

Cunslinger's

*Guide To The
Gospel*



A Novel by Ryan Gray

Gunslinger's Guide to the Gospel

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Cover design by Rodney C. Douglas

ISBN: 978-1-4835631-7-6

Dedicated to:

*My number one advocate, coach, manager, counselor, best friend, love,
life-long partner in crime, the mother of my children and wife, thank you!*

*My love for you continues to grow a bit more every day due to your kindness and
passionate heart. Forever and always, you will be my Princess, Lily, and I'll be the
dumbfounded mountain-man who still can't believe you said, "Yes."*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could never have finished this book on my own. Since the beginning of this project, my friends and family have done nothing but encourage and help me in every way possible.

Whether from Sonora, Denver, Johannesburg, Pleasanton or Cupertino, I see every one of my relationships as a very special gift from God. I am eternally thankful.

To my editor, Debbie Sloane, thank you for your patience and hard work. My talented, sister-in-law, Jazz Christie, thank you for all your formatting and graphic design expertize, you are an incredible blessing.

‘Brother’ Rodney Douglas, you completely captured my heart for the cover and have done so much to help complete this book and encourage me when I needed it most, thank you, my friend!

Thank you to my friend and a great coach Coen, who’s combat and tactics advice was invaluable. I miss our chats and your classes.

In remembrance of an amazing lady and an incredible teacher, Mrs. Dilgard. Thank you for passing along your passion for the written word.

Thank you to my Mom and Dad, who have always backed every crazy, harebrained scheme I have embarked upon. Thank you, Mom, for always telling me that I can do anything I put my mind to doing. Dad, thank you, for teaching me to think and learn for myself. Love you both!

PROLOGUE

“Sam!” The out of breath messenger exploded through the red batwing doors and into the saloon. He bumped into a table and knocked over a stool on his way to the bar, but the obstacles did not slow him down. He reached the bartop and leaned over the mahogany to emphasize the urgency of his message. “He’s comin’ down the street!”

Sam, the bartender, leaned slightly over the bar and peered outside through the saloon doors. They were still swinging back and forth from the enthusiastic messenger’s entrance. Sam, the owner and keeper of the largest saloon within the city limits of Muddy Valley, was not a man easily excited. He continued his work of cleaning shot glasses with a kitchen towel, slung over his shoulder.

“Are ya sure?” The barman asked with a deep gravelly voice. He betrayed a hint of curiosity.

The bar was fairly empty since it was still the afternoon and most men would not be in for a drink until well after work. Around these parts, work only ended after the sun had called it a day. But there were always a few outliers; a few townsfolk who wanted a cool beer with lunch or the sad, yet, honest drunk who just wanted to live in a bottle. So, Sam was open in the early afternoon, because business was business.

Mr. Jones or “Jonesy”, as his friends called him, yanked out a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his face and neck. He couldn’t remember the last time he had run that fast. “Yeah, sure as shootin’ and I think he’s comin’ here! See, I heard Margy from the store say—”

Another voice from down the bar cut Jonesy off. This voice was mean, arrogant, and a little drunk. “Of course he’s comin’ this way, you deadbeat blow-hard!” The new speaker did not look at Jonesy but stared across the bar as he spoke. His was hat pulled down over his face. “Besides, ain’t that why you’re here? To see some action, but hide behind somebody’s petticoat while it happens, Jonesy?” The man laughed at his own insult.

Jonesy turned pink with embarrassment. Who does this guy think he is? He thought to himself. Huffing indignantly, Jonesy replied, “No, I ain’t scared. I just came here to warn Sam since it’s his place and all. Besides, what gives you the right to talk to me like...”

The rude speaker stood and turned to face Jonesy. It was Steele.

Jonesy's indignation stopped in mid-sentence, and the tone of his voice changed. "Sorry, Steele, I didn't know...I mean, I did not know who you were; I just didn't realize that, well, that it was you." Jonesy swallowed awkwardly, gulping hard.

Steele walked past him and pulled up to the counter, facing the bartender. Sam stared back at him, unconcerned.

"Who is this, Boy and what does he want?" Steele asked.

The barkeeper had seen Steele's type in the past. He was a gunfighter, a good one at that, and was always for hire. The type of job did not matter, only the odds of coming out alive and the money involved.

There were two things Sam knew about Steele that made him uneasy. The hired gun didn't like taking jobs that involved capturing the bounty alive, and his reputation always had to be the best and meanest of all gunmen, or at least in his little corner of the West. The cocky gunslinger had to always be the most feared and talked about gunman around.

Sam was a man past the middle in age. A father of three and a widower. He could see past the disguise of many people that they themselves would never have believed. He always thought Steele acted like a five-year-old child just trying to get his way. The frightening thing was, he was good with a gun.

Steele spoke with his usual arrogance. "Bartender, I asked you a question, you old coot! What do you know about this Boy?!"

Sam's response was one that came from a man who was confident in his own abilities. And the sawed-off shotgun beneath the bar. He also did not care too much about what most people thought, especially a twenty-two-year-old sniveling man-child. "I keep telling you, Steele, call me Sam."

"Who cares what the devil I call you, bartender, just give me an answer!" The gunslinger swore.

"I can't say that I know too much about him—"

Steele sneered. "Well, tell me what you do know, old timer!"

"I will if you give me a chance, sonny," Sam retorted. "All I know is that he's a good shot with a rifle, and he is hunt'n someone. That's it." Sam stalled for a few seconds waiting for the tension to build in Steele's young, arrogant eyes. "That and he seems to cause a bit of trouble wherever he goes. He causes it, and always walks away on top. Even on top when it came to Mike Gonzales."

Steele did not look worried until Sam mentioned Gonzales. That hombre was greased lightning! Steele thought. How'd some Boy get the drop on him?

The gunslinger's jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. This is my town! He thought to himself and slammed his fist on the bar with angry determination.

Sam observed the behavior from the other side of the bar. He had seen this a dozen times from dozens of different men. All these arrogant youngsters were trying to leave a mark on this world with their quick hands and blazing guns. Sam just hoped that the Boy was fast enough to teach Steele a lesson but not fast enough to kill him. If he didn't start wising up, Sam thought, this arrogant youngster was going to be killed by somebody soon.

The air in the bar was thick with tension. No one moved, they just waited as the gunman contemplated what his next move should be.

After almost a full minute, Steele blurted aloud, "Well, we'll see if he can end up on top in my town." He retrieved his whiskey glass from down the bar and shot-gunned the hard drink down his throat. The left side of his face winced from the warm burn of the rotgut whiskey. Steele pulled his hat firmly against his head and started walking towards the swinging doors.

"There's one more thing you should know," Sam called after the gunslinger, attempting to scare the hothead a bit more. "He doesn't carry pistols, and he doesn't need to!"

Steele did not stop. He ignored the warning as he walked into the middle of the street, tucking his dirty coat behind the butt of his tied-down Smith & Wesson Model 3. The pistol butt was finished wood and the barrel, matte silver. Steele grazed the side of the smooth walnut handle. He grinned whenever he felt the row of notches, neatly cut into the wood.

Steele had always built himself up to these moments, reciting in his head: You are faster than him! You are faster than any of them! He believed that if he thought that he was faster than someone, then he would be.

Steele had never thought of himself as a killer, just someone doing what he was good at. Yet, he sometimes had to admit to himself he was beginning to enjoy the chase, the excitement and everything else that came with the nature of killing. He was killing more and more, even when he did not need to, or intend to! It seemed that Steele could not control himself at times. But when he thought of the women he got, the feelings of every eye on him when he rode into town, and the sight of all the other men stepping aside when he came through, he did not care; he was hooked.

The only part of killing he really disdained was the smell; that disgusting stench that always chased you down when you were bringing in a body for bounty.

Steele's thoughts were interrupted when he saw a figure making his way on the sidewalk towards Sam's saloon.

Steele saw the Boy out of the corner of his eye for the first time. He turned to face the Boy and size him up. Steele was not impressed. He was considerably short, yet powerful in build. Sam, the tender, was right; he did not carry a gun. He looked more like a trapper from the mountains than a feared gunfighter.

The gunfighter walked to the middle of the street with all the swagger he could muster. "Hey, Boy, come here." Steele's tone was mocking, and he pointed when he finished his sentence. "I wanna talk to you."

The Boy stopped and turned his head slightly to the left and eyed the challenger. "I ain't on the shoot, partner."

"Yer in my town and I don't like it and I ain't yer partner." It was an overused statement and too many gunmen claimed towns as their own. Steele didn't care. He was now thinking about putting another notch on the butt of his well-worn Smith & Wesson and guarding his territory.

Large, rough, wood planks creaked as the Boy stepped down from the sidewalk. The road was made of dried, clumpy mud. He moseyed towards the center of the street. When he reached it, the Boy turned his body square towards Steele. "Listen, amigo, I don't want trouble. I'm only looking fer a fella. Besides, I ain't heeled." The Boy turned his body to prove he wasn't carrying a gun.

Steele grinned and looked the Boy up and down. "Then come on down here and take yer whoopin' like the little boy that ya are. If'n you don't, I'm gonna tell everyone that you're yellow and ran from me."

Hearing Steele calling out the stranger had attracted the attention of the townsfolk. Much of Muddy Valley had all lined up the sides of the street to satisfy their curiosity. Behind both Steele and the Boy, the street was empty, just in case bullets began to fly. The rough wooden sidewalk held more traffic than it was used to. No one was going to miss the spectacle.

Without the tiniest change in expression, the Boy replied, "Okay, I'm yellow, so I'll be on my way."

Shocked and angry, Steele lost his patience with this so-called fighter. Spit sprayed from the killer's lips. He screamed, "You have five seconds to walk over here before I shoot your legs out from under you."

The Boy took a deep breath and sighed. His head shook back and forth with regret as he slowly walked closer and faced off against the enraged Steele, but kept

his head down. When he was a mere five feet away, he stopped and lifted his head and gazed directly into the gunfighter's eyes. "We don't have to do this. There ain't no need."

Then something changed.

With Steele's teeth clenched in anger, he spoke in a tone that was not his own. It was from his body but not his throat. His voice had turned deep and contorted. "I know who you are! This is my town, and I am going to kill you!"

The expression on the Boy's face also changed. His eyes focused and he allowed a slight grin. "You know that you have no say who lives or dies, so let's find out."

Steele grabbed for his gun with his left hand. As he did, the Boy stepped towards the gunman. When the gun came up, the Boy was ready. In one smooth and calm motion, he stuffed the base of his left thumb between the hammer and chamber of the Smith & Wesson, keeping it from firing. Then his left palm found Steele's chin and the Boy pushed Steele's head up as his right foot slipped behind Steele's heel, knocking him off balance. The Boy tripped him hard. Steele's body slammed against the dirt road. As Steele fell, he had no choice but to release his pistol so he could catch himself, but the gun was still attached to the base of the Boy's thumb.

The fight had lasted three seconds.

By the time Steele had caught his breath; the Boy had unloaded the pistol and threw it down the street away from the gunman.

"You know, it ain't nice to draw on an unarmed man. Folks don't like it much... so I've seen."

Steele said nothing, only dusted off his hat as he slowly stood. His face flushed with embarrassment, he burned with even more rage. He didn't care about the rules or laws; he wanted to see the street run red from the Boy's blood.

The Boy turned and continued on his way. He hopped back onto the wooden sidewalk and tipped his hat to the awestruck crowd of onlookers and made his way through them as quickly as possible as gleeful applause broke out.

He continued his journey towards the other end of the town. Stopping when he saw a sign that said "Sam's Saloon," he stepped through the swinging doors and bellied up to the bar. Sam, Jonesy, and the rest of the saloon patrons had seen everything that had happened, but without discussing it, decided to play ignorant.

"What can I do ya fer, mister?" Sam asked. He was still cleaning shot glasses with the same rag.

"A big cup an Arbuckle's would be good." The Boy motioned to the iron pot on the counter.

Sam winced with regret. "That coffee has been there for most the day. It's all cold."

The Boy took off his hat and wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead. "Sounds good to me. I'm pretty warm, as it is."

"All right then, stranger." Sam poured him a cup and slid it across the bar.

The Boy sipped quietly from the wide-mouth, tin cup. "You Sam?" The Boy asked after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, I sure am. Do I know you?" Sam asked.

The Boy smiled and shook his head. "Nah, but I am looking for a guy called Flint, and somebody said that you might have talked to him...say about four days ago."

"I think I recollect someone by that name." Sam started off slowly, pretending to recall which patron called himself Flint. The fact was that Sam had known Flint for a long time. He actually met gunslick Flint before the bar belonged to Sam, and considered him a friend. Usually, if someone was hunting for ol' Flint, Sam knew right away if he were friend or foe. This young buck is playing it cool and close the chest. I just don't know which one this Boy is. Sam thought to himself.

After a few moments, Sam replied, "Ah, that's right, I seem to remember him sayin' he was headin' further back east. Said he might want to spend some time in Colorado. If you ride hard, you might be able to catch him down the trail a ways. What you huntin' him for?"

The Boy downed his coffee, looked up, and nodded at the tender. "Nothing too important, but thanks for the Arbuckle's. How much do I owe ya?"

Sam waved his arm, brushing away the offer of payment. "Awe, it was colder 'n ice. It's on the house."

The Boy put on his hat and tipped it to the bartender and Jonesy as he turned to go. "Much obliged, sir."

Jonesy, who had yet to say a word, was dying with curiosity, and asked, "What's yer name, son?"

The Boy smiled and started to answer, but was cut off from Sam's loud warning.

"Watch yer back!"

Out of instinct, the Boy dove.

Steele, angrier than a sack of kicked rattlers, stood just outside the bar's doors.

He tried to shoot the Boy in the back but missed. The Boy dove to his right and a bullet hit the bar where he had been only a split second before. Steele continued firing while moving forward into the bar. His second shot sent shards of wood from a chair into the air, behind where the boy would have been standing, but he dove and rolled once more, just in time.

Dang, this boy's greased lightning, thought Jonesy as he stayed low against the bar.

The elusive Boy followed through on his second roll with a dive through one of Sam's only glass windows leading into a side ally.

Steele lost no time. After firing his third shot out the window, he hopped through the window after the Boy. He turned on his heels and took two steps toward his prey.

They were his last.

He stopped dead in his tracks, dropped his gun to the ground, stumbled two steps forward, and fell sideways against the building. Sam and Jonesy ran out to see what had happened. Steele was staring at two blades stuck into his body. One in his belly, the other one found its way between two ribs into his heart. Within moments, he was dead. Steele had been so eager to kill that he did not see his prey waiting with two throwing blades in hand.

The Boy walked up to the body as the circle of spectators grew by the minute. "Does he got any family, Sam?"

Sam looked up, puzzled that the Boy, who tried to avoid this fight, would even care about a guy like Steele who tried to shoot him in the back. Sam tried to think but found it hard with so much adrenaline pumping through his veins. "Um, yeah, I think he has a cousin who comes in sometimes. I'll see if I can let 'em know."

The Boy nodded his head. Crouching on his heels near the body, he removed the knives out of the corpse then looked at Sam and Jonesy. "You two fellers see all that happened and that this hombre started all the ruckus?"

"Yeah." Jonesy nodded, still in shock.

"Okay then, I'll leave it to ya." The Boy flipped a few silver coins to Sam. He tipped his hat to thank the bartender. "That should cover the damage and make sure this guy gets a proper burial."

Sam's brow furrowed as he clutched the silver coins in one hand and watched the Boy walk back up the street to his horse. The bartender cocked his head towards Jonesy and whispered out of the side of his mouth, "That might be the strangest and deadliest man around, and if he catches up to ol' Flint, I hope I won't be around."

CHAPTER ONE

It was a necessary stop for any journey east through the high desert. However, Silver Springs was a shell of its former glory. Years earlier, when silver had been discovered the town had its fifteen minutes of fame.

Every Tom, Dick, and Harry within a hundred miles flooded into the area. Makeshift canvas houses were thrown up and a “tent city” was born. Like all other tent cities created for the gold and silver strikes, it attracted different races, nationalities, and people: preachers trying to build their church buildings and businessmen trying to make their fortunes by selling goods to the miners.

But folks never really forgot the last type of person that a tent town attracts. Robbers, prostitutes, swindlers and cheats, saloon owners, and everything else that will always be branded with words like sin, evil, and hopeless.

The boom that created this tent city was shorter than most. All that remained were a few active businesses and the little Catholic mission ran by Father Wilkens, from Virginia. The only law in these parts was a marshal that came by only once in a great while with some sort of far-off news or trying to serve a warrant for the arrest of a man on the run from doing something somewhere else. The tiny town saw nothing of excitement except what the weather brought in.

Nothing, that is except on one windy Tuesday afternoon.

The man rode into town on a dark, brown mare. A city slicker could see that he was not from around these parts. He appeared different. He was not very old, yet his large hands were that of a grown man who had worked harder than most. He rode with confidence and was aware of his surroundings.

Under his leg, sheathed in a buckskin cover, was a long barrel rifle—a Henry .44 caliber. It had the standard barrel with a brass action and a matching sight hinged to the top of the gun. He did not carry a sidearm. Instead, a smooth thin blade was strapped to his left hip, and a conventional hunting knife was tied to his right leg with three leather straps.

Although a harsh, cool wind cut through the air, he rode without a jacket, unbothered by the weather. He seemed to invite the sharp wind. His long-sleeved shirt was rolled to his elbows, revealing dark, thick forearms. He wore one tanned leather glove on his left hand. Instead of traditional boots, he sported long custom moccasins; tied up above his calves. His brown felt hat was the only new piece of

apparel on his body. It was awkward and out of place atop his head, almost as if he wore it reluctantly.

He walked his horse into town and stopped in front of a sign that read, "Trading Post & Barbershop." With a grunt, he slowly slid off his horse onto his feet. The stranger steadied himself. He had been riding longer than he realized. After tying his horse off and slapping the dust from his trousers, he stepped inside the trading post.

It was a small store that kept only the basics for the trail. The storekeeper, Mike Humphries was an average man, with an ever-growing midsection. Mike never wanted trouble, but he loved to hear about other peoples. Currently, he had no other customers.

"Howdy stranger," Mike said.

"Howdy," the stranger replied from under his brown, felt hat.

"And what can I do you for?" the storekeeper asked.

"Well, let me see here, sir." The man casually leaned on the small counter and took his hat off. He was shorter than most men but was powerfully built with broad shoulders and big arms. His hair was jet black, and he had very few whiskers for a man that had just been traveling. His dark olive skin could only come from Mexican or Indian descent.

The usual layer of dirt and grunge from days of riding without a chance of a bath caked his face and hair. His voice was soft and a little high. Not a voice that usually accompanied such a tough looking hombre.

"I have been out of coffee now for almost a week, and my food supply is all but gone. So, why don't I start with half a sack of coffee, a bag of flour, some cornmeal, and two of the biggest pieces of jerked beef ya got, and we'll see where we go from there."

The store owner went about the work of filling the order. Feeling the timing was as good as it would get, he asked, "So, what brings you around these parts?"

The stranger did not answer right away. Instead, he turned to face the window that overlooked the street.

Mr. Humphries thought the answer would never come and awkward silence controlled the room.

Finally, the young man spoke. "Oh, I come from here and there. Lately, I come from that ranching town southwest of here. I'm here for a little business before I'm on my way."

Mr. Humphries nodded in acknowledgment. "That'll be four dollars, even. I

hope your business keeps ya here for a while. Folks seem to be mighty scarce these days.”

As the customer began digging in his pockets for the correct change, he replied, “Sorry, mister, I’ll only be here for a night. Then I’m on my way. I did notice that it is a little bit quiet.” He looked up and handed him a handful of coins. “Would you know if there is a man around these parts, who goes by the name of Flint? I heard tell he might come this way.”

The storekeeper’s happy tone turned uneasy and lowered almost to a whisper. “Is he a friend of yours?”

“Nope. There’s just a little something that I need to give him. If you see him, can you just send him my ways at the hotel or just tell me where I can find him. I’ll be here just after breakfast to get whatever else I can think of.”

Mike Humphries nodded but said nothing.

The stranger tipped his hat, picked up his purchased goods, and walked outside.

After he left, Mike hurried to the window to watch this mysterious man lead his horse to the hotel. His imagination provoked questions without answers. Why would he be looking for Flint, unless he is a lawman or a bounty hunter of some kind? If he were a lawman, he would have said so. Surely he’s too far from Texas to be one of those Rangers? He could not be a bounty hunter because Flint did not have any official bounties on his head. Maybe the stranger was sent by someone, but whom? Some folks’ relative that had set Flint off and old Flint had killed him? It’s said that Flint carried more than ten notches on his gun, but most folks say that’s cause it’s only the number that he had killed with one shot. One thing was for sure, if that younger fellow meets up with Flint, then there is going to be trouble.

Mike played the thoughts of this mysterious man around in his head to entertain himself as he went back to his usual routine.

The next morning, sunshine poured down on the earth, however, a strong wind threatened to ruin the warm sunshine as it ripped through Silver Springs main street. Upon the wind’s back rode microscopic bits of dirt, which buried themselves into anything they come into contact with, including clothes, hair, nostrils, and eyeballs. It was this type of weather which made cowboy’s wish their jobs were indoors. For the

moment, the mysterious, young stranger was sheltered indoors, away from the wind, in the warm and comfortable hotel. He sauntered down the hotel stairs to the dining room. A content smile rested on his face. He smiled because of the hot bath from the night before and the fresh shirt, britches, and socks, which felt warm and soft against his feet. He dropped his bundle of gear against a wall and sat down to a hot cup of coffee while he waited for his breakfast.

He had learned the night before that Mrs. Marlene Marx was the owner of the hotel and kitchen. Tuberculosis had made her a widow, and now she ran the place. As it turned out, she had quite the business mind, or so she claimed. Since she had the “gift of gab,” the stranger knew he would have to eat fast or spend an additional hour in another one-sided conversation.

After enjoying crispy bacon, eggs, and fried potatoes, he was ready to leave. But Marlene practically force-fed a second helping into the young man's stomach.

The young stranger gulped down the rest of his coffee as he readied himself to leave. It was none too soon.

Marlene sat down, expecting a nice long chat. “Well, I hope that you had a very nice stay here last night and make sure you look us up if you ever come around again.”

The stranger tried to reply but was cut-off.

“I can't say that I understand why you are taking off so quick-like, but I guess if you have to, you have to. Just remember that it's a long ride to the next town. Do make sure that you keep enough supplies for the journey and...”

As hard as he tried, the stranger could not keep her words into focus. Instead, he poured himself another cup of coffee and then turned to the hotel owner, who was still talking. The conversation now had something to do with her friends from the church and a boy who was caught kissing a girl. As she continued on, he smiled and nodded his head while enjoying his coffee.

“...I have no idea what this town is coming to! Boys and girls getting up to mischief together. I know my husband, God rest his soul, is just turning in his grave right now.”

The young man was patient, but now he felt his patience stretched like an animal's hide in the sun. He reached for another cup of coffee, but the tinpot was empty. This made him wince.

“Oh, I'm sorry, is there something I can get you?” enquired the incessant talker, Mrs. Marx.

Here's my chance, he thought to himself. He put on a face with all the thick

regret that he could muster. “Well, I must be going. I have a few things to do before I leave, and I would like to get a good start on the day.” He stood to his feet, as she did also. “Ma’am, thank you so very much, for your hospitality. I believe that we squared all the money away last night?”

Mrs. Marx nodded. “Oh, yes, everything is okay, and like I said—”

The stranger cut her off. “So, I will have to be off.” He spoke as he snatched up his gear and tipped his hat. Marlene tried to draw him into another conversation, but her prey was already out the door.

Marlene called out the door. “Well take care, and please bundle up tight going through the valley. It gets awfully windy out there and...” He smiled, tipped his hat once again, and made his escape out the door, into the dusty wind outside.

Flint only passed through this town for the same reason everyone else did. The half empty town was the only stop between destinations on a well-traveled, long road. He was a tough sort, developed through hard years. He had been a bounty hunter, ridden shotgun for the stagecoach line, acted as a gun for hire, and worked as a cowboy. Anything that could be done in the West with a gun, Flint had found. Or possibly, it had found him.

Although taller than most, he was not the biggest or strongest. Yet, his body was a tangled mass of lean muscle that could only have been built by a lifetime of rough living. He wore a black hat with a silver band, and his riding gloves and vest were black to match. He was never out of reach from his Colt .45. He never backed down. He drew fast and always shot straight.

As a thirty-four-year-old gunfighter, Flint was riding on borrowed time. Well, if old Jessie James died younger’ me, I guess I won! Flint cynically thought to himself. Shoot, I made it to thirty-four. I should get a prize! He was known as fast and, even more, accurate, but was always prepared for the arrival of the eventual bullet with his name on it. Even so, he was tougher than nails and colder than ice.

As a child, his mother did her best to provide for him when he was growing up. He never had a father, so it was up to his ma. Selling herself was not intended to be a career, but after taking money the first few times, his ma just found it easier and easier. Her only goal in life was to make sure her boy was strong and healthy. No one could blame her for that. That was why he stayed the night where he had. It

felt more like home than most places.

His lodgings were his usual spot when he passed through these parts. It was at, as the church folk would say, "The place where the dead go." Flint never considered himself a particularly bad person or by no means an evil man. But, after all, he was a man.

Madam Mickey, "the lady of ill repute" (another saying the church folk liked) was the only prostitute in town. She charged the same as a bed and breakfast but did not serve any food. However, her bed was much warmer and less lonely. Besides, it was the closest thing he had ever had to a home in twenty years. Flint looked back as he left the house. Mickey was watching him leave, wearing nothing but a petticoat and shawl draped over her shoulders. Mickey gave him a warm smile and winked as she turned around and went back inside.

Since Madam Mickey did not provide breakfast, it would have to come from Mike Humphries' shop. He saw Mike once or twice a year as he traveled through the area. Flint did not think him a bad sort. Actually, the gunfighter kind of liked him. Humphries just talked too much. However, as soon as the gunfighter walked into his shop, he knew something was wrong. Mike was acting nervous, which was usual for him. Most folks acted nervous around gunslingers, but not Mike.

Mike was also quiet as a church mouse.

Come to think of it, he's also running around his store filling my order like he's trying to git rid of me, Flint thought to himself.

Mike did not say a word except "Yes, sir" and "No, sir."

When the order was finally filled, Flint was about to hand Mike the money, but he stopped short and glanced at the storekeeper sideways. "Humphries, is there somethin' I should know about?"

"Why would you ask that, Flint?" The storekeeper's voice quivered.

"Cause when I usually come down this way, it takes me darn near half an hour just to leave your store with the way you carry on about your great uncle's third cousin's dog and all. Shoot, by the time I usually leave here, I havin' to find my ear so the surgeon can sew it on after ya talked it off. Not this time. No siree. You're acting double nervous and trying to get me out of here just as quick as you can. Now, what in tunk is going on?!"

The gunslinger's tone could have been sharper, but he did not want to make the poor store owner wet his drawers. Flint only needed to know what was wrong, and he needed to know right now! As his past experiences had proven, his health

probably depended on it.

Mike's lips and hands shook as he folded them together in a begging motion. "Come on, Flint, please, I just don't want any bloodshed around here. I live in this quiet town to stay away from all that. I am just a good man trying to live a good Christian life. I don't want no trouble. I just—"

Flint shot him a sharp glance which quickly changed what he was saying.

"There was a stranger that came in yesterday, looked like he was from further west or something. Anyways, he asked about you and said that if I saw you, I should let him know."

Flint pursed his lips together like he was cooing at a baby and patted the nervous man on the head. "Now, how hard was that, Mike?"

Mike's lower lip quivered a bit, "I just don't want any trouble."

The gunslinger puffed out his chest and rested his right hand on his colt. "There won't be any trouble. You know what happens to the guys who come looking for me. They are all living up on the hill with a tombstone to stay warm at night." Flint chuckled arrogantly. "No trouble at all. By the way, what did this mystery man look like?"

For those who made a living shooting a gun, there was an uneasy, yet necessary association that traded information. In a profession which your employment was not terminated, your life was, information about future opponents was invaluable. So, through the professional shootist grapevine, Flint had been hearing rumblings of this new player. The description of this man hunting him could have matched that of a dozen others until Humphries mentioned his face and he did not go heeled. That is what set him apart. He had the young face of a boy and carried no pistols, just an old Henry Rifle, and a knife. However, the "Boy," as he had been simply named, fought like a bat outta hell. Flint could not ignore the surge of excitement that pulsed through his veins.

"Do you know who he is, Flint?" Mike asked.

"Nah, haven't a clue," lied the fighter. "Thanks, Mike, and I'll see ya around."

Flint walked outside, wary of things around him. Well, from the sounds of this new prodigy, he wouldn't bushwhack me. He'll face me like a man, thought the gunfighter.

Flint started to pack his groceries into his saddlebags, wondering when it would happen. As he finished, he took one final look around. He saw nothing but a few people walking back from the store towards the hotel.

As Flint was about to fit his boot into his stirrup, he heard a voice. It seemed to appear out of thin air and came from behind him. He would never admit it to anyone, but the voice sent shivers through the gunslinger's body.

"Your name Flint?"

As Flint turned to face the man, he replied in a defensive tone. "Depends who's asking?"

The stranger was short. His well-built frame and large hands were out of place like they belonged on someone much larger. His eyes were the most intimidating thing Flint had ever seen. Flint knew the fake act that gunfighters put on—trying to act as tough as they could to hide who they really were. Not this hombre. He looked like someone who had taken on the worst and won. Even more than that, he looked like someone who would take on the worst again. He was almost too confident, too strong, and knew too much. Within a few seconds, Flint could usually stare down all of his challengers. Now, he was having a hard time staring this man in the face. He could feel himself breaking.

The few seconds of eye contact felt like a lifetime. Flint didn't understand what this was all about, so he was going to handle it like everything else in his life that he could not understand. Kill it.

Just as Flint decided to reach for his gun, the man spoke. "I have come a long way to give you a message."

"Oh, and what's that?" Flint shot back with a sneer. "Who sent you, or are you here for revenge?"

The young man softly smiled and looked at Flint in a way that felt vaguely familiar. He said "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care about what you have done before. I just came to give you this gift..."

Before Flint could react, the stranger tossed a small, square package on the dirt street in front of his feet.

"...and to tell you that you are welcome to ride alongside me for a while if you want." The shorter man smiled, and with the same confidence, mounted up onto a big brown mare and rode east out of town.

Flint was stunned. He had no idea what to do or think. He reached down and opened the package. It was a BOOK! "What in tunk?" Flint exclaimed with confusion and flipped through it, with no purpose. He couldn't read. Looking around, he tried to find someone who did. The entire town had seen what had just happened, but they were watching from behind closed doors. In Humphries' shop, the curtains moved.

Flint reached the shop in four steps and slammed the door open. He recoiled quickly after Flint felt the door smash into something hard, and he heard a loud yelp.

“OOWW!”

Flint moved the door open a second time with more caution and saw what had happened. He had broken Mike's nose! The curious store owner had been so eager to see what that package was that he didn't notice Flint coming through the door.

“What were you standing there for, Humphries? Don't you know that thing swings inward!”

“Yes, I do!” retorted Humphries. He was trying to keep his nose from gushing blood by holding his head back and pinching in his nostrils.

Flint tossed the book on the counter. “Come here, Mike,” said Flint. “I done this lots a' times.” He pulled Humphries's hands from his throbbing face and replaced them with his own and began searching for the break in the nose with his thumbs.

Mike whimpered and squirmed like a child avoiding a whoopin' from an angry parent.

“Oh, don't be such a baby and stop moving' 'round.” The makeshift doctor clasped his hands even harder on the crying storekeeper's face. When he found the break, the gunfighter pressed hard and quick, on the screaming man's cartilage. There was a small but definite crack, and Flint let go.

“Now that wasn't so bad, was it?”

Embarrassed, Mike half hid his face with a rag that was on the counter and started cleaning up his bloodied face. “Nah,” he grunted, deepening his voice as much as possible, “not bad at all.”

Flint was not worried about how embarrassed the storekeeper was. He was more interested in this book that he could not read.

“What is this Humphries?” He snatched the cloth that Mike was trying to hide behind and started wiping Humphries blood from his hands. “A warning or some sick joke or what?”

Mike looked stunned. “You don't know what that is?” He replied with a newly acquired nasal voice.

“No, you should know I don't read letters, only numbers, for money and that. What is it?”

“Yes, Flint, I know that you don't know how to read.” Mike raised his hands and recoiled a little after realizing his comment could have been seen as an insult. “I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with that, but don't you know what this

specific book is?”

“No!” Flint snapped, as he threw down the bloody rag. “I don’t, now tell me what the heck it is!?”

“It’s a Bible.”

“A...what?!”

“A Bible. You know what the preacher speaks from and it tells about—”

“Yes, I know all that. Why would he give me a Bible?”

“I don’t know, Flint. I just don’t know. You know, some folks really just read the Bible all the time and the thing that...” His voice traveled into the distance, as Flint became lost in his own thoughts.

Flint had experienced these Bible thumpers before, but not like this. They were always just telling him the “error of his ways” and that he must turn from his...oh what was that word, oh that’s right, sin. He thought to himself. He had to turn from his sin so he could avoid the “coming damnation.” Who knew what the whole damnation thing was about? Took him over a year just to find someone who would take him seriously enough to tell the scary sinner what the word “sin” meant.

Ohhh yeah...those Bible folk were weird, all right—outright strange. Not this younger feller though. Nope, there was something different about him.

Flint snapped out of his thoughts just as the talkative Humphries was saying, “...I just don’t like to bother other folks, they have their beliefs, and that is fine. Well, I have mine, too—”

“You go to church and that, don’t ya Humphries?” Flint cut in with a queried tone.

“Ya, but I—”

“And you never asked me to come to church, or read me the Bible or nothing like that?”

Not really knowing where Flint was going with this, Humphries started to reply with some kind of excuse, but the gunslinger didn’t care about Mike’s excuses. Flint was back in his own thoughts again while the storekeeper jabbered on. So, why would that man track him down, some “sinner” who could not read, to give him this old book? It made no sense. It bothered him and was almost scary. Not with a fear that he was used to. Not the fear he had known like when he was getting too close to a posse or when a lynch mob was ready to string him up. This was fear as if he might be missing something. He suddenly felt an old long-gone feeling that he thought was destroyed from grueling years of hatred, fighting, and killing. Yet, it was there.

Before he knew what was happening, before he could really regain control of himself, Flint had snatched the Bible off the store counter, left the shopkeeper talking to himself, and was on his horse galloping in the same direction of the stranger. For the first time since he was a boy, Flint acted out of desperation.

CHAPTER TWO

Flint had done some outright stupid and even crazy things in his lifetime, but this seemed to top them all. There was no gun involved, money, or killing. This was nuts!

He was racing down the road feeling some strange pulling—curiosity. It was almost a craving. I have lost my marbles! Flint thought to himself. But he could not stop riding after this stranger. All he knew was that he had to know what this guy and his special book were about.

At the beginning of a bend around a small rolling hill, he found who he was looking for. The Boy's horse was still trotting along the trail. The stranger ahead of Flint did not turn, but kept on riding, as if he were either asleep on the saddle or just didn't care. Flint slowed as he approached. His pride and usual controlled demeanor were now challenged by this strange feeling he was having. He was two hundred feet away now and matching the other rider in his trot.

If I go up to him all crazy like-like... like I need him, then how stupid and yellow will I look? The gunslinger thought to himself. I'm a man, aren't I? I mean, I can't look like I have to know what's goin' on, or I'll look weak. Yeah, ya know what, I don't need him. I mean, I don't care or know why in goose I'm even here. I don't need this. At that, Flint started to pull his reins in and slow his stallion down.

As he began to wheel his horse around, that same weird feeling came upon him. This time it hit him like lightning. Memories—old memories—that he swore he would never speak of or think about, began to flash in his mind: a screaming girl, a flash of metal, a shot, pain, and anger all began to bubble to the surface. Flint gritted his teeth and shook it off. “NO!” He grunted.

The memories faded and he, again, looked towards the rider, now further in the distance. As he did, he felt that pull again. Trying to resist, he clicked his neck by twisting it and spat, hoping to ease the tension in his gut. It did nothing. It was still there, that nagging feeling of something long lost that he still needed. The pride, that voice in his head and all his desire not to look weak were still there, but they could no longer compete with that feeling of loneliness. That feeling of...

“Ah shoot, who cares.” Flint tapped his reins and rode hard towards the younger man.

“Hey there, stranger. Wait up,” Flint called out in greeting.

The man looked around slightly to his left. With a kindly half smile, he motioned

to come alongside.

“Well,” said the smiling stranger. “You’re welcome to ride along for a bit. Just as long as you don’t mind riding with a mountain man like myself.” He spoke with a soft tone and flashed a quick grin that probably warmed up most folks.

“Ya, well, uh thanks for the offer,” said Flint lamely. “Don’t mind if I do.”

They rode for some time not saying a thing. The only sound was some desert rodents scurrying about and the wind blowing through the hills, scattering weeds. Flint had no idea what his new riding companion was thinking, but at that moment, he would almost give up his horse to find out.

After many miles and several long hours, the stranger finally broke the silence. “You ever heard of a town called Columbia?”

“Some type of old tent town below the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the way north to Hangtown, right?”

“Yep,” continued the soft-spoken rider. “There was some gold up there for a while, mostly dried up now. Well, you head up the mountains that way, and you’ll hit some of the most beautiful lands you’ve ever set eyes on. If you go a bit more south”—the man became more excited and his voice intensified— “you’ll see some of the biggest rocks and boulders anywhere, giant waterfalls, too. There are rivers and trees for as far as the eye can see and small lakes. If you head up further north from Columbia and cross a smaller canyon with a river in it, you can see some of the biggest trees I’ve ever heard about. Over three hundred feet high. Incredible. Yes, sir.” His voice quieted down again. “Surely is pretty. That’s where I come from.”

Flint was taken aback. Most men were very quiet about their past, mainly because a man’s past was his own business, and most, this far west, were ashamed of it. However, this guy seemed to be okay with it. Flint could not put his finger on how he felt about the stranger’s honesty. It was good, Flint thought. It showed some type of confidence about him that a lot of folks did not have.

“How about yourself, Flint?” The boy’s voice interrupted the older man’s thoughts.

“Umm, from further east.”

Flint’s new riding partner nodded his head in silent acknowledgment, as men do.

They continued riding for some time, as the sun began to rise higher into the sky on its journey west. They climbed hills and enjoyed the views of endless desert landscapes. They welcomed the shade of a large rock formation made of red sandstone. The giant red rocks jutted out of the ground like smooth, steep, twin

mountains. Rains, wind and time had worked together to shave the formation down, one layer at a time. At the bottom, the red rocks formed outer layers of rock, which now lay decimated in fist-size pieces of jagged stones.

The formation came up on the travel partners left-side, just before a bend in the road. The men dismissed the sweat that was dripping down their faces. A small price to pay for a nice windless day's ride in silent company—two men with two very different lives, yet very similar backgrounds.

Flint noticed his horse's ears prick up, sensing danger. He started to look around, thinking it might be a cougar in the rocks when Gray yanked him from his saddle, and they both fell backward off their horses, as a bullet sliced the air past his head. Out of instinct, he drew his gun, before he hit the dirt with a hard, dull thud. The quick youngster had slid his rifle out of its buckskin leather sheath as he had pulled Flint from his horse. Now both men quickly dove for cover.

Flint thanked his lucky stars he had strapped his Colt onto his belt, or he would be down the creek without a paddle. Two more rounds missed them, both too high but close, which meant the bushwhackers with rifles could shoot and it was only a matter of time before they would hit their mark. By then, the horses had fled and the two ambushed victims had found better cover behind rocks.

The new partners were about ten feet apart. Flint looked up, the sun was almost facing them, just barely peeking over the rock formation; it would glare straight into their eyes if they tried to stand and find targets.

"Well, it looks like they have us cornered real' good," said the stranger, lying on his back with his rifle resting against his chest. "No sense in dying over a simple robbery."

Flint nodded in hateful defeat. The young stranger pulled his blue bandana from his neck and tied it to a stick. As he started lifting it high to wave it in submission, the stick and bandana exploded from a shotgun blast from the shooters on the high ground.

"I spec' they don't plan on taking prisoners there, hombre." Flint chuckled cynically.

The young rifleman gritted his teeth. "Nope, doesn't look that way, does it?" —He gritted teeth and his gaze turned to ice as he said—"It's a shame though."

"What is?" asked Flint.

Ignoring the question, the boy turned to his new partner. "How fast are ya, Flint?"

"Fast enough, I suppose, but what would that matter, in bloody he—" Flint's

voice conveyed frustrated desperation, that was cut off by his new partner.

"I want you to get ready for some fast moving and shoot'n. I only need you to get close enough to those two dudes to scare 'em."

Flint did not understand. "And how ya suppose I'm gonna do that? There ain't no ways—"

The boy cut him off again. With a slight smile and a short look of confidence he replied, "Don't worry, you'll be fine."

Without a viable reason, the gunslinger relaxed and believed him.

After the boy had quickly explained his plan to Flint, they both nodded in agreement and began readying themselves.

Flint stopped suddenly and looked at the one everyone called 'the Boy', "Hey, I don't know your name, partner?"

Smiling and with a tip of his hat, the youngster with the big rifle said, "It's Gray, nice to meet you."

"You too." Then under his breath, Flint muttered, "And ta die with ya."

It had been a good ten minutes since the first shot. The bandits on the hill had stopped shooting. They had done this before, and so they waited for a clean shot, saving their ammunition.

Gray moved into position, clutching his rifle firmly with both hands. He angled his body so he was facing slightly to the left. Gray closed his eyes, and Flint thought that maybe he said something, but then dismissed it as only the wind. Gray took two deep breaths, took his hat off, and laid it on the ground.

Gritting his teeth, Gray took off running at a 45-degree angle, uphill towards the attackers. Flint shot his pistol twice with blind fire over the top of his cover, hoping to draw some attention away from his partner. After four quick steps, Gray dove as far as he could.

Gray pulled his rifle in close and rolled to the left, away from his enemies. He tucked his chin into his chest and quickly rolled twice, as a shot exploded the dirt where he had once been. His second roll left him behind a mound of dirt eleven yards to Flint's left. More shots spit dirt at Gray three feet in front of his new cover. They were fired too fast for any accuracy.

As Gray raised the .44 caliber rifle, Flint also came out from behind his cover. Holding his Colt with his right hand, he sprinted fifteen feet in the opposite direction away from Gray for the nearest rock.

Gray let loose two quick shots to cover him, then dropped down behind his

mound of dirt. Meanwhile, Flint continued running hard for his new cover. The men with the high ground took the bait.

At the last five feet, just before he heard two more shots fired, Flint dove. He hit the dirt hard, his body skidding to a stop behind a large rock. The gunmen atop the rock formation had realized their mistake too late.

As they both turned their attention on Flint making a run for it, they had become too eager and moved slightly from their hiding places for better positioning while shooting at Flint. Instead of going for full cover, Gray had raised himself to a prone position and used the mound of dirt as a prop for his rifle. One of their bodies had blocked a small portion of the glaring sun; it was enough for the Henry rifle.

He squeezed the trigger and the big Henry rifle boomed! Gray spied a figure roll down the sloping red rock, but he stayed on the hunt. Gray reloaded and fired again after taking half a second to find the other shooter. His rifle was too late and barely missed the second bushwhacker, but Flint forced him back into range. Flint had moved up the hill and another fifteen feet to the right, using more boulders for cover, after Gray had started shooting. Flint fired three times. The cornered gunman tried to escape over the other side of the rock formation, but Gray's rifle found its target and winged him. The man stumbled and fell, rolling down the opposite slope.

