling me?" Took Marie-Rose by surprise.

Sam met his eyes and didn't answer right away. "A month is maybe all you get."

"Huh?"

"After a month, time just... fixes itself."

"...the hell?"

"The people you sent back were all gone less than a month. The ones you can't find, the Sterners, the other ones from earlier, they were gone longer." Marie-Rose wanted to unhear this in the worst way, this confirmation of what she

hated hearing, but she was the one that had to know, so had no one to blame but herself.

"Aw, don't tell me that."

"I'm not sure. People's memories were affected, depending on how long it had been since Hilliard pulled them through. You were gone for so long..."

"And so he couldn't get the answers he wanted, because they couldn't remember."

"Or he never figured out who they were in the first place. Or something. He kept trying."

"Wait, how long was I gone?"

"Twenty-seven days." *And every one longer than the one before for Sam, don't you think, Dean?*

"*No way*, it's only been a week... Or... Oh, Jesus." Dean stopped to think and Sam let him. "Oh, God, I can remember last winter. Damn. It's like... No wonder you were freaked."

"Lost track of time, huh?"

"Now *I'm* freaked. You mean 'fixes' as in 'dead,' don't you?"

"Yeah. Like the people you become don't have long. Accidents or something."

"Shit." Dean's head hit the back of the tub with a tinny bang.

"Dean, there's still time for us to get back. We just have to figure out how to get the portal open again."

"How? You were running things from the other side before."

"Those books. If we can figure it out..."

Dean sighed. "If? You go, Research Boy." Then whistled. "Well, it's been a great month. I'm on to it now, so I'll bet I can stretch it out—"

"No way. We have *had* this conversation. You're not tired, and this isn't Amsterdam."

"You still have time on your clock. Go back, Sam. You—"

"C'mon, don't give me that."

"I fucking *am* tired, Sam. And why not? Dean gets a happy ending, huh? A ride into the sunset, six guns at my side. You go home and 'be a person again.'"

"What? Dude, don't throw that at me now."

"You told me that once."

"You know I didn't mean it like—"

"Well, here, *I'm* a person. I have a life. No fences, no fucked-up society that thinks I'm a psychopath, if someone or something tries kill to me, I can kill it back, no questions asked, or not many, and everyone's who they want to be. I get to be *the good guy*. With six guns. I get a horse. I get the girl. I want this, Sam."

"You get girls all the time."

"A girl. I want— *Dammit*." Marie-Rose surmised from the muttering and sloshing that the last was not to have been spoken aloud.

"So tell me, Mister Wizard, what's my life expectancy back home? How long before something gets me? Can't get to the first aid kit in time?"

"Dean—"

"Or Henriksen? Yeah, that sounds like a picnic, what he's got in store for us. For *me*. If I'm gone, he'll forget about you."

"You don't know that."

"Or end up a sad old bastard like Elkins? Or a sick fuck like Gordon? Where's the good, Sam? Even Dad..."

"Knock it off, Dean!"

She jumped at the whip-crack. *I don't think little brother cottons to you measuring yourself for your coffin so soon, Dean Winchester.*

"This isn't you talking! You are *not* going to end up like them! You have a life—"

Dean spoke in a strange, high pitched voice. "If I had a life, I'd hate it."

"You're quoting *Muppets* at me? I swear I never meant—"

"*Whatever, alright*. Shut up. Both of us shut up."

She could hear them breathing.

"Fuck! *Fuck!*" Dean sat up abruptly, sending water over the rim. "You *shit!* Who's keeping the portal open on that side?"

Sam muttered "I called Ash, but the cycle was up—"

"So you let the door close behind you? Not knowing how you'd get back? Knowing there's a time limit? What were you going to do, roam the range looking for my lost ass? *Dammit*, Sam, why would you do a dumbshit thing like that?"

"How can you even ask that?"

The outrage was spoken in a whisper, Dean went silent. She noted that throughout, Dean hadn't so much as sat up, and Sam had only straightened.

Sam spoke again, quiet and plain. "If you want to stay, we'll stay, and make it last as long as we can. Maybe there's a way to get around it. I'll get into those books and hope it doesn't require something gross or death rituals and I wasn't just going to shrug and drive off, and you aren't going to say another fucking word like that's even fucking possible. If you want to know why, I'll have to use the 'L' word."

There was sloshing from the tub and the silence was louder than the storm outside. Ah the threat of the dreaded word was a trump card to send men a-flying. A log shifted in the stove, sending up sparks. *Bless menfolk*, Marie-Rose thought, *brave as angels and dumb as turkeys*.

Then Dean groaned, and then laughed, the tension vanishing. "Ohhhh, *The L Word*. How could I forget *The L Word*?"

"Cause you're hard for that chick Max, you sick fuck. You'd miss toothpaste." Those words came from a tentative smile, hopeful and beseeching.

"Hot pockets and Slushies," Dean mused. Marie-Rose counted the years since she'd left New Orleans and pondered what new wonders civilization had wrought.

"Baseball. X-Box."

"Suntan lotion. NFL."

"Spinal Tap."

"Internet porn. Oh, damn. Rock and roll." Dean sighed deeply. "I guess we go back. Well, that's okay. I came here to chew bubblegum and kick ass... and I'm all out of ass."

"Okay, *Joel*. Much ass was kicked this day, my friend."

Dean laughed. "Okay, *Tengu*, and it was Crow, not Joel."

Sam's relief was palpable from where she sat.

"Oh, man," Dean sighed. "It was a nice dream... How much time do we have?"

"I think the new moon. Which is soon."

"Then what?"

"I don't—"

"You don't know, yeah, you said. Damn. So no time for fun. As usual."

"Dean, I'm sorry—"

"Nah, you're right. Answers are back home, not here. Just got caught up, that's all."

"Yeah."

"I wasn't going to let you go back alone. Or just ditch."

"I know."

They rarely looked at each other at the same time, saving it up for important times when it was necessary.

They looked at each other.

There was then a period of quiet, which she understood as peaceful.

"I'm going to go see Miss Rose and then get to those books," Sam said.

"Miss Rose, eh? Bit late for calling on the ladies."

"I need a room."

"Make sure there's a Bible in the bedside table." Dean chuckled.

Sam's face was a lemon pucker. "I need to concentrate."

"Hot water, please."

The things she heard weighted her mind heavily, and she wanted them to continue, or she might just damn form and barge into the room to demand a full accounting then and there. But all that went quite out of her head when she was taken full by surprise by what occurred next.

Sam Winchester stood up.

The blanket slid from his shoulders, his long-limbed frame bare beneath it. As he turned to the iron stove, he was bathed in amber firelight. Tall he was, and strong, that had been manifest even beneath his fine clothes. Of the male flesh she had seen most was not worth the candlelight, and

a high water mark had been set by Dean Winchester himself this very afternoon. The elder Winchester was a mighty fine wild bronco, no doubt, but the younger was glorious thoroughbred king-of-the-herd stallion. But the muscles on Sam Winchester, Lord! That belly, rippling sepia silk trailing over water-washed riverbed stones, and that chest was a architectural monument. He fixed his grip on the handle of both the steaming brass pots, hefting them with little effort, the muscles of his arms and back gathering into fluid cords. A circus strong man might be wider across, but would be dense as old veiny cheese and ugly as a buffalo's behind. You could build a house with those arms, you could build a house *across* those shoulders on that broad, tawny plain of his back; then there were those long, long corded legs, that curved and elegant yearling bull neck. There was a metallic clang as he lifted the kettles up, for which Marie-Rose was thankful, as it covered the sound of her gasp. Lord have mercy on a sinner woman, but if that wasn't a living, breathing, walking statue from a fancy Europe museum she would eat every dress she owned and she may just do that anyway to keep her damned fool mouth quiet.

Sam turned back, bringing the kettles up and over to the tub.

Sweet Baby Jesus! It's a wonder the boy can sit on a horse. You be careful, Mister Sam Winchester, because it would be a damned shame to damage my tub by swinging heavy things against it. Meat and potatoes both, saints above, you'd shame a grizzly. She shook herself, amused and annoyed at her discomfiture, and took one last look before getting down to business.

Dean Winchester yelped as steaming hot water cascaded over him.



