

GUNSLINGER'S DISCIPLESHIP
SERIES: BOOK II



BOUNTY FROM HEAVEN

RYAN GRAY

Bounty from Heaven
Gunslinger's Discipleship Series: Book II

by Ryan Gray

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DEDICATION

For the lone wolf, Chuck Gray, who taught me to be a man you can tie to;
To never take the easy way nor pass the buck.
Who taught me to never be afraid of some tough bull-whack'n,
even if the trek looks impassible.
Thanks, Pop. You're a heck of a trail boss.
It's been a privilege.

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My incredible and amazing producer: thank you for never allowing me to give up. Thank you for working so incredibly hard to publish all my crazy ideas. Most of all...thank you for always believing in us. When first we began keeping company, most believed that my dander won your heart. But the truth is, you're the bronc-buster who tamed this uppish bangtail, quicker 'n three ways from Sunday. Thanks for never growing sour on me - still sweet on you. I thank the Lord Almighty, I curried enough favor to hook the right misses. I love you, gorgeous wife: my lily of the valley, Kirsten.

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CHAPTER ONE

He sat against the window but turned slightly towards the aisle as if waiting for something to happen. A long black duster engulfed his body, hiding his frame. A wide-brimmed, black hat was pulled over his eyes, concealing his face. His boots were well polished and handmade, with decorative stitching running down to the heels. Large hands were delicately folded upon his lap.

The lone rider knew he was only brooding because life had taken an unexpected turn, but he despised the direction it took him. Although surrounded by passengers, the rider felt his heart was fighting for survival in a desert of isolation. His head was drooped, and shoulders slumped. The late 19th-century steam engine jolted and shook the passengers, making its way along to the New York and New England railroad track, from the eastern edge of the Mid-West of the United States.

Amongst the sound of chatting and the metal train car creaking and bouncing, the solemn rider's ears suddenly perked up at a noise that was out of place. It was very faint, and only one out of a hundred would ever notice a sound this indistinct, but the lone rider did. It was a soft click, the sound of a pistol's hammer being pulled back.

The rider's posture transformed. His shoulder straightened. His breathing slowed as he tilted his head up and left, and then to the right as he scanned the other direction, looking for the source of the threatening noise. After studying the train car twice, he decided he could not identify the source in time. So, as if hugging himself for warmth, the rider leaned back into his chair and smoothly slid his hands deep into his coat. Tilting his head back down, he waited. He did not have to wait long.

Twenty seconds later, the front of the train car exploded into confusion. Dressed in matching brown hats and long tan coats, two men stood with scarves covering their faces and hats pulled low. One assailant shot a hole through the train car roof to assert his dominance, while the other barked orders.

"This is a hold-up. Do what we say, and you won't die!" He emphasized his point by shoving his Smith & Wesson pistol into the face of the closest passenger: a middle-aged man in a grey pinstriped suit and bowler hat. His eyes widened, and his lips quivered as he begged for mercy.

“Shut up and empty your pockets before I blow a hole in ya!” The robber bellowed.

On the other end of the car, behind the lone rider, the door slammed open as another assailant swaggered in with the same matching coat, hat, and mask.

The crashing door startled an elderly lady who screamed with fright. “Shut up, you old bat.” The thug slapped her across that face and laughed. “Did you see that old bird? It’s like hitt’n an old bag ‘a bones.”

The leader of the trio shot back. “You’ll take one of my slugs in the face if you don’t get to work!”

The lonely rider was now so tense he almost trembled. Still, he waited.

The robbers worked their way down the aisles filling old flour sacks with goods: the first two thieves up the right side, the last obnoxious thief down the left. The lone rider was on the left.

When the obnoxious thug reached the solitary man in black, he nudged him in the shoulder with his pistol. “Come on, cough it up!”

The dark rider didn’t move but hugged himself tighter and rocked back and forth slightly, making the bandit nervous. “Ok, pal, I don’t know what yer deal is, just give me yer money, and I’ll move on.” Still no response.