While reloading his gun, Flint made a dash up the rocky hill, towards a nook at the top. Gray covered him. As he came to the cutout of the hill, he slowly moved through the formations, studying every rock, waiting to dash and take cover. The need never came.

As Flint reached the top of the formation, he looked down below the other side of the rock formation. In the distance, a man on horseback was making a mad dash through the desert valley, trying desperately to put some distance between himself and the two sharpshooters.

Flint ran frantically back down the hill. "Come on, Gray, let's go get the yellow-bellied....Flint stopped in the middle of his swearing, which was becoming quite an irritating habit, and stood to stare in disbelief at his new partner. He was kneeling down next to the first bandit, his rifle leaning on a rock beside him. "He's talkin' to that dyin' scum who jumped us?" Flint exclaimed to himself.

The old gunfighter observed that Gray's shot had been perfect. The young man had not gone for a quick kill like a greenhorn.

No siree, he went fer the smart shot, the middle of the torso. A man can usually take quite a few bullets in towards to belly and live...well for a while at least. That is

if it were just a regular gunfight. Flint mused.

But Gray was shooting a big hunting rifle with a thousand-yard range. It was big enough to stop a buffalo from charging. That's why Flint was not surprised to see blood coming from the dying man's back. Must'a gone through his spine, thought Flint. A bullet that went through a man's spine, meant death.

Flint drew closer trying to hear what they were saying. But all he could make out were whispers and sobbing from the dying man. Flint sneered at the dying man silently, you jumped us. That's what you get, you yellow-bellied sucker. But as Flint swore under his breath, he couldn't help marvel at what he was witnessing. Sure, this guy, Gray, was definitely some type of do-gooder, but nobody would be able to be this nice after a bushwhack, would they?

Not me, no ways! The nicest thing I'd give him would be a bullet in the head. Actually, nah, only a bullet in the head if it were a fair fight. Not some two-bit dry-gulching who would shoot you in the back. He wouldn't deserve a quick death like that. Let 'em die slow and painful like. Vultures can come down and finish the job; they gotta eat too. Flint smiled to himself and looked up at the sun. Yep, probably be a couple of long dry, cruel hours before this scum sucking coward dies. That's western justice. The best kind!

The gunslinger was getting impatient. "Hey, the other guy is getting away. We better get going if we want to catch his yellow hide."

"Leave 'im be," was the short reply.

As if talking to the guy was bad enough, Gray now gave the man a drink out of his own canteen. It made Flint feel sick. This was not any justice. This man deserved to have his eyes plucked out of his skull alive, not his pain eased like he was some old friend. After the "do-gooder" helped the man choke a little water down, Flint saw Gray dig in the dying man's clothes. He pulled out his cigarette kit and rolled him a smoke. Gray helped him light up and even made sure that the butt found the coward's lips.

Flint could not watch anymore. The enraged gunfighter went to find the scared horses. By the time he had come back, all the tobacco was gone, about three cigarettes, and the smoker was on his last, ever. Gray seemed to be doing some strange form of talking while leaning over him. Flint thought that this was never going to end, but then the strange do-gooder stood, knelt over his body, and gently shut his eyes.

"It's about time," Flint said under his breath. Irritated, the gunslinger turned to

mount his horse. He waited with his back to the annoying do-gooder while holding the lead for his horse. He didn't even want to think about how much kindness that yellow bushwhacker got, much less look at it!

After several minutes, Gray had yet to mount his mare. Flint's head dropped in his chest with defeat as the sound of clanging and banging rock became clearer. Reluctantly, he looked up to confirm his fears. As if this scumbag were an old friend, the Boy was now giving him a makeshift burial, by covering his body with the pieces of broken red sandstone around the large rock formation. No longer able to keep his mouth shut, Flint exclaimed, "Are you loco?! What's wrong with you?!"

CHAPTER THREE

A gentle breeze blew in from the west, and a crackling fire was the only noise that evening on the desert floor. Stars were only this bright far away from civilization. It seemed that every one of them shone brighter and grew bigger in this stretch of desolate land.

Flint could not see the beauty nor enjoy the solitude of the desert, nor even the coolness the evening brought. He was too disturbed. While he sipped long and slowly on his steaming cup of coffee, Flint pondered what Gray had done that day. He helped that yellow-bellied bushwhack, Flint thought to himself. It had gone against everything that Flint was. Flint knew that he was not the cleanest, most respectable guy ever. Shoot, he was a bit of a bad person, but one thing he had never done was kill a man in cold blood. He had never jumped a man, without a just cause, of course, or shot a man in the back. No, Flint had his rules or even his “morals” if you like. What he was trying to figure out was why did Gray help those guys, the worst type? And why should Flint, a feared gunfighter, with a well-earned reputation, want to ride with a do-gooder who helps out murdering thieves?

“Beautiful, huh?”

Gray’s voice took Flint by surprise and shook him straight out of his thoughts. “Uh, ya,” was all he managed back.

Gray did not seem to notice. His eyes were locked on the night sky. “I tried to count them once. But I kept losing track of all ‘em stars. Also, I noticed that on different nights there’s a different one and there’s one in a different place...something like that. Must be a lot more than we could ever see with our eyes. That’s all I can figure. There ain’t no way of counting them.” As he finished his thought, Gray poured the rest of the coffee, complete with thick grounds, into his empty tin cup.

“Gray, why not just let that sucker who dry-gulched us die the way he deserved; it would make things a lot simpler?” Flint blurted out, not able to hold his tongue any longer. “If you find trouble as much as it seems you do, it would be a lot easier, time efficient, too.”

Gray casually replied. “Well...”—Gray inhaled, and gazed deeper into the stars—“I have to say that it’s cause I don’t have the right to do that. I mean, I’ve done some bad stuff in my time; I ain’t perfect. You’re not perfect, nobody’s perfect. And when I look at a man like that, dying as he was, the stuff I’ve done wrong has been excused

too many times in my life not to excuse what those fellers did. You know? Besides,” Gray turned around and sat on his bed mat and began poking and prodding the fire with a stick as he continued, “I didn’t see a mean cold-hearted man, even if that’s what he’d become. I see a tired, wore-out, scared kid that just happens to be grown. He had some bad things that happened in his life, just like we all had. The only thing is that he let those things drive him in the wrong direction. It’s just sad to see how much stuff he’d gone through.”

As if Flint was not weirded out by this man already, now he was downright nervous. He was caring about the worst of the scum. Why? Who cared about them, as long as they got their due? Flint knew that Gray was right. There are things that happen to a man, and sometimes you can’t control them. But if you come out of hard times trying to get whatever you can and kill whoever gets in your way, well then, you are just asking to be hated.

The old gunslinger almost swore under his breath. “It just seems those guys were about as bad as you can get. So, he didn’t deserve that help ya gave him or being buried. He needed a slow death to help him remember all the people that he’s back-stabbed and wronged.”

“Now listen here, Flint, I don’t know ‘bout you, but I’ve done plenty wrong in my life, and some would say that some of that wrong that I did, was okay, ‘cause of what happened to me. But it’s still wrong. I believe God sees all sin the same. If you do what displeases God, no matter what it is, then it’s sin, one and the same. So, I can’t say he deserved something bad or not. There’s only one person who knows what’s wrong with folks, and that’s God.”

Flint was a bit taken aback again by this guy Gray and his honesty, and now he was admitting to making mistakes. The fact was, the only time that Flint had ever heard anyone talk this way, was when it came from some very fake, uptight church folk. Even though the church folks were trying to make themselves seem like they felt just as bad as everyone else, it never seemed like they really meant it. But Gray actually believed what he was saying.

The way the other church folk made Flint feel was totally different. He was the scum and someone to be ignored. A gunslinger might as well be the devil himself, as far as those “God-fearing” folks were concerned. But there was definitely something different about this young buckaroo when he talked about God.

After thinking some of this stuff through for a few seconds, Flint answered. “Well, it’s pretty obvious that we have our troubles.” His voice lowered a bit as he

took a sip of coffee and forced the words out of the corner of his mouth. "Even myself." He swallowed his coffee then went on speaking in his usual, louder, tone. "But bushwhackin' folks is downright evil!"

Gray's voice was even and confident. "Yes, Flint, I know that bushwhackin' is real' bad, but God cares about them, just the same way he cares about you and me."

Ah, tunk! Flint thought to himself. This guy is a first class do-gooder. Maybe the biggest do-gooder I have ever seen! Flint had heard stories of friends and other folks that had ridden with do-gooders and the worst stories he had heard was when the do-gooders had gone religious.

There was the story of Charlie Digger, an Irish friend of his. He was the toughest brawling street fighter Flint had ever seen. His thick red hair complimented his short temper. He had once taken a bullet to the shoulder and a stab wound to the back, and then he simultaneously had beaten up both of the guys who had wounded him.

As fate would have it, Charlie fell in with some guy who decided he wanted to travel around and save the whole world for God or some crazy reason. The problem was that this guy also thought he needed a lot of money to do it. That's why Charlie fell in with him. So he and Charlie started robbing banks, and they were pretty good at it, too.

Charlie was mean and everyone could sense it around him, so they did what he said. The do-gooder was pretty good with a cross draw and accurate. The problem came when the disturbed world saver realized what he had done, then he would always try to return the money. Charlie, of course, not wanting to lose his hard earned money, got real mad every time his guilt-laden partner would try to return the loot. After making the biggest score yet, the do-gooder's conscience came knocking, but that time only an hour after the robbery and while a posse was hard on their trail.

The way Flint had heard the story was that Charlie was madder than kicked rattlers. He told the do-gooder to either go back to the bank by himself or do it later, but the money was staying with him. They argued back and forth till Charlie was so mad that his face matched the color of his hair. Charlie drew his gun first, but only landed one bullet in the other man while Charlie had three in his belly. That did not stop Charlie, mad as he was. He was found trying to choke the do-gooder to death when the posse arrived. His last words were, "Lousy, rotten, do-gooder."

Then there was old Winky, the miner. He caught his name from a constant twitch in his right eye. He was an old timer who started working the hills almost from the beginning in 1851. He was the type that knew something about everything when

it came to the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

One day, a young, charming fellow came around town looking for a way to make some money and learn how to mine, so he said. He seemed to be the do-gooder type, helping older folks cross the street, and going to church every Sunday. As chance would have it, he ended up working the mine with Winky. The old miner had hired him because he was getting on in years and since he never had a family, he wanted someone around if he ever had an accident or didn't wake up one morning.

The last time Flint had seen Winky, he had told him with his continuous winking that he had hit something big. He was going to move to the big city of San Francisco and live out the rest of his days watching the men on the wharf bring in fish. Two weeks later, he was found dead in his bedroll. Someone had shot him through the forehead from close range as he slept. The 'do-gooder' was never seen again.

Flint knew many such stories. There was Susan McGee who used to serve at one of Flint's favorite saloons. She went with a traveling preacher who wanted to "save her from herself." The Preacher then left her two years later for a Mexican ten years younger. And also Johnny-Boy who took up with a man who claimed he was raising money for the local Miwok tribe in California who were down on their luck. The do-gooder ended up forcing himself on the wrong squaw, and they both got beat to death by twenty angry warriors.

The point was that do-gooders were either liars or crazy. Why? Flint did not know. All he knew was that this guy, Gray, was a do-gooder. At the same time, he seemed to be a different one at that. Only one way to find out. Time tells all.

Gray turned, changing the subject and shaking Flint out of his deep thoughts. "You wanna read a bit of that book Flint before we turn in?"

"Well, I would, 'cept, I..." The prideful gunfighter was hesitant.

"What is it?" Gray persisted.

Flint swore under his breath. "I can't read." Flint was very embarrassed. Gray could see that, and that it was difficult for him to admit.

"That's okay, partner. Reading is a good thing, but it's not the end of the world."

Flint replied somewhat relieved. "Yeah, I know, just that I feel a bit stupid at times, cause I ain't never sat down to learn, you know?"

"Well, Flint, if you don't mind, while you and I ride together, I would like to help you learn a little."

"You wouldn't mind? Teachin' me, that is?"

Gray smiled, looking Flint straight in the eyes. "I'd be excited to teach ya."

Flint couldn't help show a bit of excitement on his face, something that he hadn't shown in years. "Well okay then, let's do it." Flint took out the old book from his pocket, that had started him on the road following Gray, and handed it to his new teacher.

Gray moved his bedroll closer to Flint so he could see. Gray sat up on one elbow as he began explaining. "This here, as I'm sure ya know, is a Bible. But right here in front"—Gray pointed to some indented letters on the front of the book—"It actually says, Holy Bible."

"But how ya know that?" Flint asked.

"Well, the letters spell it out right here, B-I-B-L-E." Gray stopped as he realized that he was not getting through to him. "You mean to tell me that you've never done your ABC's?"

Flint was even more sheepish now. "No. I...well, I..."

"That's okay. I was just getting ahead of myself." Gray interjected quickly as he realized that his reaction caused unnecessary embarrassment.

Gray took the next hour showing Flint what the ABC's were. Then he talked about how each of them has a sound that goes with them. That, in turn, made the word. Flint didn't quite understand, but Gray patiently told him that eventually, he would. After Gray had written the letters all around the fire, in a semicircle, he reached into his bag and took out a piece of paper and a pencil.

The tutor asked Flint, "Did you get a good look at the letters?"

"Ya, I think so."

Gray put the writing equipment down on his bedroll. "Now, I want you to practice writing these letters on the ground and saying the names of them as you do it." Flint looked a bit scared.

Gray knew that he just didn't want to sound like a fool. "How did ya look the first time you rode a horse, Flint?"

Flint looked at Gray confused. "What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?"

This example did not seem like it was going to work, so Gray tried to think of a way to change his tactics.

As Gray was about to change the subject, Flint admitted. "Well, actually I fell off, cause I didn't know that I's supposed to cinch my saddle tightly, so when I got on my horse, the whole thing slid down under its belly, while I was still holding on."

They both started laughing.

“Ya...think that was bad.” Flint continued. “Then the horse started walking down the street in the middle of the day with every Tom, Dick, and Harry watchin’. I was just holding on fer dear life.” Flint could barely get the last few words out of his mouth because he was laughing so hard. After they both had settled down enough to talk, Flint said, “Boy, I looked like such a fool.”

“And did you give up?”

“Nope, I had to ride; I wanted to be the best rider around.”

“Well, if ya wanna read, Flint, you need to be willing to sound and even look like a fool.” Again, Gray seemed sincere. That was why Flint didn’t punch him in the nose when Gray told him what to do.

From then on, Flint began learning, but the old gunslinger was going to learn far more than he bargained for.

CHAPTER FOUR

The following day, Flint was muttering to himself, staring at a three-by-five piece of paper, while sitting atop his horse. He thought to himself that he must look pretty stupid. Why would I care? Flint mused to himself. It was only he and Gray on the trail. Flint looked to his left and saw that Gray was also reading.

The boy was looking at the worn-out Bible with incredible intensity. So much so, that Flint really wanted to know what was going on in that book.

“Gray? What’s goin’ on with that there book, now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the way you’re looking at that thang, I figure that it must be a really good part of a story, or yer eyes would have burned a hole through it by now.”

Gray responded with a half-smile. “Well, it’s not like one of those stories you pick up in the general store. It’s more of a learning book.”

“Oh.” Flint sounded disappointed.

“No, Flint, it’s got stories in it and everything. You know, like the whole David and Goliath fight?”

“Is that story from that there book? I just thought it was some old Indian story er something.”

Gray grew more excited. “No, it’s a real story that came from a long, long time ago! But that is only a very small part of this book. It’s...” Gray’s voice trailed off as he noticed something peculiar on the trail.

Flint’s gaze followed suit, and without saying a word, they both simultaneously slid off their horses with weapons in hand.

Gray held the horse’s reins, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He was ready to bolt if needed. Flint bent down to examine their concern, a lot of fresh tracks on their trail. The earth was very dry with a red hue and the top few inches were soft to the touch.

“Yep, whoever these Indians are; they ain’t too far away. I say that there’s about ten of ‘em. Probably a raiding party of some kind.”

The main trail was visible as it slopped down in front of them, for about half a mile. Besides the red rock and dirt, sage and manzanita bushes and a few bull-pine trees made up the only foliage. The desert bushes’ light green color painted the uphill slope to their right. The hill plateaued onto the top of the shallow canyon they

were traveling through. To their left the trail dropped several feet into a dry creek bed, filled with thick manzanita bushes.

Gray dropped his hat onto his saddle horn. He squatted on his heels and started looking down the trail left by the unshod horses. "Two of the mounts are riding double." He handed Flint his horse's reins and, without a word, began following the tracks.

Walking behind Gray, it only took Flint a few seconds to see that his new partner was no greenhorn tracker. Actually, he looked like he knew a lot more about it than Flint. Flint had not noticed it before, but Gray walked just like an Indian.

Flint had spent time riding with mountain men before, and they always seemed to move more like an Indian since many were their neighbors. But Gray seemed to float across the ground. It was almost unnatural. Gray walked smoothly around the trail, not disturbing anything he did not have to. It would take an experienced eye to see anything that Gray's moccasins would have left behind.

Gray sat up and looked into the distance. "You're right, there is about ten of them, but they are not a raiding party. They are moving way too careless like. See how they are just going through like a bull in a china closet? Not really taking time to cover up their tracks or even walking in a line to hide their numbers. I wonder who they're running from so fast?" Gray asked.

The hair on the back of Flint's neck stiffened as he saw both horses' ears perk up. There was movement behind them. It was not very close, but something about it made Flint not want to turn and look, as if that might magically make whatever was standing behind them disappear. With thick reluctance, Flint slowly turned and what he saw made his stomach sink.

A hundred yards away, and standing atop the plateau peering down at Flint and Gray, was an Indian war party, almost fifty of them, and their faces were painted.

In many cases, a hundred yards would seem like quite a head start, especially when you had some cover like they did now. But running from fifty painted braves in their own territory was like trying to climb face down a mountain. It was possible to survive, but it was going to hurt.

Just before Flint was about to hook his leg round about his saddle to make a break for it, he caught Gray walking through the scattered brush towards the war party. He was yelling something in a different language. A white-haired warrior, the chief, Flint guessed, rode alone towards Gray. They talked for a while as Gray pointed in the direction that they had been tracking. The chief nodded from atop his painted

mount, and the war party tore off through the brush in the direction Gray had pointed out.

Gray made his way back down the hill and went for his canteen which was strapped to his saddle.

When he finally felt safe again, Flint took out his Colt from under his arm. Letting the hammer ease back down. Flint asked, "Who are they after?"

Gray swigged some water then offered some to his partner, "Oh, their neighboring tribe came through when the men had gone huntin' and stole two of their squaws. One of them is the chief's daughter. He ain't too happy."

Flint declined the water, with a shake of his head, and commented, "I don't think there's gonna be too much dancing in the other village tonight."

Gray took his reigns back from Flint and positioned his horse to get going. "No, they will probably burn down everything in their way, and a lot of people are going to get killed in that village unless the rival chief is either really smart and gives the girls back with a few of the braves that took them or has a really good bunch of warriors waiting."

They got on their mounts and began to ride. "Rough life," Flint said.

"I suppose you reap what you sow." Gray mused allowed as he patted his mare on the neck.

Flint looked on at the war party, as he trotted slowly down the trail. The warriors shrunk in the distance as they rode hard down the trail. He continued on what Gray was alluding to as he stared at the distant riders. "I never farmed, but I know what you're saying. You lie to someone then someone's bound to lie to you. Take my old Irish pal, Charlie Diggins. He always was looking for a way to make an extra buck this way and that. Well, this one time..."

"Hold up there, partner," Gray said as he pulled his horse up to a stop. He turned his head slightly left and stared into the distance.

They both stood still, staring into the distance at a small but growing dust cloud and knew that the horses and riders creating that dust cloud would move straight across their trail.

Flint asked rhetorically, "What do you think the chances are of a group that size being in two places at once?"

Gray's reply was grim. "Probably not even a gambler's chance. That's gotta be the raiding party with the squaws, that old chief is huntin'. I'm guessing they're not gonna be here in too long."

Flint agreed. "There's about eight to ten of them and you see that smaller dust cloud behind the larger one? I 'spect there are two horses falling behind from a lot of weight, cause they're carrying double. They must've laid their horses down in a dry gulch some ways off the trail until the chief's war party rode on by. And it's sure gonna look bad for us now, ain't it partner?" Flint asked.

Gray's answer, as Flint was realizing it always would be, was slow and thought out. "I think so, partner. That chief is going to figure that trick those fellers pulled and come right back this way. And since he saw us here and I talked to him, he'll assume that we're the ones that they stole the squaws for. Nope, it's not gonna look good at all."

"Well, I figure."—Flint was already turning his horse as he talked— "if we ride hard in the opposite direction of that party, then the big war party will figure out soon enough that we are not carrying double. Since we don't got the squaws, they won't bother us." He was talking over his left shoulder as he spoke but stopped when he realized that he did not hear Gray following. Flint turned around in his saddle to see his partner still in the same place. Gray's expression was serious and determined.

"Sorry, Flint, ain't gonna happen."

Flint was shocked. "WHAT!! What in hell's bells are you talking about, Gray? There ain't NO ways you think we are going to be able to take on those ten trained killers, do you?" Needless to say, Flint was far beyond tense and scared. The growing volume in his voice drew Gray's gaze.

"Why? Please tell me why? Please, make me understand why I should even think about stayin' here and fightin' trained warriors while trying to keep two girls alive with five to one odds?" Flint's voice grew to a high frightened pitch and his eyes were wide and bewildered.

"Flint, as you see, I don't do what most folks tend to. I don't let myself do things just cause I feel like it or cause it suits me." Gray pulled his rifle out of the leather saddle holster and checked the chamber as he spoke. "God put us in this situation for a reason. I also gave my word to that chief. I told him we hadn't seen anything."

Flint was more confused now than he ever had been in his life. "What are you talking about God put you in this situation? I thought God would care about what would happen to you since you seem so concerned about Him. Then why would He care if ya broke your word to save your bacon?"

Gray had dismounted his horse and was taking her down into the dry creek bed to hide her among the manzanita bushes while he answered loud enough for Flint

to hear. "I love God and He loves me more than I could even figure out. Because He loves me, He lets me do His job here in the world." He emerged from the bushes with his big Henry rifle in one hand, an extra cartridge belt hanging over his shoulder, and throwing blades wrapped around his waist. "And cause I love Him, I do what He wants me to, cause He knows what's best."

The confusion and shock in Flint's brain made it difficult for him to speak to this do-gooder sanely. "That makes NO sense at all. You are speaking out of both sides of your mouth, Gray. Listen to yourself! If He looooved you," Flint's voice was very sarcastic, "He wouldn't have got ya into this mess to start with. I mean He is God, right? So, why wouldn't He just snap His fingers and BAM! He would kill those Go..." Flint stuttered for a split second and didn't let the 'd' form in his mouth, "Gosh darn varmints back to Himself so that He could give 'em a whoopin' to last an eternity!"

Gray had not stopped moving and continued talking as he walked past Flint and dumped his gear onto the side of the trail. He began working on covering their tracks with a branch from a manzanita bush and removed anything obvious that would give away their presence. "God is 'not willing that any should perish,' partner, 'but that all should come to repentance.'" Gray walked up a nearby hill and looked to judge the amount of time he had to set up before the raiding party rode by. He stopped and looked up at Flint with a smile and said, "That's from the Bible, by the way."

Flint's jaw dropped in disbelief. He thought to himself, This guy's loco en la cabeza, completely gone mad! He goes far beyond a do-gooder.

Flint's confused voice almost grew to yelling. "How can you think of anything like an old book at a time like this!?"

Flint was tempted to take off as fast as his horse would carry him, but the thing that made Flint scared more than anything was a feeling that he was not going to run. He was sensing that he would be just as crazy as Gray. Flint dropped his chin into his chest and let out a sigh of defeat. "What you're saying is that you think God wants you to try to save these squaws as some sort of a super God job?"

"Flint, I don't know...maybe, but what I do know is that I am a man of my word, and I am God's child. God wants me to keep my word whenever possible."

"But this ain't possible, there ain't NO ways yer gonna be able to pull this off," Flint argued.

"Yer right, partner, ain't no way. Not by myself, but with God I can do anything." Passion flickered in Gray's eyes.

Flint asked. "Even if you get killed and it ain't your fault?"

Gray loaded his big Henry rifle with the quick lever action. "Even if I have to kill."

Flint sighed again and took his hat off to wipe beads of sweat off his forehead with the back of his sleeve. He stared at the dust cloud as it drew closer. After several moments he spoke with a calmer voice, "Well, we better think about this for a second." He dismounted his horse and patted his stallion's neck before leading him down the trail for several hundred feet. He then entered the dry creek bed to hide his horse near Gray's. He knew that any horses coming up from the opposite side of the trail would be less likely to hear or smell their horses further down the trail. He then found Gray's horse and moved it further down the dry creek bed near his own. Flint returned from the brush with his Winchester rifle in hand and carrying an extra Smith and Wesson single action revolver. A rope was hung over his shoulder. "If we are gonna get killed over this, then I want to take as many of those varmints with us. That way those bushwhacking suckers can explain to the Big Man in heaven how we got up there so sudden like."

Gray chuckled. "That won't be needed, cause we ain't gonna git it, not this time."

Flint didn't hear what Gray had said; he was too busy forming a plan in his head. "You know what?" He bent down and examined the soft dirt that was on the trail. The dirt was easy to dig into for the first inch or two. He smiled to himself and thought that it was so simple that it was perfect. "There just might be a way that we could double our numbers."

"How's that, hombre?" Gray asked, with eagerness in his voice and a glint in his eye.

"By cutting theirs in half," Flint said with a sly smile.

Flint quickly explained to Gray that he planned on setting his rope up between two trees. If they set it two feet off the ground in order to trip the war party's horses up, they might have a chance

Gray looked a bit grim. "The downside is that we have to hurt those poor animals that those guys are riding. It ain't their fault, ya know?"

"Yeah, well I suppose that it's more important to save those squaws then worry too much about 'em horses. But trust me," Flint said, adding to his dry humor, "these fellers are gonna be sore tomorrow. The trick is takin' care of any signs that would tip 'em off that we're here. Also, we gotta trip the rope at the right second."

The two men rushed around trying to set their ambush up as quickly as possible.

They knew they had plenty of time to be in cover, but they had to be in position about ten minutes before the raiding party arrived. The reason being there wasn't any wind, and if the party came in and there was any unsettled dust, they would smell an ambush.

"Flint, the sun!" Gray exclaimed.

Flint turned and noticed what Gray was thinking about. "You're right, amigo, didn't think of the big guy, now did we?" They looked back and forth. The ideal situation would make the sun scorch their backs and glare into their enemy's eyes. At that moment, the sun was splitting straight up the middle of both parties. The problem was that the glare of their guns would give off their position.

Flint winced and chuckled a little. "Well now, we almost walked into this like a couple of tenderfoot dudes. Let's just keep the guns from shining like a couple of smoke signals." Flint ran to his saddlebags and emerged from the bush on the opposite side of the hill. He was carrying an old shirt which he tore into strips and started to tie them around the barrel of his Colt and Winchester rifle.

Gray looked at him skeptically. "How am I supposed to aim my Henry with rags tied on her?"

Flint gave him a sarcastic look. "You'll just have to shoot that giant cannon you call a gun like a normal human."

Gray shook his head in submission. "Well, okay then, partner, you just remember whose behind I'm covering."

Flint's smirk disappeared. "On second thought, just keep yer rifle down til' they show up."

After only a few minutes of preparation, the trap was laid. Gray positioned himself on the higher part of the hill since he was the crack shot with a rifle.

Flint, with his pistols, hid closer to the road. There was a small bull pine tree next to the old gunfighter. Lying on the ground next to Flint was his secret weapon, an average rope that all trail riders carried.

Their quarry rode closer and closer. Soon they climbed a small rise toward the ambush on the trail at a slow trot. The leader, as could be seen even from a distance, rode very high on his horse and was very proud of his "spoils" that he had taken. They continued at a steady pace.

Gray and Flint were both relieved. The incoming warriors hadn't a clue that two men were lying in wait. The surprise of the ambush would almost be more powerful than their weapons.

The first horse carrying the leader passed Flint's position, then the second. Flint's heart began to pound; he thought to himself that he had experienced this type of fearful excitement many times. Not once had he done it without the feeling of adrenaline pulsing through his veins. Yet, it was the path that had chosen him, or maybe he chose it. Oh, what the tunk did it matter at the moment anyway. I'm about to take on well-trained killers at five to one odds, Flint thought to himself.

The third horse passed by. Only one more, the gunslinger thought to himself. Wait for it. The thought of the crazy kid who got him into this mess crossed his mind. He threw up a prayer in his mind that was a bit crude, yet honest. God, this is all for yer boy, so just give me a hand or we're both done for. There it was, the fourth horse.

The rope was tied off to a tree on the opposite side of the trail and then wrapped twice around the tree Flint hid behind. Flint half-stood and with a brace from his boot against the base of the tree, he leaned back, pulling with all his might and weight against the rope. The rope's first rap around the tree tightened from Flint's left hand; the second rap tightened from Flint's right hand. The tree did most of the work as the rope popped up from the red earth it had been buried in. A cloud of dust was flung into the air. The rope grew taut in front of two horses. The rope snapped into place, and it worked wonderfully. Trotting at a moderate pace, the Indian's horses did not see the rope in time. When the animal's legs hit the rope, the entire booby trap was placed under strain. It dug itself into the small bull pine as the rope stretched and became tight. The horses hung in balance as gravity chose whether the animals would fall or the rope would snap. Unable to make up its mind, gravity decided on both.

The rope snapped under the weight of the powerful animals. Then with a wicked crack, it whipped back into Flint's face, slicing him across the cheek. Seeing the rope too late, Flint had backed up, trying to avoid the danger. He tripped over a rock and fell onto his back with a thud. Air was forced from his lungs.

"Agh." Flint gasped, trying to catch his breath.

Although the rope snapped, it was still too late for the horses. Both mounts stumbled to their knees, hurling their riders to the ground. Chaos took over as the scared animals jumped back to their feet and bolted as fast as they could. This set the other men's rides into a panic.

Gray did not waste any time looking at the beauty of the situation. When he saw Flint pull the rope. Gray squeezed off a shot. The boom from the big Henry knocked a warrior off his horse, falling into the bushes. Before the dead man hit the bushes, Gray was already aiming at his next target. The warrior third in line dropped

to the ground hard, as Gray winged his left shoulder.

Now, all the horses were going wild. Any man still on their ride was being spun around or bucked. One small horse in the middle of the pack reared up and threw his rider to the ground, drew its' ears back and ran charging down the trail.

Rising to one knee, Gray turned his attention to his gasping partner.

Flint was on the other side of the trail and only fifteen feet from the squaws. Somewhat recovered from the rope incident, he broke cover and moved towards the squaws. Both women were fighting against their captors.

Gray saw movement out of the corner of his left eye. He threw his rifle to his shoulder and found a target on the shiny glint of a rifle pointed in Flint's direction. Gray let off two aimed rounds, the first hit a brave trying to get a bead on Flint. The second missed the lead brave. His target dove for a thicket of sagebrush on the opposite side of the trail.

Gray guessed that the leader would try to run around Gray's left side and flank him, putting pressure back on the rescuers. He took a guess of six feet to the left of where the lead raider had dived for the bushes. He squeezed off the rifle and prayed that it would be enough to keep the lead brave busy for a few seconds.

Unaware of Gray's actions, Flint had drawn his Colt and ran straight towards the two horses that were bringing up the rear. The first captor tried to pull up his rifle in time to make a fight of it. A quick, two round burst in the stomach from his Colt stunned the warrior. He stumbled backward. The second was sent sprawling back over his own right shoulder from two rounds fired from Gray's Henry rifle.

Flint took one of the girls by the arm and tried to take the other one. But she would not budge. Because of the confusion, she did not know Flint was trying to help her and slapped him across the face.

"Woman! I'm risk'n my neck for you!" he screamed.

She would not relent but kept struggling against him. With very little choice, Flint slapped her hard across her face. It stunned her long enough for him to sling her over his shoulder. The other squaw was already running towards Gray for cover.

Since his Henry was empty, Gray picked up Flint's Winchester and unloaded everything it had into the adjacent brush to make sure that anyone trying to get a bead on Flint would keep their heads down.

Still hauling the stubborn squaw on his shoulder, Flint made it to Gray without incident.

"Nice shoot'n, partner!" Flint complemented the rifleman.

"Thanks, now let's get in there and flush those suckers out," Gray spoke while reloading his Henry.

Flint looked at him sideways. "Come again?"

"I ain't watching my back while trying to protect two women. Let's do it now, while we have the advantage." Gray rose to one knee and looked around for movement. "Cover me, Flint!" He bolted for the other side of the trail.

"Gray, wait!" Flint's caution came too late. "Ah, goose! Flint rose to one knee and fired twice to Gray's right.

Gray ducked into the brush. He ran into the brush for a few seconds and relaxed on one knee, listening. The next sound he heard made his heart drop into his stomach. It was a breaking twig only a few feet behind him.

"Drop it. Stand," a voice commanded in a native tongue.

In slow motion, Gray did so. He let his rifle slip from his hand to the ground.

"Turn."

That was his mistake. Since Gray was not carrying a pistol, the Indian warrior had told Gray to turn before his hands had cleared his waist. As he turned, Gray smoothly let his right hand drop to his left hip, which was momentarily hidden from the Indian's view. Gray released a blade with an outstretched arm. He then fell on his back as the warrior fired his rifle. The warrior was too late. The bullet missed Gray's face by six inches. The blade did not. It hit the target in the soft spot of his throat directly under his Adam's apple.

Gray stood up and collected his rifle. The warrior's throat was making a gurgling sound as the dying man struggled to breathe. Gray wanted to speak with him, but he knew it would be impossible. Instead, Gray spoke to him.

"Hombre, I'm sorry. I pray that God will be with you and that you have made peace with Him." Gray knelt onto the ground next to the dying man and gripped his hand as the man continued his struggle for air. "Hang on there, partner. It's almost over." Then he prayed. "Lord God, take this man into your loving arms. Forgive Him for his sins and help him find belief in Your Son."

The proud brave mustered his remaining strength to sit up slightly and grasp his enemies hand with a grip of steel. He locked determined eyes with Gray and slowly nodded his head. Gray nodded back at him with a warm smile. The warrior's energy was gone and his body spent. He laid back into the waiting arms of the red earth and past into the next life with a faint smile on his face.

After Gray pulled his blade from the corpse, he walked back towards the trail

but stopped short. Tears began to swell in his eyes. Dropping to his knees, he could not stomach it—not this time.

Whatever was in Gray's stomach stung his throat and mouth as he threw it up onto the ground. Gray wiped his mouth, hot tears streamed down his cheeks.

CHAPTER FIVE

Flint saw movement through the bushes. He aimed his rifle and began to squeeze off a shot.

“Don’t kill me, Flint.”

He eased off the trigger and sat up. “Why not, you deserved it; I thought you were dead. What have you been doing, handing out Bibles to rabbits?”

Gray ignored Flint’s remark. “It’s done.”

“Just tell me I don’t have to worry about some Injun coming after my scalp at night.”

“You don’t have to worry about some mean Injun coming after your scalp at night.” Gray deepened his voice to imitate Flint.

“Smart a—”

Gray’s interrupting cough cut him off. He nodded his head at the rescued ladies.

“Ahh, it doesn’t matter, they don’t speak a lick of English.”

Both women turned and looked at Flint with disgust. The squaw that Flint had carried to safety as if she were a sack of potatoes cut Flint down to size. “I think my English is much better than yours, crazy gringo!” Her English was excellent, and her confidence told Flint that she was the chief’s daughter.

Flint looked at the rescued women fully for the first time. They were both easy on the eyes, yet the chief’s daughter had a fire that would scare most men from their long johns. On the other hand, her remark was embarrassing. “Listen here, girly, I saved you and you don’t even say thank you. When I see your father and tell him how rude you are, I hope he whoops you.”

She didn’t skip a beat. “When he gets here, he will kill you if he knows you even looked at me.” She touched her tender, bruised lip for effect.

Flint held up his hand defensively. “Just hold on here, I had to—”

“Cut it out you two!” Gray officiated. “I think that we should finish this little match later. Enough people died for one day. Now, those guys seem to be gone or dead. But I don’t wanna wait around to see if they’ll come back. They didn’t find our horses, which is a miracle from above.” He turned and looked at the angry squaw. “So let’s go find your people, okay?”

The other three nodded in agreement and moved to gather their gear.

Flint and the tenacious squaw passed each other.

“Little spoiled brat,” Flint spat out.

“Stupid, crazy pig,” the squaw retorted.

The foursome rode double in the direction of the large war party's tracks for almost an hour. The sun was going to set soon and sleeping under the stars unchaperoned with the chief's daughter was not something either man wanted to have to explain.

They found a stray horse left by one of the renegade warriors who most likely would never ride it again. The girls doubled up and rode second position. Flint was acting as rearguard as Gray rode point, tracking as fast as his eyes would allow.

Half an hour after sunset, they came upon the war party camped only two miles from their enemy's home. The “fiery one,” as Flint called her, yelled something in her native tongue as they neared the camp. Out of nowhere, armed braves rushed from all sides. Flint and Gray raised their hands in submission. The girls were lowered from the horses and taken to the middle of the camp.

Gray and Flint eased from their saddles, they grunted as the soreness of the long day took its toll. A group of braves led them and said something in their language that Gray replied to with surprising ease. Flint was never going to be over this guy; he seemed to be able to do anything.

“That must be why they talk about cowboys walking bow-legged. I don't think I can get my knees together,” Gray said as he led his horse with a slight hobble.

Many of the men recognized Gray and Flint from the path and came up to shake their hand and forearms firmly, thanking them.

They spoke to Flint in Spanish, which he was grateful for. It was the only other language he knew, and he was very rusty. His face was exhausted from smiling. Like driving a spike into a rock, he forced one grin after another.

A young warrior stepped in their path, demanding something.

“He wants our horses,” Gray said.

Flint's fake smile dissipated quickly. He was not in the mood. “Over my dead body.” He smoothly drew his gun and lowered it at the boy's terrified face. “Tell him to make a name for himself some other time, I'm tired.”

“No!” Gray snatched away the pistol. “He wants to take care of them for us.”

“Oh, yeah right,” Flint reply, embarrassed. “Tell him to make the old man feel good”—he gestured towards his stallion— “and to shine him up like a sunny winter's day.”

With a half-smile, Gray muttered something while the boy nodded in agreement. They walked towards the middle of the camp where they were shown a place to sit down. Gray was smart enough to take out his most prized position from his saddlebags before their horses were led away—his coffee and pot. He began to set about the task of making coffee. The perfect way to end the imperfect day, he thought to himself. He had poured the water into the iron pot when Gray saw the chief walking towards them with his daughter still hugging him tightly.

He was an older man, with a well-aged body and dark skin, the color of polished mahogany. The lines, cracks, and scars in his face showed his years of experience. His hair was a thick, silvery gray, and strapped against his head was a colorful headband. His face was serious. He was in charge and not someone to be trifled with.

Without hesitation, Gray shot into the air and nodded towards the chief with his head and upper back, almost like a half bow.

Flint, on the other hand, did not notice the looming authority behind him. So he began to say a snide remark to hint that the coffee still needed to be made. Gray kicked Flint's back with his heel. Flint turned to snarl something with a temper, but saw the chief and snapped up to his feet hat in hand.

The chief did not stop walking but embraced each man's forearms with great passion. Flint could not understand his words, but he could tell they were filled with gratitude.

After noticing the lack of understanding coming from Flint's direction, the daughter turned to Flint after her father stopped speaking. "He says, he is very happy that I am safe, and that you both must stay in our village so we can celebrate and thank the spirits together. He wants to honor you and make you his brother forever. You will become one of the tribe."

"Oh, so what you're saying is that he ain't gonna kill me, cause I looked at you."

A small smile grew on her face as she answered, "No, what I mean is that I have not told him yet." She turned to follow her father as Gray and the chief were walking together in a deepening conversation.

"I don't even know your name? Can I have that honor? I did rescue you." Flint asked with a boyish grin.

"In English, it is Lily."

Flint watched her turn and walk away on her father's arm. He felt... No! He thought to himself. I am not going to let my feelings go, not here, not this way. Cause I am Flint and I don't care, the woman in the hotels and saloons are good enough for

me, and I don't need to care about nothing or nobody. "Hmph." His face had turned hardened and determined as he affirmed himself out loud.

Flint noticed that all the other men around saw him as well. They grinned at Flint awkwardly. "Ya, so women, can't live with 'em and there ain't no babies without 'em, right?"

Only blank stares returned his sexist humor.

"Okay then, I'll see ya in the morning. Bye-bye." Slipping away while nodding to the group still staring at him, he chased after his only comfort and social help—Gray.

The second rescued squaw walked towards the group.

One of the men asked her, "Is he crazy?"

Her reply was almost sad. "No, just white."

The group nodded in agreement as they went back to their conversations.

The sky was blue and it only contained three small clouds. Usually, this would mean heat and hard riding, but the two companions were not riding but loafing with their new adopted tribe.

After returning the two kidnapped squaws, Flint and Gray had followed their new friends back to their home. The village was situated between two mountains. They had set camp atop a long, but shallow plateau, two hundred feet from a stream, so the area was lush and green. In comparison to the rest of the landscape, the Indians had settled in the Garden of Eden.

Their stay had been long, almost ten days, but Flint was actually enjoying it. The gunslinger was not thrilled to stay more than a night at first. He still missed the carousing, drinking, and gambling from his usual life. But Gray wanted to stay, and for some reason, Flint could not leave this kid. It went against everything he was.

If anyone knew who I was riding with, I would lose all my reputation... he kept thinking to himself.

He did have to admit, though, he did not miss not having to tie his gun down every day. He actually had stopped checking his back as much. That was a first in ten years. Yeah, he liked it—peace and solitude. The most exciting and strenuous thing he had done was go buck hunting with the boys. Flint had even taken one. Which he thought was pretty good, until he saw Gray arrive with his group carrying three. Flint had decided that Gray was half animal. That's all there was to it.

Gray had spent over an hour or so every day teaching Flint to read. He kept

saying that he was making enormous progress, but Flint never saw it. All he knew was that he still could not tell one word from the next. It didn't matter, though, because every time he tried to quit, Gray would smile and ask, "How many times did ya fall out of yer saddle? And you still rode?" So Flint lumbered on, practicing writing letters in the sand and saying the alphabet and all this other weird stuff.

As he mused to himself, lying in the meadow outside the village, it was almost strange for Flint to think upon the last two weeks. He had ridden into a small town only for some supplies, a dry bed, and a warm woman. Since then, he had partnered with a do-gooder, survived a bushwhack, saved an Indian princess, and was now living with his new adopted tribe.

Gray seemed like the only human around that had it all together. Yet somehow, he found all the trouble this side of the Mississippi. By all rights, they did not really know each other, but it felt as though they had always been friends. Flint did not understand but knew something was good about this new friend of his. The gunslinger wanted to know what that goodness was.

He had considered asking Gray about that thing on the inside that made him seem different than everyone else, but he could not bring himself to do it. Come on now, Flint, he had told himself, you know that your feelings just ain't something you share with people. Especially with other men. A lot of folks that had come west had done so before the railroad was finished. If you came before the railroad, it was extremely difficult and hazardous.