She stepped out and down the hall to prod the girls awake. They were both still dressed, just dozing. Returning to her room, she set out the bottle and glasses, and she waited. The wind was rising, rattling the shutters. The rain spattered across in lashes against the roof. After ten minutes had passed, there were footsteps outside her door. A soft knock pushed it open slightly. Sam stood without, in his fine wool pants, pulling his suspenders over his spotless

white shirt. His smile was polite and gracious and genuine. *The boy has a gift for clean*, she thought. He carried a wallet, and had the oilskin bag on the floor beside him.

"Good evening, Mister Sam Winchester," she said in her best hostess fashion, grateful that her professional courtesy allowed her to smile politely to his sweet young face while thinking bawdy thoughts about which one of the brothers was actually the Knight of Wands.

"I saw your light on, Miss Rose. I apologize if it's too late..."

She was seated at the small parlor table at the end of her commodious bed. She gave the chair opposite her a tap with her foot. Sam entered, making sure the door remained open, leaving the bag outside. He took the chair opposite. "It's Sam, please. I'm sorry about the deception, ma'am. It's a long story."

Those riverdeep doe eyes would be the death of any woman that hadn't had practice dealing with many, many men, and Tully. Marie-Rose dropped a shot glass in front of him, and splashed whiskey into it. She set the bottle down with a thump, and picked up her own glass.

"Got time."

Sam studied the glass. He smiled a cautious smile, thoughts moving behind his bright eyes. After a brief moment, he took up his glass. Before he drank, Marie-Rose raised her glass towards him.

"To the day gallant strangers came to Gilead." She drank in a head toss. Sam looked sheepish and did the same.

"Thought you didn't hold with liquor, Sam."

"I just let Dean think that. Otherwise I have to buy." They shared a smile at that. She studied him, this boy, this man, because he clearly was both as the situation required. His hair was gleaming wet, combed smooth. She waited for him to reveal the situation here.

"Everything to your liking?"

"Yes, ma'am, perfect. Dean's taking his time in the tub."

"That's fine, then." She waited.

"I wanted to make sure it was okay if I stayed here tonight, and to settle the bill. We have to leave at first light."

Marie-Rose tilted her head. "I thought nothing else, of course you'll be staying here. The idea."

He smiled. It was different from this brother's smile, which tingled; this one sighed.

"Settle the bill? There's a thought."

"I didn't want you to think we were skipping out if we have to be away by dawn. We may have a, uh, limited window of opportunity..."

She nodded, letting him have his head. "I can tally you up now, if you'd like, though I can't imagine charging you for half of what you've done for us. We'll be sore sorry to see you go."

"Things should be better now, ma'am. The church... Well, the source of the trouble is gone."

"God sends his blessings." They shared a smile at the irony. "Such as you two. Shall we drink again, or are you more measured in your acceptance of praise as a hero of the day?"

He near to blushed at her words.

Sam looked down at the table. Still not ready. Good Lord, full grown and can't get to the point? Maybe his brother's jibes about him being raised a Puritan weren't just ribbing.

Marie-Rose spoke carefully. "Paying for the both of you?"

"Yes, ma'am." Sam sat carefully in the chair too small for him. Like a school child facing a stern master.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, ma'am." And there he stopped, like a slow-footed mule perfectly content to stand stock still in the road never mind the provocation. His fingers were worrying the fringe on the lace tablecloth. Marie-Rose wondered if she should just ask him outright, put the boy out of his misery.

"Is there another room available? I can go downstairs..."

"The room is unsatisfactory?"

"No..."

"It's the biggest bed."

"Oh, no, um, no ma'am. We don't fit in one bed." He shifted a bit.

"There is another, across from Clara. I see that you mightn't. Still, you seem powerful glad to find each other. Think you'd want to stay close."

Sam opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Where are you from where brothers don't bunk together? Kansas, was it? Do you intend to take up crochet?"

He tried to smooth out the knots in the lace. "We did as kids. It's not so easy now." Sam smiled a secret smile. "Born in Kansas, yes. Lawrence."

"Aha, so you say. Upright Presbyterians." She sniffed, refilled his glass, and her own. "Bad business in Lawrence during the War."

"We traveled when we were young, so..."

"That a fact? So whereabouts might be Tombstone?"

"Tombstone? Oh, Arizona. Uh..."

"Fair piece away. You travel here from there?"

He laughed a bit then. "A bit farther, actually." She waited.

"Well, there was something else." He cleared his throat. And grabbed his whiskey and downed the contents in a gulp.

And she took pity. "Mister Winchester, may I ask you something personal?"

Sam blinked big grateful watery eyes, and nodded.

"Sam, please."

"Sam, have you ever once transacted business at a house of pleasure?"

He coughed. "No, ma'am."

Lord love him. "Well, you should have come out and said instead of sitting there all fretful. Miss Clara's been right impatient."

Those big eyes got bigger. "Not me, Miss Rose, Dean. I mean, the—" He put his hand on his wallet, and then put his hand back in his lap. Now she knew what was required: a bell mare to lead a skittish colt through a field of snakes and gopher holes.

"Miss Lisabet more to your fancy, Mister Winchester?"

Sam shook his head. "Not for me, ma'am, for Dean. Please, call me Sam."

"If I'm to call you by your Christian name, *Sam*, which would be irregular as we are conducting formal business,

I don't expect to be *ma'am'd* for my trouble. I shall allow it, as you're in unfamiliar territory without a guide."

He brought up a smile, and nodded. "It's a deal, Miss Rose."

"Not yet, it isn't. Let's just sort out your brother, who I might say doesn't seem to share your delicate constitution. Which of the ladies of the establishment do you think he'll fancy, then?"

The lamplight was low, and so was his voice.

"Well, um, Miss Rose, if you were to ask him, I don't think he'd be able to choose between them." The skittish colt took careful steps.

Marie-Rose held her smile. "Both together?"

"I hope that's not an inappropriate request." So, not blue-nosed prudish, just well-mannered in foreign territory.

"In fact, that very arrangement had already been so proposed."

"And within our budget..." He cleared his throat.

"To haggle would be terrible bad form. We owe you our very lives."

"You don't owe us for that, Miss Rose, it's what we do. We like to pay our way, when we can."

"First-class gentlemen, both of you."

He blinked. Perhaps he found the subject matter incompatible with that compliment.

"I hope we can afford, um, the house for the night."

"You are something, young man. So you desire to empty the stable? "

Sam looked puzzled. Marie-Rose waited. She raised an eyebrow.

"I thought I'd have enough, I asked O'Malley—"

"O'Malley runs the bar, look to me about the other business. Did you wish to contract for the entire house?"

He was baffled. And then he wasn't.

"Oh! I didn't mean—Not —" He looked to choke.

She raised the other eyebrow. "Am I so past it then? Save me."

"God, no! It's not that you aren't— I meant for Dean..."

"Ah. So the girls for brother Dean, and for yourself?"

Sam blinked rapidly. "No. No, really, Miss Rose. I wasn't implying that. It would be an honor, really, but I couldn't—"

She let him fumble for a moment. This boy was spun gold. *An honor.* He slugged back another whiskey. He started to speak, halted. She started to wonder if he might have been partial to Tully after all. He stared a hole in the table. She waited.

"I need to study the books we brought back from the church. To get us home. I know it sounds weird."

"I saw those books, Sam."

"It's hard to explain..."

"I am Jean-Marie-Rose Rillieux Dumaine of Belle Chasse, Louisiana, Sam Winchester, and I am well acquainted with what can and cannot be easily explained."

He held still outside, and twisted inside.

"I put myself as far away as roads would take a body to escape it, but never mind. Just look me square in the eye and tell me you intend nothing blasphemous."

He did look her in the eye then. Steady and serious.

"I swear, Miss Rose, I just want to get us back home. I need to figure out how. After that they go into the fire."

She studied him with all the world-weary, flint-hearted, seen-the-worst judgment of character she could bring to bear.

"I believe you," she said. His tension drained.

"Thanks."

"Now tell me the rest of it."

He gulped. She sighed. Much to her disgust, she found that in the duel between her desire to press for more and her professionalism, the latter was prevailing.

"After we're done with other business."

His relief was palpable.

"Am I to believe, Sam, that you take no delight in the company of women? For that would strain my considerable credulity and be a capital misfortune to women."