The lead thug stormed over and stuffed his pistol into the lone rider’s face. “Give me your money, now!” He barked with authority.

“Do you understand your flaw?” The lonely rider’s voice was calm, distinct, and cold.

“What?” Both gunmen exclaimed.

“Your momentary flaw, do you understand what that is, as well as the problem it is creating?” The lone rider prodded even further.

The obnoxious thief tried to answer, but his boss cut him off. “What? That we haven’t killed you yet?”

The lone rider replied with his head still tilted down. “Sir, that would simply execute a solution without understanding the underlying issues, hindering your ability to fix said issue before future endeavors may be successfully achieved.”

“What in Hades is the problem?” The frustrated robber spat the question out, chased by hot breath.

The rider slowly tilted his head up to reveal his face. It was thin, pleasant, and handsome with high cheekbones. His eyes were blue with a grey hue. When he opened his mouth to speak, he held confident eye contact with the assailant. “You believe you can see everything.”

Without another word, the lone rider fell onto his right shoulder and rolled onto his chest across the wooden bench seat as two bullets exploded out the back of his long coat. One smashed through the seat cushion in front of him and into the lead bandit's stomach. The lone rider twisted his head further around, took better aim, and put the next slug higher. The .44 struck the violent thief in the crease of the neck and buried itself up into his skull, killing him instantly.

The third gunman was so shocked; it took him valuable moments to realize that his life was in jeopardy. As the realization finally hit him, he attempted to raise his weapon, but a calm deep voice instructed: "Stop." The lone rider stood in the aisle; his long frame, big black duster, and calm demeanor terrified the robber almost as much as the steadiness of the two large Remington hand-cannons pointed at his chest and head.

"Who are you?" The thief demanded.

"My name is Andrew...however, in another life, I was simply referred to as the 'Kid.'"

The man's eyes bulged, and he swallowed hard. Without another word, the thief dropped his gun and lay face down.

CHAPTER TWO

Andrew, “the Kid,” sat erect and with an air of refinement in the sheriff’s office. The price for his heroics on the train was much higher than he had anticipated. When the train pulled into the station and the sheriff was called for, the lonely rider had envisioned that he would have to refuse a commendation or long speech of gratitude. He had played in his mind words of humility and the many reasons he needed to continue his journey. Instead, Andrew’s identity was revealed. The sheriff’s young and eager deputy was on duty, and he would *not* allow the notorious “Kid” to escape, no matter what good he may have recently done.

After Andrew’s horse and belongings were unloaded, the train continued down the line. The hero of the day, however, was escorted to the sheriff’s office at gunpoint, next to the surviving train robber. At present, Andrew sat in a wooden chair, unarmed, awaiting his fate.

“Huh, interesting stuff!” Sheriff Clement commented aloud and peeked over the telegram he was reading. He was a small, middle-aged man with yellow smoker’s teeth and a balding spot on his head, which he tried to comb over with the hair from the side. There was a jovial, and almost mischievous, gleam in his eye, which added a youthful charm to his face. A fool might think Clement might be one of the least competent and least threatening sheriffs. However, the Kid had never judged a book by its cover. Andrew observed quick eyes, a slow thought-out way of speaking, and small hands that seemed to move with better coordination than most.

His office was organized and clean, as were the weapons on the gun rack, including the young deputies and sheriff’s pistols. More telling was the pistol the sheriff carried, a Webley-Pryse Revolver. It was British and not common in the West. But a wise choice for a small-statured lawman. The Webley was a smaller pistol but packed a .45 caliber knockdown punch that would take down a bear.

Since he wasn’t large enough to wield a heavy handgun to double as a club, as many lawmen did in the west, Sheriff Clement’s small quick hands would draw the pistol faster than any drunk could clear leather. Andrew also had a feeling that the sheriff’s past did not begin on the right side of the law. If the Kid ever had to draw on the lawman, he could very well lose.