The two reasons why someone would risk their homes back east for something so gruesome and dangerous, was if you were hiding from your past, or you were too poor to buy land, so you went where land was cheap or free. Even though they were all around good people, and the circumstances were generally not their fault, most folks just do not like talking about such things. It was sort of an unspoken code of privacy, especially with men. Politeness? Sure. Transparency? Never. So, Flint still wondered about the peace and happiness that his joyful partner seemed to have most of the time.

Flint was lying on a thick green patch of foliage where he was enjoying a good smoke and an even better view of the clear blue sky. His eyes roamed toward the top of the hill. Just over the crest, twenty feet from where the village began, his eyes stopped. He winced in irritation. There she was again, just staring at him.

Just go away, okay? Flint moaned inwardly. For a woman with so much fire, she sure seems sweet...wait! Hold on there, partner. He was now giving himself advice,

and from past experience, that was not a very good idea. I think you are getting ahead of yourself. She is probably only looking past you at someone or something.

He looked down towards the water where he thought Lily could be looking. The only person there made him recoil a little. It was an old Indian woman, walking back with her finished washing. She kissed her weather, worn lips at him and flashed a toothless smile. Okay, then, maybe not.

He thought back to the days that had gone by since he met these Indians. In that time, he and Lily had exchanged words about five times. He had discovered that she had learned English at a convent not far away. She had a Catholic influence, which meant she was probably looking for two things: marriage and a man who could raise a family.

“Oooh, no ways. NEVER!” Flint had exclaimed after he had evaluated this information. Besides, every time they spoke they had nothing but spiteful things to say to one another. The last one sounded like this:

He took off his hat. “Howdy, little missy?”

She stomped her foot. “Who are you calling missy? I am not yours to call that!”

He put his hat back on. “Who knocked you off your horse and stole your crown, yer majesty?”

She turned her back on Flint. “Don’t try your white man sarcasm on me! I know how you insult me, pig!”

He lowered his voice and spoke over her left shoulder. She felt the warm air escape his mouth and tickle her ear. “Well, I would rather be a PIG in a butcher’s shop, then have to live near you!”

They turned on their heels and stormed off in opposite directions.

Anybody would know that if that type of thing happens, then they would stay away from each other, but this woman just kept stalking him. Everywhere he turned, it seemed that this flower of fire was making eyes at him, challenging him, or even taunting him to try. Well, the jokes on her, thought Flint. The old gunfighter knew that he wouldn’t make a move.

The obvious reason was that he was pretty much a cowboy. He was a cowpuncher for a total of only five years before turning into a gun-hand, but he was still a cowboy through and through. She, on the other hand, was an Indian, the chief’s daughter. She might as well be the Queen of Sheba. Then there was that other thing. The missing thing from Flint’s past that he could not or would not remember. It was the time in his life that haunted his dreams. It kept him from ever caring for a woman

that he would call his own. It was impossible and would never happen.

Gray plopped down on the grass next to Flint. His partner was chewing on the end of a long piece of grass. "Howdy, Amigo. Como estas?"

"Bueno, I guess."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Ah, it ain't nothing for you to have to worry about."

Gray looked towards Flint's previous place of vision. "I see. Hmm, girl troubles, or should I say princess troubles?"

"You can say whatever you want to, but ain't nothing gonna happen."

"Why not? She's pretty and nice enough."

"Have you been smoking some of that wacky tobaccy from the peace pipe, Gray? She ain't nice. Not unless you enjoy spend'n time with a devil!"

Gray ignored him. "Looks like she can cook, clean, and kill other people with the fire in her eyes. It's everything a guy could hope for and more." After observing the change in Flint's facial expression, Gray's chuckling turned to hard laughter.

"Now you listen here. I ain't done nothing to deserve this harassment of my private life. The way she has been following me around, you would think she is trying to kill me, except for the way that she keeps staring at me."

"Come on now, Flint, loosen up. With your rugged good looks, quick humor, and heroic ways, who can blame her?"

"Well, not many folks can. I mean..." He tried to look cocky and arrogant, but the discomfort of the situation could be seen through him like blood on a white cloth. "It's just that I ain't in no place to settle down or nothing like that, ya know. I just wanna be left alone fer now."

Gray smiled, still with his piece of grass stuck in between his white teeth. "Sure, pal, I know what you're saying, I'm just having a bit of a josh with ya, that's all." He looked up and saw the chief entering his teepee and stood quickly. "Listen, I gotta go talk to the big man"—Gray's words faded as he was already walking back up the hill. He shouted back over his shoulder— "but let's make some coffee soon. I'm real thirsty."

Flint nodded to himself. "Ya, thirsty in more ways than one," he muttered to himself.

Gray's feet felt good under the soft grass as he walked briskly up the hill towards the main teepee. The air was a bit colder than it should be for this time of year. As the sun was setting, a breeze was working its way through the teepee city like water flowing between rocks. The squaws wore blankets wrapped around their bodies to hide from the cooler air as they scurried about their everyday lives.

The cold did not bother Gray; it never had. Some of his earliest memories he could recall were of he and his father playing in snow taller than himself. He could still picture the old snowshoes that his pappy had sworn by. Gray remembered the time when he was only four and had tried using his dad's snowshoes to brave a blizzard to go fishing. He had his small fishing pole in hand and his dad's shoes on. He took four steps and realized that the laughter coming from his father meant that he was not going to be able to go. But he had tried, and his dad had praised him for it.

The last ten days had been sheer bliss. He had filled the days with much needed extra rest and conversations with the chief that usually turned into answering questions. After the chief had discovered Gray's origins, it had sparked interest from the leader. He asked him about what would happen to the Dark Ones since the white man grew in such great numbers every new moon because of the Iron Horse? And what was the Iron Horse like to ride? And was it as beautiful as they say it is, west past the great mountains? Some questions Gray could answer, others he could not, and admitted it often to the chief.

Every time he would admit not knowing the answer, the chief would always say, "Hmmm, you very wise, if my elders were wise like you, me...no more gray hairs." To which they would both have another good laugh. It had happened half a dozen times or so.

In the last two days, the questions were different. When first asked why he stayed to help rescue the two captive squaws, Gray answered without hesitation. "Because the Great Spirit told me to." The elders of the tribe were very taken aback and skeptical. Yet, they were happy to have the girls back, so they had left it at that. These last few days though, the chief had asked Gray nothing except questions about the Great Spirit.

Gray stopped just outside of the entrance of the round shaped teepee. He looked up and spied smoke billowing from a hole cut towards the top. It worked as a perfect chimney.

He stared at nothing in particular. A smile grew on Gray's face as he looked to his right. "Just making sure yer with me, Lord. 'Cause I ain't gonna try to do this on

my own.” As if speaking to an old friend, he chuckled to himself. “Thanks. Knowing You’re there is all I needed.”

Gray pulled back the teepee door and stepped inside.

CHAPTER SIX

She stepped into the animal skin teepee without announcing herself. She was upset, and Flint liked it. However, he hid his feelings well with a bored expression on his face. He showed only a small amount of concern for whatever Lily was feeling. He continued packing his things while she looked on, knowing it would add fuel to emotions building inside of her.

“What’s got you all upset? Didn’t I look at you the right way this mornin’ er something?”

“Why are you leaving? You have been here for only a short while. Why go now?” she demanded.

He stopped what he was doing. It was now impossible for him to deny that she had feelings for him; that was painfully obvious.

A couple of days ago, he had taken a good look at her while she was not paying attention. Even under that tanned hide she wore, it was impossible to keep secret her beautiful figure. Her dark, smooth hair only challenged her dark, smooth skin. Her hair was thick and braided into one large strand that she let hang down against her chest. It continuously bounced against her deerskin clothing as she walked. Her eyes, you couldn’t miss them, even if you tried. Most folks would find it difficult to look into those eyes. They were dark and piercing. Even angry or serious, she was more beautiful than most women at their best moments, but when she smiled, Flint had to make sure his emotions were bound tightly inside. When she smiled, he felt the entire sky brighten.

“Because I’m a roamer. I roam. I go from place to place, make money when I can and hope I don’t git my keister shot off in the process.”

“Then stop roaming.” She stepped closer to him; they were only a foot apart. “Stay here...” She paused. “...With me.” Her eyes softened and pleaded with Flint.

“Sheesh, you go for what you want, don’t you,” Flint exclaimed. He took a step back and started to pace back and forth. Well, it’s out in the open now, he thought to himself. Now, what do you do? You can’t take this woman with you, I guess? Nay, no ways! She would never be happy on the trail, and she would be very restricting. Not to mention, I would have to worry about her, and I just got a good thing going with a decent partner. No ways! Well, I could stay here?

He stopped pacing. She looked at him, hoping he would say something. The

tension was suffocating as the battle raged in Flint's mind.

He didn't speak but resumed pacing. I can't stay here. Besides, I told myself that I was not going to settle down. I ain't lookin' fer this right now.

She was unlike any other women he had ever been with. She was honest with the way she felt and straight forward in what she did. She was a woman you could trust, someone that could be a friend and easy to love.

As these new thoughts raced through his brain, old feelings of remorse and pain began to cloud his mind. What of the past? What of what had happened? Could he ignore that? He was not good enough for anyone, especially a girl like this.

"NO WAYS!" he said aloud.

It caught her off guard. She was crushed. The disappointment in her eyes shattering. "I see, I will leave. I am sorry to—"

Flint cut her off and took a step towards her trying to explain. "I'm not looking for a woman right now. I'm just not that type, and I just, I just... well, it's too hard to explain." He had tried and had failed miserably. He looked at the ground and sat down hard onto the bearskin floor.

Lily, not understanding, followed suit and took his left hand with both of hers.

Her hands are gentle and warm, Flint mused. It still did not change the past or his experiences with women.

Her voice was soft this time and kind. The type of voice that Flint only heard in his dreams. "Please tell me, Flint? I want to understand. I care about you."

"Can't you see, Lily, I'm a nobody. I care about you, too, and that's why I can't be with you. You and I come from two different worlds. The world I come from is full of lies, murder, and everything else that you can imagine that is so evil in this world." Raising his head, he looked into her eyes. "I am no good for someone as pretty and strong as you are. I don't deserve you." He released a sigh mixed with a chuckle.

Lily's reply was almost indignant. Yet, it was said in the same compassionate voice. "You risked your own life to save mine, which is reason enough for me to love you."

He tried to look away, but her gentle touch against his rough cheek kept his eyes fixed on hers.

"I can see that there is a man inside of you, Flint, that wants to be free; a man that wants to do what is right, all the time. I know there is a hope of goodness in you." She placed her gentle hand on his chest. "In here, I can see it."

They stared into each other's eyes. The time did not matter. There was something

about this woman that Flint recognized and desired. The longer he was with her, the more he knew he must stay with her.

She was so, so...

As if awakened from a trance, he jumped to his feet. Throwing his gear over his shoulder, he looked down at his aspiring love. She stayed on the ground. He put on his well-worn hat, and as the tears began to well in her eyes, he tipped it towards her and walked outside without a word.

Now alone, Lily wept, freely.

Flint's walk was brisk and quick. He got to his horse and mounted while Gray was still saying his goodbyes.

Although having his own problems to think about, he could not help but notice the change in the chief. He looked happy and almost alive with new energy. What was different? The chief and Gray held each other's forearms in a traditional shake, with their hands on opposing shoulders, symbolizing a deep friendship. But how did Gray reach that with the chief of the tribe in only two weeks? The boy never ceased to amaze his older counterpart.

Both mounted, they waved farewell and began their journey out of the village. Lily was nowhere to be seen.

The journey was going to be a long one for Flint; he could already sense that. There was so much to think about, and now all these painful memories to force down again. After living with these memories for so long, he thought they would be easier to forget. But they were still there after all these years. Flint tried to take his thoughts off his own troubles. "So, looked like you and the chief become mighty chummy there at the end?"

Gray's response was joyful and natural. "Yep, he made some decisions that will affect the rest of his life in a good way."

"Like what?" Flint asked out of politeness.

"Well, I told him a lot about the Bible and how much God cared about his life and who He was, and about how He created the whole earth."

"You did what?!" Flint exclaimed. "First off, you can't just do something like that without warning me. You know, whatever you do is connected with me, when we're partners, so ya should be more careful. Second off, isn't there some type of law against trying to Christianize Injuns and such? Something about keeping away from them cause they're dirty. I heard a preacher once say that us whites were God's chosen and the Indians and blacks were like animals so we shouldn't mess with 'em

cause we could end up dirty, or something like that.”

“Flint, the only reason those people, who call themselves Christians, say lies like that, is cause they’re scared of anyone who doesn’t look or act like them.”

Flint agreed with that statement. He always thought that what that preacher had said didn’t sound right. “Okay, well, was that it?”

“Well, I also told him about God’s son Jesus, and how He came down to Earth and died on the cross for everyone, even the chief. It was really hard for him to understand this part. He didn’t understand how the God of everything could just let his son die, and not kill everyone who would try to kill His son.”

“That’s a good point, it doesn’t make no sense. Why would God want that?”

“It’s not that God wanted it. That was the way things had to be. Jesus had to be a sacrifice for our sins, ‘cause He had never done nothing wrong, when He lived here on Earth. He was the only one who could have been that sacrifice.”

“What in Jerusalem crickets are you on about, Gray? What sacrifice? You sound like you been speak’n too much Injun lately.”

“It’s like this. In the Bible, it says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So, we have all done some stupid and wrong stuff in our time. Well, God needs more than we can give to make up for our mistakes, what the Bible calls sins. We are all sentenced to be judged and never live happily with God. However, cause He’s a loving God, He does not want anyone to be separated from Him. So, God figured out a way, so that everyone, no matter how many sins they’ve done, can be forgiven.”

“Wait a minute. You are saying that something can be done to take away my mess-ups?”

“More than that, Flint. God can help you change into a whole different person; so different, in fact, that when God will look at you, He’ll only see a perfect Flint.”

They were now cresting a hill as the realization set into Flint’s mind. For the first time in his life, Flint saw a glimmer of hope. He could be a different person? It may have been the way Gray told him or it might be the first time it was pure hope and not guilt. Whatever it was, the old gunslinger felt warmth running up and down his spine. He wasn’t sure, but if there was one thing that Flint always knew, it was when he had made a mistake.

“Gray, I will be back as soon I can. I gotta take care of something.” Before Gray could say a word, Flint was galloping back down the trail in the direction they had just come.

He reached the village within half an hour. He met the chief on the way into the

village.

The old chief's face still beamed with joy. "You forget something?"

Flint was out of breath. "No, I just need to see your daughter quick like." After realizing whom he was talking to and the question he was asking, he hastily removed his hat and held it with two hands in front of him. "If I may?"

The chief was accommodating. "Yes, she in big teepee."

Flint found her there alone. He briskly walked towards her. She looked up, still kneeling. Her face glistened with tears; her eyes filled with faraway hope.

"I thought you had left." Confused, her eyes looked back and forth at his.

"I did, but then I found out how stupid I was being and knew I had made a mistake."

She tried to say something, but he cut her off. "I need to say this before I lose the words er the nerve. I ain't had the best life, and I thought that the only life I could ever live is the same one I have been fer years. It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks, but I want to change. I can't take you with me and I can't stay neither. But I promise one thing, I will come back for you after I'm a different man. I know that you may not be able to wait for me. But please know, I'm thankful yer trying to understand me and talk to me. Since my Ma died, I ain't known a woman who's tried to care about me like that."

Tears welled in her eyes again. The tears created by a broken heart were now turned into tears of joy. "Flint, I know we have known each other for only a short while, but I also know that you are the man I care for. I will wait for you and for no other." She stepped in close and withdrew the hunting knife Flint carried, strapped to his belt. Gripping her long strand of braided hair, she sliced off the end and handed it to Flint. "May you always remember me and the love I have for you."

Flint hadn't thought about this type of thing ever and it showed. He took the lock of dark hair from Lily, slowly, trying to stall. What could he give her that was nice and a part of him? Not his hair, might as well hand her a handful of greasy dirt. "Here, take this." He felt really stupid, but it was the only thing he could think of. He took off the red bandanna from his neck and gave it to her. "I know it ain't as nice as yer hair or much to look on, but it's definitely me. The old woman washed it yesterday, and I've barely used it since."

Her smile warmed him like the sun on a cold winter's day. "It's perfect, I will never be without it."

They smiled and embraced as the chief and Gray had, with their arms and

shoulders, but this embrace was filled with passion and growing love.

Flint walked out of the large teepee and moved towards his still saddled horse, and Lily followed. He mounted and touched her hand as it was resting on the mane of his mare. Making eye contact, they smiled at each other one last time, and he began riding back up the trail towards his chosen path of change.

Her eyes followed the tall figure ride up the trail. She gathered the bandana in her small hands and lightly pressed it against her face. His scent was strong, as she embraced the token of his love.

The fire was nicely lit, and Gray was moving about readying himself for the night's sleep ahead. Flint had been gone a few hours. If he wasn't back by sun-up, then he would have to go back for his partner.

Strange, Gray mused to himself. Flint had taken off in a very uncontrolled manner. He wasn't sure, but Gray was thinking that Flint's well-locked shell might be cracking. Gray chuckled and with a smile, prayed out loud. "Well, I don't know about folks like You do, Lord, but I do know enough to know that Flint is usually tight as a drum. I have only known him a little while, but we have seen plenty like him, and they are usually not interested in romance and such things. You do get to work fast." Father God's answer was short and straight on target, as usual. "Now, it ain't as if I didn't believe You or nothing, it's just that it was quicker than I expected, that's all." As the coffee began boiling, Gray poured it into his old tin cup. He continued listening. His expression changed into one of concern. "What do you mean this is only the beginning. You mean we have that far to go? Okay, Okay, I will be patient. But—"

Gray's reaction was triggered by nerves, which had been fed by sound entering his ears. He dove in the direction of the spot he had already picked as a perfect spot for cover. There he sat, in a crouched position. His rifle was ready as he waited for the person to approach the fire and show themselves. The horse was familiar, but not the voice. It was cheerful...and singing.

"She's a miner, forty-niner and they called her Clementine." His face was lit by the flicker of flames. It was Flint.

Gray came out of his hiding place and knew that something was going on, and it was a good thing. "Who are you; what have you done with my partner? And when you find him, tell him he ain't singing the right words."

"They call me the handsome man in black." Flint dismounted and began the usually tedious task of caring for his horse, with a rub down, but with a very rare smile on his face.

"Okay, mister. What's going on? You get married in the last hour or something?" Gray's face was serious; he did not allow his desired laughter to escape his lips.

Flint's reply was nothing short than the largest grin he had allowed in over ten years. Gray could see that this man had fallen harder than a lousy built mine tunnel. He put the rifle down and dug in Flint's saddlebags until he found the most important part of a cowpokes trail possessions, his coffee cup. He filled it with coffee and handed it to Flint as he sat down with his bedroll.

The old gunslinger was still grinning. "Ain't it a grand night?"

"If I had a woman like that, looking at me the way she's been lookin' at you, then I suppose it would be."

Flint laughed aloud, and then stopped, "Listen to me, I sound like a darned schoolboy, not old enough to know the real difference between men and women."

Gray's laughter began to come to the surface now that Flint's was being revealed. "I would have to agree, but I can tell you the real difference a little later if you like." The stick Flint threw, in jest, flew over Gray's head. "But for now, tell me about your little flower."

"A gentlemen don't reveal such things."

"Don't lie to me, man; I know more about those Indians back there than you would in two lifetimes. You didn't do nothing!"

"How do you know, oh great one?" Flint's bow was meant to mock, but he still looked like a little grinning schoolboy.

"Cause, you ain't married or missing a finger."

Flint nodded in agreement. "Good point." His smile brightened even more now; He was thinking of Lily. "It's just..."—Flint paused, pensively— "good that's all. Nothing a man talks about."

"Nothing a normal man talks about, Flint. You and I both know that you ain't normal. So, spill the beans."

Flint started off real slow, not wanting to sound too eager, but by the end, he was talking faster than a jackrabbit being chased by a coyote. He told him of the thoughts of not wanting to take any girl, especially one that he cared about, into the lifestyle and person that he is. But then, when Gray told him he could change, that made a huge difference.

All of a sudden, his focus turned onto Gray. "What did you mean that I could change, anyway?"

Gray almost spat out his coffee. He wasn't expecting to talk about this subject for a while, but there was the opportunity, so he took it, even though he had coffee dripping from his chin. "Well, it's really just this, is all." Gray coughed a little, choking the words out. "You can change the same way I did."

Flint held up his finger. "One minute, I know a real long story when I see one, so let's fill up my cup again, then you can continue, sir."

"Well, then you better hit me with another as well."

Their cups were full, and they were both comfortable under the stars.

Gray sipped at his coffee for a minute then began telling his story. "My folks were not the regular couple that you see around these parts or any part of the country for that matter. My dad is from some of the toughest Irish stock known to man. His grandparents both hitched a ride to the States to try to start over fresh. When the war between the States broke out, my pappy did his duty and served the union, like he was raised to do.

He learned to ride and handle horses through my granddaddy's job training racehorses, and so he was able to land a post with the United States Cavalry. With his hard work, he made his way up to lieutenant.

Serving with the best, General Buford's Cavalry, he fought at Gettysburg and saw that the Union kept that high ground that won the battle and eventually the war for the North. He was always a bit of a crazy man when it came to fighting."

"Yeah, darn Yankees," Flint muttered under his breath.

"Don't interrupt the story."

"Sorry."

"Anyways, he saved the lives of more than ten men in that battle, and it got him noticed; they made him a captain. Eventually, the war ended, but he volunteered to head west to help with the Indian trouble. Leading a regiment, he began volunteering his men for every mission that would take him that much further west. He loved the new land, the open plains, the frontier and all the people that came with it.

"One year he ended up stationed near old Mexico. He and his men rounded up a gang that had been stealing cattle and horses from a rancho on the state's side of the border. They brought all the livestock back to the grateful rancher, and there he met my mother, Marie-Clarita Santos.

"They were married half a year later, and he retired from the army. They decided

on moving to California. He loved the open land, the mountains, and heard that it was a very promising place. Remember that place I told I was from? Well, that's where my family settled.

"Anyhow, I was born and everything was perfect. I never had any other brothers or sisters cause of complications my ma had, but we were all very happy.

"When I was twelve I was learning to hunt. I had just received my first rifle, one of my pappy's old Winchesters. I was out hunting, maybe a mile from our log cabin, when I heard shooting. I had never heard a gunfight before, so it took me a few seconds before I realized what was happening, especially when I heard my Dad's Henry rifle booming. By the time I got there, the house was already ablaze. I saw one Indian running away towards the woods, but I was too confused to know what to do."

Gray's eyes turned tense as he continued his story with raw determination. He did not care if he cried, but he wanted to finish. "I ran into the house but could not see a thing. I only came out of the blaze when I, myself, was on fire. I was so shocked, that I didn't care. I rolled in the dirt, and then sat up and stared at the burning cabin until it became nothing more than charred wood. I must have sat in the same spot for two days."

Flint swore under his breath. "Dirty, yella renegades".

"I snapped out of it and I gathered what was left, and was fortunate in that I had my knife and rifle, with some ammo left over from hunting.

"I figured out enough from the tracks and blood around that those renegades lost a lot more than they gained. Dad killed at least two. I could see where they had drug two men out, both bleeding pretty bad.

"I tried to track them, but I wasn't good enough. I had to try. I wanted to find those dogs and shoot every one of them in the heart so they could feel the pain I was in.

"After months of tracking, I was exhausted, starving and half near mad crazy. That's when I found my new family. I was hunting a doe and ran into an Indian hunting party after the same deer. One of the braves spoke broken Spanish, so we could understand each other enough. After we made the kill, they offered to share the doe with me, if I wanted, and we could eat back at their village. I didn't trust 'em, but I had to. I was losing my mind and starving.

"They took me in and I became a part of their family. Within a year, you couldn't tell that I didn't belong there. I was eager to learn everything they could teach me, especially about killing. All I wanted to do was find the men who murdered my parents

and make it right, my own way.

“I became a driven animal. Every second was dedicated to perfecting my skills as a tracker and killer. I wanted to be the best hunter around, but not for furs but scalps. Everything was fine for the most part, living with the tribe. But the comments from the other young braves I hated. I snapped one day as four boys made fun of my soft feet. I licked them all as if they were nothing but rag dolls. I got a hold of the leader of the boys and hit him over and over. All I could see was a face that killed my family. I had to be pulled off that boy, so I didn't kill him.

“This life went on for about four years. I learned to shoot a bow, a rifle, and throw knives. I loved throwing knives. It was my favorite game. By then I was also the best hunter and young warrior in the tribe. I had taken six scalps and three bears. But nothing would satisfy that desire to kill. I killed not for pleasure or revenge, but for guilt. The guilt that told me that if I were there, my mom and dad might have lived. The guilt that told me every morning, it was my fault.

“One day a man walked right into our village, which was strange cause we didn't stay in one place for very long. We roamed a lot. His name was Jon and he claimed a Great Spirit led him to our village. He was some sort of churchman that wanted to tell the world about this guy who died a really long time ago. He was from Virginia, and since I was the official English speaker, I was assigned to host him while he was in our village.

“He heard my story and began speaking to me about love and forgiveness, telling me that killing those men wouldn't help anything, only make things worse. He said the only way to get rid of the guilt was through this dead guy that he insisted was still alive and kicking somewhere.

Gray stood up and stretched his arms in the air and continued his story. “Of course I did not believe a word he said and told him so. There were plenty of times that I wanted to knock him to ground, to get him to shut up about this guy, Jesus, and all these ideas that didn't make no sense. For example, forgiving folks who would slap your face and crazy stuff like that. But I just couldn't; I didn't know why it bothered me so much. But as hard as I tried, I could not ignore what he was sayin'. By this time, I was named Wolverine, because they said I was small and young but killed bears.

“The day it all changed was on a misty spring morning at the store. I had gone into the tent town closest to our village for supplies with some of my Indian brothers when I heard something that sounded very familiar. At the end of the tent city, three men were having a shooting competition. One was a renegade Indian, who had a

rather large rifle he was shooting with. It was a Henry rifle. When I got close enough, I know for sure it was my pa's gun.

"I confronted him and he drew on me, even though I had no gun. I rolled right and came up letting two blades fly. They both struck their mark, burying into his stomach. I had confronted and killed one of my parent's murderers, but I felt sick. I almost felt dirty. Sure, he drew first and deserved what he got. But there was still no relief or anything that I should have felt. I raced back to the village and told Jon how I felt. I couldn't take it any longer; I broke down crying. I didn't want to live the life of a monster who killed because of anger. I knew my parents would never want that.

"For the next two years, I followed Jon everywhere. We traveled from the Sierra Nevada's all the way down to Mexico, stopping along the way to preach to all the Indians, miners, cowboys, Mexicans, really, anyone who would listen. Jon talked about Jesus, and how God loves us so much that he sent His only Son to die for us, and I translated. It was in those two years that I changed.

"Now, I am happier than ever, Flint. Not because of anything I tried to do. I'm happy cause I live a life with the God of everything, who loves his children. When you live a life with that type of God then you'll change."

Flint was nodding his head, eager to get this thing going. "Ok, Let's do it then."

"Before we do anything, Flint, you need to know that this road is not easy. It's the best way to go, and it's very satisfying, but it's a hard and long road to follow. Do you want to take this road even though it will be hard? Harder than anything you've ever done?"

"Yes." Flint was growing impatient now.

"Okay, just wanted to make sure that you really wanted to. Now, Flint, you will not change overnight. You will only change over months and months of hard work. But the first part is free. No work or nothing."

"What part is that?"

"The part when I introduce you to Jesus."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The crackling wood, the flickering flames, the feel of the earth beneath Flint's boot heels, all of it seemed a little different. Flint poked the fire with a stick, deep in thought. Finally, he came out of his deep thought with a question which he fired at his partner. "So tell me, Gray, why don't you just throw 'round a six-shooter like the rest of the modern world? Seems to me that it would be a lot easier 'en those blades you got."

Gray sipped his coffee as he threw another stick into the fire. "I was wondering when you would come to that question. I suppose that I kinda have two reasons."

"What do you mean you kinda have two reasons, Gray? You either do or don't."

"Well, if you would let me tell you, then you'll know why." Gray shot a sarcastic expression in Flint's direction.

"Si, Senior Gray." Flint's Mexican accent was not convincing.

"When I was spending all that time with the Indians, they taught me a lot about fighting—their ways of fighting. They showed me how to kill, how to hurt a man badly without killing him, even how to cause a lot of pain without really hurting him. In it all, I was always impressed with their ability to throw blades: knives and tomahawks, axes. Fact is, that it was one of their favorite games. I got good, and for those few years before Jon, the preacher, showed up, I was obsessed with it. I just threw knives all the time. The thing that I figured out, just like anything, if you want to do something, is that you learn as much as you can from the best, and then you practice your tail end off. That's what I did and still do, not cause I want to prove anything. Just so happens that I like it, that's all. And my second reason, the way I see it, is that I've got more reason to walk away from a gunfight if I ain't got a gun."

This was the fifth night in a row that they had been spending the night under the stars. It was only five days ago that Gray had told Flint all about Jesus, his Father God, and the Holy Spirit and how they had first talked to Him, well...them, together. It was the first time that Flint had made God's acquaintance, and things had started changing since then. It was not all lightning and thunder like folks might expect when meeting a Being so powerful, that He made the whole world. It felt as though Flint's insides had always been a dark raging sea, bent on sinking a ship. Now that he had started learning about God, and how to talk to Him, Flint felt as though the sun was coming out and the sea's waves were becoming smaller each passing day.

Every day while riding, walking their horses, or any time they could, Gray was

having Flint do something that had to do with Jesus. Often, they would read the Bible together. When Flint “read” the Bible, he had to rely on a lot of help from Gray. Although, Flint did not consider that it was reading. It felt more like running through a thick forest at night. A person can make it through, but it would not be pretty nor feel very good. Flint thought to himself.

No matter how bad Flint’s readings sounded, Gray would always be encouraging. After their reading lesson, they would have a verse from the Bible that they would try to memorize together. The first one was pretty easy to remember. “Not by might nor power, but by My Spirit; says the Lord.” That is the verse that Flint had to say every time he wanted to quit trying to read. They also spent time listening for God to speak to them, and they would tell God about everything they were thinking or feeling.

It was also really hard for Flint to concentrate. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe that God was not there; it was just that his mind would always try to do something else. Not like Gray, the boy could talk the leg off a dead mule when it came time to talk to God, but at least that was the easiest part.

“Talking to God’s pretty easy. It’s listening that’s tough. Our mind always wants to think about other things. Our human person, or the devil, also tries to convince us that there is no way the voice we are listening to is God because He would never want to talk to us. But the thing that holds me back the most is time.” Gray had said.

“Personally, I just don’t spend enough time listening. I say to myself, ‘Ah, I’ll get to it later.’ And I never do. Just like anything, being able to hear God speak to you takes time. Ya gotta practice. There ain’t no shortcuts here. No siree. And if you’re not learning to hear His voice better every day, then you’re not growing spiritually!

It took me a good two years of mistakes and failures before I was really consistently listening for God to speak to me, through the Holy Spirit.”

All in all, this Christian life was tougher than anything Flint had ever undertaken. Flint knew from the beginning that change was never easy, and the more valuable that change was, the harder it would be.

He thought about what Gray had said. “The Bible says that a righteous man, that’s a good man, falls seven times, but rises again. In other words, Flint, even the best fall down. But the best always get up on that horse and keep riding. All this reading and praying we do, don’t make God love us more, it only helps us love Him more. You’re not saved because you read the Bible or even because you pray. You are saved ‘cause Jesus died on the cross, and you believe that Him dying was enough for all your sins. He died for us and already took away all our sins. We read the Bible

and pray to get to know our Pa in heaven, not to make ourselves better.”

Flint thought about his response. He had admitted he didn't know something. That was very unusual for the prideful gunman. “I ain't got a clue as to what you're talking about, Gray.”

A chuckle escaped Gray's lips. “That's all right, Flint, you probably won't for a while. Took me a while, but just remember, you don't have to know everything at once, just keep on keeping on and you'll be alright.”

The old gunslinger would never say it, but he thanked God for his new partner more and more each day. But Flint did have a question that he was not eager to ask. It seemed to be a bit like questioning, and he did not want to sound ungrateful. But the question was on Flint's mind, so he asked it, even if it was a little awkward. “Gray, if that whole thing about not using a gun keeps you out of trouble, then how come you get into so much ruckus?”

Gray was swirling his coffee grounds around in his cup. He took a deep breath, and looked up, meeting Flint's eyes. “Sounds like a challenging question there, Flint.”

“Ah, I'm sorry, didn't mean to be, I was just, ya know, wondering, but it ain't nothin'.”

Gray laughed aloud. “I'm just messin' with you, partner. Don't think for a moment that I got it all together. Only a fool accepts what a person tells him without asking a few questions.” Gray sipped his cup as he formed the answer in his mind and, more importantly, asked help from above.

“The world is evil, full of sin, and Satan, the ultimate destroyer, controls it. You remember that strange sounding Bible verse from today?”

Flint's answer lacked confidence. “Yeah, I remember, sure.”

“What was it?” Gray asked trying to find Flint's eyes.

Flint knew he was in trouble and was trying to remember. It had to do with something about flesh and wrestling. Gray said, something about us—no...them? no...we, ya, we. “I almost have it.” Flint put his finger in the air to signal to Gray to wait. He just had to figure out that last part. It had something to do with some prince or something. The Gunslinger, jogging his memory as hard as he could, looked skywards as he started. “We don't wrestle with flesh and blood, but against princes”,

“Principalities,” Gray interjected.

“Ya, that's what I meant, principalities and the power of darkness.” Flint exhaled hard.

“Good job, not bad at all. Now the important part, what does all that fancy talk

mean?”

Flint's face sank with defeat. “There ain't no ways! I almost exploded my head just thinking of that darn, complicated piece a' wording.”

His mentor's face was determined. Flint knew he had to answer. “Well, okay then. It means that we ain't fightin' against the flesh or a body or person, but against some darkened prince or something, I don't know.” Flint's frustration got the better of him.

Gray looked him in the eye. “There ain't no reason to be mad at yourself. A smart man doesn't always know. When a hombre admits that he doesn't know, you know he's smart, ya git me?”

Flint nodded in agreement.

Gray explained, “You were more right then you realized. See, we don't just fight against some man with muscles and bones, but there is a whole world out there, right here even as we speak that can't be seen with our eyeballs, can't be heard with our ears, but is as real as the rocks and dirt around us. I think it's even more real than we are. It's called the spiritual world. In the spiritual world, everything is either for God or not. Anything not for God can be used by the Devil. That is why, at times, people are just bent on making a ruckus for no reason.”

Flint was very skeptical. “You talk'n about that evil hombre with horns, a red suit, and a pitchfork?”

Gray laughed.

Everyone had seen those pictures of the Devil who looked more like a circus clown instead of the vilest being ever.

“NO Flint, I am talking about one of the smartest beings ever, powerful, too. If God let him, he could break us like twigs.”

“Well that ain't no good for us, then is it? I mean, if'n he is that strong, then we had better be careful, right?”

“Nope, God created everything, including the Devil, also called Satan. He is nothing compared to God's power and His love for us. When Jesus died on the cross He took away all the power that Satan had. Then Jesus gave us all the authority He had on earth. Actually, He said that we would do even greater things than He did while on earth.”

Flint's confusion grew. “That doesn't make sense. How can we do greater stuff than what He did?”

“Well, that is a big question that tons of people argue about all the time. I think,

but keep in mind that I'm just thinking aloud, that Jesus was talkin' about Christians' sharing His love all over the world. The only problem is that a ton of folks who call themselves 'Christians' are lettin' the Devil in, especially because they hate."

Flint cut in. "Hate lets the Devil in?"

"Yep, sure does. Even worse, Jesus says if you don't forgive someone, then Father God can't forgive you."

"Well, that doesn't make sense, 'cause I heard plenty of church-goers who hated this person cause they owed them money and wouldn't pay, or that person 'cause they were nothing but 'lying gamblers.'"

"Well, those folks are letting the Devil have a place in their lives if they hate anyone, even if they are church-goers."

"Well, what's this all gotta do with you getting into ruckus without a six-shooter?"

"Those people who hate so much. They end up living with demons, which are like little devils. They can tell anyone, who chooses to live with evil in their lives, what to do. Their main job is to steal, kill, and destroy, and since me and Jesus don't put up with those kinds of things, we get tangled up sometimes."

"Wait, you're saying that those guys who jumped us a few weeks back, and those other fellers you killed before you met me, was 'cause of demons?"

Gray threw in another dry, broken limb into the fire as he mused. "Yeah, it's mainly got to do with their own choices in life but demons too. There were a few times I think I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, but then again, maybe not."

Flint spent the next ten minutes staring in the fire. Flint's nervous voice broke the silence as he checked his guns out of habit. "I don't wanna have to face no demons! I don't know how to handle 'em? I can barely handle myself or plain people. Handle demons?" He looked up at Gray who was chuckling, "Your laughing at me while I am ready to wet my britches."

"You don't gotta take on no demons. That would be suicide." Gray finally gained his composure. "It's the Spirit of God in you."

Flint's blank face meant that Gray had to explain more.

"It's like if you had to fight a bully the size of a grizzly bear by hand. And next to you is a man 10,000 times bigger than the bear. You can fight the bear, and maybe get some good shots in, then die, or you can ask the big man, the champion, to help you, and He will. You only have to choose His strength and not your own."

Flint's expression was becoming all too familiar with Gray. "I still don't know

what you are talking about.”

Gray's expression grew serious as he looked deep into Flint's eyes. The confident peace in his partner's eyes, that Flint still longed to discover for himself, shone brightly. “You will know soon enough, Flint, but for now, I am going to get some shut-eye.”

Flint sighed and threw his hands up. “Okay, sounds good. But if I'm hugging my Colt and Winchester all night, it's 'cause of some loco do-gooder telling me that a bunch of demons are after my hide!”

After both men were settled into their bedding, the night sounds began taking over. Flint's quiet and sheepish voice broke the silence. “I appreciate everything you're teaching me. You're a good friend.”

“It's a privilege. But I owe you thanks too, partner. Good friends are always hard to find.”

This was a booming town the last time Flint had seen it, but now it was a small city. The land had originally been a large farming operation but slowly turned into a cattle junction only twenty years before. Currently, Nook River was now filled with every type of business on this side of the country. From fur traders to mining companies, fabric stores, saloons, and large butcheries, there was a bit of everything, however, cattle was still the biggest business. It was estimated that during the cattle season almost 10,000 cows could be corralled here at once.

Denver better watch out, Flint thought, this little city might catch ya'll.

The people of Nook River loved the cattle because of the money that came with it. But the townsfolk didn't like the men who were responsible for protecting and caring for their “cash cows,” that was for sure. Flint had seen it many times before; it had been the source of many of his “gun for hire” jobs. He hated the idea of separating a town into sections and deciding who should be on which side.

On the one side of the city lived the “upstanding citizens.” They paid their taxes and went to church on Sundays. They ran things around here and always made sure the “other folks” remembered that: they were the rich, fancy folk. On the other side of town were the “bad folk.” Carousers, gamblers, drinkers. Cattlemen with “their kind” came “their places”: saloons, the madam's house of “comfort,” and anything else that would not be considered “Christian.” Of course, in these areas were also placed the

“less fortunate of society”: the Chinamen, Indians, and the Blacks.

Although it was not a set law, anyone with enough money to buy nicer things and have a large, nice house, with the correct skin color, of course, could stay on the “Christian” side of the town. Everyone else, or those without the right amount of money or skin color, stayed on the “other side of the tracks.”

Flint despised it, but it was the reality.

Riding into Nook River, they were greeted by a few “Howdys.” In response, they both tipped their hats and continued down the road. Almost halfway down the row of shops, on the main street, they both pulled the reins on their horses hard enough for a stop. They both saw something very obvious, although no one else around saw it. The townsfolk were too busy rushing around to notice.

“I tell you what, Gray, if you were made of metal, I would call you the worst lucky charm. And I can’t believe that you’d get me into this situation when I have decided to walk the straight and narrow.”

Gray cocked his head to the right and peered at Flint with one eye. “What do you really think? I ask God to send ahead guys who would be breaking the law when I was around so that I have to deal with them? No!” Gray looked up slightly into the sky. “I hope You are having a really good laugh about this, cause we ain’t.” While sitting on their horses in the middle of the road, they sighed in unison, and looked on at the situation, with irritation on their faces.

Up the road ten yards and to the right was The County Bank. In front of the bank were five horses, all of which were saddled. A man with his face half-hidden by his coat collars and a hat pulled low, was conveniently holding a double-barreled shotgun and resting on the whitewashed corner of the bank. He was only four short steps to the horses. It was all too painfully obvious. Fortunately, the lookout had not noticed the men staring at the victimized bank.

The problem presenting itself were those five horses. That meant five men, and that would be a lot of men to handle without having to kill ‘em. Even if the duo did kill them all, it would still be a chore and a half, not to mention that there were women and children walking up both sides of the street.

Gray prayed just loud enough for Flint to hear him, “Lord, You brought us here and only You know what to do, so please tell us.” He then looked at Flint. “Well, partner, this is where you listen and hear what it is God wants to tell us.”

“Me? Why, me? I’m new at this, come on now, no way...”

“You can do this, just believe in Him, and listen to what He wants from us.”

“Well, okay, I’ll give it a try.”

They were silent for a few seconds. Then Flint smiled deviously. “I think He gave me an idea. You take care of the lookout, and I’ll do the rest.”

A few minutes later, the Bank door was thrown open with such force that it shattered a window. “Come on! Get your keisters on your horses and MOVE!” shouted a gruff voice from the back of a pack of masked men.

Holstering their pistols, the bank robbers ran to their mounts. “Hey, boss, Steve’s gone?”

“Yeah, so’s his horse.” The boss was not concerned. “If the yello’ bellied coward’s already gone, so what, let’s go!”

They gripped their reins and jumped onto their horses and kicked spurs into their heels to get moving. That was as far as they got. The cinch straps, that were the only thing keeping the saddles on the horses, had been cut. Their eyes became very wide as they slid, with their saddles off their horses, to the ground. Their rides ran down the street without them. Two of the robbers were sitting on their saddles as they hit the ground hard, almost in unison. The two other bank robbers fell over the side of their horses onto their faces. They rolled over on their backs to see what had happened but stopped before they completed their motion. An army of rifles and pistols were pointed at their faces. It was over, and the only thing hurting was their backsides and pride.

Flint, who had been joined by Gray’s Henry rifle, and four men from the bank, decided to break the silence to help calm everyone’s tense nerves so they didn’t accidentally start shooting. Speaking to the terrified men on the ground, Flint imitated an older ladies voice. “So class, what have we learned about robbing banks today?”

The boss did not go for his gun. He rested his back on the dirt road in defeat as he grunted.

Flint’s smile was filled with triumph as he leaned in towards Gray’s ear. “That’s gotta be one of the worst feelings in the world, gettin’ taken by a bunch of locals, while in the dirt and not even gettin’ a shot off.”

“Now, what have we got here?” A strong voice from behind demanded. The speaker was a middle-aged man with a serious face and a Colt Peacemaker strapped to his thigh. He wore the embroidered mark on his shirt that meant he was the local law. He stood well above six feet, had broad shoulders and a gut that was smaller than most men his age. His voice betrayed something of a southern origin. The lawman

looked tough and not a guy to manhandle. If Flint or Gray were to guess, he could shoot.

A local man pointing a gun at the head of one the succumbed robbers in front of Flint spoke up. "Marshal, these men here on the ground, were caught trying to rob the bank."