That got a small smile from him at least.

"It's not that." He shook his head, regretful, and took a deep breath before continuing. "I lost someone recently. A while back, really, though..."

Marie-Rose changed her demeanor at once. "And it's still fresh. I'm most sorry to hear of that, Sam."

They sat for a moment, him in his thoughts, her feeling shameful for playing with him, mistaking reticence for being overly corseted. He came back to himself with a shake.

"Sorry to be such a wet blanket."

"What a thing to say!"

"Dean always calls me a—well, he thinks I get overly emotional. Unattractive in a guy, he says."

"I might give him argument on that."

"Thanks."

"And he may make sport of you in many ways, but I can't believe he'd make light of such a thing."

"No, he doesn't, really. He worries, that's all."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "You take your own time with these things, that's the way of it." He took a breath, nodded, and she returned to the subject at hand.

"Now are you telling me you want to spend the night nose in a book while your brother is pirootin' to High Heaven?"

Sam nodded. "Wouldn't be the first time, won't be the last."

"Well, there's a thing. I see from the heft of your wallet that you have sufficient means to cover all bills outstanding and the price of the services we have been discussing."

"You're being too nice, Miss Rose."

"Am I not allowed? My conscience is awakened from its seven-year sleep."

"I can't ask—"

"And you haven't. I am offering. And we'll take your money, no fear there. But we can't leave you empty of pocket for your journey, and the town of Gilead owes you considerable. So you just be settled in that."

He allowed a smile through his abashment. He inhaled deep, and let it out. "I'd better get to work. I didn't mean to

sit here drinking your whiskey and spinning tear-squeezers." He made to stand.

Lisabet's voice came from the open doorway. "Well, that were pulling teeth."

Sam jumped, bumping the table.

Marie-Rose looked sideways at her. "Little pitchers. Where might Clara be?"

"In her room, I expect. Waiting."

Sam showed discomfiture under Lisabet's potent gaze.

Marie-Rose said, "As you may have been absent for *some* part of our conversation, you may inform Miss Clara Howland that Mister Sam Winchester has been recently aggrieved."

Lisabet's expression changed to concern. "I'm truly saddened to hear that, Mister Winchester. As will Clara be."

"So she need no longer bewail the desertion of her womanly charms," Marie-Rose continued. "She was ready to put herself out to pasture, the way you kept her off." Sam looked more dismayed, which was piling up a sight on his sweet face.

"I am happy to report that Mister Sam Winchester tells us that his brother, the esteemed Mister Dean Winchester, is feeling sportive. Sit back down, Sam." Sam did.

"Mister Sam Winchester thinks his brother deserves rewarding for his valiant work this day on behalf of our town. And it is not too fanciful to suggest that he wants the best for his brother, am I right about that, Sam?"

"Yes, please." His face couldn't decide on an expression. His eyes had a bit of wet to them, though that could be from the whiskey.

"Isn't that just the sweetest thing," murmured Lisabet. She entered the room, which of course caused Sam to stand up again.

"Lisabet, you go fetch Clara and make Sam a nice present for his brother."

"Shall we expect—"

"Sit down, Sam," interrupted Marie-Rose, "It is our considered opinion that it will take a concerted effort from you both to satisfactorily reward the worthy Mister

Winchester Senior, who I expect to be an enthusiastic and even exuberant patron."

Marie-Rose exchanged a look with Lisabet, who smiled to Sam. "And not a bit undeserved, no, not a bit. So that we might best provide for him, what might we know, Mister Winchester?"

"Please, call me Sam. He's in the tub..."

"Figured that. What particulars?"

Sam cocked a puzzled head; Lisabet held his gaze.

He flushed as he caught up with her question. Marie-Rose stifled a smile.

"The normal stuff..."

Lisabet's pout expressed immediate dissatisfaction with that response, and she waited.

"I don't know!"

Marie-Rose spoke matter-of-factly. "'Course you do. All fellows know a thing or two about each other. Perfectly commonplace." She was glad she hadn't let the mule's bridle drop entirely.

Sam sat frozen for a moment and looked at Lisabet to confirm that indeed, she considered the question entirely routine. He held for a tick of the clock, then leaned forward to whisper in her ear. One hand awkwardly came up to touch his neck just behind the ear. Then an abrupt gesture, his other hand twisting upwards and around in a particular motion. He took his seat again with a thump and thrust his shameful hands under the table and wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. But now he was grinning.

"And he likes— his—" Another gesture, a cupped hand. He collapsed back in his chair laughing. He had a gorgeous, rich laugh that filled the room entire.

Lisabet smiled and nodded. "Jiggle the giblets?"

Sam leaned forward, near to putting his head on the table, shaking with laughter and amazement. "Sorry, never had a conversation about—"

"You get a wiggle on, girl," Marie-Rose said. Lisabet's eyes twinkled, and she vanished down the hall.

"And Sam, you and I should get to those books, which I am thinking are not the Book of Concord and hymnals."

Suddenly serious, he looked at her in wonder. She stood, moved to the door and took up the satchel from the floor. Shutting the door behind her, she returned to the table, dropping the satchel and its foul contents in front of Sam.



As it was, she wasn't useful for more than keeping him company. He knew what he was looking for, and tore through the leather-bound volumes and loose papers rapidly. The rain fell to beat the Dutch, rattling the rafters and windows. She answered questions geographic and atmospheric when asked. He asked for a Farmer's Almanac, which she was thankfully able to provide, and looked up dates and moon phases. He muttered under his breath, sometimes in strange cadence and a language that caused her to sit closer the stove.

He didn't explain, she didn't ask, though she wished he would, no matter how much she didn't want to know. Whatever had happened, whatever he had seen, it weighed on him. The clock ticked, and she gave him brandy water instead of more whiskey, and wanted in the worst way to just stand behind him and rub his shoulders, but he didn't seem the sort to take to that familiarity.

Then he stopped at a page, looked rapidly back and forth between it and his scratched notes, and exhaled a sigh filled with relief.

"We have till sundown tomorrow. We have to get to Divinity Falls."

"Divinity Falls? Boy, there's nothing there but bad memories. Been deserted nigh on two years."

"That's where we... We have to get back there."

Marie-Rose nodded. "Fair distance. Have to be up with the sun and ride hard. The weather may not be clement."

Sam nodded in return, and turned to listen to the storm. The wind's whine whistled over the clatter of the shutters, at first sounding like a mournful wail, then like something else.

Marie-Rose put her hand over her mouth as Sam came to understand that the wailing he was hearing wasn't the wind. His expression of consternation was beyond price. He stared at the book in front of him so intently it was a

wonder it didn't leap under the table to hide. Lisabet was in full voice. He grabbed for his whiskey glass.

"I should let you get to bed, Miss Rose." He fumbled the books back into the satchel.

"Now here we were enjoying each other's company."

"I can go downstairs, if there's..." He was fighting a fit, either of nerves or laughter, and was attempting to look scandalized, though Marie-Rose could not fathom why he should attempt that for her benefit.

"Sounds like they're having a high old time."

Sam guttered and stood. Lisabet's voice was powerful, but now Clara's could be heard as well.

"I must say, I am right impressed. Now why should you be discomfited by your brother's clearly exceptional fandangoing?"

Sam looked at her with some trepidation. He shoved the books back into the satchel with dispatch. "Thanks for everything, Miss Rose. Really."

"Just returning the favor, Mister Winchester. Perhaps it is Lisabet's enthusiasm causing you agitation?"

The rattling of the wind resolved to a steady, drumbeat thumping against the wall, in time with the voices. It put Marie-Rose in mind of an Indian powwow, the chanting and the drums, primitive and sacred and calling up the magic of the earth.

"G'night, Miss Rose. No, don't get up, Miss Rose, just tell me what room..."

She stood nonetheless, and led him out into the hall, lamp in hand. He had his satchel of books, picked up his bag with his clothes from beside the door. She took him to the room at the end of the hall across from Clara's. It was small, just the bed, a table, and chair, not even a dresser. The window looked out to the south, over the blacksmith's roof and the trail south to Kansas. Black with the night and the storm now.

He set his bags down. The lamp on the table had been set to gutter, the bed was turned down. Must have been thoughtful Clara. The minx.