“Wyatt thinks a lot of you.” The Clement continued. “Seems that you were the reason that he’s still breathing after that minor skirmish with Pander and his boys.

“He also says here that you’ve been,” The sheriff pushed his spectacles closer to his face and read slowly. “R-e-h-a-b-i-l-i-t-a-t-e-d, I think I know what that there word means, but I ain’t too well educated. So, why don’t you explain it to me? What does it mean?”

Andrew smiled softly to himself as he attempted to lower his vocabulary to the average citizen’s level of understanding. “I believe it means simply: to change.”

“Are you changed?”

“Yes, Sir. My ability to allow you to keep me in custody without cause and to allow you to dispossess me of my weapons is evidence of that change.”

“Are you saying that you would have previously refused?”

“No, sir. I would not have stated my intentions or communicated my thoughts. After shooting your deputy until dead, I would have ridden my horse out of town.”

The deputy was leaning against the opposite wall and overheard the bold statement Andrew made; he sat up and tried to say something when his superior held a hand up and turned to Andrew.

“You’re that good, are ya, son?” There was a twinkle in the lawman’s eyes. He was testing Andrew.

“No, Sheriff. In stark contrast, I am stating that I was once that evil.” The lawman leaned back in his chair, clearly surprised, but his deputy leaned forward, confused.

Andrew continued. “My skills are impressive, but they are also terrifying and destructive to its targets. My skills can only destroy and kill. Although a necessary evil in a world filled with evil men, I am now filled with a terrible sadness whenever I must employ them upon those who would hurt the innocent.”

“I’ll be darned! You surely do sound changed.” Sheriff Clement was shocked. “That old man, Wyatt, says you had the most drastic turn-about of a man he’s ever seen, and he told me I couldn’t let you go until you tell me your whole story. That law-dawg knows I’m a sucker for a good yarn!” Clement thoughtfully scrubbed his head with a balled-up fist. Then, as if he were sitting on a spring, he suddenly popped up from his chair. “Let’s get a drink! Come on; I’ll buy!”

“I must decline. I do not drink alcohol,” Andrew replied.

“Fine, you buy and talk, and I’ll drink!” The sheriff shot back.

Andrew was about to refuse, but something inside him would not allow him. Instead, he smiled and stood with the Lawman. “Please, lead, and I will follow, Sir.”

Sheriff Clement looked at his deputy, “Keep it all locked down till I get back. We’ll be at the ‘Horseshoe’ if you run into trouble.”

“Ok, boss, but you sure this guy’s safe?” The deputy inquired, eyeing Andrew suspiciously.

The sheriff laughed and gave a fatherly pat on his young deputy’s shoulder. “Of course, he is. If he weren’t safe, we’d already be dead, son.”

The deputy’s face turned red from embarrassment, and the lawmen cocked his head back and burst into laughter. Even Andrew smiled a little as the two men stepped outside onto the wooden sidewalk.

As they walked towards the saloon, the sheriff occasionally said hello to the townspeople as they passed. After a few minutes of silence, he turned to the man formerly known as the *Kid*. “First, I gotta know, son. How did you get those guys on the train when they had the drop on you?”

Andrew’s reply was neither shy nor arrogant. He was polite and factual and sounded as if he were dictating a letter. “With the large caliber pistol I prefer to use, I discovered that wearing a double deep cross-draw holster best fits my style of fighting and body type. Being able to fire without withdrawing one’s firearms from their holsters surprises most men. It was a style I learned from a Mexican gentleman in El Paso. Unfortunately for him, he only grazed my leg. I shot more than his leg. That being said, it was a lesson well learned. I now purposely maintain loose leather belt holes on my holster to pivot my Remington’s quickly while still inside my long coat.