The marshal spoke with a sigh. "Really, Sam? Cause, I thought they were lying on the ground in front of the bank with guns pointed at their noses, wearing masks on their faces, to protect them from your smell."

A little confused, Sam lifted his arm and smelled under his arm. The marshal continued, "What I meant was, why are the bank robbers on the ground and who are these gents on my right?" He pointed to Gray and Flint. "And where in the name of all that is good and holy is my deputy who's supposed to be patrolling this street?"

"I'm behind you, Wyatt." A groggy voice came from a man holding his head and walking slowly towards the growing crowd in front of the bank.

The mention of the marshal's name perked some interest in Gray, but he held his tongue for the moment.

"These sons of guns jumped me from behind and cracked my skull, good. Bunch of no good..." The deputy's voice trailed off as he saw Flint standing next to the marshal. "By hooky, what on earth are you doing here, Flint?"

Flint grinned. "Johnny? Why...I never thought I would see you again, especially after that trouble you got into with that rancher's daughter. Where have you been all this time?"

Both men shook each other's hands vigorously, showing a strong bond.

"Before you start hugging and kissing, can we take care of my new guests?" The marshal growled.

After the prisoners were placed in irons, Gray and Flint followed the lawmen to the jailhouse. The marshal shook Gray and Flint's hands. "Well, thanks for saving the good people of this little city, from a lot of lost money."

"Yeah, this here is another one of Pander's groups," the deputy said.

Wyatt cut him off. "Shut up, Johnny, you can't prove it, and I ain't start'n nothing I don't have to."

"It's true though." Johnny defended.

"Who's Pander?" Flint asked as the four men stepped outside of the marshal's office.

"He's the rich man of the town," Wyatt said in a hushed tone. "And there's a lot

of talk 'bout how he got rich, ya know? Anyways, enough of that, I think at least the city can buy you two fellers a hot meal."

"We'd be much obliged." Gray nodded in agreement.

"While we do that, you two can tell me what your business is here. I know a couple of sharpshooters when I see 'em, and I like to know what their business is when they're in my town."

"Fair enough, Marshal," Gray responded.

The café was very typical of where you might eat in the West. Besides the fact that the curtains and furniture were new, the only difference Flint could see with this place was that there wasn't a tin or cheap piece of crockery in the house. The coffee cups, saucers, plates, and everything else were all fine china. It made Flint and Gray nervous holding such delicate things.

The obvious awkwardness of the fine china situation made the marshal and deputy lean back and chuckle.

Marshal Wyatt spoke up. "Don't worry, everyone has trouble getting used to Miss Gretchen's insistence in using fancy things. We have tried to tell her she should just use normal cups, but she insists that she will bring culture to Nook River whether the town likes it or not."

"Well, excuse me for saying, boss"—the deputy wiped his mouth with a napkin but kept his eyes well away from the marshal's— "it seems she's culturing you quite regularly these days."

The embarrassed lawman snapped his napkin across the rude deputy's mouth as he broke into laughter. "Johnny, how many times do I have to say to you, keep your mouth shut, especially in front of perfectly good strangers. When we get back to the office, I'm gonna whoop you like no one's business."

Gray and Flint were chuckling to themselves now, while Flint could not resist adding a remark. "I don't know about you getting cultured or not, marshal. But, this here deputy of yours keeps his mouth shut about as well as two old women in the middle of a knitting session."

Johnny was quick to bring things down a notch when he was being teased. "Hey now, there ain't no reason why you should be mean to an old friend, Flint."

"I'm only messing with you, so calm down, mouth"

“What was that? Mouth?” The marshal was very curious now.

“Oh yeah, back in the day, this here boy had a good cross draw and a decent enough shot that could knock down anything within seventy-five paces. Even though he was handy enough in a fight and a good enough riding partner, he couldn't stop talking for more'n three minutes.”

“That ain't true, Flint. I didn't talk for a week once, cause I was so mad with you and the rest of the Buckaroos.”

“I remember that, but that was cause you wouldn't shut your mouth...again! So a bee flew right in it and stung yer tongue. So, you COULDN'T talk for a week.”

The Marshal tapped his fingers on the table while in deep thought. “Man, I need to git me a beehive in the office.”

The three men, excluding Johnny “The Mouth” erupted in laughter.

“Yeah, well, you'll see one of these days my mouth is gonna land me somewhere good, you'll see.”

For the next hour, the men ate and talked with genuine enjoyment. Flint was feeling a bit like his old self again around Johnny, which he didn't think was a good thing. Flint dismissed it in his mind. They were only talking, and he was sure that he could handle himself around an old buddy like Johnny.

Flint shrugged it off in his mind. What's the worst that could happen?

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Flint, wake up, you have a visitor.”

Flint groaned as he rolled over and then raised himself up on one arm and winced. Sunlight beamed into his eyes. “Where am I? Marshal? What are you doing here?”

Flint rubbed his eyes in disbelief. He was in one of the marshal’s cells. He moaned in frustration as he collapsed into his bed with his hands grasping his face. The room seemed to be smothering him as the walls closed in on his brain. Recognition of the situation flooded into his mind worse than his pounding headache.

“Who did I kill last night?”

The marshal didn’t say anything but waited for Gray to come through the jail door and talk to his partner.

“It’s me, Flint,” Gray said to announce his arrival.

Flint spoke through his hands that were still covering his face. His voice came out muffled but still understandable. “What did I do? Who did I kill and why?”

Gray plopped down on a bench that was opposite to Flint’s cell. He dropped his hat on his knee and leaned his back against the wall, where he smiled to himself. After all, he could only laugh in a situation like this.

“Flint, you didn’t kill anyone last night, as a matter of fact, you never even drew your six-shooter.”

“Well then, let’s get me out, and I will be done with it.”

“There are other things that put a man in jail besides killin’, partner. You..well you were dancing in the street.” Gray looked away and his voice dropped a bit as he prepared to say the next part.

“So, are you telling me I am going to stand trial for dancin’ in the street? What kinda crazy town—”

“No, that ain’t the reason; however, that actually is an offense, punishable by up to five dollars, but you were dancing with someone special.” He paused again.

Flint was irritated and showed it. “Gray, I feel like a herd of buffalo is running through my head. I’m in jail for something I don’t remember doin’, and you are taking way too long to tell me. Now, what in tarnation did I do!?” Flint came as close as he could to shouting. If he did shout, he feared his brain would pop.

Gray leaned forward and looked Flint in the eye. “You went to the wrong side

of town and started raising a ruckus. While there, you saw what you thought was a woman and started dancing with her. Because you were so far gone, you and your drunk self, you didn't realize that it was a man!"

Flint's eyes widened and he erupted into muffled laughter. The marshal peered around the corner to see why Flint was laughing. Flint tried to stop because of how painful it was; he couldn't.

"Shut it, Flint! Folks aren't happy about this, okay?" Gray sighed and shot Flint a concerned and serious look. "You forced him to dance in the middle of town."

At that instant, Marshal Wyatt came in with a plate of food for the prisoner. He slammed down the plate of food with a cup of coffee next to Flint's cell. Wyatt walked out briskly, muttering to himself about another one of Johnny's friends doing something stupid that makes his job more difficult. The annoyed marshal turned around and stuck his head back into the jailhouse. "I almost forgot, yer trial is tomorrow at noon. I'll rent a suit out fer ya. I'm sure if you don't got the money, your good friend Johnny will cover it." Wyatt's voice was even more gruff and sarcastic. He disappeared around the corner, again.

"Okay, Gray, what happened last night? I want the whole truth." Flint took the cup of coffee from the table on the other side of the bars but winced when he saw the food. The smell of the buttermilk biscuits and gravy made him feel sick as a dog.

Gray picked up the plate and began eating Flint's breakfast with the fork provided. He spoke with a mouth half-full. "First, tell me what you remember happening, and I'll tell you the rest."

Flint dropped onto his bed and groaned as he felt the juices in his stomach sloshing together. The old gunslinger eyes closed and forced a vision of what had happened into his mind. He best described the picture. "I remember from when we were eating with Johnny and Wyatt.

"I remember Johnny first talkin' about us going out that night..."

"So, Flint, tonight, I'll introduce you to some of the guys in the area and see if we can find you a woman, to keep you warm and all."

"Johnny winked and that kinda embarrassed me, I guess cause you were there and we knew what Johnny meant..."

"Yeah, I don't need a woman; I got one waiting for me back down the trail a way."

Johnny laughed at me and said, "Right, that would be the day." He looked up at me and I was staring at the ground..."

"You're serious. Well, I guess that's okay. Well, at least you can come over for a drink with some of the boys," Johnny said.

"I nodded in agreement..."

"Sure, that'll be great."

"I didn't know whether to be excited or not. You changed the subject to take the conversation off me..."

"So, you're the famous marshal, Wyatt Earp?"

"Herp, Herp with an H!" the marshal snapped back.

"He was obviously bothered; I knew that by the way, he threw his napkin on the table..."

"If you don't say the H, people always mistake me for that crazy idiot from Dodge City."

"We all nodded and left it, realizing that Wyatt and the former marshal of Dodge City didn't see eye to eye. We finished our meals and walked outside, where Wyatt told you how to get to the local boarding house. Johnny and I worked out a time to meet up and have a drink.

"We unhitched our horses and began walking towards the stables. You said..."

"Flint, I just want to make sure you know that this time in your life, when you are still getting to know Jesus, is when the Devil really wants to get you. He will try to make you go back to your old ways, so you will give up on the Lord. I really don't think you should be going out to the saloon tonight."

I said, "Well, I don't think it's really your choice, now is it, Gray?"

"I looked the other way to avoid eye contact with you, Gray, cause I knew that you were probably right. Your voice was worried..."

"I know it's your choice, but you just need to remember that some of these folks around here are going to try to make you fall away from God."

"What do you mean?"

"You spoke while I tipped my hat to a pretty girl who was watching us from the sidewalk..."

"That's exactly what I am talking about. I am trying to talk to you about a very

important thing, so you don't fall into yer old life, and a pretty girl just happens to be there distracting you from who God wants you to be."

"I looked up and met your eyes, but then looked away. You was looking straight through me, again..."

"Flint, the Devil wants you to fail, and there are a lot of people in the world these days who will help him, even though they don't know they are helping the Devil. Just, tonight, when you are with Johnny, be careful and remember that you are a changed man."

"Well, after that, I kinda gave you a piece of my mind. And I'm sorry about that, by the way. Anyways, when I walked down the main street to meet Johnny that night, I was still thinking about what you said. It just didn't make total sense to me. I walked in through the swinging doors of the saloon.

"It was as beautiful as saloons get. There was a gal swaying back and forth on a giant swing from the ceiling lettin' everyone see her petticoat. There was a huge bar on the far side with about three guys tendin' and six card tables with smoke billowing up from every corner of the saloon. There must have been 'bout hundred and fifty folks in all. It was as good as a saloon gets. But something was different.

"Johnny pulled me from the doors and into the crazy building. He was introducing me to this person and that person, telling me about a pretty gal this one guy was with the night before and another one the previous night. How drunk this feller got and that one shot up this one. In a way, it felt like I was right at home, but in another way, I knew I shouldn't be there. I knew you were right.

"As soon as I admitted that to myself, I tried to leave. But Johnny convinced me to have a drink, and meet a girl he wanted me to meet. Before I knew it, one drink had turned into four, and I was playing cards with some gal on my knee. I began convincing myself that I was my own man and that I shouldn't let you or anyone else tell me what to do. Besides, what could a few drinks and some cards do to me anyways? Well, things got rowdier in the saloon, I had been drinking fer a few hours, and the girl I was with kept trying to get me upstairs, so she could make some money. I knew I HAD to git out of there. I finally dragged Johnny out of the saloon and we began walking. Actually, now that I think about it, it was more of a wavering stumble. We made our way towards the boarding house, and then everything just fades away.

I don't remember anything else."

Flint looked down at the cell floor. "Gray, I'm really sorry. I know I really messed-up 'n all. Maybe this whole straight 'n narrow thing ain't for me. I mean, first chance I git, I tell you to pound sand when you're just try'n to help me, and then I make a mess of myself. I'm probably more trouble than I'm worth." Flint's head dropped into his hands in an attempt to hide his shame from Gray.

"Let me tell ya a story, partner." Gray took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "After I gave myself to Jesus and I was traveling with Jon, the preacher who came to my village, I thought everything would be perfect from then on. Actually, I thought I wouldn't mess anything up from then on. It didn't happen like that.

"We were in a logging town to get some supplies when I saw some mean hombre roughin' up an Indian. This poor Miwok was just trying to defend his sister. Well, Jon had said that we don't make trouble as Christians, but King David in the Bible was quick to take care a' folks who were picking on weaker folks. Well, I stepped in and warned this guy to stop it er else. He let the Indian go and turned on me. Well, he was big and mean, but a terrible fighter. I took him to the ground in three punches."

"Lousy yella bellied skunk. Sounds like he deserved it," Flint commented.

"Yeah, well that wasn't the problem. The problem was when I saw what was around his neck. It was this silver necklace." Gray pulled the piece of jewelry from under his shirt. It had a detailed crucifix on the end, also made of silver. "It took me two seconds to figure out where I saw it before. It was my ma's. My pa had given it to her the second year they were married.

"I asked the dude where he had gotten it. He thought he would look tough and told me it was off a dead Mexican woman." Gray's eyes darkened as he recalled the scene. "He actually laughed a little."

"Oh, I hope you killed the sucker!"

"I told him it was my mother's. We just stared at each other for a while. He drew first, but he wasn't fast enough. I rolled right and threw my hunting knife from my boot, but it didn't kill 'em. I hit him in the face with the butt of the knife."

"You missed, Gray? I thought you never missed."

"I don't. It stunned him, and I had totally lost control. Everything around me turned white. By the time that I realized what had happened, I had beaten the man to death. My hands were covered in his blood."

"Nobody stopped you?"

"Nah, Jon wasn't there and everyone else had heard this guy laugh about

taking it off a dead woman, and that I said it was my ma. Plus, he drew first 'n I didn't have a gun. They all figured it was justice. It was okay, cause it was the world's way, but Flint..."—tears rolled down Gray's cheek. He locked eyes with Flint—"That ain't God's way. I sent that man to Hell. I could have showed him a loving God and forgave him, but I let my old self, the old bitter and hateful Gray take over. When that all hit me—what I had done—I just thought there was no hope fer me, 'cause I messed up and did the same thing again. I picked up the dead man's gun and put it to my head. I thought, if I can't do this, there ain't no reason for living. I was just about to pull the trigger when Jon stopped me. He got me out of there, then came back a day later and paid for the burial of this guy and we left as soon as we could.

"That night we had some really deep talks and he prayed fer me a lot. What he told me was this: 'I'm perfect in God's eyes, cause Jesus' blood, that he bled on the cross, makes me perfect. That's why I can go to heaven.' God sees the perfect Gray, not all my mistakes. God's already forgiven us of everything bad we've done or will ever do. God's love is more powerful than our mistakes, cause of the grace He gave us."

"So it doesn't matter if we mess up and do bad stuff?" Flint clarified.

"No ways, The Bible says, 'What shall we say then, shall we continue in sin that grace may increase? May it never be.' In other words, choosing to sin ain't gonna help anything. When we do mess up and sin, we have to take responsibility for what we did wrong. If you rob a bank, you gotta go to jail. If you kill a man, you gotta swing at the hangin' tree. But just cause folks won't forget our mess ups, doesn't mean God won't. He says, 'As far as the East is from the West, so far has He removed our transgressions, or sins, from us.' Ya gotta still move on, cause God still loves you the same, Flint, even after you've done what's wrong. 'A righteous man falls seven times, but he rises again.'

"So, ya have a choice, partner, you can give up and roll over 'n die, or you can keep listenin' for God's voice, keep praying and keep reading the Bible. You can keep livin' for God, cause He loves you as much now as He ever will. That is why we call Him, Father God. He loves you as a son, His son, and He is a perfect Father! Your mess up is only another part of you growing up. Learn from it and move on, or keep thinking about it and let it eat you alive."

Gray leaned back on the jailhouse bench. "You and Johnny walked towards the boarding house, but then went straight past it, and you wandered into the nicest part of town."

“What?” Flint was lost.

“Last night, Flint, you two were on the rich side of town and you saw what you thought was a woman and forced her to dance with you. While Johnny passed out on top of a lady’s flower garden.”

“Well, was he pretty, I mean, I hope I meet her, I mean him soon, just to thank him for the dance, it’s only polite.” Flint was chuckling and thought the extra hangover pains he felt from the deep laughter was worth it while seeing the expressions on Gray’s face.

“Flint, you danced with the judge, in his own front yard, well after dark and the flower garden Johnny took a nap in was his wife’s prized possession.”

Flint’s face changed to a new shade of red. His eyes became the size of saucers and he covered his mouth with his hand. “Oops, I didn’t mean to do that.” Laughter escaped his mouth.

“Shut it, Flint. Folks are not happy about this.”

Flint was about to burst into laughter again, but Gray cut him short. “You really made the judge mad. Really cut deep into his pride and all that stuff. Have you heard of the Looney Bin?”

Flint’s face dropped and fear flashed in his eyes. The looney-bin was a fairly new concept that was meant for those who couldn’t stop from doing crazy things, some criminal and some a danger to themselves. These unfortunate folks use to be left up to their devices or mixed in with the typical criminal in jail or prison, but this place was thought to be more humane. For Flint, there was no other place that sounded more terrifying. A place he was confined and also told what to do and how to live cause every sane person you had contact with believed you were crazy.

That silenced Flint immediately. “But why would they want to do that. I mean, it was a mistake. Nobody got hurt er nothin’.”

“Flint, you forced a dance onto the town’s most well-respected citizen and then killed half his wife’s flowers! Wyatt and I had to keep the judge from putting a buckshot in your hide.

Gray stood up and looked at Flint, who was in utter shock with the realization of the amount of trouble he was in and what he had caused with one drunken dance.

“Tomorrow you have to go to court. I’m gonna go talk to someone I know here, so while I do that, would you please just get some sleep and make sure you look presentable to the judge.”

Flint’s face nodded in silent, shocked submission.

Gray briskly walked out and left Flint to his own thoughts which were: "This is by far the stupidest thing you've ever done, ya big dummy!"

The courthouse, like most courthouses in the West, also served as a community meeting hall, social center, and city hall. There was a double door front entrance and a single door back exit. It had six wooden benches on either side of the room, all facing the front, where the judge's desk was positioned. Next to the judge's seat was one wooden chair for the witnesses and on the other side of the desk was a long bench for the jury. In the middle of all this was a crudely made desk with two chairs behind them for the accused. This is where Flint sat next to Wyatt, who was also serving as his legal advisor and the bailiff. The room was completely packed. After all, it wasn't every day that you saw a guy who forced the old judge to dance in the street.

"Everyone rise." Wyatt bellowed aloud, in front of the judge's bench.

Flint stood briskly as did the rest of the crowd in the courtroom. The Judge came into the hall from the back door and sat down. He was well along in years and balding on the top of his head. He wore a long black robe, which was unusual this far west, and put on reading spectacles as soon as he sat down. His Boston accent was a bit too high for a man.

Wyatt sat down next to Flint as he squinted his eyes at the judge to make his vision blurring. Aw man, I must have been a lot more drunk than I realized if I danced with that old-timer, Flint thought to himself. He looked around the full room, but Gray was nowhere to be found.

The judge continued, "Court is now in session. Now hearing the case of.."

Flint was already disinterested. He just wanted to know what these people were going to do. Oh yes, everyone knew the law in these parts. You were supposed to get a fair trial with a jury from your peers, but Flint knew otherwise. He knew that everyone came into these things with their minds made up and that he would hardly ever have a chance for a fair trial in a town where he was only passing through.

The first witness was the judge himself. He stated the obvious, that Flint danced with him and called him names like sweetheart and lovely. Then there were some other men who testified that what the judge said was true. After all the accusations were made, the judge asked Flint if he had anything to say.

Flint rose slowly and cleared his throat and began very carefully. "Listen, judge, sorry for whatever I did wrong, forcing you to dance with me and all. But it was a big mistake. I was a little drunk." He paused and glanced down at the table. The old gunslinger realized that he might as well be completely honest. "Actually, I was a lot drunk, and I didn't mean nothing by it. Could you please just work something out with me? I just think this whole thing is crazy." Flint sat down, exhausted and needing a break from his fifteen seconds of public speaking.

"Did you know that forcing anyone to dance with you can be seen as assault, according to the law?" The judge was sharp, to the point, and not happy.

Flint snapped back up to his feet but stumbled over his own words as he replied. "Yes, sir! I mean, no sir! I mean, I do now, sir!" Then he sat back down. Flint thought to himself, What in tuck? A simple dance is an assault? I didn't punch you or nothin'.

"So, are you asking me to ignore the law, son?"

Wyatt leaned over and whispered into Flint's ear with urgent desperation. "Say no, say you ain't!"

"Uh, no I ain't, sir. I mean, no sir. I just am saying that I'm real sorry and that I know I was drunk in public. And I also danced in public, so maybe I just serve those fines out?" Flint ended in a smile that he hoped would win the judge over. It didn't.

After only ten minutes, the jury came back from "deliberations" and gave their verdict. It was guilty.

"Because of your conduct and lawlessness, I hereby sentence you to five years..."

"Wait!" Gray burst through the double doors at the back of the building, a man carrying a big and a black Bible trailed closely behind.

"May we come forward, your honor?" The man with the Bible asked.

"Yes, Reverend, but I hope there is a good explanation for this interruption."

They drew close to the judge, and Wyatt stepped in to hear the conversation as well. It was hushed. Flint heard them talk about the thwarted robbery and something about a church.

The semi-huddle broke up and the judge announced, "I hear-by hand over the accused to the custody of Reverend Cookshank until he deems the accused is rehabilitated and ready to experience society without his supervision, especially until the new church is finished being built. Court is adjourned."

Everyone stood up and walked out of the building rambling about the new latest topic of town gossip. No one really knew what had happened when the reverend and

Gray came into the building, but despite that, half a dozen different rumors were created within minutes.

Flint shook the reverend's hand until it almost fell off. "Thank you, so so so much, I don't know how I will ever thank you, ever." Gray smiled as he walked over and stood next to Flint

The reverend smiled. "It is not a problem. I am just happy we made it before it was too late, and I'm very glad I can help you, cause I really can use your expertise as a carpenter."

"My expertise as a carpenter?" Flint's confusion was obvious. "I can swing a hammer, but I'm not—"

Gray kicked his knee as he spied that the judge's ears had perked up.

Flint stopped rubbing his knee as he also spotted the judge eyeing them out. "Yeah, of course, you know me; I can build anything and everything if just given the chance," Flint added too much confidence, so the judge opened his mouth to say something, but Wyatt, seeing what was happening, distracted the judge with a lame question about a piece of paper he couldn't find, that was actually in his hand. The other three made their escape during the distraction.

CHAPTER NINE

Many folks took it for granted or did not understand the importance of it, but there are differences between a house and a home. Although they both share similarities, they have even more differences. A mansion is not necessarily a home, yet something even as simple as a cave can be the most comfortable place on earth.

A person has said many times, "Home is where your heart is." No one knew how true that saying was, more than Flint. He often wondered why a man, who had a wonderful place to come home to, with a loving wife and beautiful children, would spend so much time with his work or take a trip to the other side of town to experience another woman. Are they sick in the head? Flint would often wonder. These men who had "it made" would go the other side of society to party with the people who only wanted what these selfish men had, a real home: a place where people around you were your family. A place where you could sit with people who would love you no matter what, a place that would provide safety from judgmental attitudes and warmth from your head down to the very depths of your soul. Flint knew this more than most folks. He knew this because his last and only home was destroyed when he was only a boy.

The Reverend and Mrs. Cookshank had a home all right, Flint thought.

Sure, the roughly hewn logs that were used to piece the three-room homestead building together were not anywhere as exquisite as the Easterner's big white mansions. Nor was the furniture much to look at. Yet, as Flint and Gray walked through the door, the gust of warm air mixed with the smell of freshly baked bread and the sound of children running around the house proved that this was a first-class home.

Mrs. Cookshank herself was a lovely woman. At first glance, folks might only see the weathered face and strong body that has been built through years in this rough country. If you gave her a chance, you would see a divine spark which set her apart from most other women. This special God-given spark gave her a desire to see the world content and everyone around her joyful. Within seconds, Flint knew she was the main reason this dwelling was more than a house; it was a home.

"Please, please, come in, you must be a little chilly by now." She dusted her hands on the apron wrapped around her waist. The reverend stepped over and kissed her on the cheek. They whispered a quick, yet intimate hello.

"This is Reverend Gray, a friend of Reverend Jon Lane. I met Reverend Lane a few years back while visiting Denver."

"Please, don't bother with the Reverend stuff." Gray turned to Mrs. Cookshank. "Just Gray will do, ma'am, thank you." Gray was obviously bashful about such a title. Flint look over with wide eyes and smile. He began to mouth the word "Reverend," but Gray quickly cut him off.

"This is my good friend, Flint."

"Ma'am." Flint nodded as he nervously played with his hat, which he politely held in his hands. "We are much obliged for your hospitality and do hope we don't put you out too much."

Mrs. Cookshank's response was quick as she had turned back to the kitchen to tend with her cooking while keeping the conversation flowing. "I don't know how much hospitality we can claim, after all, we only have the barn to offer you to sleep in."

Gray responded. "That's not a problem ma'am, we been livin' under the stars most nights, so anything with a bit of warmth and a dry bed will be a real nice change." He smiled as he saw one of the many Cookshank children run to his mother and throw his little arms around her leg.

Mrs. Cookshank placed her hand gently on his head, "There are four of them, and they seem to run the house more than I do sometimes." She looked down at the dark-haired boy and smiled. He ran off to find his brother to see what mischief they could get up to. "If you will excuse me, gents, I need to get supper on soon or my kids might go looney, and from what I hear about you two, you just escaped the Looney-bin."

Flint was taken back by the sarcastic joke and didn't know what to say.

Reacting to Flint's shocked expression, the lady of house chuckled and reassured him. "It's okay Mr. Flint. I was just joshing with ya. Why don't you take a seat in the lounge and just relax?"

"Yes, ma'am." Flint stepped into the small lounge while the reverend plopped down on the ground to play with one of his children. Out of the corner of his eye, Flint also saw Gray helping Mrs. Cookshank with the supper. He found a crudely built chair to sit in and peered around the room, eyeing the layout of the home. It had a few decorations but not much to speak of. There were some slate boards in the corner, obviously used for schooling.

Then he felt a tugging on his pants and looked down. Big, innocent eyes

stared back at him.

“Do you need a friend?” It was the second youngest, a delicate girl that was the prettiest little thing Flint had ever seen. She had her mother’s sandy-blond hair and was cute as a button, but was no one’s fool, so it seemed.

“Why do you ask that?” Flint asked with an awkward smile.

“Because Jesus just told me that you need friends. I asked Him if I could be your friend and He said I can. I hope that is okay, ‘cause Jesus said it was.”

Flint stammered as he was knocked from his comfort zone. At first, he thought that this girl was only a cute kid, who hadn’t yet had the years to figure out what real life was about. However, if he were being honest with himself, he knew she was right. He could use some more friends. How did this little girl know this, and why would she tell him—a stranger? He left the subject alone, somewhat dumbfounded. What was it that he read from the Bible a few days ago? Something about God using the simple to confuse the wise?

After finishing supper and thanking the family, the partners walked toward the barn. Flint thought about his new little friend that he had made. He explained to Gray what the little girl had said to him. Gray thought it was one of the greatest things he had heard in awhile. He told Flint that the Bible says, “Out of the mouths of babes, He has ordained praise to silence the foe and the avenger.” Flint was awed that God would choose something so small and weak to say such big things.

It was morning and the homestead was alive and buzzing. The Cookshank home was stirred up to a new level of chaos, which could only mean one thing, it was Sunday and time to go to church!

Kids were running away from parents and parents were forcing kids into Sunday clothing. Only half the family sat down for breakfast at a time, while the other half were being cleaned up with a technique that looked very similar to Indian wrestling. Because their father was the church parson, the family had to be at the church building before anyone, and it was over half an hour’s ride to get there. Flint and Gray did their part as well, saddling the reverend’s ride and readying the buckboard and two brown mares for the family’s transportation.

Even through the chaotic organization of the homesteaders and the tears shed from upset children, Flint still could not help but notice the way this family loved one another. There was something about this family that was undeniable. It was the same thing that Gray had in his eyes. Peace, happiness, maybe both, it had to be

something like that. Like a hungry man, Flint craved it. Whatever that similarity was, between the Cookshanks and Gray.

Flint thought about this while driving the family towards town. They headed up a small hill to the half-built church building, which would also serve as Flint's "work release" project. He and Gray helped all the family down from the carriage, and before they could react, both of them were swept away into a sea of greetings, hellos, and I ams. "I am Mary-Beth, I'm Roger Studson, I'm John Stello..." and on and on. Gray and Flint may be reigning experts on the trail and in a gun-battle, but when the homestead women opened their mouths, the females most certainly ruled the roost. "I am Sister Martha. We have a ranch two miles from here..."

Most of the "I" conversations sounded like this: "You both need to visit sometime very soon. Any friend of the reverend is a friend of ours. Besides we have two lovely daughters that would appreciate the company of two Christian men like yourselves." Flint counted five such proposals.

The church building was going to be a larger version of the Cookshank's house. From the looks of the nicely stacked lumber, it was going to be made of thick timber that had been milled to last, not to look fancy. The flooring had been completed and the frame finished.

The only part of the building that was made to look good was a Cross. When the roof was finished, it would be mounted on the highest point of the building. For now, it was temporarily tied with ropes to the church's frame. The Cross was expertly milled, sanded and stained with some type of oil. Apart from protecting the cross from the weather, it made the wooden artwork dark and shiny.

Mrs. Cookshank, holding her youngest against her left shoulder, broke away from her current conversation with a polite, "Excuse me," and crossed the mulling people to where Flint stood to stare up at the triumphant cross. "Some folks were upset at us for putting a cross up like that; they said it made us look too Catholic. The reverend simply said that Jesus died upon such a thing, and Jesus' death was the thing that made it possible to cross the giant gorge to get to Father God, so we should display it with gratitude and excitement."

Flint looked sideways at Mrs. Cookshank with a smile. "Did you agree with him?"

As she walked away, the reverend's wife spoke over her free shoulder. "I should, I told him to say it."

Flint chuckled; he really liked Mrs. Cookshank.

The meeting began the same way they often did in every church across the West: off key. Flint was doing the best he could to concentrate on the hymn the church was singing with all the racket or music that was going on around him. Gray was next to him, he was either used to this type of verbal abuse or he had already died, standing up. If he had died, Flint knew he was in big trouble. The old gunslinger's curiosity about his partner ended as Gray turned and winked at him. Flint almost exploded. Both men's faces were purple from holding in laughter.

The song-abusing culprits comprised of the high pitch tenor behind them who wanted so desperately to be a base, but failed miserably. The lady who thought that this was as good a time as any to show the power of her lungs, was on the other side of the building. Flint wondered if she had fallen from a horse to many times and forgot that she was no longer in the opera. The worst was an older couple that was trying to sing in harmony from the front row but would rival a pack of depressed wolves. The hymn did prove one thing to Flint; God was merciful, patient, and slow to anger just like Gray had said.

The ear-torture ended after two songs. Flint thought it was maybe because the reverend didn't think they could handle anymore, and he was probably right.

Everyone was seated. As he sat, Flint peered around and noticed that the crowd had grown to around a hundred folks dressed in their nicest duds. Of those people, Flint and Gray looked to be the only folks not from the higher type of society.

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. And love thy neighbor as thyself.' We have all heard these two commandments that Jesus also spoke of as the summary of the entire Old Testament. But have we heard it with our ears or with our hearts?"

The reverend's start to the sermon caught Flint off guard, and he found himself almost answering the reverend out loud.

"I would imagine that many of us still do not know what loving means. Why just last week I heard of two more men who were shot and killed down South cause of that no good range war that is still going on. You know why they were killed? Cause of money! Some selfish rancher would send his boys to die because of money. I don't care about what kind of money we are talking about. I don't care if it has to do with all the money in the world; it's not worth a man's life."

The excitement in the reverend's voice sharply rose. "Before He was crucified, Jesus gave us one of the greatest examples of love that He ever showed."

The reverend announced where the Bible reading would come from as he wiped

the sweat from his brow. He read the passage of Jesus and the wayward woman. The reverend spoke on the fact that this passage gave us a wonderful example of love and how to treat our neighbors, especially if you are considered respected and they are not.

Flint was leaning so far forward now that the woman in front of him had to lean against her husband to keep from feeling his breath. Flint didn't care. The only person he had heard speak like this was Gray, but he was by no means this elegant and well-versed. The reverend paused and began staring at the congregation in the eyes. When he looked at Flint, the old gunslinger was convinced that his very soul had been laid bare before the entire world.

When the reverend began to speak again, you could have heard a mouse eating cheese. "Brothers and sisters, I have seen how you all treat the men and women who live on the other side of town. I know what you say about the women who sell their bodies for money. I know what you men say about those who drown themselves in whiskey every night. I know that you believe in your minds that talking to these folks from the other side of town might ruin your image."

The disappointment was painfully obvious in the reverend's voice. "Did you forget dear congregation that it was for the sick that Jesus came to this earth? Do you not remember that you were all once those who were on the road of despair away from the heart of God, just like the people that you pass judgment upon?"

The reverend was right. Flint was raised around the "wrong crowd" and had lived in that crowd his whole life. Even the rich men who would happen to "purchase" a woman for a while would still consider themselves better than "those other people."

Flint's thoughts continued, leaping from one event to another. With lightning speed his life with the wrong crowd was flashing through his mind until he saw himself as a boy. And with the blink of an eye, he began feeling something bubble, forcibly, to the surface, pain that he had been held down in the depths of his soul for years. The tough gunslinger began peering around looking for an exit that would not distract anyone, but the only way out was the back, and everyone would see him leave.

The reverend continued, "If Jesus were here, He would stop and take enough time to get to know those hurting women. He would tell them that they would be forgiven. He would say that they would no longer have to sin, but that He, God, made flesh on this earth, would be there to help them through all of their hard times. He would go to those men who hide in their whiskey and tell them that He is the only

one that can give them happiness. And, if they needed someone to talk to, they could speak to Him, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for everyone, even the drunken man and the prostitute.”

The tears were now just barely being held back in tear ducts. Flint could feel throbbing in his red and swollen eyes.

“Jesus, as a physical flesh and blood person, is not here, folks. He left the job of telling the world about His unconditional love to us, with the help from His Spirit.” As strategic as a general waiting to ambush the enemy, the reverend lowered his voice but maintained the same intensity. “We, right here, in this very church building, are called by God to be the messengers of God’s love to folks who aren’t as blessed as us. Not on a soapbox, beating them over the head with the Bible, but actually trying to love them in our day to day lives. Jesus wants you to look into the eyes of all those hurting people to say, ‘It’s okay. My Father in heaven loves you and He wants to give you an incredible gift. He wants you to spend forever with Him in Heaven.’”

The reverend’s stood straight up, pointed his figure and released his ambush on the congregation with a booming voice. “Church, He wants to do this, with His Spirit looking through your eyeballs, using your mouth!”

With those words, for the first time in twenty years, tears flowed down Flint’s face. Feelings, almost as old as Flint, began swimming their way up from the locked vaults of his soul. He stood and quickly rushed out of the building with everyone looking on. He did not care though; he only wanted to be alone where he would not be seen crying. He hurried away from the building towards a grove of trees in the distance. The teary-eyed gunslinger hoped it would be quiet and out of sight.

“It’s okay to cry, Mr. Flint,” a tiny voice said.

Flint turned and saw his newly acquired friend from the night before, the Cookshank’s daughter. She and the other children were outside playing under a watchful eye of the two oldest Cookshank children. “Wait...what? Why would you say that?”

“Cause Jesus and I saw you. You looked sad. He said that I should tell you it’s okay to cry. Also, it can make you feel better.” She took four quick steps forward and wrapped her arms around Flint’s leg. After a few seconds, she lifted her sandy blonde hair and smiled her tiny mouth up at the man who was about to cry even more than before. “Do you feel better now? Mommy always says a hug can always make you feel better.”

“Yes, I feel much better. Thanks, little darlin’.” The words barely made it past his trembling lips.

Flint's little angel, as he began calling her, grinned as he called her darling. She turned quickly and ran back to her friends who were now playing church: one of the older kids, who was playing the reverend, told the others to love or God was not going to be happy.

When he reached the grove of trees that was to the rear of the church building, Flint plopped down on a large flat stone behind a big oak tree. No longer able to contain the heavy emotional saddlebags that had ridden atop his soul for so many years, the softened gunslinger lowered his head into his chest and sobbed.

CHAPTER TEN

When you ride with someone for a while, you begin to recognize them, by the sound their feet make on the ground. Flint could tell that the man walking up behind him was shorter, wearing moccasins, and comfortably walked without noise. The soft steps that approached belonged to Gray.

He dropped to the ground next to Flint and made himself comfortable in the weeds. With expert skill, Gray slowly slid a weed from its sheath and stuck it in his mouth. "How ya doing, partner?"

They both looked off into the distance as if following Gray's question into the blue sky.

"I'm fine, just a little bit shook up, that's all. Sorry if I embarrassed you 'n all. I just needed some air. Something the reverend said brought up a lot of memories that I haven't let myself think about fer a long time." Flint's eyes winced, as he tried to force back the emotion in his voice.

Gray exhaled slowly, then tossed a stone at a nearby tree as he replied, "Well, partner, sometimes it's best to talk about all the bad stuff that's happened. Just to git it off yer chest."

Flint and Gray stared off into the distance for what seemed to be an eternity.

Flint's voice was reserved as he broke the long silence. "She had it rough in life, my mom, that is. Her pa died when she was young and left a family of eight for my poor grandma to feed. When she was thirteen, my mom was sent on her own to make some money in the city. She tried working in the sweatshops fer awhile; it was too much for her. I don't know how it happened, or who the first man was, but she figured out pretty quick how much easier it was to make a living, if you didn't care too much about yerself and who yer with, ya know. She slept with men fer money a long time. Had me when she was only seventeen. Still kept enough money coming in to even send money back to her ma. I don't recall one time when she thought of herself."

It was hard for Flint to go on, and the tears were streaking his rough cheeks again.

"It's okay, partner, we can talk about the rest later if you like, no problemo." Gray placed his hand on the shoulder of his hurting friend.

"No, I gotta git through this while I can." Flint exhaled and focused. "Cause she was such a kind woman, and so beautiful; she would attract men of any sort, even the

men who thought of woman the same as dogs. It seemed like those men hated her 'cause she was so kind and gentle. All they wanted to do was force that kindness out of her.

“The worst was this one businessman type who I think ran the bank or some such thing. He was always comin' in liquored up, demanding that my ma would be ready for him upstairs right that instant. I noticed that whenever this man would come, my ma would have to stay in bed for a few days after he had gone. I didn't know exactly what it meant right then, but it made me hate him even more. After two years of this man treating my ma like he did, she couldn't take more of it. She told him that he couldn't come over no more. When he refused to leave, she pulled a small pistol she kept next to her bed and forced him out the house. Two days later, he came knocking again.”

Flint set his jaw and spoke through clenched teeth. “He shot my ma without warning. As I ran down the steps to where my ma was layin', I heard the murderer say something about how it was just like killing vermin.

“Next day I knew I was gonna pay that dog a visit and bed him down! I took my ma's pistol and went into the nice part of the city looking for this murdering businessman. It took me almost two days, but I found him and called him out in front of everyone on the street and in front of his business. I demanded he draw his gun, but he kept laughing at me, cause I was only a boy. I demanded again that he draw. He didn't, so I leveled the pistol and shot him. I winged him on the left shoulder and began walking toward him. After I shot the first time, he began trying to raise his pistol for protection, but by that time, I was already hovering over his body. I emptied everything else that was in the pistol into his chest and walked away.”

Flint's eyes were contorted with a mixture of feelings. “I hated him so much, and I knew he deserved it, that's fer sure. But I regret it to this day. For some reason it isn't him that makes me regret it, it's what my ma would think. She would have never done anything like that, even when she was real good and mad. I know that if she saw me kill that man...I just...” He sunk his head down in-between his knees and tried to hold the tears back, to no avail.

After a few more minutes of sobbing, Flint brought his head back up and continued on. “From that moment on, I just starting killing. I ran cattle for a few years, but then got caught up with a range war. The boss was impressed by my ruthless way of taking men down, so at age sixteen I got my first hired gun job. I was eighteen when I had been in my tenth gunfight; I had killed four men by then. From then on

I thought my fate was pretty much sealed. By the time I was 'bout twenty-three I was bounty hunting, and cause I had some street smarts mixed with skill and I was killing without carin' much, I was pretty good. I was able to get more bounties done in about five months than most men could in a whole year. Well, then it seemed that there were a lot more marshals all a sudden, so us bounty hunters were needed less. That's when I started taking just about any job that would pay. Jobs that would put me somewhat on the dodge but nothing too bad."

The recollections deepened in his eyes and Flint's face hardened by a fraction. "Well, not 'til I fell in with Bart and his gang."

"There you boys are!" It was Mrs. Cookshank.

Flint turned slightly away so she would not see his tear-stained face.

"We have been looking all over for you. Everyone's eating now and I wanted to know if you would like me to bring you a couple of plates of food."

Gray stood. "No, that won't be necessary. I will come and fetch 'em, ma'am."

Mrs. Cookshank forced Gray to the ground with surprising strength. "No, said I would get'em, just wanted to know if you were interested."

A few minutes later, she arrived with two full plates of food. They both thanked Mrs. Cookshank, as she turned to leave.

The men both ate listening to the church folk talking and the children playing off in the distance. When Flint had finished, he cleared his throat and tried to start speaking again, but words would not form. Flint breathed deeply and exhaled hard trying desperately to calm his emotions.

Gray could see Flint's struggle, "You know, it's been a pretty hard morning, partner. Why don't you just tell me the rest tomorrow?"

Flint's answer was sharp and almost desperate. "No, I gotta git this out now, while I still have the guts!"

Gray understood his point of view and nodded.

"I first helped these guys, Bart and his gang, when we were both hired to take out a large ranch that was trying to steal a waterhole from a few smaller ranches. We started out as just guns fer hire, but then, as guys like us usually did, we got greedy. We wanted more than just a good-payin' job. We started with robbin' miners and such. That became stages and then came our first bank job.

"Well, we were so over prepared for a bank that it really wasn't much more than tak'n money from an old man sitting behind a desk. The greed grew as we were just stealing anything we could git our hands on."

Flint stopped speaking, closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth. The pause made Gray turn and see what was wrong. It was obvious that the next part of the story was what made Flint ashamed. Gray began praying silently to himself as Flint struggled to speak of what had plagued his mind for so long.

After a small grunt of determination, Flint continued. "It all came to an end when I got caught by a posse on a fluke. My horse had thrown a shoe and I was already winged in my left shoulder. I was taken back to jail, but since I didn't have any of the loot on me and no one was killed, I was only in jail for a few months. When I caught up to the gang again, they had changed, especially Bart. He acted like the world owed him everything. Like nothing he could ever git would be enough, always wantin' more. We did another job that changed it all fer me. I knew something was wrong when Bart rode in without his face covered." Flint's eyes began to swell and turn a brighter shade of red. "He shot everyone there, even the ones that surrendered. I had killed before, but not just for killin' sake, ya know?" The gunfighter's face streamed with tears. The pain he felt was almost unbearable. The pain only increased as Flint choked out the final words. "Then they found a girl hid'n...She was, wa...was only a kid.. ." He swore, yet not at the men who were to blame, but at himself.