"Good night, Miss Rose. You've been incredible."

She stood just outside, her with her arms crossed, he with his hand on the door. They looked at one another. He looked away first; she reached over and pulled the door closed.

"Good night, Mister Sam Winchester."

She returned to her own room.



The thumping of the bed against the wall took on a telegraph tattoo, four long, six short, then a change-up, and the girl's voices sounding in concert. At this rate Marie-Rose herself was going to start getting restless. She thought on Sam. *Strange boy. Both of them. Must have been a peculiar upbringing, one so sweet-simon pure, the other an ace-high curly wolf with women.*

Her principles told her she was leaving a young fellow all alone, upset and rabby, which was a cruel thing indeed. Her conscience told her he was right clear about his propriety, and it would be discourteous to intrude. She drew out the silk bag containing her cards from the box on her dresser, set them on the table. She set to unlacing her dress before starting her consultation.

The cards had been in a strange temper for a month, but tonight they were orderly as a marching band. The wicked boy responsible for the inspired rollicking next door was all Coins and Wands, solid, resolute earth and creative, stimulating fire. Power and resisting power. Earth of the material world, desiring and finding and holding dear, security and safety. Fire energy, forever moving and joyfully doing, rapture and wrath.

The younger down the hall was Cups and Swords, mutable, unfathomable water, and powerful and sky-soaring wind. Transcendental empyrean ideas and fathomless deep sea dreaming. Emotions and intuition. The serene pond rippling with contemplative rain or ocean depths of devotion churned and foaming from the lashing winds of thought and lightning strikes of fearsome intellect.

One generous and passionate with an expansive and fragile ego, the other a perceptive philosopher who can't leave well enough alone. One vital, violent, and joyously carnal, the other, well, Lord save him for being a romantic. All traits so

unlike and should be in conflict, but those traits taken entire make the world.

In her shift, she sat at the table. And what did the cards recommend? Fuck-all, as usual. Just like that Pawnee bone-rattler would always tell her: "I take your payment to tell you answers you already know. A good living." Cockeyed old buzzard.

Lisabet hit a note that caused Marie-Rose to fear for the glassware in the saloon. Fortunate that Tully was off resting at Doc Abernathy's. Poor little lamb would be all up a knot by now. Sleep, what with the excitement of the day, her wound-up nerves, the storm, and as she'd had a nice nap, was out of the question. She contemplated the rabbit's foot on her dressing table, but decided rouge was not what was called for. She changed hair pins for a ribbon, took a new bottle of whiskey, and took herself down the passage to the room at the end of the hall occupied by Sam Winchester.



Light flickered from under the door. She knocked.

He answered, looking skittish as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, in his unbuttoned shirt and linen drawers. She kept her eyes professionally on his face, glad that she was a sufficient player of poker to keep her inside thoughts well inside. Sam Winchester, however, was conflicted and troubled, just as she had thought he'd be, with the storm winds in his head showing on his face plain as they were bawling outside. She waited. He pulled his shirt closed and stepped aside to allow her in. She almost wondered if he would decline to do so, which contributed a bit of pique to her own state of mind.

As she suspected, the lamp was turned up, the bed untouched, the books open on the table. He reached for his trousers, but she stopped him.

"We're all good friends by now, don't you think?" She took his pants from him and tossed them over the bedstead, then pulled out a chair and sat. He was unsure, though now she knew it was manners, not modesty. She set her full bottle with a thump next to the less full one on the table. He considered for only a moment before likewise sitting down, though his long legs barely fit under it. He wrapped his shirt closed.

"I suspected sleep might be a slippery fish." She glanced at the books.

"I just wanted to check some things..."

"You unsure?"

He shook his head after a moment. "No. I'm sure. I was hoping..."

"Looking for a way to extend your stay?"

He studied her, surprised and wary at her guess. "I haven't found one. Maybe— It's too risky."

She waited, but he trailed off and didn't pick up again. "You've been after him for a while."

He nodded. "I waited for him to come back. The people he came to rescue returned... some of them. But then he didn't come back."

"You don't have to tell a woman about waiting, Sam Winchester. So you came to fetch him back." *Came to rescue*, she noted. *Yet more stories.*

Sam nodded. "I was afraid he'd gotten lost, forgotten the way home."

"Still, you knew just the watering hole to wait by. For the prairie wolf to come drinking."

He smiled at that. They looked at the whiskey bottle for a moment. There was only the one glass. He filled it and set it in front of her, and took a swig directly from the bottle.

"Just you two then?"

"We lost our Dad last year."

"That's a terrible thing. No other folk?" She took the bottle from him and drank from it herself. She uncorked her full one and set it in front of him.

"Our mom died when I was a baby. He's taken care of me my whole life."

"I could see that about him. That's real nice. And I'm thinking you take care of him, too."

Sam smiled and turned the bottle in his hand. "When he lets me. When I think to."

"Now I won't hear that. Like tonight? He's sounding right taken care of."

He looked askance, not willing to confront that face on. "That's something he never needs help with." His eyes smiled, at least.

"You didn't come here to listen to me ramble, Miss Rose."

You don't think? She smiled at him. "I'm seeing to the comfort of a guest in my establishment, Mister Winchester. You are sore troubled, that is plain. Your brother is seen to, that leaves you, and I take it as a sacred duty to see to you personally."

He seemed not to hear her, or to take her meaning.

"Dean really likes it here. He's a deputized agent of the law."

"That mean a lot to him?"

"Sheriff Buell trusting him like that? Yeah. Yeah, it really does..."

"Milo Buell put the same faith in you." Sam just twitched a smile.

She tried another tack. "Had trouble with the law, maybe."

Sam drew a breath, deep. "We try to stay on the right side, but things just get away from you sometimes, you know?"

She did. "And?"

"Dean's one of the good guys, Miss Rose. He deserves..."

He leaned forward, hunching into his shoulders. She was looking at a man, but saw a boy, with all the waggle-tail devotion just pouring out of him. And again leaving himself out.

"I have no doubt he's a good man, Sam. Though aside from cold-blooded murder, I'm thinking there isn't a Commandment he bothers with."

Sam spoke softly. "Just one."

She waited for the ghosts to pass through the room, and then said, "What's in Divinity Falls, Sam?"

He considered his answer. "Our way home. What turned it into a ghost town?"

"Ghosts?" she asked.

"No, no, sorry, I mean, why was it abandoned?"

"Locusts wiped out the crops. Strange thing."

"Just that town?"

"Just that town. Where Hughes owned property. Makes sense now, knowing..."

He nodded. She bit her tongue, hoping he'd continue. He didn't.

"Home is wherever you two are together, I take it?" That at least got a nod.

"There trouble waiting for you back home? Wherever home might be?"

"Yes, but we'll deal. Doesn't matter." A sigh. "It's complicated."

"You sound like you just need a bit of respite yourself."

"I'm tired, too, Miss Rose. He's not the only..."

He studied the bottle long enough for a peal of thunder to build, roll over the town, and fade into fitful rumbling. His eyes looked up, and she was caught by the knowing look.

He looked at her with a chary regard. "In another place and time, Miss Rose, you'd be a celebrated psychologist."

"I am going to assume as you're a sweet-natured thing that was complimentary."

"It was."

"Well, then. Now we're getting back into friendly waters. What of you, Sam Winchester?"

Let's see where a shift of wind sends him. He just shook his head.

"I thought you were coming here to seduce me, Mrs. Robinson." His voice went from tenor high to base fiddle low and if she hadn't been looking right at him she'd have thought someone else was talking. *The apple falls not far from the tree with Winchester men, they are a menace to all womankind,* she thought, *and I wonder who Mrs. Robinson was in his history.* And smooth as the best charcoal drip Tennessee bourbon mint julep, that voice.

"Crossed my mind."

"What made you change it?"

"Can't say as I have."

He watched her, and she him. He played with the bottle, tipping it this way and that. "I'm bad luck for women."

"You believe in something as haphazard as luck?"

"Not really. Do you?"

"I do not."

He went silent again, looking down at his fingers drawing little circles of whisky on the table. She wanted to wait for him, to let him have his thoughts, but elder brother was busy proving how much he enjoyed the company of women, it sounded like they were putting up a barn at the end of the hallway. Sam lowered his head. Served her right for sending him in this direction, just when it appeared she was about to get him talking. But still, her responsibility.