When the assailants approached me, I already had my hands in my coat and employed subterfuge by provoking their egos. When they felt confident I was not a threat and merely a blowhard, I fell slowly towards the ground away from their gun barrels. I fired when my body reached the appropriate angles. Is that explanation satisfactory, or would you like to examine my leather holsters more carefully?”

The Sheriff’s mouth was slightly open, “Umm, yeah...I mean, no, that won’t be necessary. I’ll take your word for it. By the way, where are you from, kid? I don’t mean to embarrass you or noth’n, but I ain’t never heard someone talk like you. It’s like hearing the preacher speaking from the bible, except as a conversation. The way you speak is amazing!”

Andrew chuckled as they continued down the wooden sidewalk, “I do speak; differently, this much I am reminded of, quite often. However, I have learned to use a vocabulary that could be described as more modern. In the vernacular,” Andrew’s voice added a western twang, “Y’all should’ve heard me a few years ago.”

Sheriff Clement laughed with delight and slapped his knee. “That’s pretty good, kid, haha!” Clement’s laughter was almost a cackle and genuine. Andrew could tell the sheriff loved to laugh, and he thought most people probably enjoyed his company.

The sheriff opened the door to the “Horseshoe Saloon,” and they both stepped inside. They found a table in the back of the saloon and sat down.

“Ok, so you come from a well-to-do family, and you’re educated. So, how did you become ‘the Kid’?”

Andrew took a deep breath and focused his eyes nervously on the tabletop. Just as he was about to speak, Clement interrupted the nervous gunman. “Sorry partner, hey June, would you bring me my usual rotgut and some coffee for my friend here!” He looked back at Andrew, “Go ahead, son.”

“Please excuse my pause. I have only shared my story twice, and each occurrence was difficult, to say the least.”

“Take your time, son; I’ve got plenty.”

Andrew sucked in an air full of lungs and began, “I was born in Maine to a family of wealth and privilege. My father was a man of leisure whose father left him more money and land than he could use in several lifetimes. My mother was his second cousin from England. Maintaining a pure bloodline is a matter of importance in my family.

“I know my father was not always mean, but I believe the proverb ‘Idle hands are the devil’s workshop’ proved true in his life. Soon, alcohol was not enough to keep him happy, nor the women he employed for his pleasures. Eventually, he turned his misery onto my mother.

“I was too young to understand what was happening at first, but by age fourteen, I was maturing faster than God had intended. One day I stepped up to him in order to protect my mother. I awoke the next day in bed, with a doctor caring for me. I would not stand for another eight weeks. Three months after that, I was sent to boarding school.

“I lived at the school for almost two years, only seeing my mother during visits and holidays, until the fateful day I received news that she had passed. I

thought she might have died from a broken heart. She always loved my father and missed the man he was during their early days of marital union. I know she missed me greatly. I then found out it was an ‘accident’ and that she had fallen down the stairs. I knew at once that my father had killed her.

“Enraged, I began the long walk home from boarding school. I was going to kill my father. However, logic forced me to stop and think. My father’s aim, when firing a pistol, was legendary. It was his only discipline, and he maintained it well.

“Changing direction, I turned towards the road to town. Through a few strategically placed coins, I found the most skilled gunfighter in the area. I agreed to pay the marksman to teach me to kill. I snuck away from the school every hour I could spare, and some I could not, to hone my new craft.

“Every weekend was used to utilize my skills with a pistol, and every evening was the study of warfare and meditation upon how to defeat and kill my enemy: my father. After months of dedicated research and contemplation, I could wait no longer. I loaned a horse, and I rode to my father’s estate.

“Strategically, I arrived as the sun began to rise as I knew his inebriation would not have run its course from the night before. I stood outside my father’s house, my home, and I demanded he face me as a gentleman, with pistols in hand.

“Our head steward and butler, Fredric, pleaded with me to leave before I did something I could not take back.” The Kid paused and looked up, thoughtfully, “Dear Mr. Fredric, such a nice friend of whom my family did not deserve....Excuse me; my emotions have been overwhelming as of late.”