With hands buried in his lap, Flint sobbed, quietly. Although hard to watch, Gray knew that this was necessary for Flint to move on in his new life with Christ. He placed his right hand on Flint's shoulder, and without words, he consoled his friend. He figured in a time like this, there was not much to say. All he could do was listen, pray and be there, as a friend should. If there would be something to say later, Gray would have to ask for wisdom from above about what to say.

The sun was moving shadows atop the companions. It had been over an hour, and both men were still sitting in the same place. Eventually, one of the ladies had brought two cups of coffee over for the men as they continued their deep conversation. Flint drank his within minutes. Gray sipped his silently, while deep in prayer. A small grove of far-off trees was swaying ever so slightly in a breeze that passed, and a flock of ducks flew overhead in a V shape towards an unknown body of water. The scene was beautiful and peaceful, but the real-life drama that Flint had to face was far from over.

"She isn't disappointed in you, Flint." The statement, although spoken into silence, answered Flint's current thought.

Flint's eyes turned to ice. "Course she is, I failed her. When it came time to

stand up for a woman, so she wouldn't be used and killed like my mom, I FAILED! I'm just as much of a dirty son of..."

"No, you ain't!" Gray's words cut Flint's self-deprecation off. "You're saved by God's grace now. God has forgotten your sin now and has made you a new man, a new person. The only one who has the power to allow that stuff back into your life is you, Flint." Gray paused, waiting for help from God's Spirit before continuing. After a few seconds, he received it. "She ain't upset at you neither. I can't tell you where she is right now, but from the sounds of it, she was an understanding woman, and she loved you. Stop being afraid of what you think she would have thought. Cause you're ashamed of yourself, you're not thinking of her, even though she was such a great woman. You're letting your shame keep away all the happy memories of who she was."

"But Gray, you don't know what it's like; you don't know what it's like having a little girl's innocence hangin' on yer neck."

"You're right, Flint, I don't, but Jesus does. He took on the sin of the world, so that means that he experienced every sin, ever. Not cause he did anything bad, but cause he took it on Himself, so He could forgive everything you have ever done or can ever do."

Flint slumped down deeper against the tree that served as his backrest and sighed. "What do I gotta do to get rid of this?"

"You just need to give it up to Jesus. All you gotta do is tell Him that you give Him all this bad stuff you've done, once and fer all. You will take Jesus' wonderful gift of grace and trade it for all this trash."

Flint was skeptical. "Why would He want all this stuff in trade fer something perfect like that. Only a fool would make a trade like that."

Gray smiled as he stood. He looked Flint in the eye and spoke with a mixture of humor and conviction. "That's why they called him Christ." Gray turned to walk away.

"Am I getting saved again?" It sounded like a dumb question, but Flint really didn't care what Gray thought about him anymore.

Gray turned back around to face his partner and grinned. "No, partner, you're only understanding the Lord a bit more; it's exactly what He wants—for us to know Him more and more. Getting to know Him, never stops."

Flint thought about that as Gray walked away. It made sense. In anything worth learning, you only got worse when you stopped learning. When Flint first started shooting, he thought it was only about pointing the gun and firing, until he began

speaking to the older ranch hands. As it turns out, killing the businessman who murdered his ma was luck. Flint didn't know anything about shooting until he began learning. It took about a year of practice and a lot of help before he could even shoot straight.

The hardest was shooting when a group of men were around telling Flint exactly what he was doing wrong as he did it. "Nah, your stance is all wrong for an aimed shot. Turn more to the left," one would say. "Yer still trying to shoot too fast, kid. Slow down and take yer time. Remember, one aimed shot is worth three quick ones." Of course, Flint knew that his would-be instructors were only trying to help, but it was hard for him to put up with it sometimes. The fact was that as uncomfortable as it made Flint feel, those situations had caused the most growth in the young cowboy. Now, instead of struggling to hit a can seventy-five paces out, Flint could hit it five out of six times on a quick draw. He had come a long way, but he had never stopped learning and had allowed himself to be made uncomfortable along the way.

Flint decided that this situation was not that much different, just a lot more important. The gunfighter had held onto these problems for a long time, and he knew that if he didn't take this opportunity "to trade them to Jesus" as Gray had said, he may never.

But these burdens had become a part of him. They were a part of his life. The thought of getting rid of them was almost too good to be true. Besides, hanging on to this guilt and all this baggage was his punishment. He had to hang on to it; he deserved it. No, he can't let these feelings go.

"Flint, just let Me have it..."

Flint looked around quickly, moving his gun hand into position out of habit. "Who was that, what was that?" No one was there. All he could hear was the sound of children still playing in the background.

"All you have to do is let it go."

Confused and nervous the gunfighter asked, "Who are you? Where are you?"

"You know who I am."

The voice was not audible to his ear. It was more like a soft touch that reached down to the depths of his soul. More perfect than anyone would deserve to know.

"I know who you are?" Flint repeated the phrase out loud with more confusion.

Like lightning, something that Gray said a week earlier shot into Flint's mind. "God speaks to us, Flint, even today. It's just in a still, small voice and most of us folks just don't take enough time out of life to listen."

Flint's eyebrows creased together as he spoke with the voice of an unsure child. "Is that you God?"

"Yes, Flint, It's Me."

The half-constructed church was alive with the sounds of praise and prayer. They were prayers of intensity being spoken on behalf of brother Flint. Ten of the remaining churchgoers were praying together in a semicircle. Gray was sitting on a pew, the reverend was pacing and Mrs. Cookshank was on her knees in her good Sunday dress. They were praying with such intensity that they did not notice the approaching footsteps on the pine wood floor.

The first to notice Flint was the reverend, who stopped pacing, then Mrs. Cookshank who sat up onto a pew. The rest of the group, noticing the lack of praying from the church leaders, looked up to see Flint standing in the middle of the building. Gray began to stand up a bit worried but then sat back with relief as he made eye contact with Flint.

He was smiling.

"How do you feel, brother Flint?" The Reverend asked.

A warm smile grew on Flint's face and a sparkle twinkled in his eye. "Happy!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Claiming control from the night sky, the dawn of the new day was making itself known. The gray color continued its journey towards the farthest reaches of the earth. As the new shade overcame the night sky, its center was pierced by an array of purple and pink shades.

“There are very few things in this world more beautiful than a sunrise in the West. A sunrise is proof that there is something way bigger than us. God sure can paint!” Flint spoke out loud. He was not smiling, but his facial muscles were relaxed, calm and he looked younger, proof of his new joy.

It had been two weeks since he had unloaded the great burden that had held him back for the greater part of his life. Since that moment, Flint had a sense that he could never be the same again. Every morning he awoke before sunset and would walk a mile away from his temporary home to the top of the same quiet, solitary hill. Removing the old leather-bound book from his pocket, the gunfighter, reborn and eager, situated himself to look into the sunrise. He read from where he had left off. His reading was getting better. The more he read about Jesus and all the incredible things He did, the more urgent his reading became. At one point, Flint felt as though he were a man who had been kept from water in the desert for twenty years, then, all of a sudden was thrown into a mountain spring. Only ten days earlier, it took Flint an hour to read half a page. Now, after reading two pages, he would still have time to, as Gray put it, “Learn more about talking to God or the Holy Spirit.”

At one time, Flint thought it would be pretty nuts to even mention anything about a Spirit unless making a joke about it. Talking to someone who wasn't physically there, well, Flint didn't even know people tried that type of thing. He thought prayers were more like “magical spells” or something. He would have never thought that they were really trying to talk to anyone, especially the way he had heard some churchgoers pray.

“Oh Lord, that thy hand wouldst come down hither, to smite those with whom have sought to destroy thy servants...” Flint always found it amazing that these people were so good at their magical prayers that they could go on saying these crazy things for hours.

The folks at Reverend Cookshank's church were nothing like the church folk that old Flint had experienced. The folks here were so normal and real. They spoke

about God like He was the most incredible and awesome being ever, but they did it in a way that was real, it was from their heart. When they prayed, they prayed in their own way, as only they could. When the reverend prayed, he always seemed to cry and weep, begging for mercy and forgiveness for all the folks in the town who still needed to find Jesus. When Mrs. Cookshank prayed, the whole building seemed to shake. Everyone would always joke that the only reason they were taking so long to build the homestead style church building was because they needed it strong enough to handle the parson's wife and her powerful praying.

Then there was Gray, he had a prayer style all of his own. Gray spent many sunsets walking about the countryside, doing nothing more than talking to God. After the church service, one Sunday, Flint asked his partner about why he prayed in such a casual way. They were resting under the same grove of trees that had been the home of Flint's liberation from his heavy burdens only two weeks earlier.

Gray replied after a slow drawn out thoughtful breath. "Flint, how would you like it if every time I was going to talk to you, I was on my knees or crying? Or, worse yet, reckon I asked for stuff every time I talked to you? That's not my idea of spending time with someone. Don't get me wrong, I do plenty of crying to God on my knees, and I sure ask Him for plenty, that's a fact, but there are times when God just wants us to get to know Him. The best way I know how to get to know God is to talk to Him, like you and me now."

"That doesn't sound very much like what everyone else says?"

"Well, that depends on who you call everyone, Flint." Gray smiled.

"I mean everyone in other churches and things."

"Well, Jon, who introduced me to Jesus, he talked to God. The reverend and his wife, they have times of just talkin' to God. Then there are folks in the Bible."

"Yeah, but, partner, you can't count them. They were back in the old days. Things were different and they, well they're different."

"Nope, they had pretty much the same problems we do and made the same mistakes. Look at David, for example. He got his friend's wife pregnant, and if that weren't enough, he then had him killed to cover it all up."

"No ways, you mean the little feller who killed the giant bear of a man? He did that?! "

"Sure, and Moses got real good and mad at Israel and disobeyed God. He smacked a huge boulder with his walkin' stick to make water come out, when God told him to only speak to the rock. And of course, we all know about Adam and how

he had only one thing that he couldn't do. But he just HAD to eat that apple thing."

"Well, I think he only did it cause he was naked and he was being fed by his naked wife. Cause, I don't think a man can say no when he's naked." Flint stopped and looked down. "Was it okay to say that?"

"Well, I don't think you are in danger of hell fire, but I wouldn't say it to many folks, especially the ones who think you're crazy as a loon."

Flint chuckled as he spoke. "Yeah, I guess it wouldn't help if, when I see the judge again, I told him about a new interest in the nakedness of Adam."

Both men erupted with laughter.

After settling down from their joking, Gray looked down at the ground and scratched his cheek, trying to think. "What was I just saying?"

Flint exhaled a deep breath and looked into the sky trying to think of what Gray had said before their momentary detour.

Gray snapped his fingers as he recalled their original conversation. "That's right, people messing up. Anyways, where was I going with that? I was just going to say that all these folks in the Bible were just as human as us. Sometimes the church folks forget that fact. David thought about God on his bed and sang songs to Him in fields. Adam walked around the Garden of Eden with Him, naked no doubt, as we already discussed. And Moses spoke to God face-to-face 'as a man speaks to a friend.'"

"What if God just does things differently?" Flint smiled a little and looked back towards the church, sheepishly. "I don't mean to hassle you or nothing, just—"

Gray cut him off, brushing away Flint's insecurities. "Partner, when I was in your shoes a few years back, all I did was ask questions. If you ain't askin' questions and finding answers fer yourself, you either don't care or you're just a fool. If you try to find answers to questions having to do with God, 'searching for it like gold' I can guarantee you, God will oblige. And, to answer your question about God doing things differently, it ain't so. It says in the Bible, 'He is the same, yesterday, today and forever.' Here's the thing though, partner: Learning to talk to God ain't no picnic. Yeah, it's simple and not hard to understand. But it takes years of practice. Not cause He doesn't want to talk to us, but cause we don't know how to listen to Him. The most important thing you can know about talking to God is this: He usually speaks in a still and small voice."

Even though they went over it a few times, Flint was having trouble understanding how a great and powerful God could or would want to speak to someone as small

and troubled as himself. Gray said believing that God is there for us is one of the hardest things to believe. Sure many said they believed, but they didn't really put their trust in God. They would trust money, guns, or good horses for whatever they needed. If they were lonely or having a rough time at home, they wouldn't turn to God but to a bottle or a woman. How can you really believe in God if you don't go to the creator of all things, when things were bad?

Two weeks later Flint looked up from atop his and God's hill. He had just finished reading three chapters of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. He looked up at the sky. It was almost totally invaded by the sun. "Well, God, I'm still working out this whole prayer and hearing your voice, thing." He stopped and looked around, making sure there wasn't anyone listening in, even though he had checked only five minutes ago. He suddenly realized that worrying about what others thought didn't help his belief. He looked slightly upwards at the sky. "Sorry, God, I ain't perfect yet, but that's why Gray says you came down here as Jesus. Right?"

It was almost half an hour later when Flint left the hilltop where he was spending time with his Maker. Although the transforming gunman knew he had a long way to go, he also had to admit, that after spending time on that hill, he felt lighter, refreshed and happy.

Flint and Gray had been building every day for two weeks, except, half of Saturday and resting on Sunday. When Flint first heard the news that his "community service" was finishing the church, he was not extremely thrilled. He knew that anything would be better than going to prison, but he hadn't done manual labor in a long time. He had bad memories of the last few months he had spent on the ranch where he had reached his manhood. That was the last time he had worked with a rope and shovel.

Flint and the rest of the ranch hands he had worked with were in the middle of another pointless range war. Now that Flint was older and beginning to understand more of the sin of men, he realized that it was nothing more than a cockfight. Sure, both ranges needed those green valleys with their fresh springs for the cattle, but neither ranch needed both valleys. Yet, big ranchers, being the way they were, decided that they were both entitled to the whole pot. It was all or nothing; no matter

who got killed.

The young Flint had spent those last few months on the ranch never further than arm's reach from a rifle and always carrying his Colt. They had to work double shifts almost every day. If you weren't on guard duty or lookout, you were working the load of two men. If you weren't breaking your back, then you were on patrol. After three and a half months of working too much, burying two friends, and forcing the opposing ranch to bury two of their own, Flint had enough of riding for the brand; he was out.

Flint packed up, went to his boss's big ranch house and demanded his pay. At first, the boss threatened to not give it to him on account of his desertion. He was about to call the young man yellow, but Flint drew first. They were standing in the main ranch house living area. On the far wall was a picture of the ranch boss and his family. It was not a flashy quick draw. When you draw like that, usually a gunman needed to let loose three or four shots to hit anything. Instead, with smooth pace, Flint drew his Colt and neatly put a bullet-hole in the photograph, through the head of the rancher. Flint looked at his ex-boss in the eyes and spoke with an eerie calmness. "You're lucky you didn't finish calling me yella."

Most would probably call Flint lazy for hating manual labor, but the gunfighter wasn't. He had bad memories. But the memories that kept him from working with his hands were now washed away.

Working on the church was not anything like working for the old rancher. It was even fun. Everyone was interested in one common goal that had nothing to do with making money or bettering one physical person.

Every morning before they would start the day's work, the reverend, who could outwork even the best of them, would gather all the men together to pray for safety and that no one person would ever claim glory here but Lord Jesus Christ. From then on, everyone worked hard and never complained. Some would sing, others were constantly talking amongst themselves while working. The quieter men would only keep working, and then laugh periodically when someone would tell a joke. That was Gray. He loved talking to anyone in a one on one situation but did not say much more than three words in a group.

Flint smiled to himself as he was gathering tools for the day's work. He was really looking forward to building. Today they would continue finishing the construction of the roof.

Flint was whistling to himself when Gray rushed into the barn. "Flint, you better

get some coffee and food down quickly. There is some trouble in town that the marshal needs our help with." Gray turned to the saddles and reins, lying on top of the barn's railing.

Flint grunted with disappointment. "I was really enjoying not having trouble. Do you know what the story is?"

"I don't know the whole story, but you better tie your guns down. The message said something about "the Kid."

Within fifteen minutes, they were on the road. Flint chewed on a stick of jerky while trotting his horse towards town. The thought-provoking name from the message plagued his mind as his horse carried him down the trail: the Kid.

The Kid was a nickname that was as well-known as any outlaw or gunfighter in the Great West. The reputation was earned by a young guy who was said to go absolutely mad-dog crazy when he did not like something or someone. Most everything Flint had heard was five or six people removed from its original source, which was common for the West and the reason why he didn't believe all the stories he heard. Although, there was one first-hand story about "the Kid" that Flint heard while he was riding.

It came from a Mexican man who ran a canteen from his home in southern Texas. The muchacho was a very nice family man who never tolerated troublemakers. So, when Flint and Johnny stepped into the family-owned café and saw the blood-stained ground, they had to ask. The terrified Mexican man spoke in a hushed tone, "the one of whom I speak was possessed by evil spirits that should never be angered."

The canteen was a separate building to the family's home. The walls were made of roughly hewn stones and mud with a roof that was constructed from tied dead wood. It wasn't the nicest place, but the food was hot, it was clean, and the sun was kept out. If you stayed inside the little Mexican café long enough, your eyes would actually forget that the sun was still in the sky. The cafe seated twelve comfortably.

Apparently, it was a busy day. A lot of men were on the trail due to good weather. The canteen owner and his wife and oldest children were busy serving beans and tortillas to all the weary riders. He didn't take too much notice to a lone rider who slipped in through the doorway. He stepped in and asked for beans in a quiet voice. The soft-spoken rider wore a long, dark slicker, even though it had not rained in almost two weeks. He did not raise his head or take his hat off to allow anyone the chance of seeing his face. He ate quietly in the corner of the small, dark building.

The Mexican man stated that if not for the other men who had followed him inside, not one person would have known. Unfortunately for them, they all found out.

The would-be posse burst through the door. Apparently, they had already scouted the canteen because they immediately fanned out. They were caked with dirt from riding hard, and sweat dripped down their faces. They trapped the Kid into the corner of the building and flanked him. The leader of the group was a man whose brother was killed by the Kid. He had three friends with him and two of them were said to be gun-slick and most likely hired. As the group finished pouring through the doorway, the rest of the canteen patrons escaped outside into the sunlight. The owner slipped his family out the back door. He watched the rest from the bottom half of the backdoor.

The main leader of the group spoke first as he removed his hat and slicked back his hair with a trembling hand. "Are you gonna take this like a man or start crying like the yellow-bellied baby that you are?" Sweat dripped from his hands.

The Kid sat in the same place for some time not looking up. A buzzing fly landed on the Kid's face and crawled around his cheek, but he did not flinch.

"Well, are you going to sit there and let me call you yellow? I'm sure you will, cause you are. You are nothing but a yellow dog who picks on little kids. Like my brother!"

The Kid's hat tilted up slightly. "It was a fair fight, and he asked for it, not me."

The man laughed as he dropped his hat on one of the crudely built tables. "Well, I'm gonna call this fight, but it ain't gonna be fair."

What happened next is what had turned the Kid into an infamous legend. His head began swaying back and forth very slowly. Then, as if someone had lit a fire in his mouth, his head jerked harder and faster until his whole body seemed to be out of control. The men who had chased this crazy Kid were at a loss as to what to do. Without warning, he exploded with fury and unnatural speed. Instead of drawing, he lunged at the group of men, smashing his forehead into the leader's nose while he simultaneously reached deep into his long coat that hid his double gun rig.

The men were stunned by his move, which gave him time to put bullets into the stomach of both the hired guns that were on the Kid's flanks. The only man who had not been touched was in the middle and to the left of the Kid. He reached for his gun, but the Kid got to him first. Instead of trying to beat his draw, the enraged Kid took two quick outside steps past the drawn gun of the scared man; they stood nose to nose. The Kid lifted his knee hard into the groin of the stunned gunman.

As the cafe owner had described it, the Kid surveyed his “handy-work” with mild amusement. Four men that had him cornered and outgunned now moaned on the ground in agony. The victor raised his hands revealing two large .44 caliber pistols. He deliberately took his time. He turned to each helpless man, one at a time and fired twice into their skulls, starting with the leader.

The beaten leader had been trying to wipe a flood of tears out of his eyes so he could see what was happening. His nose had been crushed, so his eyes continued pouring liquid. As some vision came to him, he beheld his last sight: two gun barrels. The other three men beheld the same last vision, as the Kid forced them from this world and into the next. He stepped over the bodies, mounted his horse, and rode on. He had used ten bullets to kill four men, and they had used none.

What stuck out to Flint the most, was when the Mexican man told him of the cold and callous way the Kid had killed the men. It was not wrong for him to kill them; they had started the fight. But did he have to kill all of them? From how the story was told, it sounded as if he executed them.

Now Flint was riding to meet and possibly take care of such a man. All of a sudden, Flint was wondering if he should be eating something a bit more substantial, a meal that would be worthy of his last.

“Partner, do you know who we are facing?” Flint was pretty sure Gray knew about this guy, but he wanted to get his partner’s thoughts on the situation.

“Yeah, well, actually I know who he is, but I just need to know what he is.”

“What he is? Well, I can tell you. He ain’t no greenhorn or a snowflake.”

“No, I don’t mean that, Flint. I mean is the Kid a man or a demon who takes over a man. I’ve handled a few of these guys in the last couple of years, and trust me, I don’t take these things lightly. As a matter of fact, I must admit that I am scared all the way down to my britches. I do the best I can takin’ on these situations with God’s strength, not my own. We just have to have faith.”

“Faith?” Flint queried.

“Once I hear what God wants me to do, I believe what He tells me to do is right, then I do it. That is what faith is. Even though you can’t know in your mind what is right, you’re still willing to do it. Remember what I was telling you about trusting God and not men? Well, if God wants us to talk to the Kid so he can meet Jesus then that will be the safest place on earth.”

“Well, I’m still a bit confused, so...I’ll let you do all the talking. Hey, wait a minute.” Flint stopped in mid-sentence as he had a thought. “Is that how you handled me? In

God's strength and with faith?"

Gray grinned. "You bet. If I didn't, you probably would have shot me dead."

Flint's jaw dropped a bit as the realization hit him. "That's why I was acting so strange. When you talked to me, it was as if someone or something was encouraging me to do stuff that just wasn't me." It was starting to make sense now as he recalled his actions over the past few months.

"And that is why we need to be praying for the Kid right now, 'cause I know God has a plan for him just like He had one for you and me."

"You're right. How should we pray? Oh, and by the way, Gray, your right, I probably would have shot you if God hadn't been holding me back." Flint chuckled, hoping the kidding would take the edge off the situation.

Gray took a deep breath and peace relaxed his face as he listened for the Holy Spirit. "Sure, right, old man." Gray slipped in with a quick grin. "But let's not argue and just stay silent, listening for God's wisdom until we get to town."

They exchanged looks and quietly chuckled. The peaceful look on Gray's face deepened into a spiritual determination. Flint noted this as he began to pray in silence alongside his mentor. Flint knew it would be nothing short of a miracle if the Kid was reached. Yet, according to the Bible, greater things had happened. They finished the rest of the ride, silently being strengthened by their God, the Strong Tower.

They pulled up in front of the marshal's office and tied their horses. They stood in the doorway while Gray called out. "Wyatt? You here?"

Johnny's voice replied as he came from the ally beside the jail building. "He ain't here, fellas. He is trying to make sure everyone stays clear of the Kid."

Flint and Gray shook hands with Johnny and walked into the office.

"I can see you ain't happy about our guest" Flint pointed down at Johnny's waist. He was carrying an extra gun.

"No, I ain't. You both should know why."

Quick footsteps ran up behind them. The three men grabbed for their guns as they turned. It was only a boy who Flint recognized from church. "Deputy, come quick! The Marshal's in trouble. The Kid's got him and has a knife to his throat!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gray and Flint sprinted out the door with the deputy on their heels. Running down the thoroughfare, they dodged horses and wagons, trying to get to the marshal in time. Flint didn't like running—ever. Cowboys generally didn't run. They were all horsemen and proud of it. His hand was grasping his black cowboy hat, pinning it against his head as he tried to keep up with Johnny's desperation and Gray's swift feet. They slowed down at the corner of the building, before the entrance to the saloon, in unison. No one wanted to spook the Kid. Bursting through the door with guns drawn was out of the question.

Gray spoke, only slightly out of breath. "Flint, why don't you and Johnny go around the back. One of you try to get behind the bar and the other one go around, behind his left side. I'll make sure he's facing me towards the front doors. Don't be too quick to shoot if you get a bead on him. Give me a chance to talk him down before you shoot." Gray handed his rifle to Flint as everyone nodded in agreement. "Oh, and Flint, don't forget to be praying."

"I will," Flint replied, panting heavily. "Praying?" Johnny looked at him sideways while he sucked in air, desperately trying to slow his heart. "How are you going to have time to pray? That's the craziest thing..." Before the deputy could finish, Gray began creeping up to the batwing saloon doors in front and Flint took off towards the other side of the building, to find a backdoor. Johnny shook his head in confusion as he chased after Flint.

Gray took a deep breath, checked that his blades were ready and on his hips, threw up a prayer, and started his walk up the two wooden steps through the doors and into the saloon. As he entered, he felt a supernatural peace grow from his belly, enveloping the deepest part of his body. Gray could sense a lot of fear and anger, but his emotions were under control keeping him an unnaturally calm. As he pressed the saloon's batwing doors open, the unexplainable peace in Gray made him smile.

The men in the building were tense and wide-eyed. Broken glass and spilled liquor had made a large and dangerous puddle in the middle of the floor.

The Kid had the marshal's left arm twisted behind his back and a bowie knife pressed into the neck of the stone-faced lawman. Gray could not help but admire Marshal Wyatt's ability to compose himself. But he had been in this uncomfortable

position for quite a while and something had to be done quickly.

Still smiling, looking like a man without a care in the world, Gray walked towards the Kid who viewed him with malicious eyes. Gray stepped closer to the bar and looked up and down the bar to no avail. He asked, "Where's the barman?" He turned to the crazed killer. "Hey, Kid, you know where the barman went off to? I'm really thirsty." The Kid said nothing but his face showed confusion. Gray, seemingly unaware of the knife against the marshal's throat, gripped the bar and pushed himself up to peer over the wood countertop. The barkeeper was cowering on the ground between two crates of rye whiskey. "Ah-ha, there ya are, partner. Do you have any coffee going?"

The barman slowly pushed himself up to his knees and stared at Gray with disbelief. "Are you crazy?" he whispered back.

Gray stared back at the barman and returned the look of disbelief. "Now, the last time I checked, most places 'round these parts sold coffee." Gray turned his head and looked at him sideways. "You must be one of 'em saloons that only carry booze. Well then, I will have to settle fer beer. One please, actually." He held up one finger as a sign to wait one minute, then looked at the Kid. "You want one, too?"

Finally, the Kid responded, but not as Gray had hoped. "Someone is going to die." His voice was too full. More than one voice spoke through him.

Gray did not react or seem to notice. "Only one please; he ain't having any."

The barman did not move.

Gray sighed and hopped over the bar—"Okay, I'll do it"—and got to work pouring himself a beer from the tap while he whistled. He stopped whistling and took a drink.

The Kid spoke at Gray. "Are you ready to lose more souls. We know you have saved sooo many." His tone was mocking. "Try your luck here and now, if you are THAT good." The demons smirked.

Gray looked the possessed man in the eyes. "Mmm, that ain't too bad. I'd rather have coffee, but it does wet the whistle." Gray placed his beer on the counter, hopped back to the other side, and picked up his drink again. He stepped within 6 feet of the marshal.

"Any closer and he dies!" The Kid screamed at Gray. Spit and hot air chased the words from his mouth.

Gray covered his drink to keep the saliva from flavoring his Ale. "You don't gotta git all upset about it and all."

Out of the corner of his eye, Gray spied the back door open and close slowly.

The bar blocked his line of sight to the bottom half of the door, so Gray could only assume that Flint and Johnny were both sneaking around the Kid, flanking from behind.

The Kid did not seem to notice and continued talking with a smirk. “You think we do not know who you are; the one they call the ‘Boy’? We know who are and whom you serve. You will never touch us!” He grunted out the last part of his words and then continued, “We know you use blades, place them on the bar.” He stiffened the marshal’s arm and the knife that was still being pressed against his throat as a warning. Small droplets of the marshal’s blood rolled down his neck.

With one hand, Gray slid the blades onto the counter and with his other hand, Gray took a sip from his drink. “That’s okay, I won’t need those weapons to handle you, devils. Well then, since you know who I am, let’s just stop beating ‘round the bush. First, I want to know how many of you there are.” Gray spied Flint coming up from behind the right side of the Kid with his colt in hand.

The spirits inside the Kid laughed out loud. “You think I would ever tell you that? Don’t try to be in control, we are in—”

Not allowing him to finish, Gray cut him off. “In the name of Jesus Christ, shut up! You may be servants of the Devil, but I am a son of the Most High God and serve Jesus Christ in this world.” Gray did not yell and only slightly raised his voice. He spoke with bold confidence instilled by a Spirit stronger than any other.

The Kid’s mouth shut, and his eyes turned even more manic.

“Now, in the name of Jesus Christ, how many are you? Speak!”

“Ten.”

Gray grinned. “Is that all? You would need a lot more than that to stop Jesus. Of course, it doesn’t matter how many you got. You’ll never stop Jesus Christ, cause He’s already won! Now, leave the marshal alone, cause you know you would rather have me.”

“We may never be able to stop you. You are of the One who we will not name. But we can kill all the same.” After dropping the bowie knife, the Killer threw the marshal at Gray with brute force and grabbed for his guns.

Gray moved his body to one side and let the exhausted lawman fall behind him. As Gray straightened back up, he held up his hand and spoke louder than Gray himself thought he was capable of.

“Stop!” This time Gray did not say it in the name of Jesus Christ, but everyone knew whose power Gray was using

The Kid stopped in the middle of a double, cross draw. He growled and screamed at Gray, but could not move. Flint circled around towards Gray, keeping himself as far away from the Kid as possible, with a gun aimed at the frozen, screaming gunfighter. Johnny came out from his hiding spot behind the bar. He hopped over the bar to help the marshal to his feet and out the door.

“You want me to shoot him?” Flint’s gun was aimed at the kid’s head and a bit shaky. “He ain’t nothing but a madman now, like a wild animal. Ya can’t really trust what he’s gonna do.”

“No, put yer gun away.” Gray was still focused spiritually. He wasn’t saying anything or acting in any different way on the outside. He was allowing the Spirit of God to control the situation through him. “Flint, could you git everyone out?”

The bartender, who was still as scared as a cornered jackrabbit, spoke up with a quivering voice. “I can’t let you do that. I have a business to run here. Can’t you git him outside?”

Gray turned his head to the left and raised one eyebrow and hissed through clenched teeth. “Just get everyone outside, please. Flint, you stay with me.” Again, this extremely authoritative Gray took Flint by surprise. However, it was comforting to the old gunslinger that someone seemed to know what was going on.

After the bewildered crowd carefully funneled outside, silence owned the room for several moments. The saloon doors swung back and forth, squeaking. After several long tense moments, Gray turned to his partner. “What we have to do first is to find out where these devils come from.”

He turned to the Kid, who was still holding two large hand-carved horse pistols in a frozen, half drawn position. “In the name of Jesus, tell me your names; who are you?”

The demons, manifesting themselves from the Kid, snarled their answer. “Hatred, Bitterness.”

Gray smiled. “Well, devils, this just ain’t your lucky day. You see, I already took care of those a while ago in my own life. So you can make a move and leave now, or we’ll have to do it the hard way.”

The demons hardened the Kid’s face. “You know, we can’t do that, son of the Most High.”

Flint was trying as hard as he could to pray, but he was having trouble focusing. After all, one of the deadliest men in the West was speaking with ten different voices at once, holding half-drawn guns and growling like a grizzly bear.

"In the name of Jesus, put your guns on the bar and slide them this way," Gray demanded.

As though forced by unseen giant hands, the Kid obeyed, growling all the more.

"Now, stay there." Gray pointed to where the Kid was standing.

Flint surveyed the weapons as the Kid dropped them on the bar. They were .44 caliber Remington pistols, a very efficient weapon with a lot of power and accuracy. Each had custom ivory handles and were more than a foot in length. Flint noted that both weapons were in immaculate condition and almost glistened with perfection.

After wiping sweat from his brow with the cuff of his sleeve, a question occurred to Flint. "Uh, Gray, you didn't say in the name ah Jesus Christ like before. Just seems like something important you were saying, why not now?"

Gray nodded his head. "You're right, partner, it is very important. But not so important that you say it, but that you are it."

Flint was confused, "Thanks a lot, Cochise. Anything else hard to understand you wanna tell me while I am next to the most feared killer around?"

Gray's patience was thick, and he smiled. "Speaking with the name of Jesus Christ—"

Interrupting Gray, the demons screamed, "Stop saying that Name!"

Gray ignored them and continued on, "is saying that you are coming with His strength and not your own. It is a way of life more than some magical words. The apostle Paul said that our earthly bodies are now dead and hidden in Christ."

The demons shuddered again. "If you or going to keep talking about HIM then get rid of us, boy!"

Gray paid no heed. "The more I know Jesus Christ, personally, then the more I become like Him. My old selfish and fearful thoughts and habits are replaced by Jesus' power and love. Since Jesus has all authority over every kind of evil spirit on this earth, and He lives in us, they have to obey us, as long we remain dead to our old selves and alive in Jesus."

"Stop saying His name!" The demons were frantic.

Becoming irritated with the demons, Flint snapped back. "Y'all shut it, in the name of Jesus."

The demons relaxed a little and smiled insidiously. The possessed Kid slowly moved towards Flint as the demons spoke. "Flint, you don't know your identity, do you??"

"I do, so stop!" Gray shot back.

The demons stammered back as though they had been repelled by an unseen force.

Flint stated, "I don't get why that would make a big difference."

"Think of it this way. Jesus said that all power on earth had been given to Him by Father God, and He also told us to continue His work on this earth. Part of that is to cast out the little devils. The loco thing is that once we accept Jesus, we are given that power. It's similar to when the army gives you your rifle. Every soldier has the ability to shoot. Not every soldier knows how to shoot well.

"Now, our mission is to set the captives free. With these little devils causing havoc"—Gray pointed with his thumb at the spirits and they sneered back—"we have to get rid of them for folks like the Kid, so they can taste real freedom in Christ. That means, Flint, you need to start learning to shoot an entirely different weapon."

"Okay, so how does God teach me to shoot?"

Gray smiled. "The Bible says that we when we received Jesus and His grace we have been made children of God. So, if you remember that you are the son of God almighty, know it in your heart, then you can do all things in God's authority. You just gotta remember, you, Flint, are a son of God!"

"I don't git it." Flint confessed.

"Don't worry. If you keep trying to get closer to Jesus, then one day you will."

Gray turned to the Kid. "As for you, devils, it's time."

The Kid's eyes flashed red and an insidious smile grew on his lips, "You know how it works, boy! We don't have to go."

Gray sneered and his eyes turned colder than ice. Flint had seen him in a firefight, arguments and other tense situations, never had he seen the vicious stare he now had. Gray's breath was tense and his teeth clenched.

"NO! You cannot speak to him, never will you..." The demons tried to get Gray to back off.

Gray's voice bellowed with authority. "I bind you in the name of Jesus Christ, be gone!"

The Kid's face softened, his eyes cleared and his hands hung limp at his side. Flint hadn't noticed before, but he was young and his appearance was almost delicate.

The Kid shook his head and muttered something about it happening again. Then stopped and looked up with a slight smile. "Finally! Peace," he said softly and softly chuckled to himself.

He then stiffened as he noticed Flint with his Colt in hand and Gray smiling at

him. "Who are you?" His voice was soft and frantic, like a confused child. After he looked around at the bar noticing it was completely empty with broken glass on the wooden floor, he quickly sized up Gray and Flint. "What do you want? Have you been sent to kill me?"

"Nope, Kid, we ain't here to fight you." Gray reached over and picked up his large pistols from the bar and handed them back to the Kid.

Confused, the Kid re-holstered them with ease.

"My name is Gray and this here is Flint. We're here to help you out." Gray relaxed himself on the bar, leaning on one arm and took another drink of his beer. He spoke in a soft, concerned voice. "You know all those voices that convince you to do things that sometimes you don't want to do?"

The Kid was shocked by what Gray had said, "For any inconvenience I may have caused, I apologize. However, my personal life is of no concern of yours!"

Gray's eyes intensified so much that the Kid took a step back. "Is this the kind of life your mom would want for you? There is nothing you could have done to stop what happened to her."

The air seemed to be sucked from the Kid's body. The men stood silently in the same position for what seemed like an eternity, while what Gray said registered in the Kid's brain. Flint was ready to draw, but the need to did not arise.

The Kid took a deep breath and his voice quivered as he spoke. "What must I do?"

Gray took another swig of his drink and slammed his glass down on the bar with jovial enthusiasm, the leftover beer splashed out of the glass onto the counter. "Well, I just had a nice talk to those voices inside your head, and I made them leave. Problem is, if you don't replace them with something good, they'll be back...times seven!" Gray took out a few coins and tossed them on the bar, then he turned serious. "It ain't gonna be easy. It's gonna take hard work, but we'll help you through it. If you wanna come with us, we have a place where we can talk some more. But first, we have to have a chat with the marshal and convince him to let you come with us instead of going to jail."

The Kid did not respond. He only turned and walked amongst the tables to where he had apparently been sitting before the ruckus started. He reached down and picked up a writing tablet and pencil lying on the table. He place the tablet inside his long coat and his pencil in his pocket and walked back towards Flint and Gray, who waited for him to pass between them, then followed the Kid through the swinging saloon doors.

The entire town was outside, waiting and watching from a distance. A light breeze swirled dust down the main street. Most of the men's guns were drawn, and the women stood in the background with fear, yet enough curiosity to chance a possible shootout. The three men passed between the onlookers. Gray took the lead after seeing the mob with drawn guns. The Kid untied his horse and walked with Flint and Gray. They escorted the Kid up the street towards the marshal's office.

Johnny exploded out of the office with a Winchester aimed from the hip and pointed it at the Kid's chest. "What do you think you're doing? I'm not going to let that guy come in here and finish the job on Wyatt," he shouted in Gray's direction. "The Marshal took me in when no one else would. He is the only friend I have in this lousy world, so nothing and no one's gonna take him away; ya understand?"

Gray stepped in front of the rifle. "I understand."

Johnny's face hardened. "I don't think you do."

Gray's eyes sharpened, "I do understand, Johnny."

Johnny eased back a little and looked the Kid up and down. Noticing something about him that was different. He looked like a different person, but in the same get-up.

Flint stepped around Gray. "Hey, he's okay, Johnny. It's a long story, but we are here to talk to you and Wyatt about helping him out."

Johnny was not impressed or convinced. He kept the Winchester aimed at the Kid as the trio stepped into the marshal's office. Marshal Herp was sitting in his chair with a bandage around his neck. He had a cocked Colt on his desk in front of him and a double barreled shotgun across his lap. There was an open bottle of scotch he was using to calm his tense nerves in front of him. His eyes stayed locked on the Kid who looked around casually with a keen eye. His long black raincoat hid his nickel-plated pistols. That did not matter, the marshal knew they were there, and if the Kid even reached under his coat, the lawman's scatter-gun would tear him in half.

As the Kid turned, he made eye contact with the marshal. The marshal leaned back in his chair and looked at him bewildered, something was different.

The young man spoke and shocked the marshal and his deputy. "I would like to apologize for my actions in the establishment located down the street. It was an unmerited response, and I now realize that you were merely attempting to have a professional conversation with me. Please accept my humblest apologies." The Kid spoke with a refinement and an accent that could only come from a well-educated Easterner.

After a few moments of confused silence, Gray broke the silence. “Flint, can’t you and the Kid wait outside for a bit while I talk to the marshal?”

Both men stepped outside.

Wyatt almost exploded. “What in blue-blazin is going on here!?”

“Listen, Marshal, the Kid has agreed to spend some time with me ‘n Flint. He’s got some things to work through, but he’s willing to work out his issues.”

“I ain’t lettin’ that kid leave the sights of my guns till I have some answers.” Wyatt’s voice was sharp.

Gray took a deep breath and plopped down in the chair opposite of the marshal. “You remember your Bible, Marshal?”

The marshal raised his eyebrows a bit. “Yeah, I remember my Bible. You ain’t gonna start preachin’ at me, are you?”

“No, but it’s the best way to explain what’s going on with the Kid.”

“Go on.”

“Well, you remember that time when Jesus had that naked guy screaming at him, telling him to leave, then Jesus told all those demons to go into the herd of pigs. Then the pigs ran off a cliff into the water and drowned?”

“Yeah, I remember it,” the marshal replied, slightly irritated. He wanted to get to the point.

Gray flashed a half-nervous grin. “The Kid kind of had that experience. A lot a demons messing with his head. Whenever he let ‘em take over, he’d go crazy and didn’t know what he’s doing. We got rid of them for now, so he’s himself; he’s under control.”

“Well, that’s fine and all, if it’s even true, but how are you planning on helping him?” Wyatt exhaled and wondered if one bottle of scotch was going to be enough after this day.

“The devils were there cause of some bad experiences that happened to the Kid a while back. We need to take care of the hatred and bitterness that’s inside of him, otherwise more demons will come back, and it’ll be even worse.”

“So how do I know these demons aren’t gonna come back and kill someone or something?”

Gray smiled. “Lord willing they won’t, but because they came through the Kid, he’ll need to deal with them. It’s his choice, but it’s a choice he’s willing to work on. If he’s around me they won’t come back, cause Jesus has given me power against demons.”

Wyatt stood up and looked around. "I don't know, this is all crazy to me." Demons controlling an infamous killer, what's next, the marshal thought to himself. He said the only logistical marshal type thing he could think of. "Well...who's going to pay for the damages at the bar?"

"I'll take care of it," Gray agreed.

Wyatt was about to pour himself another whiskey, but he stopped and placed the bottle down. "Well, I do wanna help that kid, if he's had a bad past. But I can't let no one git hurt, ya hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. I leave him with you. But here's the deal: If it's okay with the Reverend and his Mrs., he'll stay with ya'll fer two weeks. After that, we will see how he's doing."

"Agreed. And thanks," Gray replied with a smile. Inwardly Gray prayed, Lord Jesus, help me! Please!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Flint leaned against a building, and started rolling himself a smoke as he spied the lingering crowd of gawkers on the other side of the street. 'Well now, it's been a long time since I had a smoke.' He thought to himself. He finished rolling the paper around the tobacco with moistened lips. He popped it into his mouth and stuffed his hand into his pocket for a light. Realizing his impoliteness, he glanced up then offered his tobacco with an outstretched hand. "Kid, you want?"

The Kid was standing with his hands resting against his coat clasped together in front of him. When the kid turned around to speak to Flint, he did so with an air of refinement. Most cowboys would either cock their head over their shoulder and reply or twist halfway around with a hand resting on their gun. Instead the Kid turned his entire body around and squared off with his hands still resting in front of his body. It took Flint by so much surprise that he almost grabbed for his gun, until old gunslinger realized that the young man was only being polite.

"Thank you, but I will decline," was the Kid's response.

"All right, no problem, hope you don't mind if'n I do?" Flint asked.

"No, I do not. Thank you," The Kid responded.

The Kid began to turn, but Flint had to know. "I gotta know, Kid. Where you from?"

"The East"

This young gunslinger is quite a tough one to crack. Flint thought to himself. Been on his own for too long. Probably ain't talked to nobody in long while. Flint tried the relating approach. "Ya, me too. I'm from New Orleans originally, but I don't mind to never go back there again."