"What was her name?" she asked.

Sam's body shifted slightly. "Jessica."

"Does it do you well to speak of her?"

He met her eyes again, from under that tangle of hair, and she was looking down into a deep well of sorrow.

"Sometimes."

They sat another while. Down the other end of the hall, the girls must have finally regained their professional dignity, and as it was two to one, they must have gained the upper hand. It was his voice that could be heard now, getting from them as good as he had given. Made Marie-Rose feel right proud. Sam was only hearing his own head.

"How long?"

"A year... Yesterday. Over a year."

"So recent? Dear Lord. And your papa, too, right on the heels." She clamped her mouth closed before she said something about poor lambs. "I suppose folk have been telling you 'time heals.'"

"Sometimes."

She sighed. "Busybodies."

"I haven't had much chance to talk about it with anyone. "

Another pause.

"Ah." She waited.

But then she found her own self speaking into the silence. "One person can't ever another know how their squash is going to grow, each one twists up different. Some men cut their hearts out, but that only works on small-hearted men."

Something must have penetrated; he raised his head to her.

"And it probably doesn't help to have that one for a brother. Not a gambling woman, but I'd lay odds on that he's been a fire-blooded colt since his first hair sprouted." She looked at her own bottle. Must have had more whiskey than she'd realized, talking her fool head off.

"Yes, ma'am. Hasn't changed. You don't think I'm wallowing?"

"I think that an insulting charge. Who says that to a man in mourning? What took her, if you don't mind my asking?"

"She was murdered. Before I could ask her to marry me."

Marie-Rose felt the blood go out of her face. Words deserted her, and she reached across the small table, putting her hand over his, squeezing hard. He clutched her fingers.

"I know I'm supposed to move on, to get... I don't know. Dean keeps hoping I'll meet someone. Another girl."

"*Move on?* I'm sure he means no harm, but honestly—" He was still speaking, though.

"I *have* met other girls, but—I can't. I try, but..."

"Everything reminds you?"

He nodded, and she saw the rising tide in his eyes. "It's not fair. There was a girl in New York, but every time she smiled I thought..."

"You were betraying."

Now the winds were blowing them both far out to sea.

"How do I start over? When does it get better?"

She drew a full, deep breath. "Some hurts aren't to be healed this side of the grave, Sam."

He looked full doomed at that, but she pressed on.

"You don't set your heart on wedding a green-grass Lawrence virgin, for one thing. She'll expect the moon never rose and the stars never shined but for the two of you, past, present and future, and that cannot be. You'll find a woman who has suffered as you have suffered. No shortage of those in the world. You'll find yourself a woman who will count herself lucky to find a man who can love a woman as much as you have loved. Your Jessica will always be a shadow by your bed, and her man will be just in the next room, to her, but all you ask is 'as much as,' never 'instead

of.' You and her will learn to live peaceful with each other's ghosts."

He jerked at that, looking at her in some shock, but didn't release her hand.

"And I can tell you how it was for me, Sam Winchester. It doesn't get *better*. You get better at living with it. And after a good long time. That's what I can tell you. Now take a deep breath, Sam."

He stared at the tabletop. She squeezed his hand again. He inhaled, caught his breath, then sat back and straightened up proper. He breathed in deep then, smiling gratefully at her. She felt the tension recede. He let go, running both his hands through his hair, visibly shaking off the melancholy.

"That's very wise, Miss Rose. Do you take this good care of all your guests?"

"You don't think? You are no worse as some and a damned sight more deserving, I will say."

He smiled back at her, amazing her at how quickly he recovered his poise. She met his look evenly, knowing now that the boy might have been anxious, but the man knew what she offered and that held no fear. There was just enough bleary in his eyes to give her pause, however. He sighed, after a time, glancing at her and away, unsure. The boy and the man needed to agree and couldn't. He started to say something, but didn't. The appreciable sound of Dean's voice was currently muffled, fortunately, and the rain steady. He fought a yawn, which was a signal for Marie-Rose to help the deciding along.

"If you intend to be riding at sun up, you need your sleep, do you not?"

He nodded, and ran his hand through his mop of hair again. They sat for a while longer, pulled one more drink each from their bottles.

She stood, and went round him to pull back the blankets on the bed. He looked up at her, mournful sad and a bit groggy and she felt herself a horrible person. She wanted to tuck him in with a sweet story. Plying this forlorn child with drink and into bed? What had she been thinking? He stood, and his shirt slid down, baring his chest and shoulder, and she was immediately, powerfully and sincerely recollected of just exactly what she'd been thinking.

He crawled into bed and curled, and she pulled the blankets over him. He turned to his side facing her, pulling his pillow to his chest and drawing his legs up.

"Thank you for talking to me, Miss Rose." The little stripling was back, shoulders or no, changeable as a fish flashing dark blue-green then gleaming silver in a stream.

"Thought you'd be poorly by yourself. You did mighty good work this day. Did your family name proud. Tomorrow you take your brother home." She considered jumping out the window for talking like a mooncow fool. The treacle coming out of her mouth was the right thing to say, but good God damn, next she'd be tucking him in and kissing his forehead.

She put her hand to his head like she did for Tully when he'd been young enough to need comforting thus and not so old as to be the very Devil when getting it. Sam's eyes closed and she leaned over and damn her indeed, kissed him on the forehead. A howl of wind moaned through the window, though it was solid closed. Good thing, sounded like big brother down the hall had been reduced to pleading.

She held off a sigh as she leaned over to blow out the lamp. Then as she turned to take her leave, hoping his dreams wouldn't be bad, a hand snaked out to catch her wrist. Gently it took hold, but firmly. For an instant she felt as if he had played her, with his little boy act and his shining doe eyes, but of course she'd only played herself, for he was what he was, boy and man, and she wanted to laugh at her own foolishness, for didn't she just say changeable as a flash of water?

He held her beside the bed for the count of three heartbeats, waiting for her, and she waited for him, and then he rose up, drawing up alongside her like a rising wave of the high tide, releasing her wrist to slide his hands up her body to take hold of the sides of her face and impress his mouth against hers. And like the wind rustling the leaves of a lakeside cypress tree, he held himself against her with strength but not force, barely disturbing the drape of her shift and breathing away the lock of hair that had strayed across her face.

In the midst of being born up in the surge of those powerful arms, Marie-Rose was amazed at how he held her face, his hands not gripping, not pulling, but cosseting her cheeks

like he would hold a glass bowl or a soap bubble, allowing no fear of his strength. He pressed his lips against hers wanting permission, wanting indulgence, just wanting.

She slid his shirt from his shoulders, giving that indulgence, and the great wave that had borne her up now drew her down in a heady rush across and over his body to lie beside him. He washed over her, never letting his weight bear down, releasing her smoothly to hold himself above her, their bodies touching all along, but not pressing. She should have felt engulfed and drowned, his prodigious body so strong and potent, but she did not, the way he handled her so particular. She was minded of childhood summers in a skiff on Lake Ponchartrain as powerful blue-green waves lifted the boat high, gently but irresistibly, and then falling down again: she felt the same rush of the cool wind and the sense of the majestic, the immensity of the water beneath her, safe in her little boat, rising and falling in the bottomless embrace of the lake but no fright of being overwhelmed. He buried his face in her neck; she drew his shirt down his arms. Smaller men had made her feel claustrophobic with their weight and their pawing, but had she wished she could have slid right out from under him, he was so careful with her. As it happened, she did not so wish. She tossed his shirt aside. She let her hands roam the great landscape of his back. He was shivering.

As she might have guessed, he did not just admire and enjoy a woman, as did his firely brother; he worshiped, he venerated. He kissed her neck, her cheeks, her eyes. He breathed in her hair, and whiskey-warm breathed out against her neck, his tongue slow and patient, lightly used on earlobes and throat. Guaranteed to make a woman sing hallelujah and go *loco* with impatience, for he rushed nothing. His unlacing of her chemise was opening a tabernacle, and he set to attending to each of her breasts like he would kiss the head of his first newborn child. He had that rare hunger that could only be sated by satisfying hers, and he worked with a will.