The Kid looked at the sheriff. Clement looked to be studying Andrew as an apache would a curious boot print in the dirt, or a scientist would regard a newly discovered beetle species. He smiled eagerly at Andrew and encouraged him to continue.

“After an extended time of demanding my father face me, he stumbled out of the front door. Fredric followed him, carrying our family’s 1770 Hollister pistols. Our family has attempted to kill our neighbors or one another with those pistols for more than a century.

“After silently loading the pistols, we stood almost shoulder to shoulder facing in opposite directions. Before I began my twenty paces, I stated to my father. “You killed my mother, and now I will kill you.”

“I began the long walk, and with every step, my rage grew. Fredric called out the steps one at a time. At the end of twenty, Mr. Fredric made his exit,

running up the mansion's steps. There was a floating mist in the air, which made it difficult to see at forty paces. Considering my father's drunken state, it was probably hard for him to see me, as I had planned it to be. However, my vision was perfect. As I had called the challenge, my father would fire first.

He aimed and fired. It missed me, grazing my shoulder. I smiled with hatred, rage enveloping my heart. I was finally going to do what I had played out in my mind over and over again. Kill my father.

My bullet took his leg. I could have killed him in one shot but did not purposefully do so. I was so wounded and hurt that I wanted my father's last image to be that of looking into the face of his own son ending his life. I wanted him to feel MY pain. I was transforming into the killer, 'the Kid'. Standing over my father, and without emotion, I drew my sidearm and spoke these last fateful, vengeful words.

Tears streamed down Andrew's face as he repeated them, "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." I took his life and walked away from the life of Andrew, never to look back. I could not stay in Maine, and most of the eastern seaboard would not be safe. Thus, my long trek out West began. I was sixteen."

"Here, son," the sheriff offered a red handkerchief. "You know, I didn't mean for you to share so much detail."

Andrew accepted the help and wiped his face. "I am terribly sorry to be burdensome. Speaking with attention to detail is the only way I know how to communicate."

The older man smiled softly, "Well, I appreciate that you would share your story with me. And for the tears, don't worry; I'm too old to worry about what other folks think. The sooner you young fellers learn that, the happier you'll be."

"Yes, Mr. Clement, you are correct. My pride is still quite a distraction." Andrew coughed and cleared his throat, "Where was I?"

"You were heading West."

"Yes, of course. I began with some bounty hunting," Andrew looked away and lowered his voice nervously, "Participated in questionable dealings for pay, and I also rode shotgun for a stage line. I eventually devoted my business dealings toward my strengths and what was most lucrative: professional killing. "I used to keep track of how many I had killed, but I started to lose track over time, and eventually, I lost coherency every time I would fight. That is when I

began to realize there was something different about my actions. I heard voices and sometimes felt as if I were merely a steed, ridden by another man. I wanted those voices and feelings gone, but I also craved the power they gave me. I felt faster and more robust than any two men. When I killed, no matter the nature of the killing, I always saw my father's face. More and more, I was seeing and killing that face even when I did not want to. I was so angry that I eventually lost all self-control.

"While traveling West, I continued my true passion, charcoal sketching. I journaled using pictures to remember the events of importance. Usually, those pictures had to do with another contract executed. Although I improved as a fighter, my artwork remained my passion.

"After years of this meaningless vortex of destruction which I could not escape, I ventured through a small municipality focused on the cattle trade. The local marshal, your companion, Wyatt Herp, heard that I had arrived, and so he politely asked to speak with me about my business. As I looked up at him again, I saw my father's face. I stood quickly, smashing my head into his chin, which stunned him. I slid around behind him and pressed my Bowie knife against his throat. But, this time, I stopped. I could not kill him or let go. I felt as if two powerful beings were contending for my soul.

"Suddenly, all went black. When I awoke, two gentlemen were staring at me with very different expressions. A short, powerful man who showed concern for me and a tall, lanky man with a gun in one hand who looked very nervous.