The Kid's eyes darkened. "I will never travel east of the Mississippi." His eyes relaxed again as Gray emerged from the marshal's office. "All right Kid, looks like I worked things out. There's a few conditions you have to agree to if you wanna come with me though." The Kid nodded and waited for Gray to continue. "You gotta stay with me for the next two weeks and..." he stopped and looked at the young gunfighter with as much sincerity as he could muster upon his face, "Ya need to check your guns in with the marshal."

Flint cut in, "Come on, Gray, that's bull...I mean, that ain't right. Some no-good glory hunter will bushwhack him when he can't do nothing about it!"

"I know, I know, Flint. I took care of it. Ya gotta give the marshal your two-gun rig, but he will hook you up with a Colt. Ya'll get them back after two weeks."

The Kid nodded his head, and with reluctance, took off his gun-belts. "I am complying because I am in the marshal's debt."

Gray took the guns and stepped into the marshal's office. A few minutes later he stepped back out and handed the Kid a Colt and belt. The belt had its day, but the pistol could shoot straight.

By this time most of the crowd around the street had left. The three men mounted their horses and began the trek out of town and towards the Cookshank's homestead. Neither Gray nor Flint knew how they were going to help this young man, but they both had faith that God did.

The Kid was looking happier. Not the brightest star in the sky, but his eyes were glowing a little brighter as the days rolled on.

The same was true of Flint. He was still spending time with God. It seemed that the more Flint spent time with his heavenly Father, the more Flint wanted to know about Him. He felt a craving growing inside of him to read more and more of the Bible, but an even greater craving to spend time with the only Father he had ever had. Now that he was helping Gray show Jesus' love to the Kid the same way Gray had done for him, Flint felt as if something new had come alive inside of him.

"It's hard to tell that you really know Jesus, unless His love is flowing out of your life, onto people around you." Gray had explained, "Jesus said that the most important commandment of all time was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. But the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. When church folk don't love others that don't know Jesus, then something's wrong. Jesus rode with people from both sides of the tracks. Also, Jesus is love. If we want to love people we have to show them Jesus or they will never feel fully loved. Remember this, Flint, the only way to get eternal love is through Jesus Christ."

The change began when, after two days of hard prayer and fasting, Gray was able to finally get the Kid to share his story. And it was about time! Flint hated not eating. At first, Gray would not let Flint fast.

The old gunslinger took it as a sign that Gray thought he was weak. If he ain't eatin', then I ain't. Gray don't gotta know, Flint thought to himself. After the first six

hours of not eating, Flint changed his mind; Gray could keep his stupid challenge. After all, what was the point of the stupid not eating anyway?

He asked Gray this, and Gray's answer was as simple as it always was. "Reason is, it's good for me to fast, cause it gives me more time to focus on praying. There is something about it that helps us focus only on God, and when you do it for the right reasons, it seems you pray even harder. I reckon it's only good not eating when God tells you not to or you feel it's needed, that's why I didn't want you to. It's probably best that you just concentrate on praying, but if you feel that God wants you to miss a meal or two, then go for it. Just make sure you're takin' that extra time to talk to God on behalf of the Kid, cause there ain't no reason to skip eating if you ain't praying instead."

Flint decided that he would not eat lunch. That was the first time that he felt like the Holy Spirit talked to him. After the Kid began breaking free, he knew for certain that it was God's Spirit. Flint knew that would be a day he would never forget.

The conversation that had helped the Kid break free happened at the end of another long day. The Kid was sitting on a rock in the middle of the meadow that was neighboring the Cookshank's home. His writing tablet was in hand, but as Gray learned, it was not used for writing, but drawing.

"Can I sit?"

The Kid stood politely as Gray made himself comfortable.

"Nah, Kid, you don't gotta do that."

He smiled. "Politeness holds similar habitual patterns for me as it may for others to breathe."

"Yeah, well, that is self-evident." Gray was trying to relate to this well-groomed gunman with larger words. "Can I see what you're drawing?"

The Kid handed over his drawing tablet with some apprehension. It was a picture of the scene that had introduced the Kid to Gray. It was a detailed picture of the Kid holding the large bowie knife to the throat of Marshal Wyatt with Gray standing in front of the two men. The likeness of the bar and the three men was uncanny. The picture was only black and white. Drawn by a single led pencil, it was still exquisite. Gray knew nothing of drawing or art, but from first glance, he knew this was incredible.

"Whoa, this is better than anything I'd ever seen. You go to school for this?" Gray handed the pad back to the Kid.

"No, Mr. Gray. I was almost expelled from school for doing this. I was not allowed

to draw. I taught myself in secret. My father..."—he paused for a split second—"was a very particular man."

Gray nodded and listened with intense prayer in his heart. This was the moment that he had been praying for. To make any progress, the Kid had to be honest with Gray. The best way to be honest was for this artist to share how he had become a stone-cold killer.

"But that is a story that I would not like to speak of at this moment, so if you will excuse me, Mr. Gray, I will continue my drawing." He took the pad back from Gray and began drawing again.

Gray knew he could not say much more, but then the Holy Spirit told him an insight into the Kid's life. "You know; it wasn't right for your Dad to not let you draw, just cause it wasn't his thing, but it was worse of him to treat your mom the way he did."

The Kid did not move his head or bat an eyelid. With his eyes still on his drawing, he spoke with the same refinement, yet he could not hide the emotion that was working its way to the surface. "Excuse me?"

"The way your dad treated your mom could not have been helped by you, Andrew." Gray stopped and only then realized what he had called the Kid.

"I did not tell you what my birth name is, did I?" The Kid put his writing tablet down and slowly looked up at Gray with a cold expression.

Gray replied with a supernatural calm. "No, you did not, Andrew. God told me. He also told me that it is time that you tell someone. You need to tell someone the whole story. I would like to be that someone, but you need to make the choice. That choice is a part of the process of getting rid of those demons for good, the ones that keep bothering you, so you can find lasting peace."

This was the key to unlocking the torment in the heart of the artist turned killer. As if his soul were a dam filled to overflowing, Andrew received another fresh flow of emotions, he had no space for. The strain was too much, so he spilled his guts. If written by Shakespeare, the Kid's story would be described as an extreme tragedy.

The Kid, or Andrew, was born to a very wealthy family in Maine. His father came from old money, he learned to be a social man and seemingly happy in parties and social events. But when the curtains were drawn and his party guests had left his closed fist would usually be used against those he loved, especially his wife, Andrew's mother. Every time Andrew had to hear the sounds of his screaming mother, he would hate his father that much more.

When Andrew was fourteen, he tried to stand up for his mother. His father had thrown him into a burning fire. It did not faze him. Andrew hopped out of the fireplace before any flame could ignite his clothing and stood. After realizing Andrew was not finished, his father made a move toward him again. Andrew was ready with a fire poker in hand, which found its mark across his father's face. Andrew's father felt the pain, but did not stop moving forward. He gripped the boy and threw him hard against the opposite wall. Andrew woke up in his bed the next morning, barely able to move. A week later, he was sent to a boarding school for boys, and there he lived year round, for several years. Andrew did not know the details, but when he received the message that his mother had had an accident, and fallen down a flight of stairs and died, he knew what had really happened.

Andrew took a steep dive into a world that he had never imagined. He became "the Kid" more and more every day. He did not go back to his family estate right away. He stayed away long enough to learn how to shoot a pistol straight. He had one thing on his mind: killing his father. Since his father was a dead shot, sober or drunk, Andrew knew he had to plan it carefully. The more he practiced, the more he realized that he was a natural. After months of shooting and allowing his hatred to grow, he made the journey to his family estate.

He did not go inside the house, but waited on the lawn until his father would finally see him. Andrew had to wait outside on the grass of the estate for more than six hours, but he knew his father was inside. More than ten times the servants came outside, begging him to leave before something bad happened. Every time they came outside to plead with him, he said in a calm polite voice, the exact same thing. "Would you please ask my father to come outside, armed. He will not be a coward anymore."

Finally, his father emerged and the Kid was ready. Andrew had been shooting with a modern six-shooter that was strapped to his side, but since his father's family had come from an old English heritage, they would follow the ancient pistol dueling rules. They would use single shot flintlock handguns and walk twenty paces from each other, starting at a back to back position.

They walked towards each other, not saying a thing, as was typical of their poor relationship. The father and son met in the middle. The older man was completely drunk, which did not mean that much, since he usually practiced shooting when inebriated.

His father's butler, an Afro-American man named Fredric was a friend of

Andrew's, and had been with this estate from boyhood, since the "Great War, between the States." He carried a large chestnut box. Inside were two 1770 British Flintlock Holster pistols. They were customized with hand carved decor and silver plating on either side. The red handles were made of a well-polished hardwood that chased the long barrels underneath the guns.

Father and son took care in loading their weapons and then turned their backs to each other. Neither man said a word until Andrew broke the silence, just before the pacing began. His words trembled with bitter hatred. "You killed my mother, and now I will kill you."

They began walking. The butler called out the steps, one at a time. At the end of twenty, the butler made his exit, half running up the steps of the mansion. There was a floating mist in the air, which made it difficult to see at forty paces. Considering the drunken state Andrew's father was in, it was difficult for him to see his son. However, Andrew's vision was perfect.

Because Andrew had called the challenge, his father would fire first. His father aimed, only able to make a faint blur in the distance, and fired. It missed Andrew, grazing his shoulder. Andrew smiled. It was an expression of hatred and rage. He was finally going to do what he had played out in his mind over and over again. Andrew was going to kill his father.

Andrew's bullet took out his father's leg. He could have killed him in one shot, but did it on purpose, wanting his father's last thoughts to be looking into the face of his own offspring, ending his life. Andrew, quickly transforming into the Kid, stood over his father, and without a tear in his eye, drew his side arm.

"You have always been a coward, father. You were never deserving of my mother, and now you are only deserving of a cold, lonely death." He placed two slugs in his father's forehead and walked away from the life of Andrew, never to look back.

He could not stay in Maine and most of the eastern seaboard would not be safe. So his long trek out west began. He did some bounty hunting, bank robbing and riding shotgun for a stagecoach line. After a while, he stuck with what he was best at, professional killing. He would have been a bit more verbal about how many men he had killed, except he eventually lost coherency every time he would be in a fight. That's when he began to realize that there was something different about how he was acting. He wanted to get rid of those little voices in his head and be in more control of his actions, but at the same time, he craved the power they gave him. The controlling spirits made him feel that he could do anything, which meant killing more men than humanly possible.

While travelling the West as a feared killer, Andrew had never stopped sketching. His steady hand had drawn a picture of every major event of his life, which usually had to do with killing someone. Although he had never stopped improving as a fighter, drawing had remained his passion.

Sitting on that rock next to Gray, it was the first time that Andrew had shared his entire story.

The next day in a church prayer meeting, after many hours of prayer against the demons that had been in control, Andrew accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He then prayed for God to help him to forgive those who had hurt him. After he said that, he kept trying to say something, but the air was literally being taken from him.

Gray, the Reverend and Mrs. Cookshank all yelled at the same time. "We bind you demons in the name of Jesus."

That did the trick, and Andrew screamed, "Especially my father!"

Through the battle of emotions, the sharing of hearts and the transformation of their new brother from the "Kid" to a reborn Andrew, Flint was with Gray and Andrew almost every day talking about Jesus. Chats were held between building the church, doing chores, and helping the Cookshank family around the homestead whenever possible.

The reverend would join in a lot as well. At the end of the long workdays, the reverend talked to the boys and sometimes he would end up taking long walks alone with Andrew. The topic, in-light of Andrew and Flint's past, always came back to forgiveness. The conversations that would ensue from these four very different men, were something to never forget. Flint would never forget one conversation in particular...

The chat had begun after dinner one evening. The reverend donned his jacket and picked up his pipe and tobacco. "Anyone wanna join me outside for a smoke?"

Flint was the first to jump at the opportunity. "Don't mind if'n I do. Gray? Andrew?"

"I will be present only for the conversation and company," was Andrew's polite

reply. "Well, I haven't had a smoke in a while, and I think tonight seems like a good smoking night." Gray said.

The reverend smiled. "Brother Gray, every night is a good smoking night." He spoke as he reached over his wife to retrieve his smoking kit from the top of the bookcase.

Mrs. Cookshank sat in her rocking chair knitting a scarf and did not look up from her work as she spoke, "And that is why I have to wash yer's and my clothes so much, Mr. Cookshank!" The reverend's wife chided as she looked up long enough to give her husband a small poke in the midsection with her knitting needle. "Kiss me now, while ya still smell decent."

They pecked on the lips and the four men made their way outside.

The sun had all but disappeared as the foursome sat together. Flint pulled out what he needed to roll a cigarette and then handed his tobacco and supplies to Gray.

The reverend was setting up his pipe as he began the conversation. "Can you believe there are folks back East that are trying to say that smokin' ain't Godly?"

Gray chuckled, "How's that possible, Reverend? What's next, that a little whiskey is evil?" Gray continued, "I mean getting out of control with anything like whiskey ain't good, and I never touch the stuff cause I think it's uglier than sin in my throat, but sounds strange that folks would think that way."

"Well, believe it, Gray, and it seems that belief is getting more popular," the reverend spoke as he lit his pipe. "There's this really good preacher, so I hear, from England. His name's Charles Spurgeon. Now, he is said to be one of the more powerful men 'round today. When he preaches, thousands show up and hundreds come to Jesus. Now, I know for a fact, he loves his C-gars. But he has taken a bit of flack 'bout it. Now, if it were the case that tobacco was bad fer ya, well, then I would have agreed that it ain't good to smoke too much, just like drinking. But everyone knows that smoking keeps you warm and helps ya live longer."

Andrew, who was sitting on the stoop of the porch, turned to face the group and added his two cents, "Actually, reverend, that has not been proven. I believe it is best to stay open minded about medical manners. We must wait for science to discover the truth."

"Right you are, Andrew, right you are." The reverend agreed.

Andrew's gaze turned back to the shades of orange, from the remnants of the sun, as he thought out loud pensively. "It seems to be the same with this new path of Christianity that I have chosen. It is as if the way my mind works must be changed in order to understand the way God chose to enact His will. For instance, to understand the full complexity of a God, coming down to earth as a man, allowing Himself to

be killed in the most dishonorable way possible, then asking His Father, the most powerful being in the entire universe, to forgive those that brought His demise, is well beyond my comprehension.”

All the men looked at Andrew with the same bewildered stare that he was used to, from days of confusing his new found friends with the way he spoke.

He condensed his statement. “I do not understand how Jesus could do that. Allowing Himself to be executed.”

All the men nodded in agreement, now having an idea as to what the well-educated young man was saying.

The reverend started off slowly. “He was meek, and it says that the meek will inherit the earth.”

Andrew nodded in agreement, while Flint looked to all the men's faces and asked, “What is ‘make’?”

Andrew's explanation sounded straight out of the oxford dictionary, “Flint, allow me to define the word for you. Meek is a word that quite literally means strength under control. It is used to describe a powerful being that is kind to a person, place or thing, which does not have the right to that specific kindness. A few other words that you might use in a modern day, western tongue, would be: unassuming, humble, or shy.”

Flint nodded his head, slowly, but still unsure. “So, it's kinda like grace.”

Gray jumped in. “Not totally like grace, but along those same lines. It's cause of God's meekness that He gives us His grace.”

“So,” Starting off slow and trying to pull this ‘meekness thang’ into perspective, Flint said, “If we need to act like Christ, then we also need to be make.”

Andrew cleared his throat, and drew letters in the air in an attempt help Flint visualize the word, “M-E-E-K, Meek, there is not an A in this word.”

Flint threw up his hands in frustration, “That's what I said, make.”

Gray forcibly moved the conversation on “Moving on. You're right, Flint. You do need to show meekness. And...sooner or later, God will give you a chance to be meek. There will be a time for you both, more than once, actually, that someone will deserve to be gunned down and you'll have the power to do it, but God will say no. If you shoot them after the Holy Spirit says no, that means that you didn't let Jesus be in control. It will mean you let your old self take over.”

“Even if they deserve it?” Flint questioned.

“As Jesus said, when He was being tortured and killed for no fault of His own,

'Father forgive them.' If you two can show the love of Christ to a guy, that you can lawfully kill, and whose been asking for it, then you will prove that God's ways are higher than the world's ways. That's how you, Flint and Andrew, can be meek."

Flint and Andrew gave each other a serious look, and both took a deep breath and sighed. For two well-known gunmen, that was a tall order.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“This family is out of hand!” The deputy yelled in anger. “Wyatt, we gotta put our foot down, and we gotta do it now before they git more gutsy.”

Marshal Wyatt Herp was leaning against a wall in his chair behind a dusty, worn desk. Placed squarely in the middle of the desk was an old wooden placard that simply stated “City Marshal.” He knew Johnny was right, but he also knew they were out gunned and a lot of the town supported these guys. As bad as they were, they were clever, and very good at lying and manipulating.

The marshal responded thoughtfully, “If it were just them that we were dealing with, then it would be different. We could have twenty guns from town ready to back us up, but a lot of the town supports these guys. If we ask some folks for help and not others, this entire town would explode, half would back them and the other half would back us. A lot of folks would be killed for no good reason. So, Johnny, ya need to keep control of that tongue of yers. So it don’t git shot off.”

Johnny was pacing back and forth, his pent-up anger and frustration bubbling up to the surface. “Well what the jink, we gonna do? If we keep letting these guys roll over us...”

“Wait a minute!” Marshal Herp stood and leaned over the desk and slammed powerful hands onto the wood. “We are not letting anyone ‘roll’ over us? You’re keep telling me we gotta do something?” Wyatt’s voice bellowed. “You think I don’t know? Johnny...I know. But, you forget, son, that I’ve been in this business longer than you’ve been alive. I’ve been through too much to run into this situation with guns blazing, shoot’n anything that moves. We gotta think through it carefully before we make our move; they have way too many friends.” Wyatt knew he had to move quickly, but he wasn’t about to admit that to Johnny, not with all of that hot blood running through his veins. The marshal’s face softened a bit as he leaned back to soften the blow he just unleashed on his young deputy, “Besides, I’ve invested way too much time in turning you into something useful to let you go and get your keister shot off.”

Both lawmen chuckled a bit and the thick, tense air in the office seemed to dissipate.

They both sat staring at nothing in particular, lost in their own thoughts, until Johnny broke the silence. “Ya know, Marshal, we have access to two really good gun hands, possibly three. That might not make it totally even, but it will...”

Wyatt held up his hand, "Ok, hold on a minute, I know what you're thinking, Johnny. But, we don't know where the Kid stands, and how far Flint and Gray will go."

"I know Flint, and he will back us all the way. As for Gray, he knows us and not them, plus he seems like a guy that would take the side of the law just on principle. The Kid, well, we'll just have to take the gamble. But it's the best chance we'll get against twelve guns, if we can't trust the town's folk." Johnny allowed desperation on his face to prove his point.

The marshal took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He and Johnny were both good and smart. Maybe even smart enough to handle four or five guns, but twelve? That would be impossible. There were a couple of men that the marshal could rely on for some back up, but they were not what they used to be, and they had families. He admitted to himself, the only option he could think of was deputizing the three new churchgoers. If justice would be done, they needed the talent.

"Okay, Johnny, you tell them what's going on. Get out to the Cookshank's as quick as you can. They need to be here before sun-up, cause we can expect these guys before noon. I will be back here, trying to work something out with the judge on paper to cover our backs."

Johnny was already in motion, and within minutes, was outside the office and walking briskly to the livery stable to saddle a horse.

The marshal watched him go, and as he did he asked himself the same question the long time lawman had asked half a dozen times before, "How did it get this far?" The question was rhetorical, as he had learned through years of fighting the good fight that men's intent on evil would always plague the earth. What he would rather ask himself or ask God up there, was how much longer he would have to be the one to stand up to these evil men.

Marshal Herp would like to think that his crime fighting days had started as a young man who had first toted a badge in a small cow town in the crime infested area of lower Texas, but that was not the case. His first experience fighting crime happened growing up on a tobacco farm, down in the deep South. This was before the Great War Between the States. Whereas most Southerners, as they allowed themselves to be called, said that General Sherman was the meanest thing to ever head down south. Wyatt knew that was not true.

The cruelest man Wyatt had ever known was the owner of the largest farm in the territory. He also was a neighbor to the Herp family. His name was Walter O'Hagen. He was an old Irishman and widower, who had lost his only son when the

boy was four years of age.

He had developed into a nasty-old cuss that most said came from an emotional cocktail of Irish blood and losing a wife and son. This deadly combination of unfortunate events had placed inside of him a desire to see everyone else fail where he had succeeded. He might have failed as a family man, but he was succeeding as a businessman. His aim was to tear down everyone around him and to be known as the “Tycoon of Tobacco.”

He had thousands of acres of land, some next to the Herp's property and some in another state. Accompanying his enormous farms were hundreds of slaves, who were the footstool he rested his financial feet upon. “There is only one thing better than land to invest in,” he would often be heard telling folks, “those hard working black animals. Once you've paid a slave off, you will have free labor and something to breed for years.”

Wyatt's father was the opposite. He had four strapping boys, of whom Wyatt was the second born, and two younger daughters. Wyatt's parents both did not believe in slavery, nor that the black man was inferior. His father would always say, “The only problem with the black man is that they did not have guns or money enough to stop someone from stealing them. All the slaves around were victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. So, why would I buy another man and force him to do my work for me, especially since we got four big boys that the good Lord gave me?”

And Wyatt and his brothers were big!

They loomed over many of the other men, and had hands tough enough to tear apart steel. The other white kids were not as strong and well-developed as the Herp boys. The other white families had slaves. So the slave owner's children only had to worry about the occasional hunting trip or caring for their personal interests and schoolwork. The Herp family did have three black workers. Their father had “purchased” them off the auction blocks and given them their freedom. Since most of their families were still in the area, they stayed and worked for the Herps. Hunting, farming, cleaning stables, feeding and grooming horses, milking cows, readying wood for the winter months, and doing the same school work that the other white boys did. These were only a few of the things that had created the Herps into the toughest and biggest boys around.

To add to their hardiness, was the Herp family's gun skills. At the age of seven, all Herps, men and women, learned to shoot a rifle. At age eight, the men were expected to help with hunting. By age nine, they were chasing down birds on their

own with a scattergun. At age eleven they began pistol practice twice a week. By the time each one reached the age of fourteen, the Herp boys could shoot better than most of the neighboring men. Their father was always insistent that his boys would be ready to defend themselves, their family, and their land.

Although, they were all good with a gun, Wyatt was the best. He was a bit faster and a better shot. When he would shoot, it would be with total confidence, and he would never hesitate.

His father would always say, "It's a good thing that yer so good with a gun and such things, Wyatt, to make up for the way you hate farmin'."

It was true, he hated farming with a passion, loved his family, but he would be happy to never touch soil again.

Even though the Herps could impose their will on others by throwing their weight around as a powerful fighting force, Mrs. Herp would not hear of it. She was a little woman. But when she spoke, she had fire in her breath. "The more power given, the more responsibility given. We have so much, and you boys are so strong and good with guns." At this point of her usual lecture, the little woman would look up into their eyes and point her finger at their noses one at a time. "And if you ever take advantage of some other folk cause they are weaker than you, you will deal with me, then with God, then with me again! You understand?"

Respectfully and in unison, the boys would reply, "Yes, Ma'am."

Although the boys were reputed to never be reckoned with, the Herp children were said to be some of the nicest and most respectful children around. That did not stop Mr. O'Hagen. Since the day Mr. Herp had outbid Mr. O'Hagen for the piece of land he now called home, O'Hagen had envied him. Some say it was because the land held three different water spots, two streams, and one spring. Others said it was only another reason for him to hate something.

The event that would change the marshal's life happened on a warm summer's night. Everyone was bedded down for the night, when a crash was heard through the farmhouse. Someone was breaking into the home. The three older boys and their father were down stairs within minutes, guns pointed at a dark figure laying on the ground. It was one of Mr. O'Hagen's slaves. He had been beaten half to death by one of the favorite weapons used by slave drivers—a bullwhip. He had obviously upset the wrong man, and somehow had made an escape while no one was looking. He had chosen to try for the Herp residence for asylum because most folks around knew they hated slavery.

Mr. Herp checked his pistol. "Boys, get yer guns ready. We're about to have a visit from our neighbor."

When O'Hagen heard where the hound dogs had led his men, while looking for the runaway, he knew what to expect. He readied his men, mounted his horse, and rode towards the neighboring farmhouse. This was no longer just about one slave. His property was on the Herp farm, and that would give him a reason to be on the farm. What he really wanted was to use this upcoming confrontation as an excuse to kill Mr. Herp and then force the family to sell.

Mr. O'Hagen and his men arrived at the farm and began spreading out as soon as they set foot on the Herp's property. From the very start O'Hagen was not only trying to reclaim his asset, but to attack someone who stood in the way of the Irishman's business expansion.

Wyatt's father, the usual loving and kind farmer, walked out onto his porch to confront the Irishman. He had a pistol stuck in his belt and a double-barreled shotgun lowered from his hip. "You ain't comin up fer'a visit, are ya, Walter? I can tell by the way yer boys are sneaking 'round my place."

The Irishman stayed mounted on his horse and leaned over the horn of his saddle as he spoke. His voice boomed, with the smallest hint of an Irish accent. "You and I both know that I have a legal right to be on yer property, as long as you have some of mine!"

Wyatt's father scoffed at the term property. "Sure, sure, you must be talking about the young man, who's currently scared half to death, while the other half of him has been beatin' to death. Well, I will pay ya fer him, and then we can be done with it."

"He ain't for sale."

"Well, we both know why you are really here and what I'm gonna do, so let's just git on with it then, shall we?"

Both men's eyes met in a stare down, as they tried to estimate the other's strength. Mr. O'Hagan's men had now reached the house and upon deciding that there was no immediate danger, they came out from cover and fanned out in front of the house.

One of the men said something softly to his boss. He nodded and laughed lightly. "I can't blame you for protecting your family, Herp. But, what are ya planning on doing now? Taking us all on with one pistol and a double barrel?"

Mr. Herp had experienced his share of fighting, and when it came to men with evil intentions, he had never backed down. "O'Hagan, I don't know who's going to

win this fight, but I will guarantee you this, someone will die if we do this.”

Wyatt remembered that it was as if a different person had taken over the older Irishman. Much like when the kid's voice had changed when he had his blade against the marshal's throat. He spoke in a low-growled tone that was different than most had ever heard. “Your way of freedom around these parts will die with you, tonight.”

Wyatt's father had tried his best at talking him out of a fight. He placed two fingers into his mouth and let out a deep, loud whistle. Guns began to point all around O'Hagan and his men. The Irishman turned sharply around in his saddle to the left, then to the right. One gun pointed down on him from the double-story farmhouse windows on the left and another one in the first story window on the right. There were two men who had sneaked to flank O'Hagan's man on the right side, there back was to the moonlight. The Irishman had more guns, but he was in a terrible position.

“Now, O'Hagen, you can leave or you and six of your men will die.”

The Irishmen smiled in a way that scared Mr. Herp. “Sure, we'll go.” He turned his horse while the Herp's held their positions. O'Hagen's men walked backwards, fading into the darkness.

The tense air exploded, when one of Herp's hired hands, on the right side, yelled a warning. One of O'Hagen's men had figured out Herp's positions early and made it around their right flank. When Wyatt's father heard the warning, he turned to see what was going on.

The distraction was what O'Hagen was hoping for. He turned in his saddle, raised his pistol, aimed and pulled the trigger. The bullet smashed into Mr. Herp's chest, knocking him back into the house, through the doorway. The Irishman kept riding in hard to finish the job.

All hell broke loose, as the men exchanged fire. Wyatt's older brother had taken care of the man on the right flank and then laid waste into his opponent from the right side with double pistols.

The two younger boys began firing from their positions from the second story windows. Wyatt had seen what had happened to his dad, but had enough sense to take out one guy making a run for the back of the house.

One of the Herp's hired hands who was in back for reloading, took Wyatt's place as he ran for his father, armed with a pistol. Looming over his father was Mr. O'Hagen. He had ridden his horse to the top of the farmhouse steps where Mr. Herp was trying to fight off losing coherency.

“Ya think yer a martyr, Mr. Herp, but yer really just blind to the fact that this world

is only good if you take whatever you can git your hands on.” The Irishman raised his gun and took aim at his enemy’s forehead.

“Then, Mr. O’Hagen, I will take you. Because yer wrong.” It was the biggest speech the evolving lawmen had ever given, and it will be the longest he would ever make. His pistol was pointed at the dark figure on the horse. He fired twice, once at the Irishman’s chest and the second at his head. Later, he would discover that he hit his mark both times. The dead man slid from his saddle and landed hard on the wooden porch.

Wyatt slid his pistol into his belt, then tried to move his father. His father quickly raised his shotgun and fired. Wyatt turned to see one of O’Hagen’s men making a move towards Wyatt, to avenge his dead employer.

“If you move me now, I will die, but it’s already gonna happen no matter what.” His father spoke with a hoarse voice that jerked tears from Wyatt’s eyes.

Wyatt knew it was true, but he didn’t want to admit it. “NO! Dad, ya gotta...” He could not finish. Tears got in the way.

“Don’t cry fer me, Wyatt. I had a good life, saw most my kids grow up, and had the best wife God could offer.” He stopped and grunted through the pain. Wyatt raised his shoulders and placed his father’s head onto his lap, trying to keep his body straight with his arms. “Make sure yer brother takes care of the place, and cares fer yer ma. Tell her I love her; tell her I died fighting the good fight. I’ll see her in the better life. And you Wyatt, ya gotta gift with a gun. Use it for good, and don’t ever give up the fight, ya hear?”

Wyatt wiped away his tears. “Ya, Pa, I hear ya.”

He breathed his last and died in the arms of his son, but Wyatt’s mom would always say that those arms of his were also the Lord’s.

His brothers reached the porch, all expecting to see their father, toughening off the bullets. After all, he had experienced some painful things and had always pulled through. They stopped dead in their tracks as they saw Wyatt holding him. Tears stained cheeks telling them all they needed to know.

Wyatt was fifteen.

Two months after burying his father, Wyatt left his farm, which was now in the care of his older brother, and joined with a rag-tag group, calling themselves the “Texan Army,” under the command of Sam Houston. He missed the Alamo, but avenged Davy Crockett and his men when they had surprised General Santa Anna and his men at the Battle of San Jacinto.

He stayed with the Texan army through '45 when Texas became a state. His service totaled almost twenty years. He retired from military life when he heard that Texas would join the succession and he would be called back to fight against the North, on the side of slavery. However, the Civil War was not the only fight going on during the 1860s. With the distraction of the war, many bad men thought they could get away with law breaking. Sometimes they did, but not when Wyatt was around.

He started with a deputy's badge in lower Texas, which grew to a sheriff's position in only a few months. The other sheriff was gunned down by Mexican banditos. Wyatt hunted them down by himself and killed or arrested them all, one by one. There were eight in all. From there, his reputation only grew. It became so big, that most of the law breaking he dealt with were glory hunters picking fights with Wyatt only to prove themselves. So, he would move and take over another lawman's position, until his reputation would catch up with him again.

He had handled cattle rustlers, renegade Indians, Mexican bandits, stagecoach holdup men, and deserting soldiers. He had stopped range wars, land disputes, and gangs. He had foiled and tracked down dozens of bank robbers. He had been shot six times, but always in his limbs.

Thinking about it now, he still could not figure out why he was still alive. He had seen dozens of his fellow lawmen die next to him. He had killed at least twenty men, but still nearing the age of sixty, he was alive and kicking. Whenever he would question why he was still alive, he would think of one of the last conversations he had with his mother. She was again speaking of God...

"Ma, if He's so great, then why would he let Pa die like that. I can't believe in a God like that."

"Wyatt, please don't say such things. Walter O'Hagen made his choice, and that was because he was an angry man. Sometimes those men do evil things to good people, like your father. It doesn't mean that the good Lord is to blame."

"Yeah, well God should have done something about it."

"Wyatt, I will pray that the good Lord will never let you leave this world until you are able to forgive God for what happened to Pa."

Wyatt responded with a small amount of sarcasm, but with growing bitterness. "Ma, I don't wanna live forever."

Wyatt knew he should be trying to pray but he just couldn't. Wyatt knew God was there, but the old lawmen had too much baggage blocking the way. He knew what his mom would have said. "You don't have too much baggage blocking the way,

you just keep putting the same baggage in the way.”

He would like to give God another chance, but throughout the years, the more he stayed away from anything to do with God, the easier it was to stay away. Yet, he still had that nagging in the back of his mind, or maybe it was his heart. Ever since Gray and Flint rode into town, that feeling had become stronger.

Honestly, he thought, the current, impossible situation which might mean death is not worrying me half as much as that constant nagging in my heart.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Johnny reached the Cookshank home in record time.

No one was in sight, so he knocked on the door rapidly. No one answered. He noticed that the family's buckboard was gone, as were most of the horses. He remounted again and was about to shoot off to the new church building when he heard a voice.

"Jonathon, may I be of service?" It was the Kid. He was not carrying his pistol, only his Bowie knife. It was hanging off his belt.

Johnny reached for his gun, "Where is everyone?" He demanded.

The Kid lifted his hands up in surrender "There is no reason to be alarmed, Jonathon. They are at the church. I elected to stay here to make repairs at the residence. I am alone."

Johnny kept a hand on his gun, "It's Johnny, my name ain't Jonathan. I come to ask you and yer partners fer some help. We're gonna have major trouble in the town tomorrow, and we need some more guns."

The Kid nodded his head in understanding, "I will prepare my horse to ride with you in order to alert our companions."

Johnny's eyebrows wrinkled together, "Huh?"

"I am going with you. Please allow me one moment."

"Oh, okay, Kid, but please don't git bent outta shape cause my fingers are tickl'n my pistol. I still don't trust you," he said bluntly.

"I do not hold it against you; I do understand. And please, call me Andrew."

As soon as the two men arrived at the church building site, Andrew led both horses to water, and to rest them before a hard ride back to town. Johnny ran to find Gray and Flint.

The church had gone up very quickly and looked a lot better than expected. Johnny saw that they were already roofing the far side of the chapel, which meant that the building would be in full use soon. This is where Johnny found both men. They were pounding nails into shingles at a nice pace. Gray and Flint were so hard into their work, that it took Johnny several moments to get their attention. After yelling their names a few times, he picked up a rock and threw it towards them. It landed in between them with no avail.

"Cut that out, Reverend," Flint yelled behind him without looking back. "We're on

a good roll here.” He began pounding nails again before Johnny could say anything.

Johnny picked up yet another rock; he was losing his patience. The deputy threw it as hard as he could and struck true on his old friend's back.

“What the?” Flint turned to see Johnny standing on the ground looking up at him with his hands on his hips. “Hey, that hurt partner.”

Johnny was unsympathetic. “I don't care; I've been standin' here fer darn near an hour trying to git yer attention.”

Gray turned to see the irritated deputy with his hands on his hips. “Hi there, how ya doing, Johnny?”

The deputy took a deep breath. “Not too good. Ya better git down here.”

When the two men were down, they found that Andrew had already saddled their horses. The four men ate their lunches, which Mrs. Cookshank had prepared, whilst Johnny began to explain.

“I don't know if you have heard the name Pander thrown around at all?”

The others nodded with some recognition, but said nothing. Their mouths were full with food. Andrew would not let them speak with their mouths full. He stated that it was the one impoliteness that he could not excuse.

Flint gulped down what was left in his mouth to finally answer Johnny. “Yeah, yer big mouth said something about them being responsible fer those bank robbers me and Gray stopped on our way into Nook River.”

Johnny's reply almost cut Flint off, “Yeah, that's right. They own the largest ranch around. Huge spread. Well, when Wyatt first got here, they were trying to force out the rest of the ranchers, in order to steal their land.” The other three men's eyes hardened. It was a typical move of big ranchers who lacked any sense of decency. They were big, and no one around was any bigger, so they thought they could create their own law.

Johnny sat forward and began talking faster with dramatic hand motions, “Everyone round here calls Pander, Mr. P. The first time Wyatt met Mr. P, he tried to bribe him. Marshal of Nook River was Wyatt's ninth lawman job, so I'm sure ya can guess what Wyatt said.”

Flint chimed in, “The Marshal told the P feller to stuff his money where the sun don't shine?”

Andrew looked confused. “Where is that?”

Everyone was about to lose their focus to laughter when Gray cut them off. “Never mind. It's slang. Keep going, Johnny.”

“Well, yer pretty close to it, Flint. Of course Mr. P. told him he just wanted the marshal to have a little extra cause he would be using a lot more of his time, since the big rancher owns so much. Wyatt picked him up by his belt and collar and threw him out of his office. Well, being the man that he is, Mr.P told a couple of his gunhands to kill him. They tried to bushwhack him while he was patrolling the streets one night, but he was too quick for them. That and they were no good cattle rustlers who couldn't sneak up on a corpse. The next day the marshal delivered them back to the ranch. One of them was tied up naked, the other, dead.

“Well, Pander, of course, was madder than kicked rattlers. He heard there was some fellers down south that wanted to settle a score with the marshal, so he put a price of five hundred dollars on his head and sent word to do these bushwhackers about the bounty. Wyatt was smarter than that. He had friends also down that way, and they let him know what was going on. When the hired guns got close to the territory, he was waiting with six guns. Pander tried a few more little tricks, but none of them worked. Especially since the marshal always had a few key people on his side.”

“Who's that?” Flint asked.

“Oh, the reverend, the judge, a couple of businessmen, and all the lawmen west of the Mississippi know and respect him. Pander figured all this out before the whole town turned on him, so he all of a sudden became a “changed” man. Course, it's all just an act. He still does things that would get most men jailed, but he uses hired guns that don't have a connection to him with one hand, and with the other, he's given jobs to folks in need, and helps out the town. Slowly, the Nook River has become split. Half of 'em think he's the greatest thing since the railroad. The rest of us know better. We're trying to keep him from taking over the entire territory. Let me tell you fellers, he ain't far from it either.”

“I don't mean to be rude, Johnny, but what does all this have to do with us?” Gray asked.

“Well, there was a main businessman that has been keeping Mr. P at bay. It was the owner of the biggest bank in the territory.”

“Was?” Flint asked, even though he could guess the answer.

“That old man was quick when it came to numbers and business, but he was no gunman. The Pander boys set it up real good, too. They waited till the marshal and me was trailing some bank robbers last week, so there weren't no one to stop them. One of the rancher's sons followed the banker's youngest daughter down the

street and violated her enough to force the banker to call him out. Course, it also so happened that the son doing this is the quickest draw. The old banker never even cleared leather.”

“I don’t git it, Johnny!” Flint exclaimed. “Why didn’t you just play the same game on them? You and I both done that sort of thing plenty?”

“I was going to, but Wyatt said that it wasn’t right, and that if we didn’t win using the law, we weren’t never going to win.”

Andrew offered a sincere suggestion. “I do believe that a violation against a lady would, in my humble opinion, warrant an assassination. I am more than happy to—”

“No you ain’t,” Gray interrupted. “The marshal is right, Jesus said that the whole eye fer eye thing is out. We use the law, or we do noth’n.”

Andrew, Flint and Johnny, being less mature and hot-blooded all rolled their eyes. Johnny finished getting the three up to date. “Anyways, we can’t prove it, but the Panders made a visit to the banker’s widow. They forced her into selling the bank for pennies on the dollar, and the rest of her husband’s estate, too. They probably threatened to kill the rest of her family. Now, on paper, the old cattle-rustler, Pander, owns most of Nook River. We need to make a move now, cause the more we let him go on like this, the more powerful he becomes. He’s coming into town tomorrow to look at his new property. Actually, he is going to come into town and show his strength to make sure he’s in control.

We could turn to the town folks fer some extra rifles, but we don’t know who supports who. Not to mention, the town’s men have a lot to lose, with families and businesses and all.” The deputy turned and looked Gray in the eyes as he emphasized the ending with intensity. “We ain’t got enough guns. Wyatt and me are good, but they got at least a dozen men who can kill. But...”—he paused and shrugged his shoulders a little—“with you three, we gotta shot.”

Gray finished his lunch as the deputy said this, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Let’s mount up, and go talk to a cattleman.”

The sun only just began its ascent into the morning sky after the lawmen had awakened. The small city of Nook River had three new lawmen, but only the marshal and the deputy knew it. They all began getting ready in their own ritualistic style.

Johnny came inside carrying a large tin pot of coffee. "Who wants?" The morning was the only time of the day when Johnny didn't use extra words.

Everyone grunted in unison as the deputy began to pour the thick, dark liquid into five tin cups.

Gray was sitting at a small table against the wall, cleaning his dismantled his rifle. Also on the table, lay his blades; they had just been sharpened and polished.

The actual fight did not have Gray very frightened. Not only was God on their side, but they had enough firepower and talent in this room to take on just about anyone and anything around. Gray would not say it, because he did not want to be arrogant, but the odds were in their favor.

Gray was more afraid of what would happen putting Johnny, Andrew, and Flint together in a fight. Would Flint and Andrew lose control and go back to using the same rage and bitterness to kill that they had used so many times before? Or could they resist the temptation of their old-selves?

Flint was carrying his usual long-barreled Peacemaker, tied tightly against his thigh. He tucked another pistol in his belt, a Smith & Wesson .45 bottom hinged handgun; it was much faster to reload. Gray gave him a quick glance as Flint sat down next to him to begin cleaning a 73 Winchester rifle.

"You think your gonna need more firepower than they used on Fort Sumter?" Gray asked his partner.

"Nay, you riflemen will never understand about pistols. I am better with my Colt, but it's slow to load, so I need this Smith & Wesson to be able to slam shells in on the run."

"Weren't talking about that. Looks like that 'ere short barrel gun stuck in your drawers will take a bear down."

Flint's smile was devious. "I don't need to kill no one, just knock 'em over. Ain't that right, Andrew?"

Andrew did not take notice. He was reunited with his guns, his babies. These pistols were the only stipulation he made when discussing terms with the marshal for his help in this saga. Andrew smiled to himself as he allowed his ivory handled Remington pistols to spin easily within his hand. The long barreled guns were an extension of his hands. They would do anything he desired them to. He lifted his guns and aimed them at the ceiling. As he did, his eyes darkened, ever so slightly.

Gray took notice of this, but went back to cleaning his old Henry rifle.

Andrew sat down next to him as he worked quickly with precision on his babies.

"If, I may be so bold, Gray, why do you not use the Spencer Rifle? I have heard reports that it is a more precise weapon in relation to your style of shooting?" Andrew inquired.

Flint jumped in, "Don't even ride in that direction, partner. To Gray, when it comes to rifles, the names Spencer or Winchester is a swear word." Flint chuckled as he continued cleaning the rifle.

"Ah, I don't know about that," Gray replied. "It's just that I got raised with this here rifle, and know its feel."

Wyatt stood and put his hat on. "Alright, listen up, the judge should be awake by now, and I want to make sure that he gives me his backing before we do this. So Johnny, you take a stroll and make sure everything is alright. I will be back soon; we will get set up then." The marshal picked up a shotgun and stepped outside. Johnny followed him, armed with a rifle and a half-empty coffee cup.

After the lawmen left, Gray seized the opportunity of privacy to talk to Flint and Andrew. "I don't know how to really say this in a way that seems right, so I'm just gonna say it. Remember that you can kill in two ways. You can do it when you have to, or you can kill cause you want to. None of us had the best past, and so we all can just get real mad and kill anything that moves cause we think it makes us feel better. That ain't God. This may seem confusing to you two, but it's the best I can do to explain it.