She let her hands and mouth and body attest that she welcomed his weight and his strength and that he need not fear her fragile and that she welcomed the heart's pain that could not be separated from joy and she would not remonstrate if he cried out a name that wasn't hers. That skin that had looked of museum marble was supple and warm and she breathed on the little hairs on his arms to

raise them up. He tasted of Castile and linen starch and eucalyptus.

They moved against each other, river merging with stream, turbulent joy found in learning each other's currents. He was surefooted, but still she felt hesitation, conflicted by the lightning storm still crackling over the tempest-whipped sea. She used what she knew to draw him out, to give him license, to show him she neither feared the great strength of his body nor the great hurt of his past so he could let the wind and wave work together, and she could let her fire and earth join with it.

But strong as a field ox though he was, and young and exceedingly hale, comes the moment when even the most robust constitution must bow before the imperfection of the flesh. The exertions of the day and the lateness of the hour and the whiskey betrayed him, and he sounded a small whimper of frustration. She ran her fingers into his hair, and raised his head, to bring his eyes to hers. She saw not frustration or disappointment there but full disgrace, and she smiled, and kissed his mouth and kissed his nose.

He slid off to the side, breathing labored, and made whisper a mournful apology. She put her arms around his head, let his arms slide around her. In another amazing display of his peculiar and unusual upbringing, his embrace was asking her to remain. And as the night had been right full of peculiar and unusual, she found herself remaining.

She pulled him close and held him there and she whispered to his ear:

"No cause to be afflicted, Mister Sam Winchester. No doubt in my mind you are a passionate and dedicated lover of women and should I live a further thirty-seven years I shall never hope to again have in my bed a body as beautiful and a heart as boundless as yours. But sleep you need and sleep you shall have, for your life and the life of the brother you hold dear depend upon it. Now I shall tell you this: if you truly wish to please me, Sam Winchester, here's what you can know. I have been a widow lo these last eight years when Mister Claude Dumaine took fever and left me bereft. And in all the years after as I have made my way as best I could, I have bedded many a man, some good, many rotten, and most just ordinary. But the one thing I miss, what I truly miss of married life is to wake up in the early morning with my man next to me heavy, sweaty, and warm

as a hound dog in the noon sun, drowsy and wanton and hard as a blacksmith's mallet and with no flowers, no poems or fuss just to take hold of me and roll on top and drive on in and barrel straight down the line express special with no more control than stampeding horses till he bursts like a noon-day cannon grunting like a rutting boar hog, moaning like wind through a ravine and I'm yelping like a whole Cheyenne war party and 'a very good morning to you, my dear.' Then he falls asleep on top of me panting and dozing so's I'm like to suffocate. You want to please this woman in bed, Sam Winchester? Now you know how."

His breath was unsteady and she couldn't tell if he was about to laugh, or cry, or snore. He receded, turning to curl around her, wrapping her up, and she could see his eyes shining in the moonlight.

"Thank you," said his voice in her ear.

Silly creature, thanking her for doing her business. She pulled the blankets over them both, as she didn't trust herself to speak. Were she to speak, she might say something importunate about how changing so quick from a magnificent stallion of a man into a beautiful, dear little boy while they were entwined together sweat and linen and skin was downright flummoxing. She was askew to stroke his hair, which was just as well, as that would be far too precious. So she turned herself to spoon into him, molding herself into the living wall of his body, like a mottled pearl nestled in a warm, strong, wet oyster shell, and she drew his arm across her like a curling ocean breaker falling endlessly down. He exhaled a sigh, touched with soft murmurs. She looked out the window at the blue-white moon making a showing through thinning storm clouds, wondering if she'd lost her mind recently and no one had had the good grace to tell her.



Marie-Rose came awake in the dark, feeling his hands on her, warm and damp from sleeping coiled body against body, and he rolled on top of her and his arms slid up beneath her back, taking a strong grip that stopped her heart for a moment, and his breathing was next to her ear as he aligned himself over her. Her shift was absent, his drawers as well, and no peaceful lake this time, this was the unconquerable ocean, moving tidally against her, and

she thought *good boy* but then *good God!* as she took him inside her and she held back her gasp, so as not to give him pause and break the spell, for if he thought too much of what he was doing he might balk skittish. And she thought *Thank the Lord it wasn't dainty Clara, we'd be using her for split rail-ties* and he growled, a throaty wolf snarl and had her hair in his teeth and he flowed atop her as a great ocean wave, not banging in and out like a battering farm hand hammering a tent-peg but using his legs and back and hips and arms to move every part of him, every fiber and muscle flowing, and she thought of a gale sending surging wave after wave against the imperishable shore, and she was hardly imperishable but *damn*, and his growl transformed into a long, single note of unquenchable need being slowly quenched, and then she stopped thinking and wrapped her legs and clutched at his powerful rolling back.

At the crescendo of his devourment of her, she felt sure he'd forgo his control and grind her like a beetle under a wagon wheel, but his was not the grunting cannonade finish, no, instead he fell to a deliberate and measured pace, struggling to kiss her, and the great wave crested almost tentatively, just little dancing droplets daring the edge, till they fell, then fell more, and to her amazement he carried her with him, not to drown, gasping for air, though gasping she was, but over the brink into delirium, thundering horses and dizzy falling and falling, at last subsiding into a whispering sighing. Rarely indeed did she take that journey to extremity with her partners, never without her determined intention.

He twitched mightily. She moved lightly under him, boat against the dock, just enough to lull him back to sleep. In time the spasms ceased, and then the quivering, and he sank back down, and wonder of wonders, the implacable ocean was placated by her insignificant body; the sea was serene and calm. Should she ever again hear of fools who dared go in barrels over those great waterfalls far to the east in Buffalo, New York, she would mock no more, as she now felt she appreciated the sensation. The room was dark as the moon had moved off, but there were fingers of false dawn in the sky. She listened to him slumbering beside her in the dark, his heavy breathing washing ashore barnacled memories of her lost husband and she cursed all green-eyed men.



The sun was not yet up when she full awoke, but it was just down the road. Sam had rolled off, pulling the blankets around him, in the way of those used to fighting for blankets with brothers and not wives, his breathing deep and slow. She looked on him a bit, touched his hair, before slipping out of bed to find her shift and returning to her own room to dress. As she passed Clara's door and saw lamplight, she looked in. Clara was sitting on her bed, also in her shift, brushing her hair, looking quite dragged out and deliciously contented.

"Tore yourself away?" Marie-Rose asked.

"Wanted to live to fuck again, thank you very much," Clara said. "There's a man who *appreciates* women."

"Well and good. Your estimation was correct?"

"Sold him cheap. Tongue like a copperhead and don't need to breath at all."

"Ain't that grand. Come down to the kitchen. We need to fix them some breakfast and traveling provender."

Clara rose, somewhat gingerly, and followed. She glanced at the closed door across from hers, then gave a careful look at Marie-Rose, who said only, "Strange one, much burdened. Departing anon." Clara shrugged.

Down in the kitchen, O'Malley was making coffee. Marie-Rose thanked him for keeping watch, and reminded him to remind her to pay him more. She sent him out to the blacksmith's stable, for horses would be required in short order. Clara set out the bread, fried the eggs and bacon and potatoes. Marie-Rose wrapped two gingham packets of hard rolls, smokehouse beef, and cheese wedges.

Coming back through the saloon and up the stairs, she heard a sound above her. Looking up, she saw Sam in his wrinkled shirt and drawers, scratching at the door of the room wherein his brother had spent a bumptious night. He was whispering urgently.

"Come on, Dean. We have to go."

She couldn't hear if there was a response from inside, though Clara drew breath at the sight of those legs. She stepped up the stairs, quietly, behind him, Clara following.

"Dean, come on! Time's running out! ...And we can't afford it..."

Marie-Rose cleared her throat, and Sam jumped a foot. "You let me worry about things pecuniary, Mister Sam Winchester."