"The Bible says, 'Be angry, but sin not.' In other words, doing justice on bad men ain't wrong. Enjoying it is. Sometimes it's not about what you do, but what your heart is like when you do it. You may not think there's a difference, but there is. What's your attitude? Today, everyone may be lookin' at what happens on the outside, but God looks at what happens on the inside. You understand?"

Both men nodded with a hint of confusion on their faces. Gray stood and slid his blades into his buckskin sheaths tied down to his thighs. "Don't allow this fight to bring up all that hatred that kept you guys tied up for so long. Keep yer eyes on Jesus and don't lose control."

Upon his return, the marshal walked through the door and straight to his coffee cup, the contents were now lukewarm. Picking it up, he took a sip while speaking through his bushy moustache. "It's a cold one out there this mornin', boys." He placed

his coffee back on the table.

Johnny burst through the door, and went straight to the coffee pot, shivering.

"You ok there, princess?" Flint asked dryly.

"Shut it." Johnny retorted through chattering teeth.

Flint laughed.

Marshal Herp plopped in his chair and dropped his hat upon his desk, "Ok, now we are all here. Good news, the judge is with us. He's scared to death, but he's with us. He wants us all to know that if we mess this up, then there is gonna be the devil to pay." He did not have to explain that they were the only men who could stop the Panders. Each one had been thinking about it all night.

The marshal sat on the edge of his desk. "The judge gave me a warrant for the arrest of Pander and a court order that states that all his men have to drop their guns if they want to stay in town." Wyatt paused to let this process. "If they leave their ranch now, then they'll probably be here around about noon.

"Why's a showdown always gotta be around noon?" Flint commented allowed.

"Cause that's when most people come into town, genius." Johnny retorted with a chuckle.

"Johnny, control that tongue and shut up." The marshal commanded. "Now, the first thing is that I think the stable is gonna be the best place to move these guys into a corner and keep folks away from stray bullets. Johnny, soon as we're done talkin', get down there and warn that old coyote that runs the livery stable. Make sure he knows what's going down."

Johnny nodded in agreement.

Wyatt picked up his lukewarm coffee again as he spoke. "Mr. Gray, I hear tell that you are about as good as a person gets with that old Henry rifle there. Could you give us some cover from the rooftop overlooking the stables? I would also be much obliged if you would get up there in about half an hour to keep a sharp eye out." He took a sip to allow Gray to reply.

"That sounds alright to me, as long as the other fellers don't mind."

"If yer half as good as Flint says, you better be up there." Johnny commented.

Flint smiled while sipping coffee. "Course I want you up there. If it were Johnny, he would be talking so much to himself that—"

"Don't finish that, Flint!" Johnny warned with a punch to Flint's shoulder which made Flint's coffee splash into his face.

Flint chuckled.

Andrew was lost when it came to these men's sense of humor. His face was a mixture of apprehension, excitement, and morning drowsiness. "With my life, Gray, I will trust you."

Gray nodded to himself in deep thought, "One more thing, while we're talking about it, do you want me to show myself, or just let them know I'm there if need be?"

The marshal leaned back slightly and sipped on his coffee, thinking. "I don't want a repeat of that fight down in Tombstone. That ain't what I'm after at all. Stay hidden. If the Pander's feel trapped, they might just try to kick their way out. Or they might just be itchin' so much fer a fight that they'll be lookin' fer a reason to draw."

Johnny leaned forward and slammed his fist on an empty chair in frustration, "Ah come on, Marshal, they deserve whatever they git. Who knows what they are really after, but we all know by now that it ain't gonna be good."

Wyatt sighed, "The main thing is serving the warrant, Johnny. If they obey the court order and warrant, then there is nothing we can, or will do! If we do something, and try to pick a fight, then we ain't lawmen, just a gang with a judge's piece of paper. If we don't do this right, it will be a step back in seeing this country tamed. If we don't do it according to the law, then what our daddies and granddaddies have been fightin' for over a hundred years, will be ruined."

Johnny sat back down in his chair and sighed, but then leaned forward with one more question, "Okay, okay, they draw first, but that doesn't mean we can't be ready, right?" Johnny pleaded.

"Nope, that surely don't." Wyatt smiled. He took a piece of paper and pencil out of his desk and drew a quick and efficient diagram. "Okay, here's how it's gonna play. Johnny and me will come straight at them. After all, they don't know we got anyone else on our side.

Flint, take that Winchester up into the loft; it'll look straight over the tying post where they will leave their horses. Kid, you stay in the stables and wait till they tie down their horses. After they are turned to walk through town, Johnny and me will walk straight at them from the general store on their right. When you hear me talking to 'em, you"—Wyatt turned to Andrew—"walk up on their left flank, and Flint you cover him. We'll come out with guns ready. Gray get a bead on Pander's younger son, Jay."

Johnny rolled his eyes jovially, "He's the one that wanted so badly to be Mexican but was born to his mean old cuss of a white daddy." Johnny laughed.

"Yeah, well most people wanna be like me and my Mexican brothers, they just

don't say it." Gray joked.

Wyatt tried to finish but was cut off by Flint. "Was that sarcasm from you, Mr. Gray?"

"Yeah, a little but don't get used to it." Gray joked.

Wyatt's gruff voice shot down Gray's words. "Ah, shoot! You boys better shut up. I'd git more done if'n I was talking to kids down at the schoolhouse. No one else says a peep till I finish! Now where was I?"

"You were—"

"Shut it, Johnny. I said not a peep. If I let you, you'll preach a whole darned sermon. Gray, git the bead on Jay; he'll probably have a double gun rig, both silver Colts. He always wears Mexican-style clothes, so he's easy to spot. If there happens to be two looking the same, his horse is black as night." Wyatt stood. "Remember, we only move if they draw first. Understood?" He pointed to Andrew and Johnny.

They nodded in agreement.

"Okay. Be in position in half an hour." Wyatt tossed Gray an old duster, "And Gray, make sure you have lots of extra ammo and wear that long coat; it's gonna be cold up on that roof."

Johnny hurried out, armed to the teeth with two pistols, a sawed-off shotgun, and a Winchester. Flint could not convince Andrew to take a rifle or scattergun. He had his regular rig, two nickel plated, ivory handled .45 Remington pistols and two extra ammo belts. He also carried his authentic bowie knife strapped to his belt. Flint had his Winchester colt and a Smith & Wesson.

"Want one of these, Gray?"

Gray smiled as he looked at Flint offering a pistol. "I'll be okay. Wouldn't know what to do with it anyways. Take care of yourself and Andrew." Before Flint stepped out of the door, Gray grabbed his arm and leaned in close "Remember, getting shot ain't as dangerous as shootin' with hatred."

Flint's jaw tightened and he nodded his head in agreement before he stepped out the door following Andrew.

Suddenly, Gray found himself alone with the marshal. Something he had been hoping for. "How are you doin', sir? If you don't mind me asking?" Gray asked as he slipped on his coat.

The marshal was stuffing shells into his coat pocket. "Ah, son, I'm getting on in years. Us old folks don't tell others how we're really feelin'."

"Ya, and you don't need to tell God. He already knows exactly what yer thinking

about and how scared you are.”

The marshal stopped and looked Gray in the eyes. “What did you say?”

Gray returned the look with a smile. “God knows. He did hear yer mom’s prayers and she never did stop prayin’. God has never given up on you, and He still has plans fer yer life. You have a long ways to go before you see Him face to face.”

Wyatt tried to say something, but the words would not come out of his mouth.

Gray stepped towards the door, but turned before he stepped out. “Those ain’t my words, Marshal. It’s just what I was told to say.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The livery stable was the oldest standing building within the city limits of Nook River. The first successful homestead, turned farming operation, was started by the Sterling family. Eventually their farming business had given way to a new booming cattle industry. Since they were in a great spot for horses and cattle to water, and tired cowpokes to rest, the town almost built itself. With the surrounding land rich, both for cattle and crops, many cowpokes returned with new brides to start a family and stake a claim on some land.

After the Sterlings passed away without any children, they willed their estate to the only baby they had given birth to, Nook River. Their land and possessions to be used however the city fathers saw fit. The Sterling barn had long since been transformed into the main livery stable, and that is where Andrew and Flint busied themselves, setting up defensive positions and loading weapons. “Well then, looks like we are going to be hanging around here for a while Andrew,” Flint stated.

Andrew was deep in thought and did not respond to Flint’s superficial conversation starter, but instead, he changed the subject. “Do you think that it is possible to be armed with the same guns and wear the same clothing without being the same person?”

Flint started to respond as he stacked another bale of hay. “Well, I don’t think it’s so much about what ya look like. It’s more about—”

Andrew cut Flint off, and checked his weapons for the 8th time out of habit, “Yes, I do understand that, Flint. I am only...” Andrew paused and stared out the door holstering his large Remington pistols. “I am frightened. I do not want to slip back into what held me prisoner for so many years. Can I kill, and yet not be a killer? Is it possible to use what I have developed as my means to control the world around me for something righteous and good? I think not.” He turned to look Flint in the eyes, and his face conveyed desperation. “I am not able to accomplish this task!”

Flint stammered. He stared at his stack of hay bales for several moments, stalling. He hadn’t a clue as to what to say. Flint knew that the younger man was pleading for help, of any kind. The old gunslinger did not expect Andrew to be looking to him. He was just old Flint, a broken down gun-for-hire who was new at this whole Christian thing. He did not know enough about Jesus for this level of help. Flint had no idea what to say, but suddenly remembered something Gray had said. Both Flint

and Andrew were followers of Jesus, so they must always be willing to help each other in whatever way possible. Flint also remembered what Gray had said about advice.

Gray had said, “If you have trouble giving advice, or don’t know what to say—good! You should never be telling folks what to do but let God speak through you. Most of our advice is hogwash anyways. In the Bible Paul says to rest our faith on God’s power rather than on man’s wisdom.”

Flint threw up a prayer and spoke what he felt in his spirit, even though his face flushed with warmth and his heart skipped a beat. “I think you should know, that it’s good that ya don’t think yer ready to do this whole thing.”

Andrew was confused. “It is? Please expand on your thoughts, Flint?”

“Yeah, cause if’n yer not able to do this, then you have to move aside and give God the reins so He can steer what you do. Then, He’ll do the work. It says in, um...”—Flint scratched his head—“Now where is that darned verse? Anyways, it says, God gives grace to the humble, but he doesn’t like the proud haughty folk. Something like that. Also, I remember the reverend sayin’ that it’s good to be proud of yer weaknesses.”

Andrew’s face relaxed and he smiled a bit. “I, too, remember Reverend Cookshank saying that, and I believe that you are correct, Flint. Thank you, my friend.”

“Anytime, partner. Now, let’s pray that both of us are able to handle this temptation. Don’t think I ain’t scared like you. I haven’t been this nervous about a fight since I was fourteen.”

Meanwhile, across the street from the barn, Gray found a medium size cottonwood tree that was growing alongside an office building; it was enough to get him atop the roof. The roof had a great view of the livery stable and a view of the road that Pander would use to ride into town. Gray scouted around the rooftop to get an idea of his position. It was only eight feet to the ground from the lowest part of the building. If need be, Gray could jump to the ground.

He judged the distance to the livery stables and set out his extra boxes of .44 caliber bullets. Now he would be ready for a quick reloading. He glanced in the direction of where the Pander men would be coming from, in the next couple of hours. It was west of town, so it was the last part of the world to get sun. It was light enough to see, but not as bright as the town.

Lying before him was a beautiful landscape. It was a long deep valley with

tanned earthen color spattered with green patches. The trail was well worn through years of driving cattle over the same road. This rough road made its way through the valley and looked to stop abruptly by two large mountain tops rising from the earth. Gray had been told by Johnny that at the base of those mountains, was the Pander spread.

Gray was admiring the colors of the rising sun and settling in for a long wait when something caught his eye, "Wait one darn minute!" Gray exclaimed to himself as he sat up.

What he saw was not larger than a pinkie finger and difficult to see at first. It was so difficult in fact, that it took a few seconds to register in Gray's mind what he was looking at. The distant object grew larger and larger as it moved towards the town. It was a faraway cloud of dust and could only be a band of men riding hard towards town. It had to be Pander, and they were earlier than expected!

"I hate starting a ruckus in the morning!" Gray grunted aloud to himself as he ran to the other side of the roof and looked down on the street. No one was in sight. This end of the town had been cleared of all civilians, and the other lawmen were all hidden, waiting for the right time to take the enemy by surprise. At this rate, though, it was Wyatt's men that would be surprised.

The lookout lifted his rifle and aimed at a spot in dirt in front of the livery stable. The rifle boomed, cutting the chilly morning air. Flint slowly stuck his head out of the stable's door.

"Hey! You up there with the Henry! There are folks in here trying to pray!" Flint hollered with a grin.

"No time fer jokes, partner. Pander's men will be here in about fifteen minutes!" Gray shouted back.

Flint's expression changed. He ran as fast as his legs could take him to the general store. Wyatt, who was coming out of his position to investigate the shot, met him at the door.

Flint said something to Wyatt, but Gray was too far away to make out what exactly was said.

Wyatt was serious. He walked closer to Gray and yelled loud enough to be heard. "Can you tell how many yet, son?"

"Nah, give me a couple of minutes then I can tell ya!" Gray shouted back through cupped hands.

Gray went back to his lookout position on the other side of the roof as he

muttered to himself. "Ya know, God, if'n you just give me some super eyes or something, things would be a bit easier right now." He stopped and listened, then smiled after the reply came, "Ya, sure...that would make it way too easy and not so much fun. I guess everyone's a comedian."

Five minutes later, Gray could start to make out shapes. "One, two, three..." He counted quietly to himself. "Ah nuts!" Gray ran to the other side of the roof. "Marshal, I count fifteen!"

Wyatt swore under his breath. "Okay, let's stick to the plan."

Gray nodded and the band of lawmen got into position.

Gray walked back to the other side of the roof, and squatted on his heels as he muttered to himself. "Well, fifteen ain't too bad. That's only three a piece, and if'n I can take out four, the odds will start to swing in our favor..." Since quick movement attracts the eye, he slowly crawled back to the edge of the roof. When the Pander men were almost to the edge of town, five riders broke off from the rest and rode around Gray's right. They're probably figuring on flanking anyone who would be waiting for them. Gray thought to himself.

Gray now saw two alarming things. First, these guys were not here to talk, they wanted a fight and no warrant or court order was going to stop it. Second, Gray could not tell Wyatt or Flint about the other group that broke off from the main pack. The band of riders were too close. Gray's position and the other men's surprise would be totally ruined.

Gray had to make a choice and quick. The first option was to stay where he was and cover his guys from two positions, while they would be taken from the rear. The second option was to get down to the ground and do something to warn the others. If he did that, he would leave his men down one rifleman. But he could keep Pander's men from ambushing Wyatt and the deputies.

He spied his quarry making their way towards the middle of the town. Gray figured they planned on sneaking up towards the stables from the opposite direction of the main pack. Gray could not stay on a roof if he were going to keep them from getting to the stables. The smaller group of men sneaking up on Wyatt and Johnny would be out of Gray's field of fire. He decided on the second option. After snatching up his rifle and extra shells, he ran to the lower part of the roof and jumped without hesitation. Feeling his feet hit the dirt, Gray barrel rolled to absorb the impact of the fall. His knees still complained, but he ignored the pain.

Gray ran up the left side of the street, keeping his back close to the buildings as

he did. His rifle was in his left hand, already loaded. He heard the riders slow down to a stop; they were only one building away. As he neared them, an idea came to mind. He smiled to himself as he slipped back, away from the alley that the sinister men were approaching. One word came to mind. Horses.

Meanwhile, back in the barn, Flint sat down next to Andrew, who was closing his eyes in continual prayer. He did not open them as he spoke. "Did he say fifteen?"

"Yep, that's what he said all right." Out of habit, Flint nervously checked his guns.

Andrew opened his eyes. "Well then, I suppose we shall have a slightly larger temptation than expected."

Flint chuckled as he settled in for the wait.

Although it seemed like a lifetime, it had been fourteen minutes when horse hooves began pounding their way into town. They became louder by the second, until slowing themselves near the stables. The Pander men dismounted their horses and walked them to the tying post next to the stables. A loud man, obviously Pander Sr., gave a muffled order, but it was silenced by the sound of Marshal Wyatt's voice.

"That's us, kid. You sure that you're okay out there alone? You can take the Winchester up in the loft with me if ya like?"

"No, thank you, I do not like rifles, close range is my expertise."

Flint climbed his way up to the loft overlooking the hitching post that was usually filled with a dozen horses. Although outnumbered, the lawmen stood their ground, no longer tolerating the disrespect for life and others property, that the Panders had displayed. As if the saga of Marshal Wyatt Herp and the Panders had become a stage play, the lawmen's backup was made known as the Kid, flanked the group of cowboys.

Pander did not notice at first, "Do you think that you and Johnny even have a chance against ten men?" He snorted at Wyatt. He was going to say something else, but was cut short by the presence of Andrew to his left and then the sound of Flint's Winchester loading in the loft drew his gaze. Flint's rifle could shoot down on his men from cover. Pander and the newcomers looked each other up and down.

Pander wore a long fur-lined coat that protected a tailored dark blue pin-striped

suit. His hat, a European make, completed his overstated attire. He was shorter than expected, but that meant little. He was still dangerous.

Andrew knew that. The thing the gunslinger knew to look for was within the eyes. They were shifty and cold.

Pander had eyes of a surly wolf. He looked to have faced the world and had bent it into submission, until he felt in control. Pander was mean, and his vicious attitude was fueled by fear. Pander was running scared in his own mind.

It reminded Andrew of someone.

“Who the jink are you!?” Pander growled the question at Andrew and Flint.

“We are friends of the marshal; that’s all ya gotta know.” Flint bellowed from the livery stable window.

A surly looking character with a thick handlebar moustache, who was allowing tobacco juice to drip from the corner of his mouth, spoke up. He was next to Pander on his left side. “The one with the rifle is Flint, gun fer hire and such, pretty good. The other one, if’n I guess right, is the “Kid.” He’s mad-dog crazy and a dead shot. But neither one of them is God Almighty. They won’t be able to do miracles. They’ll bleed like the rest.”

Andrew’s reply was spoken with perfect enunciation. “I was not aware that a man as ugly as you are, would think himself capable of identification or to presume to know the will of the Almighty God?”

Flint chuckled at Andrew’s cynicism.

The tobacco chewer did not appreciate his humor. “Why you, son of a—”

“Shut up, Huck!” Pander ordered.

Wyatt spoke up. “Pander, all I want is you to come with me to the courthouse and yer men to drop their guns, that’s it.” The marshal was taking no chances. He had the double-barreled shotgun levelled at his hip.

“You and I both know that ain’t gonna happen.” Pander’s eyes hardened.

Flint slowly surveyed the ten men, not resting his gaze on any man, but waiting and looking for any fast movement. One thing bothered him. Gray had said that there were fifteen. Flint only counted ten. If it were anyone else, Flint would have guessed that they were just wrong, not Gray. He had eyes like a hawk. Where were the other five?

Andrew stared straight into Huck and it was beginning to terrify Huck. The gruff cowboy was the foreman of the Pander ranch and good at masking his fear. His face showed nothing, yet his mind was racing with fright. He knew the only chance he

had with the Kid was to draw first. The dirty man spat and touched his gun. As he did, it released a chain-reaction until every man had a hand on his weapon, but no one drew; they were frozen in stalemate.

“Stop! I don’t want this!” the marshal bellowed.

“Well then, lawman, you should have never crossed me.” Pander hissed.

Huck was the first man to draw. He had just levelled his long barreled Smith & Wesson when Andrew’s two simultaneous bullets smashed into his chest, knocking him off his feet. Flint fired off three quickly aimed shots with his Winchester. Johnny’s scattergun knocked one man over, but the deputy himself fell from a bullet which tore through his leg. He then drew his pistol and fired from the ground. The marshal’s shotgun knocked one man over, and winged another. Pander’s Colt took off Wyatt’s hat, but nothing more. A well-aimed shot from Flint buried itself in the head of a man who had a bead on Johnny. The standing dead man crumpled to the ground, like a rag-doll.

Two of Pander’s men took cover behind bales of hay and unloaded into Flint’s window. It forced Flint to recoil back inside. As he did, he looked out the right side of the window and caught sight of the five missing men. They were walking down the street to get behind Wyatt and Johnny. The lawmen were so focused on what was happening in front of them that they would not see a thing until it was too late.

“MARSHAL!” Flint screamed with all his might, but he could not get his head outside the window far enough to be heard over the shooting. He was pinned down.

The leader of the five was dressed in all black and silver Mexican attire, complete with Mexican spurs. He had to be Pander’s son, Jay. He raised his gun and started to fire walking towards the marshal’s back, followed by the other men around him. Wyatt turned too late, to find himself surrounded.

“That snake!” Flint said out loud. Flint pinned himself against the wall and took the best angle he could out of the right side of the window. He fired off the rest of his ammo from his Winchester, which distracted the oncoming assault for a few moments, but he just couldn’t aim far enough right. Jay Pander stopped fifteen feet from the marshal and took aim. Wyatt was desperately trying to reload.

Suddenly, Jay Pander and his men stopped their assault and started whistling and yelling. All of their horses were charging straight for the fight, past their owners. Gray was riding one of them, from the back, urging them on straight through the chaotic torrent of fighting men. The horse’s reigns were in his teeth and his Henry was finding targets around him. He looked like an apache warrior gone mad.

Marshal Herp bolted towards cover, slowing down only to drag his deputy to safety. Johnny did not stop firing, but covered their escape with his pistol, screaming a rebel yell while being heaved by the collar to safety through the side door of the general store.

The sudden chaos of the horses confused the Pander's. They began firing at anything moving in front of them. The only men in front of them were their own.

"Stop!" Pander screamed, after he had realized their mistake. "Look at who you're firing at!"

The rancher's men stopped and let the smoke settle.

Gray had disappeared from on top of the horse he had borrowed and was nowhere to be found. Flint made his way down from the loft as he was out of bullets for his Winchester. He also needed to check up on Andrew.

Andrew was crouching on his heels just behind the main door. He did not look up at Flint, but kept his eyes on what the enemy was doing outside. "How many are left?" he asked.

Flint checked his pistols as he spoke. "Well, I only killed one, and Johnny got one. The marshal got a couple, but I ain't sure they're dead. Gray put a hole straight through one, the other was only winged. They killed at least one of their own. How many you get?"

Andrew's answer was just as professional and his voice even. "Three confirmed."

Flint almost exclaimed in shock, but footsteps on the walkway kept him silent. He was about to suggest a plan when Andrew burst out of the stable doors with speed. He levelled his giant blazing Remington which cut down a Pander man five feet away. It started the fighting again.

The Panders tried to avenge their comrade, but Andrew did not back down. He walked to the middle of the street, his long coat blowing in the wind. Flint stayed close to the stable walls but moved towards the Panders while firing his pistols. The marshal came out of his cover, on the other side of the Pander's, with Johnny supporting his left side through a broken window.

Flint turned his gaze on one man who was desperately trying to mount his horse. Flint let loose rapid-fire from his Colt. The quick shooting threw the man off his horse. Johnny kept shooting from the corner of the general store, covering the marshal who was on one knee and closer to the middle of the fight. He fired into the middle of the white cloud of smoke that grew too thick to see through.

Pander tried to end it. He moved in on the marshal while Wyatt was reloading

his pistol "It's time you die!" He screamed and aimed at the marshal's head. He stood only five feet away.

Two quick shots from the Andrew's pistols blew the rancher's knees to shreds. He collapsed in pain.

The shooting all stopped at once. The men loyal to Pander were dead or dying, the rest were hired guns and did not feel like dying for a man that was not going to win. They dropped their guns and raised their hands. Wyatt and Flint moved in quickly to complete the disarming. They told the Pander survivors to line up against the wall of the general store.

Andrew did not notice. He ventured toward Mr. P, who was moaning in pain. "I feel, Mr. Pander, that our souls possess an uncanny connection." After he tucked one of his pistols under his arm, Andrew slowly began reloading the other pistol. "It is as if, from the beginning of time, God knew that we would meet. It is as if I were destined take away your privilege of walking, an ability that I am sure you have often taken for granted. Although, we have never met, we have always been together." Andrew's expression changed, and he aimed his gun at the confused and terrified rancher's head as he spoke with a sharp, cold tone. "You remind me of my father." He cocked the hammer.

Flint turned to see the Kid facing the temptation they had discussed earlier and rushed over. "Andrew, he ain't worth it. It's over now. When that dude goes to jail, it'll be worse for him than death. You know that."

There was a fire in Andrew's eyes, and he did not look up "Your argument may be based in logic, Flint, but my feelings are speaking a different language."

The other men looked on, because they knew there was nothing to do but hope, pray and let the Kid make his decision.

Andrew spoke aloud, still debating his decision in his head. "This situation is very intriguing. A man who has always held the power no longer is able to hold power, except that which I allow him."

"Please, I'll do anything?" Pander pleaded, sweat dripped from his brow.

Andrew smiled and slightly withdrew his gun. "Maybe I will allow you to be tried by law?" Instead, Andrew quickly pressed his gun against the terrified man's temple, "But I shall not!"

Pander screamed in terror as the angry gunman pulled the trigger; it was met with a dry click.

The onlookers breathed a unified sigh of relief.

"You are one crazy, son of a gun, kid," Wyatt said. "I could have sworn that was the gun you loaded."

Andrew smiled, his countenance completely changed. "I have fast hands; forgive my deception, but I thought it would be quite pleasurable to force a man who commonly resides within power and comfort to sweat, as it were, and also to, please forgive the colloquialism, wet his drawers." Andrew's words got a laugh from the other lawmen.

Johnny limped towards the jailhouse, as Wyatt marched the men able to walk towards the same destination. A thought hit Flint. Where the blue-blazens is Gray?

"Flint! Gray's in with the doc." Flint turned to see the reverend running in his direction. "He's been shot and ain't conscious."

When Gray had ridden hard into the middle of the fight, he found a bead on one of Pander's men and dropped him. A second later, a bullet tore into his side ending Gray's fancy horse riding. He fell to the ground and lost his Henry. Gray jumped up as quickly as the seething pain in his side would allow, and made a beeline towards the general store. He figured that hooking up with the marshal was his best bet.

As he reached the steps of the store, he spied Jay Pander walking into the building next to store. He's sneaking behind Wyatt and Johnny! This guy really likes shoot'n folks in the back, Gray thought to himself. He stumbled to the doorway that the white wanna-be 'Mexican' had entered. As he slipped inside, he caught a ray of sunlight on the other side of the room, coming from the backdoor. Gray gritted his teeth and forced himself to run across the room. Blood dripped from his side as he peered through the doorway into the sunlight. He crouched down low and peeked his head outside and around the corner, almost at ground level. Pander Jr. was taking aim into the building, that Wyatt and Johnny had to be in. Without a gun, Gray did the only thing he could.

He hobbled into view; Gray could not resist the temptation. "Amigo, Mexico is that way." Gray tipped his head south.

The Pander boy spun around. He was momentarily shocked. This short young guy was bracing him without a gun, and he seemed to come from nowhere. The scary thing was that something about this little guy made Jay Pander very nervous. Then it dawned on him, this was the "Boy."

“Well, Amigo”—Jay tried to sound arrogant, but his fear betrayed him—“I know who ya are, Boy. But I gotta gun and you don’t.” He took a step forward. “So, give up.” He laughed arrogantly, as he holstered his pistol.

“Don’t come any closer, Pander, and stop trying to treat me like a tenderfoot. You and I both know I ain’t. If you thought I was, your voice wouldn’t be shaking right now. Now, I got a court order that says ya need to put down yer gun, if ya don’t, you’ll die.”

“Ah, come on, you don’t think you can take me on with those little blades of yers? You little—”

“Stop talkin’ and shoot me or put your gun on the ground.” Gray stood ten feet from Pander.

Jay smirked and grabbed for his gun with arrogance. Gray’s hands were quicker. Jay got off two shots, one that grazed Gray’s right side, just one inch from his first flesh wound. Pander tried with all his might to fire again, but he could not manage to hold his gun. It loosened and then dangled around his finger before it dropped to the ground. He had one blade in his stomach and another in his throat. He could not talk or breathe. Within seconds, life escaped from his body.

Gray stared down at the dying Pander. He gripped both wounds with his right hand, and winced in pain. “You shoulda dropped your gun!” His momentary rest was shattered as he suddenly felt as though a horse had crashed into his shoulder. Gray fell face first into the dirt. He rolled over to see a young man standing over him. Sweat dripped from his forehead and hatred boiled on his face. Blood leaked from a leg wound as he struggled to stand. However, the gun he held was steady enough, and only five feet from Gray’s head.

“You killed my brother!” he screamed.

“Sorry, mister, but it was a fair fight.” Gray grunted.

The young Pander brother stumbled a few steps forward, leaning over Gray. “Yer still gonna die—”

A loud boom cut his voice off and threw him against the wall. He slumped to the ground as life drained from his body.

Gray looked up to see the reverend holding a smoking shotgun and looking unusually serious.

“Rev, I never thought you had that in you.” Gray sat up very slowly. The reverend helped him to his feet as he spoke with a deep preacher’s voice. “The Kingdom of God suffers violence and violent men take it by force,” he finished the verse with a wink.

“That’s true,” Gray grunted and forced out a smile. “Now, I gotta git to the others and see what’s going on.” Gray stood up and took one step forward. Everything faded to black as he fell into darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

His eyes were open, but Gray's mind could not focus. Someone he knew by voice, stood above him. The fog in his brain blocked his memory as to who this person could be. The young man's eyesight was strained, and the face above him was a blur of dull colors.

Another person joined him and said something about a day or two. The voice was feminine and familiar.

"Ma?" He felt strange and his voice hoarse.

The response was full of regret, "No sweetie, I wish I could say I was yer Ma. It's me, Mrs. Cookshank..."

Gray faded back into darkness...

His eyes opened again, but this time there was no face staring down at him, only bright sunlight pouring into Gray's sensitive eyes. It felt like morning. Staring into a whitewashed ceiling, he could now focus on the detail above him. A fly was buzzing over his head and landed on the cheap, white paint. After several minutes, he thought, Awe, this is stupid, I ain't gonna just lie here. He tried to sit up, but only managed to raise his head enough to admit to himself that he was not going to be able to leave bed for a while. The only rewards he received for his hard work was an excruciating headache that squeezed a painful moan from his lips.

"Gray! You up, partner?" It was Flint. His long frame loomed over Gray. He had wide eyes and a giant smile that had never before accompanied the face of the gunslinger. "Ya'll, git in here! He's up! Hey Doc...Git doc in here!" Flint bellowed behind him, which Gray could only guess was the hallway leading to the others. "How ya doin', partner?" Flint asked with a smile.

"Just dandy. How about you, buckaroo?" Gray managed a sarcastic smile.

"Well, course I know how you've been doin'. I probably know more than you. Yeah, it's good to see yer awake. Fer awhile there, we didn't even know if'n yer gonna make it." Flint had totally lost his sense of pride as a tear of happiness escaped his left eye.

Gray smiled. "Well, good to know you'd miss me. And you better get yourself together..."—the bedridden man stopped to take a breath and winced a bit—"because in about two secs, these folks are gonna see you're a mess."

Flint held up his hand. "Now, you stop talkin'. The doc says there ain't no talkin'."

when you're awake. Ya need yer rest. And, to tell you before one of these mean folks do, I've been a mess for the past two and a half weeks. So, it don't matter what they think."

"Good for you..." Gray couldn't finish what he was trying to say, but he flashed a soft grin, and that was all Flint needed to understand.

Voices in the hallway grew louder, as did Gray's headache.

A man's voice that Gray did not recognize got closer. Gray assumed it belonged to the doctor and that he was attempting to beat off the hoard of well-wishers trying to make their way into the makeshift recovery room at the same time.

"Now, Mr. Flint, you have already talked to him, and you can see that he is okay, so I have to insist that you step out." The doc was about fifty-five and missing half his hair. He seemed the type who can put up with a lot and took his work very seriously. "Everyone else, you can say one sentence. Andrew, you are only allowed a phrase. No poetry or anything sneaky, you hear?"

Andrew leaned over Gray's bed. "I am overjoyed at the fact that your body is mending in the way in which God intended it. Please—"

"Okay, you're done, don't think for a second that I didn't know that you spoke more than you were told to, so skedaddle. Next!" The doctor was taking no prisoners.

The reverend and his wife leaned over the bed and smiled. They were very patient people, and did not feel the need to speak, but only to make their presence known. Mrs. Cookshank touched Gray's face as only a mother could. The reverend placed his hand on Gray's and gave him a man's clinch while he spoke. "Your Bible's next to ya. Andrew and Flint have mine."

Gray nodded and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Next was Johnny. He leaned over Gray's bed. "I know'd what ya did fer me and Wyatt, the way you rode into those guys and then took Jay Pander without a gun." The deputy looked away searching for words. "I ain't never known anyone to do that fer friends. I'm grateful."

The doc cleared his throat loudly, hinting that it was time to wrap it up.

"Well, I'll be seein' ya, and don't worry 'bout being safe. We're all taking turns to..."

The doc pushed him out the door. "You and that mouth. Too bad the Panders didn't shoot half it off. That way you'd only talk as much as normal folk."

"Ah come on, doc, I was only thankin' him. He saved my life and—"

The doc cut off Johnny. "Wyatt, yer last, so make it quick and good."

The marshal nodded and asked to be alone with him for two minutes. The doctor brushed Wyatt off with a wave of his hand. "I said one sentence."

Marshal Herp gripped the doctor's arm and looked him in the eye. "Doc, please! I need to." Wyatt's eyes were desperate. That was an emotion never before shown by the old grizzled marshal.

The doctor smiled. "All right, let me see how he's feeling." The doc leaned close to Gray and asked in a different soft and kind voice. "Young man, how are you feeling? Okay to talk to the marshal for a spell?"

Gray nodded slowly.

The doctor packed up his bag and glanced at both men. "I'll leave ya to it." The doctor softly closed the door to the room as he left.

Marshal Wyatt pulled up a chair and sat down next to Gray and leaned forward. He rolled his hat nervously on his fingers and looked out the window as he spoke to the young man. Wyatt was trying to say something from his heart, and it was not easy. "I just wanna let ya know that, well, what ya said to me before we walked outta the office the day of the fight, well, it did something to me. No one's talked to me like that since I left my home down south. I was younger than you, actually."

Wyatt looked down at Gray, who was managing a large smile.

He in turn smiled. "It was my mother. You were right, Gray. She would always say that, cause I never forgave God fer letting my pa die. Well." He chuckled a bit. "This old dog's learning a bit of new tricks these days. I've been spendin' time with the reverend and his Mrs. I even been to church and read the Bible for the first time in forty years. But the hardest one, I wanted to do with you, cause I felt that's only right..." He stared out the window and paused for a second, before speaking. "This may sound strange. But, can I pray with you?"

Gray's hand motioned for Wyatt to bring his ear closer to Gray's mouth. "Sounds good to me. Ya talk, I'll..." He couldn't finish, but Wyatt knew. "Of course, son. Don't worry yerself. Why don't we do this in a few days."

Gray's face changed and he gritted his teeth. "Now!" He heaved the word out with determination.

"Okay, okay, then. I'll just....well, yeah. I'll git on with it, then." The old lawman cleared his throat. He felt more nervous now, than when he had faced off with the Panders. He was not used to this sort of thing, but the marshal took it very seriously. "Hey there, Lord. It's me, Wyatt Herp. I know it's been a while. Sorry I haven't been talkin' to ya, er nothing. Well, it's been hard cause of what happened with Pa, and..."

Wyatt hardened his face, trying to keep back his tears. "I just never really did know why. I still don't know why. But that don't matter. What I'm try'n to say is that I was wrong fer not talking to ya. And that I forgive you, and I even forgive O'Hagen. I'll be seeing you 'round. Thanks...uhh...amen."

Gray put his hand on the marshal's, trying to shake it. He wanted to congratulate him, but he only managed to mouth the word, "Good."

"Well, thanks, Gray." Wyatt said while he stood up. "I'll come by tomorrow and see if I can git ya anything." The two men exchanged nods of their heads that were silent but conveyed deeper sentiments than words could express. Wyatt turned on his heels, opened the door, and stepped outside.

The doctor stepped inside and began lecturing Gray that he needed to take care of himself as he helped him drink a few drops of water from a wet cloth. He was saying something about the amount of blood Gray had lost, and that he should be okay to get around in a little while, but he would live with some side-effects for the rest of his life. This new information was settling into Gray's mind, when he fell into another deep sleep.

It had been over a month since the shooting. The judge had investigated the Pander incident and shootout. "It is the opinion of this court," he had stated, "that Pander has acted outside the law and has used his power and money to hide his unlawful activities. Marshal Wyatt and the four deputies by his side are innocent in the fight that happened and only acted in self-defense and the defense of the good people of Nook River. They are cleared of any charges. Pander"— he turned to address the ex-wealthy rancher—"you will spend ten years in a state prison." He smacked the table in front of him. "Case is over."

Most of the town were happy about the results, yet there were some that didn't like it. Some of the town's folk even left in protest. "It just ain't right." They would say. "He did so much fer us."

The reverend's response? "The ignorance of people will never cease to amaze me. The reality is that Pander was the cause of most of the crime in the area. But by buying the town a few things here and there, he blinded us. He bought us off! We must never think that just 'cause we have new things that everything is okay. And just cause we get money doesn't mean it's from God. God gave us the Holy Spirit to discern what these type of people are up to. Let's learn to hear what He is saying to us!"

Gray didn't worry about the politics of the town, what folks thought about the

fight, or even about himself. He had enough on his plate. Although getting stronger, he was still busy trying to mend. The week after he had regained consciousness, with the help of a cane, Gray was able to walk down the street from the hotel where he had been staying.

Besides his recovery, he was still mentoring Flint, Andrew, and most recently, Johnny and Marshal Wyatt. All of that combined could not compare to the largest worry which plagued his mind: stardom! After word of his bravery was made known, his list of admirers grew larger by the day. "You took on five gunmen, all alone, to protect the marshal and the other men? You're so brave." The girls would all say, almost identically. It irritated and intimidated Gray at the same time. However, every minute of this soft, feminine torture brought sheer delight to his amigos.

"I liked Betsy the best, Gray. I am telling you, she is the one for you!" Johnny said with a mouth full of food. They were gathered on the porch outside the marshal's office watching the town folk walk by.

"That's only cause yer over there munchin' on her cornbread and the honey she brought over. Now listen up, the right one was..."—Flint's voice became high, and he fluttered his eyelids in mockery—"Sarah. She was—."

"Hey, watch what yer saying, Flint." Gray cut him short.

Flint continued with caution, "She was, well...of the womanly type of features."

"Well now, Mr. Flint," Andrew spoke up. "I appreciate your attempt at using more extensive words. Although, I do have to note that she did seem quite taken with any male who was single."

"Yeah, she's a bit of a flirt all right," Johnny said.

Although they enjoyed giving Gray a hard time, they were even more impressed at his excuses. So far Gray was saving himself for a Chinese woman in New York. He had sworn to his mother that he would marry someone from Mexico. He had lost his ability to have kids while trying to ride an elk in Canada. Of course, everyone's favorite: he had been married three times, the first when he was twelve. They are all around the country waiting for their four months with Gray, but he was always looking for wife number four.

It was a lot of fun, but "Alas, all good things must come to an end," Andrew would say. No matter how much the town's people tried to convince them otherwise, Gray and his partners would be off, very soon.

The day of the trio's departure was decided when the judge excused Flint of

his deeds. Deciding that he had been Christianized enough and that his insanity had been cured, he was pardoned.

The judge also wrote a letter of pardon for anything that Andrew might have done in the past. His role in the town and change in character had proven itself. Most of the town agreed, plus it was the only thing that Gray had asked from Wyatt and the city fathers, for his part in the Pander saga.

After praying and discussing it, the three men decided it was time to move on. It had been over three months. A lot longer than Flint could have ever imagined when he and his mentor had ridden into Nook River and foiled the banker robbers.

The doctor was livid. "You need to stay off yer horse for at least another six months. And don't even think about doing anything that requires sweating for another year. Oh, but who cares! What do I know? I'm only the doctor!" The doc brushed past Flint in a huff, muttering something about arrogant youngsters.

"What was that all about?" Flint asked as he walked into Gray's room.

Gray was trying to figure out how to fit a lot of clothes into small saddlebags. "You got any room in yours?"

Flint leaned against the wall of the hotel room. "Nah, I'm just as full as you. Think we're leaving with about three times the amount of stuff than when we arrived. Now, don't act like you don't know what I just said. What's the doc blowing-up about?"

"He just thinks that if I don't take care of myself, the different parts of my body might get holes in 'em. That's all."

"That's all?!" Flint exclaimed. "Ya mean he says that if you go rid'n all over God's creation your organs could fail?"

"Yeah, that's what he said. My organs could fail me. But, I told him that I don't have no organ. So he told me, that he meant the parts in my body. So I said—"

"Gray!" Flint did not appreciate the humor. "We both know what happens when you ride. Trouble finds you, and your body always takes a beating!"

The young man shrugged as he continued packing. "Flint, God says move, so we're gonna go. That's all there is to it. With or without you, I'm taking off. I don't know exactly what God's got for us, but I do know that He wants us on the move, now."

Flint spoke over his shoulder as he left. "Well, don't come crying to me if'n you git yerself shot, again."

Gray yelled after him. "Okay, Ma, I won't!"

Half the town, and most of the church, decided that Gray, Flint and Andrew

would not be allowed to leave quietly. They were treated to a large shindig at the Cookshank's home. There was dancing, laughing, and a whole lot of food. Everyone talked the three gunmen into a friendly competition. They set up three cans, to see who could put more holes in their can on a quick draw. Gray was opposed to it, thinking it would encourage the young boys to want to be fighters. The reverend's excuse for seeing the spectacle was that the boys would look up to someone who was a gunfighter, so it might as well be three men of God who had morals. Gray sighed reluctantly, but agreed to it.

Flint was elected to go first. He drew fast and leaned back slightly as he fired. He shot the can twice with his Colt, causing it to flip in the air. He finished by unloading the final four bullets with quick shots by cocking the hammer with the heel of his hand. Flint really played to the gallery when the old gunslinger flipped his pistol round his finger in two directions before sliding it back into its holster. The can had six holes in it, which caused Flint to give his companions a haughty smile.

Andrew strapped on his rig and moved to the same distance that Flint was standing. Without any thought of being quick, he drew both guns and blew holes so accurate into the can, that the steal container tore in half as his Remington guns were emptied. He turned squarely at Flint and bowed slightly.

"That ain't fair. We never said two guns," Flint whined.

"Yet, there was not a stipulation against it," Andrew retorted.

"It's okay, cause I got my money on Gray." Johnny said over Flint's shoulder, he had arrived late.

"How much?" Flint asked.

"A drink on yer way out'a town?"

"Done." Flint spit in his right hand as Johnny did the same and they shook on it.

Gray was standing with his Henry rifle. Because his rifle was larger, he asked everyone to step further back.

"Come on, boy, I gotta drink ridin on you!" Johnny yelled.

Flint decided on some distraction techniques against his partner. He stepped up close to Gray, leaned into his ear and whispered, "Look, there's Sarah over there. She's asking for her husband, Gray."

Gray took a deep breath and levelled his rifle. However, instead of firing, he handed his rifle to a confused Flint and walked to the can. He took out one of his blades, and with a mischievous grin began poking holes into the tin and counting out loud "Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen. I believe gentlemen, that you lose."

The crowd roared in laughter. But soon Flint was able to turn the laughing crowd against Gray. Soon they were booing, demanding the real thing. After a few minutes of coaxing and booing, the Boy agreed to using his blades. "But only to prove that you don't need guns," Gray said. So a new can was found, and Gray set himself up again.

First he rolled his left shoulder, which was still a bit sore from the wound. He took a deep breath, allowing his body to relax, and flew into action. Gray let loose two blades one after the other. They both buried themselves into the steel can. The fact that the blades both struck true surprised Gray more than anyone. But he did not show his shock.

He turned slowly around with an eyebrow raised. "And that is why, my good people, that pistols are not needed." He gave Flint most of his smile.

The crowd exploded with applause and laughter. Men were heard saying that this night and these men would never be forgotten. Johnny muttered something to Flint about being glad he did not try, cause he did not want to look like a fool, as Flint did.

Flint could not recall a more enjoyable evening, until he realized that his "little angel" was not playing with her usual group. He wondered where the Cookshank's youngest could be. Flint strolled to the house, only to overhear his little darling crying in her mother's arms. The old gunslinger listened for a minute, before entering.

"Why does Mr. Flint have to go? He's my friend." The young girl sobbed into her mother's shoulder.

"He is leaving not because he wants to, my love. He is only going because it is where he must go." Mrs. Cookshank stroked the young child's hair.

Flint entered the house, a little scared. He wanted his little angel to know that his leaving was hard for him too, and it was not a bad thing. But would she understand? Could she understand?

Mrs. Cookshank looked up and smiled. She turned her child in her lap so she could see Flint. The mother spoke with as much excitement and sympathy as possible. "Look who's here, sweetie. It's Mr. Flint, why don't you stay here with him for a bit." She set her down on the couch and stood to leave.

Flint touched the mother's arm as she passed and gave her a look of desperation. She whispered in his ear, "You'll know what to say."

Flint watched her leave and sat down next to the little child. She had crossed her arms tightly and pointed her body away from Flint in emotional defiance.

"Listen, I don't want you to be upset, but I gotta go." He tried to explain.

"Why? You don't have to. You said you're my friend." Her tear stained face was angry.

"You remember when I first talked to you, darlin'?" Flint tried a different approach. She said nothing, so Flint kept talking. "Well, you were right, twice. I needed to be friends with Jesus and friends with you. So, I'm friends with both of ya now. But ya see, Jesus told me I need to go and follow Uncle Gray wherever he goes. So, I need to do what Jesus says." Flint prayed that had made some sort of sense.

"Will you come back?" She still would not look at him.

"Little missy, I haven't had too many real friends. Especially friends as smart as you. So, you can bet I'll be back to visit my favorite little woman in the world." Flint placed his large rough hand upon her tiny back.

The little girl stood up and turned to face Flint with tears in her eyes. She wrapped her tiny arms around the big man's neck. "I will miss you, Uncle Flint. Don't forget me."

Two tears simultaneously streamed down either side of the old gunslinger's face. "I couldn't forget you, even if I tried, little angel."

The next day was a hard one, but exciting too. The church had showed up to say goodbye to the trio. Flint had his drink with Johnny. The Cookshanks had one last encouraging conversation with Andrew.

Gray said his farewell to everyone, one at a time. In true Gray style, he did not say too much, but everyone understood his heart. When he spoke to the marshal he said, "It's been good. And it's better when it's God."

Marshal Wyatt smiled. "Don't worry 'bout me. The Lord's slow to anger, and He's got a lot of mercy. I know that again, thanks to you."

"Thanks to Him and yer ma." Gray corrected him. "I'm just glad I could help."

The two men nodded and shared the same look that they had while Gray was still bedridden.

"Come on, Gray, we're burning daylight." Flint jostled his partner. He and Andrew were mounted and ready to ride.

Smoothly, Gray slid onto the back of his mare and walked his mount next to Andrew and Flint.

They all waved their farewells to Nook River and rode out of town.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The three companions made their way down the trail towards Junction City. Gray would not tell Flint nor Andrew why he felt they should move that way. His only response was, "That's where God wants us next."

It was an enjoyable journey. For the most part the road to Junction was very non-eventful. Although, there was one event that had the three ready for a fight, however compared to their previous encounter with the Panders, it was a minor incident.

The trio had been arguing about which rifle was better to use.

"I keep telling you, the day of the long range rifle is over. There ain't no more buffalo to hunt, and the Indians are either friends or run down towards Mexico," Flint argued.

Gray had never been so defensive. "Yeah, but what about buck hunting. How do you think that hunting buck with a Winchester's going to work? Might as well be using a bow and arrow. Take my Henry here for a second, old Betsy, as Pa would say. 'She can knock down a running buck on the other side of a canyon. That is if'n you can shoot a rifle.'" Gray directed his subtle insult towards Flint with a smile.

"If an inexperienced man from the East may offer an opinion, I would like to speak." Andrew interjected.

Flint looked impressed. "I must be gettin' sharper, Andrew. Cause I can finally understand what in the world yer talkin' about with those fancy words you call English."

Andrew looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Well, in my defense, my good man, I would have to say that it is merely I who speaks with proper grammatical skill and communication, in contrast to the entire population of the Western United States."

Gray brought them all back on the subject, "What were you sayin', Andrew?"

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Mr. Gray. I was merely going to state that, although the Henry does have equal range to any other rifle in the world, it does not have the same destructive power. If I am not mistaken, the Spencer Rifle repeater 7 introduced for the Union Calvary is of .52 calibers, yet the Henry is only a .44 caliber."

Gray was defensive. "Well, you know what! That overrated ugly Spencer Rifle don't hold as many bullets nor is it as fast to shoot. Plus, if I were carrying a .44 pistol, I'd only have to worry about one type of ammunition....besides, my Betsy's got a way

better feel to her.”

Flint became smug. “Well, if you didn’t shoot an antique with half a stock, then you wouldn’t have to wear that left handed glove to keep from burning your fingers on the barrel when ya shoot.”

“Listen, you gotta pay for beauty sometimes. The Spencer ain’t got no style. It’s so dull and...”

Gray’s voice faded as the three companions spied a dust cloud rising in the distance to their right. There was a certain way of thinking a person develops through years of experience on the trail. If you could survive traveling the highways and byways of the far western territories, then you had done so by developing an instinct which automatically knows when something is not natural and does not feel right, an ability to accurately judge distance, and surmise the intentions of both man and beast. Of course, none of this was an exact science, but it was necessary for staying alive, and the three companions had highly developed trail instincts. So, if a tenderfoot from the city were to listen in on the trio’s conversation, he would assume they had forgotten to say a few words. However, the fact was, that the three men already knew what the others were thinking.

“Three, I reckon.” Flint guessed aloud as he checked his Colt and then his extra Smith & Wesson, which he took from out of the saddle bag and tucked into his waistband.

Andrew was not wearing his overcoat, so his large pistols were visible and glimmering in the sunlight.

Gray twisted in his saddle and looked behind them, then sighed. “Well, it doesn’t look like they want us to get away.” He spied two horses pulling around from behind a bend 200 feet to their rear. They wore masks. Gray glanced at his friends as they also twisted in their saddles to look at the men behind them. Yet, the three companions did not stop, slow down or even change their direction of travel. They did not have any reason to. God was on their side, that...and these bandits were tenderfoots.

“Gray, you remember those two bushwhacks that tried to kill us when we first met?” Flint asked.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Those fellers look like the James-Younger’s gang compared to these idiots. Just let me handle these bally fools.”

The others nodded slowly in agreement to Flint’s request, but were still ready to move with their weapons.

The bandits rode in on the three men with guns drawn, but to make their mistake complete, they lined up in front of the three, instead of surrounding them.

“Hand over yer money and guns and we’ll let you go,” the lead rider demanded. His face was hidden under a blue bandana.

“I cannot, good sir,” Andrew said his face void of expression. “I am frozen in fear.”

After several seconds of silence, Flint, Gray and Andrew exploded in laughter. They were almost doubling over in hysterics.

“Now listen here, I ain’t got all the time in the world, and you got two seconds to hand ove’—the lead bandit tried to finish, but Flint cut him off.

“Let me guess, boys, you’re starvin’ actors?”

Anger and embarrassment flashed in the leader’s eyes. The bandit pointed his pistol in the air and fired, leaving the gun in the air for effect. “Money, NOW!”

Before the man could level his pistol again, Flint shot the lead bandit off his horse, reloaded and had his other gun drawn, and they were both pointed at the head of the next man. Gray let a hunting knife fly, but in an act of mercy purposefully hit the bandit in front of him with the hilt of his knife, then grabbed and loaded his Henry in the confusion. Meanwhile, Andrew followed suit, sidestepping his horse into the man’s ride next to him. Both of their horse reared up, but Andrew was ready for it. He held onto his horse with one hand, and used the other to draw his pistol. The bandit wasn’t so lucky, he fell backwards into one of his partners in crime, taking them both to the ground. When the dust settled and the horse were either calmed or had run off, it was clear that the tables had been turned. The would-be bandits all had guns pointed at their heads. But unlike the incompetent robbers, the three armed victims would not miss.

Flint sighed and clicked his tongue at the thieves, “Now, boys, if your gonna be highwaymen, don’t be so stupid. You thought you can control us enough to take our stuff then git? No, next time—”

“Flint,” Gray whispered with a harsh tone. “Don’t tell ‘em how to successfully rob folk! Folks could get killed.”

“Well, why not?” Flint argued back. “These guys can’t do nothing anyways. Look, most of ‘em have already wet their trousers.”

“I was talkin’ about getting themselves killed.”

“Gentlemen, can we please save this argument for the next leg of our journey?” Andrew asked politely with his gun still aimed.

“Oh yes, sorry boys, you may go now. Just take yer big bad leader with ya.” Flint commanded.

Gray had another idea. “Hold on there. To teach you that being a highwayman ain’t worth it, put all yer guns in yer saddle bags.”

After they had all obeyed Gray’s command, the three men took the bandit’s horses with them. Two miles down the trail, they left the animals to go wherever they pleased.

That night, the three travelling partners lay on their bedrolls next to a warm flickering fire. Crickets chirped, an owl screeched in the distance and a lonely forlorn call of a coyote joined the wilderness chorus. The crescent moon did not let off much light, which annoyed Flint, since he was trying to read the adventures of Tom Sawyer, written by a loud crazy man. Flint had actually ridden shotgun for his stagecoach years earlier when he had traveled into California. Flint had seen the book on the Cookshanks shelf, and asked about it. That was his mistake, quickly, it had become a gift from the reverend and now he was committed to reading the entire thing. Flint’s first novel, the first of many, so Mrs. Cookshank promised. After only a paragraph, he closed the book gruffly and stuffed it back into his bag. “Can’t see a darn thing!” He growled to himself.

Gray and Andrew didn’t seem to mind the dark night as it allowed more stars to be visible. Both of them were on their backs counting shooting stars.

Flint joined them, and soon find himself enjoying the competition of being the first to locate and call out the streak of light shooting across the sky. Of course, Gray dominated the game, so after an hour of losing, Flint decided to change the subject.

“I sometimes think that folks in the west just don’t age past ten in their heads.” Flint stated as a comment on the day’s escapade.

“Yes, people living within the western side of the country seem to stay very immature, Mr. Flint. Even so, my good friend, we are committed to loving and tolerating you until death.” Andrew even added a sense of conviction with his words.

Gray chuckled.

“If’n I had a mind to, then I would go over there and whoop you, Andrew. Or should I just call you Drew?”

“Please, I highly dislike that nickname. Forgive anything I may have said. Please, just do not call me that name.” Andrew shook his head slightly, as if he had a bad taste in his mouth he was trying to forget.

Flint dug deeper, “What’s wrong with that name? You don’t mind me calling you something like Kid, but Drew is bad?”

“I just do not appreciate it. That is the point at which this topic should be forgotten.” Andrew crossed his arms and tried to direct the attention back upon the stars by looking hard into the sky. It didn’t work.

Flint was too curious to give up, “Come on, Andrew, just tell us, then we don’t never gotta talk about it.” Flint bluntly pried. “I told you all my past and everything bad. Now, you can’t be holdin’ back.”

“That is what my father would refer to me as, satisfied?” Andrew’s voice shook with emotion, and he spoke through gritted his teeth.

Flint apologized, realizing he had gone too far, “Okay, didn’t think it would be that bad. Thought it would be more like someone from school er something, sorry.”

“You need to go back East, Andrew.” The statement was the last thing either Flint or Andrew expected to hear, and it came from Gray.

“What?” Andrew asked, his voice was not raised or angry, but very tense. It had a hint of disbelief. “What did you say?”

Gray repeated himself, without fear. He knew that Andrew was not going to take this well. He also knew it was the next step for his change from a killer to a free son of God. “The next thing you must do is face and make right everything in Maine.”

“I told you, Gray! I will not go back there! Ever!” Andrew hissed.

“I know this is hard for you to understand, but you left yer home after killing a man—”

Andrew cut him off, “He killed my mother and...”

Gray did not let him finish, “I know he did, Andrew, but there are still unanswered questions from folks around there. Plus, you have not seen the grave of yer parents... yer ma. You ain’t seen what’s happened to your family’s estate.”

Andrew did not move or look at anyone. Anger streaked across his face as he lay on his back with his hands folded across his chest. “Why would you do this to me, Gray? I need to be in the company of you and Flint for me to continue becoming like Jesus Christ. For the first time in my life, I have real friends. Now, you are telling me to leave?” Andrew clinched his jaw. “Do you want me to go?”

“Yeah, Gray, I—” Flint tried to speak, but Gray shot him a look which shut him up in mid-sentence.

“No, Andrew. If I had it my way, I would want to ride with you till death, but God’s got bigger and better plans. Andrew, you don’t need us around anymore. We have

helped you get started, and God has used us, but it's not us you need. You need Jesus, and He will be there for you every single time, no matter what. He has a plan for you, Andrew. A plan that is back East for now. The only way to grow in God is to obey Him. That's what that verse is all about in Proverbs, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.' If you don't obey Him, then you ain't trusting Him. Without trust there's no way you're really in relationship with Jesus. And if you don't trust Him, He's not really God in your life." The harsh truth seemed to take a shade of brightness away from the starlight.

An awkward silence hung in the evening air. Even the sounds of the wildness seemed to settle, feeling the thick tension. Gray finally broke the silence. "I will leave it up to you, Andrew. If you think I am totally wrong, then just say so. But, if I am right, and God is saying you gotta go, then please, don't be scared. Cause you're always safest when yer doing what God wants you to do. You will have till Junction City to decide."

The ride to Junction City was no longer enjoyable. It was four more days of riding before the three men would reach the railroad town. To Flint, it seemed more like four years. Flint would try to make conversation with Andrew, but he would only reply in one word answers. If Flint would speak with Gray, Andrew would pull his horse back and walk far behind the others so he would not have to hear Gray's voice.

On the last day, the three had stopped to allow their horses to rest near a stream. Flint and Gray were sitting on a fallen log that was pushed aside from the trail so wagons could pass. As Flint chewed on jerked beef, Gray closed his eyes with his hat pulled over his eyes, trying to get some rest.

"What is required of me?"

The sound of Andrew's voice took Flint by surprise. He sat up and grabbed for his gun. Gray pushed his hat up. His eyes were full of sleep and confusion.

Andrew spoke again. "If God does wish me to return East, He must have an idea as to why I must go, correct?"

"Yep." Gray nodded in agreement as he sat up and rubbed his eyes. "He does have a plan for you. I just don't know what it is. It's time for you to hear Him on your own."

"How will I know that it is what He wants, and that it is really Him speaking to me?" Andrew asked nervously.

"We have talked about this before, Andrew. First, nothing He says will be

against the Bible. Also, anything He wants you to do will be loving towards others and yourself. And it'll make God look good. Most of all, don't worry about whether or not you can hear Him. Have faith that He, God, can talk to you and that He wants to talk to you.

Look, in the Bible it says, 'Which of you, if your son asks for bread would give him a rock, or if he asked for a fish would give him a snake, will he? If you, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him?' Don't have faith or trust that you can hear Him, but have faith that He can make Himself heard by you. He's all powerful and speaks to you!"

Andrew did not look convinced.

"You're not gonna feel super confident in it, never. As soon as you do, God will change how He is teaching you and speaking to you, so that you have to stay humble and keep learning. He wants us to have to trust in Him, 'in our weakness He is made strong.'"

"I believe, inadequate, is the feeling I am experiencing." Andrew admitted.

"I feel inadequate almost every day. So, it's a good thing He's God"—Gray pointed up towards the sky—"and we are not."

Andrew's only response was a deep sigh.

The next day, the three men mounted and rode the final leg to Junction City where Gray and Flint would see their companion off to another adventure for Christ.

Flint and Gray had been riding much too hard, especially because of Gray's poor physical condition. Flint tried to get his partner to slow down and take it easy, but Gray was insistent that they had to hurry back West, in the same direction from where they had first met.

They had said goodbye to their friend, Andrew, weeks earlier. It was solemn to say farewell to someone with whom they had shared so many experiences and adventures. The Kid, now in a state of continuous change into Andrew, the man God had intended him to be from the beginning, was moving into a different and new phase of his life.

While his partners were seeing him off at the train platform, he had given them farewell gifts. "Flint, I want you to have this, I am not going need it anymore." He had

given Flint his 12" Bowie knife. Flint could not figure out something worthwhile to say.

"Gray, I would not have enough time to explain how much you have impacted my life, or how much I appreciate you and what you have done to assist me in my journey with Christ." He had handed him what seemed to be a rolled up piece of paper. "Please only open it after I have departed?"

Andrew shook hands once more with his companions. He stepped aboard the train and tipped his hat at them through the train window, as the locomotive pulled out of the train station heading East.

As Gray opened the rolled up paper, it was much larger than expected. It was an extraordinary picture of their past. The art was drawn with simple pencil led, but the feelings behind the story told on this paper did far more than make up for the lack of color.

It was a drawing of Jesus with His hands stretched wide towards His Father in Heaven. Around the Son of God was light that came from every part of His being. He was standing over two figures. The figures were sitting on a boulder in the middle of a field. The figure on the right had a writing table, and the other character's mouth was open to say something. They both had identical features to Gray and Andrew. It captured the first time Gray had shared about the Father's love for Andrew. Andrew had allowed Jesus to touch his life through Gray that day, and this picture was the only way he had known how to express it. In Gray's opinion, Andrew could not have said it any better.

After the very emotional departure, Gray and Flint had travelled steadily back West. Gray said he felt that they needed to get back to where he and Flint started their journey together, Silver Springs.

After many days of hard riding, they made it. "Well now, Gray, seems like we were just here, don't it?" Flint mused out loud as the two riders rode into the sleepy town. He did not notice that his partner had not replied. "Wonder if Mike's 'round. And didn't you say you were eager to git yer ear talked off again by Marlene Marx?" Flint paused, then looked to his partner. "Gray?"

Gray was staring straight ahead. However, he was incredibly pale. Suddenly, his eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body slumped over his saddle. Gray's head landed atop his horse's mane, and Flint caught him before he rolled over and fell. Flint gripped his partner by the belt and hefted him over to his own horse, kicked his heels hard into his stallion and rode hard into town. Flint's horse struggled to stop,

carrying both men so fast, but the powerful animal managed. Flint had stopped right in front of Marlene Marx's hotel. A few onlookers, one of whom happened to be Mike Humphries, the store owner, helped Flint get Gray inside Marlene's place.

Flint and Mike, hauled the young mountain man up the stairs and dropped him on the bed. "Ya'll gotta doctor, Mike?"

"No, he only comes in once a month. Marlene knows a good amount of stuff about these things, Flint. She can manage," Mike said. Then he stopped and got closer to Flint's ear and half whispered "Flint, is this the "Boy?"

Flint waved Humphries away. "His name's Gray. Why?"

"Well, I'm only asking 'cause I'm curious if he's like this from what happened to you boys cause of that fuss with them Panders?"

Flint looked at Mike sideway for a minute and thought to himself. For such a huge stretch of land, the West sure seems like a small town sometimes! Flint then turned back to his partner. "Now ain't the time, Mike." Flint growled over his shoulder, as he got to work taking the boots off his partner.

"I know, Flint, and I am sorry, but it's just that." Mike looked around nervously.

Flint shook his head. "Noth'n changes 'round here, does it? Just say it, Mike. I promise I won't shoot you." Flint said.

"It's just that there's a feller saying he's gonna start a ruckus with the Boy... I mean with Mr. Gray. The angry man says that this here young feller beefed his cousin. He wants revenge. I only told him that I saw you two together last when you rode out of town together some time ago."

"Well, if anyone wants Gray, they're gonna have to go through me, first," Flint stated with irritation building in his voice. "This whole country is infested with ten-year-olds trapped in men's bodies," Flint grumbled out loud.

The old gunfighter walked over to a table on the other side of the room. He poured water from a jug into the room's water basin to wash off Gray's face.

"That's the thing, Flint. I told him that you two have been riding together, but he says that doesn't matter. The man swears he's an old riding partner of yers and you wouldn't draw on him."

"I've ridden with quite a few men in my time. What does he look like, Mike?" Flint placed a cold wet cloth on Gray forehead.

"Everything about this guy is black. He wears black, his guns are black, his hat, horse, and saddle...all black."

Flint stopped what he was doing. He stood up straight and glared at the

storekeeper with intensity that could have burnt holes through wood. “What’s his name, Mike?!”

Humphries’ lips quivered timidly. “I think it’s Bart.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Flint flew down the stairs and burst through the hotel doors onto the street. He did not wear his coat. A stiff wind pressed his shirt against his chest. His bandanna flapped in the wind. His Colt was tied down, and his five shot, large caliber, Smith & Wesson was tucked in his belt ready for action. He was hunt'n trouble!

"Ain't no one's gonna git to Gray, not while I'm 'round!" Flint growled to himself through a clenched jaw.

He was walking to Mickey's place. She was the woman of ill repute that Flint would usually stay with. He knew that was most likely where Bart would be. The house was on the edge of town. The wood that it was built with had some shade of blue that had been painted on several years ago, however, most of it had worn off. A makeshift fence led to the front door. The door was basic, white without any trim or decoration. Its existence was there for one purpose: to cover up what happened inside. On either side of the door lay two windows both of them covered by cheap curtains. When coming into town, Flint had thought to himself that he would not set foot near this house because of temptation. Now, things were different, and Mickey was the last thing on his mind.

The Gunslinger stopped in front of the house and checked his guns for the third time. Flint opened his mouth and then stopped. He was desperate to settle his emotions. His desperation subsided as Flint took a deep breath, then he bellowed, "Bart! Git yer yellow, four-flushing, lying keister out here!"

Calling a man yellow or a liar was a sure way to get into a fight in the West. Put them together, and the man doing the name-calling was stating that, no matter what, he was going to shoot at someone. Flint took another deep breath to relax. Loose muscles would give him an advantage to react to whatever might happen.

His relaxation caused something unexpected though. A small and calm voice interrupted his angry thoughts.

"Wait for My timing."

Flint tried to fight off the voice. He desperately wanted to ignore these words.

The voice spoke again. "Wait for my timing."

Flint did not hear it through his ears or in his head, but deep down in the pit of his stomach. He knew it had to be God.

The curtain on Flint's right flank moved aside enough for someone to see who

was in front. Flint's hands moved into positions, hovering over his guns. The door unlocked and opened.

It was his old partner. Bart had aged. There were more lines on his face; the hair under his black hat had faded. He did not wear his guns and his clothes were messy. He obviously had just been in bed. His eyes used to be incredibly intimidating and seemed to cut right through a man. Yet, now that Flint had begun to experience God for himself, in Bart's eyes Flint only saw what was really there: hatred, pain, and most of all, fear. His eyes lacked life.

Good, he'll be easier to kill. Flint thought to himself, but that same voice spoke through his spirit.

Wait for My timing.

"Well now, look what the wind blew in." Bart's voice was just as arrogant as Flint remembered. He cocked his head over his left shoulder and spoke back into the house. "Mickey, look who's in town?"

Mickey stepped around Bart. Flint's head recoiled slightly. I spent the night with her? Flint thought repulsively. Oh, how things change! At this shocking realization, he shook his head so he could focus.

"Hi, Flint. Hope I'll be seeing you soon." Mickey said with her usual suggestive manner.

Flint ignored her and spoke directly to Bart. "I ain't here as a friend."

Bart grinned. "Ah, stop messin' 'round, partner. I know that you—"

"You know nothin', Bart!" Flint's words cut him off sharply. "You ain't my partner, and I ain't messin' around. Heard you wanted a friend of mine. I'm here to— Flint wanted to tell him to put on guns on so he could kill 'em, but that voice kept stopping him.

Wait for My timing.

"I'm here to tell you that ya ain't gonna be dealing with him, only ME!"

Bart was taken aback. He eventually managed to shoot back a reply. "What are you talking about! Flint, that little Mexican half breed killed my cousin Steele 'bout a year ago."

"Ah, shut yer bazoo, Bart. You forget, I knew your cousin, both you and I know that mean, dumb kid had it coming. It was a fair fight. Yer just looking fer another man to brag about kill'n. Your just hunt'n trouble." Flint glared straight into Bart's eyes.

"What's gotten into you, Flint? You still sore 'bout that lil' girl?" Bart's voice was patronizing and showed no remorse.

Flint felt his rage bubbling to the surface. He remembered the sickening screams that had haunted his dreams for so long. But, I'm over all that, aren't I? He thought to himself. Well, if these feelings were still around, then he must not be over it. Flint knew what that meant; he was about to lose the battle against his emotions and lose his temper.

He was about to say something that would have set Bart off when the Lord spoke to him in the same voice, but with different words.

"Why doesn't Gray lose his temper?"

God was right. Flint had never seen Gray lose his temper. Gray admitted to being tempted to many times, but he never did. He said that it was because he would always remind himself that the major battle wasn't with guns, but in the spiritual world.

"We war not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of darkness."

It was one of the first Bible verses Flint had ever memorized. "Around the West, these days," Gray had said, "it's a very useful verse to know off hand. If you're ever tempted to take on the wrong fight, just say that verse. It helps chase away Satan's tempting, and it helps us to concentrate on Jesus again, before we do something stupid cause we let our emotions get the better of us."

"Why does it matter so much?" Flint asked. "Losing yer temper in a fight can help sometimes. Going mad dog crazy helps a lot."

"Yeah, maybe so." Gray admitted. "But remember that going mad dog crazy means yer lettin' yer emotions win. That means that you're making a bed in your soul for the Devil."

"Well then, what do I do to keep a hold of 'em emotions?"

"You just stop what you're doing, and give those feelings back to God. Then you focus your mind on Jesus again. Don't be thinking it's easy," Gray said with a smile. "It ain't. As a matter of fact, I have messed up a lot. But if you remember that verse about who we're really fighting, it'll come in handy."

"We wrestle not 'gainst flesh and blood, but 'gainst principalities 'n powers o'darkness." Flint suddenly said out loud. He meant to say it to himself, but instead it smacked Bart and Mickey in the face.

"What in tarnation are ya on about, Flint? You going loco?"

"Ah, nothing." Flint realized that he had spoken the Bible verse out loud. "Just, I don't wanna fight, Bart. And don't think about takin' Gray on fer a while. He's real sick, and needs to git better. Before anything happens—"

Like a bullwhip, Bart's mood snapped. "I don't care how he is. If'n he won't meet me, I'll drag him from his bed to the street. HE WILL FACE ME LIKE A MAN!" His eyes widened and a crazed, sadistic smile grew on his face.

"Ya didn't hear me, BART!" Flint shot the same intensity back at his former partner. "YOU WANT HIM NOW? THEN YER GONNA HAVE TO COME THROUGH ME!"

"Oh, I see how it is, Flint. Ya hook-up with this..."

At one time it was a part of Flint's normal speech, but the malicious obscenities that now spewed from Bart's mouth surprised Flint. He thought that it would make him angry. Instead, it showed Flint how childish and pointless it sounded. As a matter of fact, it made Flint feel sorry for the man.

Flint cut Bart's insulting, suggestive talking short. "Bart, ya got problems. The thing is this, if you wanna take on a guy who's sick, then yer yella!"

Bart eyes narrowed, his hatred and bitterness directed towards Flint. "Fine! If that's the way ya want it. You're a dead man! Meet me on the outside of town, tomorrow, just after dawn! I'll get my beef from you first, then your half-breed partner."

Flint backed away from the house carefully. "Yeah, ya'll keep talk'n Bart. I see ya there. Oh, and by the way, yer lookin' a little wrinkled around the edges. Might wanna try some ladies cream or someth'n."

With a growl, Bart turned and stormed back into the house, slamming the door behind him, leaving Mickey standing alone outside her home, unsure of what to do.

Adrenaline pumped through Flint's veins creating a slight shudder in his hands. His survival instincts were taking over. Flint's body pumped extra oxygen saturating his muscles which gave the old gunfighter hyper-sensitivity: His eyes were wide, ears strained, lungs flexed and full of air. At a moment's notice, Flint felt he could grab iron faster than a rattlesnake, move quicker than lightning, or wrestle a grizzly bear. Flint knew this sensation all too well. He used to thrive on it, even live for it! It was the greatest high and even came in handy when things went bad. And this intense sensation used to be the only way the grizzled old cowboy could remember human emotion. Yet, since meeting Gray, it just made him feel disturbed and unhappy. Flint no longer liked it.

After calming himself down with a few breaths, Flint turned on his heels and

walked with a quickened pace towards the hotel. He helped himself to a cup of coffee in the hotel's kitchen before heading upstairs. When he reached Gray's room, he stopped short of the door and took three deep breaths to finish calming himself. He did not want to stress his ill partner any more than he had to.

"Are ya coming in or not, Flint?" Gray said from the other side of the door.

Flint eased the door open and stepped in. His partner was propped up against two pillows with blankets pulled up to his stomach. On his lap was a tray of food that he had already finished. He seemed to be doing better, but there were still bloodstains around his wounds showing through fresh bandages. Flint knew Gray had been riding too hard.

"Well now, don't ya look like yer doing better. Knew you were faking." Flint joshed, but his expression was worried and tense.

"Thanks, partner," Gray replied sarcastically, "Yeah, ain't feeling too bad now. Think I just needed some rest, that's all." Gray tried to twist a little to reach his cup next to him. He grunted as a wave of pain shot through his body.

Flint stepped around the bed quickly to get the cup for Gray, careful to not spill his own coffee. He handed Gray the cup and said, "Ya know, you should take it easy. You need to git better, partner."

"Nah, I'm fine." Gray discounting the pain did not impress Flint one bit.

Flint turned around and leaned his shoulder on a window frame as he glared out the window in the direction of Mickey's house and sipped his hot coffee. He could only imagine what Bart was thinking and saying at that moment.

Gray interrupted Flint's thoughts. "So, partner, when you gonna tell me what's going on?"

"Ah, come on now, Gray, that ain't right. How come I ain't allowed to have any secrets 'round you?" Flint complained without turning around; he still glared through the window.

Gray smiled, "No one ever said ya couldn't. Just Mike was here before you came up and told me all about Bart. I figured that's where you were." Gray paused and took a deep breath that he tried to hide from his partner. "So, how about it?"

"That loud mouth shopkeeper!" Flint growled under his breath, then looked back over his shoulder, trying to sound nonchalant, "I don't wanna excite ya er nothing. Cause it can't be good fer ya."

"Flint...just tell me!"

"Fine, but if you get too excited and die, then it's yer fault, not mine!"

"Fair enough."

"Well, it seems that ya killed Bart's cousin." Flint started.

"Who's that?" Gray asked.

"Awe, this kid who thought he was ten times faster than he really was. Name was Steele. Actually his name was really Marvin, but he nicknamed himself Steele thinking he'd sound real hard. He was really a deadbeat blow-hard."

Gray racked his memory until recognition finally struck him. "Oh, that was the guy that had it in for me just before I met you. He drew first and I actually beat him twice. The first time, I left him alive. The second time, he tried to shoot me in the back."

"Figures." Flint spoke as he took a sip of his coffee. "Kid was mean, stupid and slow."

Gray winced as he thought back, "Come to think of it. He had a demon in 'em. I felt real bad about killing him, but I didn't have a choice."

"Well. Bart says he wants ya now. I couldn't talk him down."

"So, what did ya say?" Gray asked.

"I called him yella." Flint did not look over his shoulder to see his partner's expression, but continued staring out the window.

"Flint" Gray groaned his name with frustration, "what you do that for?"

Flint pushed away from the window and turned to look Gray eyeball to eyeball. "Why do you think, Gray. Look at yerself," Flint demanded.

"Ah, I'm, fine." Gray spoke while trying to fight away a cough. "What time are we gonna do this thing?" he finally asked after getting his coughing under control.

"Jerusalem crickets, Gray!" Flint shouted, "Ya ain't comin! Yer not strong enough. I ain't telling ya where or when. I'll handle it." He started out the door.

"Can you beat him?" Gray asked.

Flint stopped in the doorway and turned around to face Gray. He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. We're about even."

Gray nodded his head deep in thought. "And what does God have to say?"

Flint snatch his hat off his head and slapped the door jam in frustration. "He just keeps sayin, wait fer My timing."

"Is this the time?" Gray asked.

"I don't know, Gray." The old gunfighter confessed. "What do you think?"

"I think ya should trust me, Flint. Now, tell me when and where."

Flint sighed, "Just after dawn, outside of town."

“Okay then,” Gray settled down into his bed and closed his eyes. “I’m going to sleep.”

Flint opened his mouth to argue more and complain as he was confused and scared. But he stopped himself, when he remembered his partner needed sleep. The old gunfighter stepped outside the room, stomped down the hotel stairs, and stepped into the evening air. He looked up and down the street. No one was around. The night sky was beginning its dominance. He sat down on a bench in front of a crudely built structure. The sign on the front said, “Barber Shop and Dentist.” Staring into the evening, he began talking to God through his own thoughts. God, I just need to know what Ya want. Please tell me. Help me to listen and do what You think is best.

God’s voice was becoming more familiar and brought instant peace, which would always baffle Flint.

Just trust Me, and wait for My timing.

When, Lord?’ Flint asked

Just trust Me.

“What does that mean?”

You will know soon enough.

Flint had awoken with a surge of excitement on many occasions. Usually he would barely sleep the night before a big fight. And then he would complete the task of killing whoever he had to on pure adrenaline. This morning was different. He had actually slept well the night before and felt a supernatural peace that told him everything was going to be okay. After dressing, he strapped on his rig, along with the Bowie knife that Andrew had given him.

The Bible said, “The righteous are as bold as a lion.” Well, Flint felt like he could take on a lion. Bart was going to have his hands full.

The readied man walked down the hall to Gray’s room. “You awake, partner?” Flint knocked on the door. It creaked open from his touch, so Flint stepped inside. Gray’s bed was empty. “What the—” Flint did not finish his exclamation as his eyes rested upon a piece of paper on the bed.

He snatched it up. Flint read it out loud, as it helped him read faster.

Dear Flint,

You are a better friend than a man deserves. Please know that I did not mean to trick you. But I felt that this is what God wanted. God’s grace is for everyone and He has a

plan for Bart's life, just like He still does for yours. Please know that I consider you a brother and I will see you when the Good Lord has decided it is time for you to come home. Keep Jesus close to you, and never stop loving Him, hearing Him and obeying Him.

*In Christ, until I see ya again, your brother and friend,
Gray.*

The paper dropped from Flint's hand as realization seized his mind. He turned to leave the room, but it was too late. The sound of gunfire erupted down the street.

Flint was on the street within seconds. He ran harder than ever to the edge of town, where he saw two figures lying on the ground. Bart was writhing in pain. Gray's body was motionless.

Flint skidded to his knees as he reached Gray. "NO!" he screamed. "Not like this. NO!" Gray was alive but not for long. He had been shot once in the left shoulder, which was bleeding, but not badly. The other shot was undeniably mortal. It was in the middle of his body, just below Gray's sternum. Flint pressed hard on Gray's wound, trying desperately to stop the bleeding.

From the looks of the two men, they had faced off. As fast as Bart was with a gun, Gray matched him. Gray had placed his blades into each shoulder of the man in black, wounding him but purposefully not killing him.

Gray's eyes open slightly. "Flint, that you? Can't see..." Gray said in a low tone, lifting his hand up slowly.

Flint gripped it and held it tightly. "Yah, brother, it's me."

"Funny." Gray grinned. "When you're dying you don't feel a thing. But it's awful hard to hear or talk."

"Don't go, Gray. Please don't go?" Flint pleaded, tears streamed down his face. "You're the only family I got."

Gray suddenly gritted his teeth as his body tensed. He spoke again with an even lower tone. "D...do...don't worry. Jesus is with y..." Gray could not finish the final word. He gasped for air once more with pain but then relaxed and a smile grew on his lips as he exhaled for the last time.

Flint's eyes widened as he realized Gray was gone. Dripping with Gray's blood, Flint placed his hands on his deceased partner's eyes and closed them. He stood and stared at the body of his partner. Shock blocked any emotions.

A small group of town folk circled the two men on the ground. Marlene, the

hotel owner, leaned over Gray to make sure he was indeed gone.

Flint looked up at Bart. The man in black rolled back and forth on the ground, writhing in pain. Unable to use his arms with the two blades stuck into the meat of his shoulder, the evil man in black was almost paralyzed. Rage flashed in Flint's eyes, and he felt a sensation of heat travel up and down his spine. Enraged, the gunfighter drew his Colt and fired at the ground on either side of Bart, scattering the onlookers like pigeons. Flint's stroll towards the wounded man was not fast, but rather terrifying methodical. With every step he took, Flint's anger grew. By the time his blood-soaked hands were hovering over Bart, Flint had decided that a quick death would be too easy for a man like this.

"You have done nothing on this earth but hurt people. Ya hurt that little girl, so she went crazy. Now, you shot..." Flint fought off the tears and tried to say it again. "You shot..." He still could not get the words out. "You shot the wrong man, ya no good yellow dog!"

"If you're gonna do it, then git it over with," Bart grunted.

Flint holstered his Colt. "I ain't gonna shoot you, Bart." Flint's clenched his teeth and partially smiled as he slowly and sadistically slipped Andrew's 12" Bowie style knife from its sheath. He knelt down on Bart's left side to get to work on the terrified man's skin.

"Please, Flint, I'm sorry, don't do it, have mercy?" He whimpered. Mucus and tears dripped into Bart's mouth.

"Like ya did on a sick man?" Flint retorted with a snarl.

He placed the huge blade on Bart's chest and lightly drug the knife's tip down to his groin, toying with Bart. "Let's start with what usually gits ya in trouble." Flint laughed with wide sadistic eyes.

Flint raised the knife. He was about to split the whimpering man wide open, when someone behind him placed a hand on his shoulder. He whipped around and glared up. Suddenly, it felt as though time itself stood still. Flint stared dumbfounded. The hand belonged to a Man who had the kindest face he had ever seen, and He looked to be made of pure light. Words could never describe the sensation felt in Flint's gut, it was though every word this Man spoke released giant butterflies within his stomach. Flint had never seen Him before, but he felt as though he had always known Him. When He spoke, Flint instantly knew who He was.

"Flint, it's okay, be merciful."

Tears poured from Flint's eyes as he looked back at Bart. "I can't, he don't deserve it."

As Flint looked back at the Man's face, he was met with a patient smile that poured peace and love into Flint's heart.

"You are right. He doesn't deserve mercy, but neither did you."

EPILOGUE

The wind was mean and harsh, but it was also a messenger, warning about a large storm. It was almost winter. The huge trees swayed their thick green branches back and forth in the wind. They warned all creatures, large and small, to start readying for the long, cold months ahead.

A man stood alone looking down at a final resting place he would never forget. Twenty-five feet away, an old burnt out cabin was crumpled in a heap. The charcoal remains that were once pine, would be considered an eyesore to anyone who happened past, an eyesore to anyone but the lone man staring at the earth. He held an old tattered black book in his dirt-stained hands. Tears dripped down his tough weathered-torn face.

Flint stared at the fresh grave. It was packed down with rocks and adorned with a small tombstone at the head. It read, "Here, with his beloved family, lies Gray. His last words: 'Jesus is with you'."

Flint breathed in deeply and fought hard to control his emotions. "Well, Gray, I don't know how I did it, but I found yer old cabin. The Lord helped me out a'lot." Flint's lip quivered, but he managed to continue. "I don't know how to go on, but Jesus is showin' me. I'm just rightly proud I had a chance to meet you, brother." He sniffled and wiped his nose.

"Anyways, I know'd you be happy here, cause yer in your favorite woods. You talked about 'em all the time. I know your home with your family and Jesus, but I just wanted to see you at this home too. It's the only way I could figure on sayin' thanks."

Flint suddenly remembered something. "I almost forgot. I couldn't sell that old Henry rifle. Didn't feel right, and I can't carry it round with me, cause...well it's yer gun. It's too darned heavy anyways. So, you'll have old Betsy in there with you fer company. I don't think she'd like being with any other hombre anyways."

The gunfighter dried his eyes and wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve. "Well, I gots to go, but I'll be back some day to make sure your doin' all right." Flint nodded his head and turned to go, but stopped and looked back with a grin. "And, don't worry about me. Jesus has been keep'n me pretty busy with my own things to do." Flint tipped his hat, turned and started down the hill towards his horse.

As he reached the bottom, he untied his mount and swung his leg over the

saddle. Pulling his stallion around, he faced towards a mounted rider on a black horse.

“You know, Flint, if you would have let me help you, we could of been outta here an hour ago and beaten the storm. Now we’re gonna get all wet. Shoot!”

Flint smiled and looked at his new riding partner calmly. “I told you it’s something I wanted to do alone. Okay, Bart?”

Bart grunted, “Fine.”

“Besides, I told you to go on if you wanted to. Why didn’t you just go?”

Bart turned his horse to ride off, ignoring Flint’s question. But instead he stopped and took a deep breath. He turned in his saddle to face Flint. “I don’t know? Kinda strange, just felt like I should stay with you, ya know?”

Flint’s smile was cryptic and telling. He chuckled. “Ya, partner, I know all too well.”

Bart dismissed the comment. He straightened himself in his saddle as Flint pulled his horse alongside. “Okay then, Flint, where are we going now?”

The corners of Flint’s mouth stretched from ear to ear and a bright shade of red lit up his face. “Well, old buddy, I’m gonna go see about an Indian princess, named Lily.”

What if the right friendship could change your life forever? An aging gunfighter is about to find out.

Flint is a well known over-the-hill gunslinger in the old West: tough as nails and afraid of no one. He killed his first man before he could shave, has no family and few friends. He'll never attack innocents, nor shoot a man in the back; so, compared to many hired gunmen, he's actually a good person. However, after the past couple days, the gunslinger's world and way of thinking has been turned upside.

It all started when a wily mountain man, who throws a quick blade and is a crack shot with a rifle, invited the old gunfighter to ride with him. The rumor mill claims that if you tangle with "the Boy", you'll earn yourself permanent residence in boot hill. Surprisingly, the Boy offers Flint a partnership and something he secretly craved for since he was a small boy.

Gunslinger's Guide to the Gospel is a story of an unlikely partnership between two tough frontiersman. One willing to leave an old life behind to chase after the unknown in search of peace and forgiveness—the other, to share his secret of peace and forgiveness with anyone he meets.

About the Author:

Ryan spent much of his childhood exploring his backyard in Northern California: 900,000 acres of the Stanislaus National Forest. His passions are to inspire mentoring for those in search of family and to teach others how to pray. Currently, he lives with his wife and two children in the San Francisco Bay Area.