He yanked his shirt closed, but it didn't near cover those tree trunk legs. He looked to his own room, but Marie-Rose just stepped past him, opened the door and entered, she not being afflicted by whatever noodle-headed fears Sam Winchester held of being party to his brother in the act of sexual congress. Near-dawn light filtered into the room, the last flickering of firelight from the stove gleamed off the brass tub and the amber, sweat-sheened body of Dean Winchester. He was sprawled on his back, jaybird naked, one hand hanging off the side of the bed, the other planted on Lisabet's odalisque bottom beside him. She was wrapped in what was left of the Astoria's best bed sheets. Some sections of those sheets were still knotted on the bed frame, which looked like it might require some repairing, and had been moved some distance from its accustomed position against the wall. The blankets and quilt were on the floor and clothing was dispersed to every part of the room.

His face was a pornographic symphony of lazy contentment and indecent satisfaction, his green eyes blissful and drowsy; his mouth smiling a salacious cat-purring-by-an-empty-cream-pot smile. He was rigid soaring erect, which Marie-Rose concluded was equally a miracle and entirely unsurprising. A work of art it was, at any rate.

"Good morning," Marie-Rose said.

"*Dean!*" Sam bolted into the room, grabbing up the quilt and tossing it over his brother's nether regions. Clara filled his space in the doorway.

"We fixed some breakfast, gentlemen, as we cannot send you stalwarts on your way on empty stomachs," Marie-Rose said.

Sam stood between the ladies, the dressed ones anyway, and tried to apologize for God knows what.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Rose, I was trying to get him up..."

"He's that," Clara said from the doorway.

Sam flinched, and then cleared his throat. "I'll get him dressed and we'll be right down. I'm really sorry if you were disturbed."

Marie-Rose leaned against the tub. "Who is disturbed, Mister Winchester? We must get you fed and on your way, but it's only right that we certify you got value for your money. Are you disturbed, Mister Dean Winchester? Or will you attest to your considerate and dutiful brother that received proper value for his money?"

Dean's heavy-lidded eyes barely moved, but as the liquid, licentious smile didn't leave his face it could be supposed that no, he was not disturbed, and yes, Sam had got his money's worth. Lisabet sat up and stretched, yawning ever so slightly. She caught sight of Sam, and looked him over most appreciably. Sam gulped and looked as elsewhere as possible.

"Miss Rose..." He cleared his throat.

Clara took a discarded robe from the floor, and tossed it to Lisabet. Both girls came to stand beside Marie-Rose.

"Well, who's hungry?" Lisabet asked.

"We'll be down as soon as we're presentable," Sam stated firmly, back on land.

"I speak for the entire Astoria in saying you are both rightly the most presentable creatures to have graced our beds," said Marie-Rose.

"Ornaments to manhood," said Clara.

Sam squirmed. "If you'd excuse us..."

"You looking to be shot of us, Mister Sam Winchester?" asked Clara.

"I dare say he's hiding something, Miss Clara," murmured Lisabet.

"His behavior is suspicious, Miss Lisabet," said Clara.

"Stealing from Mrs. Aushenbrenner's larder, are you?" accused Lisabet. The game was a familiar one.

"Suspicious— Huh?" Sam floundered.

"And you're hiding the *weisswurst* right there." Clara directed an accusatory finger directly at his drawers.

"The what? Stealing? No! I swear—"

Sam's shocked and confused protests of innocence were interrupted when his brother's hand, heretofore dangling drowsily off the bed, snaked over to catch his fingers on his brother's nearby undershorts. A quick yank dropped them down about the ankles. The ladies made careful and thoughtful perusal of the provided proof of innocence.

Dean's indolent hickory-smoked voice murmured, "She means your dick, you moron."

Perhaps dithering mortification would be the expected response, but to Marie-Rose's wonderment Sam gave only one mighty twitch. He pulled his shirt closed, which covered very little of the "white sausage" he had been accused of smuggling, and drew himself up to his extraordinary full height.

Clara did not, as would be regular, finish the game with a smart word about the suitability, condition, or even the stature of the discovered *weisswurst*. She may have swayed just the tiniest bit till Lisabet put a steadying hand to her back.

"I apologize for my uncouth brother, ladies. I'll go get dressed." Sam spoke with imperial composure. Stepping clear of his drawers, he strode right out the door as he was. He was allowed to depart without further remark, as to have sullied that superior performance with applause or further comment would have been shamelessly disgraceful. Professionalism be damned, however, when it came to delighting upon his superlative *derriere* as he departed. Two beautiful blushing bell peppers, seashell smooth and firm and strokably ripe, and there was a moment of reflection ending in a group exhalation and before attention was returned to the remaining Winchester. He was observing his brother's exit with rich amusement and affection and no sign of disappointment. The green eyes drifted back to rest upon to the ladies.

"So. Breakfast awaits, and Mister Dean Winchester must dress," Marie-Rose said. "But now despite what was just conveyed to good brother Sam, as I entered I believe I witnessed a clear indication of business not yet entirely concluded. That is a professional incivility we cannot abide."

"My responsibility, Miss Rose," said Lisabet, "and I was fixing to remedy that presently. I shall attend to it and we'll be down before the eggs are cold."

"No blame to you, girl, the schedule was not given to you timely," Marie-Rose said, "but let's get a wiggle on and have him down right smart." She took Clara by the arm and proceeded out, closing the door with a smile as Lisabet's robe and the quilt floated back down to the floor.



The sun was clearing the horizon by the time a glowing Lisabet presented Dean Winchester at the table, so breakfast was hearty but perforce hurried. Sam had been down almost twenty minutes, his fine turn-out making him again the picture of a Western lawman in dignity and elegance. Marie-Rose added yet another item to her list of surprising things: she would have thought Dean Winchester would appear groggy, sated, barely able to stand, instead of frolicsome and high-spirited and starving, singing down the stairs, kissing her hand, and slapping Sam heartily on the back. Well, the starving was expected: he assaulted his tucker with vigor.

He fussed at Sam for picking at his food, and proceeded to criticize his brother's haberdashery as "pantywaist," till Marie-Rose pointed out that Sam was on his third plate and asked if Dean were offended at their bad manners for not waiting till he came down and should they be saying grace first? Sam made a churchman's superior face that had the women giggling, and Dean smoothly siderailed to complimenting the cooking, which Sam soundly supported. Dean went on to rave of the accommodations and appointments of the Astoria, particularly the appointments, most especially and egregiously the appointments, and bemoaned having a brother too feeble and bookish to properly appreciate those appointments and wasn't that a sad, sad thing? Sam took a serious long time buttering a biscuit and the girls looked at her, and looked at Sam, but she held her peace.

Dean's eyes showed a rascally sparkle that was as contagious as his singing, but what made Marie-Rose smile was Sam's pompous fraudery: he'd steal a glance at Dean then look away, the Puritan disapproval unable to veil the delight at his brother's manifest happiness. Thus they spoke of Tully, and Willam, and Buell, other words about the future of the town, but, despite promises of the

previous night, the conversation strolled only along sunny paths.

But then it was time.

The clock was ringing out six and O'Malley already had two horses saddled out front: a borrowed horse for Sam, and Dean's own Blackie. Dean sprang up, grabbed his kit, calling for Sam to get a move on, and stepped outside. The girls stood as well. Sam took up his satchel, followed more leisurely. He glanced about, noting everyone else otherwise occupied, and started to speak to Marie-Rose. She was looking at Dean, come to a sudden halt on the portico, his attention fixed upon something down the road. Sam followed her gaze, and stepped out to stand beside Dean and look in the same direction. Marie-Rose was going to reach for the shotgun, but she noted they were showing no distress, just observing. She went out herself.

The full-up sun was throwing brilliant diamond light across the town and the land beyond. The heather aster and prairie clover, sparkling from the rain, made vivid blotches of spilled purple and green across the variegated topaz browns of the plains stretching out till forever. A crisp and cool breeze carried the scent of new grass and wet loamy earth around and through the water-splotched buildings. She sometimes wished she were a romantic or superstitious person, so she could see cloud-dotted sky and clean air as a sign of renewal and the dawning of a new day for Gilead, but she was not such a person, and if she looked eastward and saw a rainbow she'd go back for the shotgun after all. She reminded herself to have O'Malley check the roof for leaks. She scanned the landscape to see what had attracted their observation. A pair of grouse skittered across the muddy ruts and puddles of the road. Long ways off in the bean field the windmill was creaking around as usual. She couldn't see a thing to engage their rapt interest. The brothers were standing side-by-side, one more inch and Sam's chin would set on Dean's shoulder, both enthralled and silent, there's a wonder, eyes wide.

"Wow," Sam said. His eyes reflected the dew on the grass.

"Good day to be alive," murmured Dean. He drew in a long, deep, lung-filler breath. A moment longer drinking it in, and they set to saddling up.

Marie-Rose bit her lip. Given her druthers, she'd be pleased to just have the slap across the face, thank you very much.

Marie-Rose stood with Dean as he checked his tack. His cap was in place, his fringed jacket buttoned, his tomahawk hung across his back. Lisabet and Clara said their goodbyes to Sam.

"We'll have to leave the horses. They'll be there tomorrow, unless..."

"Unless you come back on them."

Dean nodded, jaw tense at the thought, grateful she didn't ask him to explain the unexplainable.

"Tully will be right broke up that he couldn't say his goodbyes," Marie-Rose said.

"He's a good kid. Tell him... not to grow up too fast." A rueful twinge in his jaw even as he said it.

"I'll tell him you thought well of him. That will chuff him up something fierce, I can attest," Marie-Rose said. He smiled a little, as she thought he might. Dean shook hands with O'Malley and went over to Lisabet and Clara as Sam came to Marie-Rose.

"You'll have to ride hard to make Divinity Falls by sundown." Marie-Rose handed Sam two packets with the food they'd prepared. He set to securing them in his saddlebag. Dean addressed himself to Lisabet and Clara.

"Ladies..." He spoke no further, but let his eyes speak of memories held treasured in the heart that spoken aloud would sully them, and let that wicked, willful smile intimate of secret places touched and carnal depths plumbed that spoken aloud would cause the blue sky to blush pink. He took Lisabet by the hand and set the other to the back of her neck and kissed her in the way that tells a woman she's been soundly, thoroughly, meaningfully kissed, and then whispered something in her ear that caused her to nicker and flush, an astonishment, and then he kissed the hand he held. It seemed to Marie-Rose that his eyes held some apology, Lisabet's some melancholy, but perhaps that was herself just feeling sentimental. He moved to Clara to repeat the performance, who accepted his gratitude with more composure. He plucked his kerchief out of his back pocket, and knotted it around his neck, eyes again fixed on Lisabet. He raised his voice, turning toward Marie-Rose.

"Thanks for everything, Miss Rose, you run a fine establ—" He halted, eyes going wide in disbelief. It had likely been his intention to favor Marie-Rose with one of those toe-curling

kisses as well, but her dance card was full: she was fully engaged by Sam Winchester. No fear from those mighty arms now; he was free to run the fingers of one hand to tangle up her hair and the other down to the base of her spine so to bear her body entire against his. He inhaled deep her scent, exhaled a zephyr of breath across her face, touching moth-flutter soft his cheek to hers then pressed their lips softly, deeply, earnestly together, no adolescent mashing or vulgar tongues, calling halt to all measures of time but their own heartbeats. A pang like a church bell rang through her, and she felt an unlovely spike of pure envy for the woman, who and wherever she may be, that would one day brave the tempest, cross the storm-lashed sea and lasso this splendid stallion.

His eyes were open as he released her, his fingertips lingering on her cheeks, and not a word did he speak as he drank in her face, her eyes. He turned to his horse and mounted smoothly. As Dean stood with some little noises dribbling out of his mouth, Sam flicked his spurs and set his mount to a canter down the road. Not a backward glance, as was proper. Marie-Rose watched emotions fight for dominance across Dean Winchester's face: surprise, protectiveness, a little temper, and, as he hurriedly leapt to his own saddle, hesitant as he was entire unsure, gratitude.

*"Take my love, take my land, take me where
I cannot stand."*

The song he took up rang clear and loud in the clean air. Sam was already clear of the town when Dean hee-yahhed Blackie to such as a gallop as she was able, and the ladies waved at their backs.

*"I don't care, I'm still free. You can't take the sky
from me..."*

O'Malley had already gone back into the Astoria, but there the women waited, as was proper, watching the two ride into the sea of sun-washed sage till they fell from sight.



Marie-Rose waited a day. The town was quiet. People would return eventually as word got round. Tully was good to ride, though wouldn't, and she waited yet a while longer till Willam improved sufficient to put a hand on Tully's face, then his shoulder, instructing him to be vigilant as he rode

escort for her. Doc Abernathy's promises were insufficient, and not till Missus Louisa Lancaster swore solemn oath not to let Willam need for a thing till Tully returned in his own person to this very bedside could Tully be moved. They rode to Divinity Falls. He was somber quiet, and she at first thought he was smarting at not being around for the leave-taking, but on further reflection she realized he was pensive about bigger things, things to which he, along with the other men, had been party. She was minded to think of him differently now. She would chafe if he didn't answer her questions when he couldn't or wouldn't answer, but still she was grieved to see him settle into that stony suffocation as men grew into.

After a while he asked her why she didn't ask, and she told him why he wouldn't answer if she did ask. She said she knew men well, and how they couldn't bring themselves to talk easy about what burdened them. Maybe bragging to each other round the campfire, but mostly thrown to the bottom of the mineshaft of their souls; either way things weren't often shared with the womenfolk. Sometimes, in the dark, after a bout on the sheets and enough drink, a man would speak low and grave about something that bore down on his soul. She finally told him to think of this day, some day hence, when he had a woman of his own, and that when he leaves her to wait, and she would wait, to remember that this is what it was like for her, him never telling and her never knowing. She then said she was rattling like a brokedown hay wagon and they should just ride.

Fearful of what they might find, or of finding nothing, they came to the windblown shipwreck of Divinity Falls. Tumbleweeds loitered in the street and gathered in the doorways of the indifferent buildings. Aside from lizards and jackrabbits, the only living things were the two horses, tied on long leads nearest to the carcass of a church.

Tully spoke for the first time in some while. "This would have been Gilead."

She looked around at the locust-husk empty buildings, then looked at him. "Not going to be."

Looking inside the church, they found the remains of many candles, some objects best not examined close, and evidence of markings having been on the walls and floor having been hastily but sufficiently eradicated. Motes of ash

danced over a white patch in the center aisle—curled and charred leather book covers in the remnants of a small fierce fire. They didn't linger. From one of the horse's saddlebags fluttered the two blue gingham cloths that had wrapped the provender for the Winchesters' journey, and looking inside that bag they found what cash money that remained to the brothers, their firearms, and a paper. She wished she knew whose hand had written on the paper, for the message was clever worded so to be from both brothers together and from each alone:

*Miss Marie-Rose Dumaine and all of the
Astoria,*

*Thank you for everything you did for me,
and thank you for everything you did for my
brother.*

*Mister Dean Winchester and Mister Sam
Winchester, Deputies Sheriff of Gilead.*

P.S., Under the last pew, for Tully.

Of the six pews, two were upright, and under the last was the tomahawk.

On the ride back, stopping to water the horses under a stand of white bone sycamores by a swollen stream, she thought on things. She thought on her bruised lilies back at the Astoria. Lisabet, waiting for a man who would leave, and there he went, but couldn't take her with. Clara, waiting for a man who would stay, and there was a man to stay with but couldn't stay with her. She thought of herself. She thought of the events of the last days, and how despite all she still hadn't heard a good reckoning of what all had gone on, and didn't that raise her hackles? She thought on the Belrose ranch, which would go up for auction, and the businesses of the town that Belrose had owned, like the new trade goods merchantile half to finished, and the considerable value of her deposits secured in the vaults of the Nemaha First Bank in Brownsville. She thought how she was sick to her back teeth with waiting, waiting for men to do right by her town, and do right by her girls, and waiting for men or God or anyone else to do right by her.

Tully gingerly asked her what was on her mind, as she had over the last hour developed a truly frightful expression. She informed him of such sundry thoughts of which Tully should take note: it that was time Gilead had a mayor, and it was time Willam Bodiene settled down, and it was further

time for Tully Bodiene to put down his broom and give thought to operating the future Gilead Trade Goods Mercantile. She kept to herself her thoughts of coins and swords, earth and fire, and how she didn't know which card would be her own, but she would look it full in the face when she drew it. They rode back to Gilead along a trail cut through goldenrod earning its name and purple beardtounge buzzing with bees.