"Wait a minute," The Sheriff interrupted, "How the heck did old Wyatt get out from under your knife?"

"The shorter gentleman's name, I discovered later, was Gray, also known as the 'Boy.' The second was Flint."

"I've heard those names before and believe they're pretty good," Sheriff Clement interjected.

"The best I have ever seen." Andrew confirmed, "However, more importantly, they fight with an unseen power."

"What?!" The sheriff looked at Andrew sideways and smiled awkwardly, "What are you talking about now? You talking hokum?"

"No," Andrew replied with his usual matter-of-fact tone, "I am merely continuing to recount the process of the transformation in my life. But I can stop now if you prefer."

"What! Are you nuts? Of course, you can't stop now!" The sheriff shot back

and leaned forward, his genuine interest revealed.

Andrew smiled nervously and continued, "As I was about to kill the marshall, Gray stopped me. I was not in control of myself, but Mr. Gray knew what was controlling me."

"What?" Asked Clement, leaning forward on the table and hanging on every word.

"It was an evil spirit of hate and rage. It was in control of my thoughts, therefore, in control of my actions. But Gray knew how to stop it."

The sheriff leaned back and held up his hands, "Wait, you're saying a demon was inside you making you walk around like it's wearing a human suit?"

"No, sir. This evil presence was so welcome in my heart and thoughts that it was able to not only encourage me how to think but also what to think."

"Huh, that's...interesting" The jovial attitude melted away from Clement as his eyebrows pressed together and his eyes focused. He switched to processing mode. He looked up at Andrew and, with a softer tone, asked, "Continue, son, if you don't mind."

The Kid nodded his head in agreement, "Gray and Flint came with the power of Jesus Christ. He has all power on this earth after dying on the cross for the sin of the world. Not only that, but Jesus went into death and took back the keys to death and destruction. Gray was close to Jesus and a member of His family, as he knew how to walk as God's Son. No spirit on earth can stand against a son of God. The spirits controlling me knew that."

"When Gray was around, the demons were held at bay. And the marshal released me to Mr. Gray's custody until I was rehabilitated. I soon discovered Jesus Christ's love and accepted Him as my Lord and Savior, and began learning to walk as a son of God. I have been on that journey of discovery these past several months."

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and began to rap his fingers on the table, staring off into the distance. As a former gunslinger, this was more nerve-racking for Andrew than facing down three men at once. The sheriff was silent and thinking for what seemed like an eternity.

When Clement finally spoke, his words were deliberate and specific. "I have often wondered about those crazy churchgoers. Every Sunday, listening to the preacher scream at them for an hour, then they leave and go back to being whoever they were beforehand. It all seems so pointless. But, now you're telling me that Jesus actually changed you from being a crazed killer."

The sheriff sipped his whiskey, then continued his well-thought-out monologue. "I've seen men like you, hell, I've ridden with men like you and even started down the road myself, once or twice. Not in a thousand years would I have bet a person could help any of those evil umbres. The only option was a bullet in the head. After reading Wyatt's letter and knowing about your reputation, I think I have some serious thinking to do. To be honest, I would have locked you up and not listened to a darned word you said, except the older widow the train robbers hit is the closest thing I've got to family." The sheriff chuckled and looked away sheepishly, "Look at me, talking about this stuff with a total stranger."

"Haha," Andrew laughed aloud, which shocked him more than the sheriff.

"Ya laughing at me, kid?" The lawmen asked.

"No," Andrew's reply was apologetic, "I am merely musing at the way the Father in heaven works."

The sheriff was confused, and his face showed it.

Andrew smiled warmly and a sparkle grew in his eye. "The Bible says that all things work together for good for those who know God and are called according to His purpose."

"So?" The sheriff pushed for more. *Ah! Andrew, what are you doing, don't preach at the Sheriff, be nice, and get on your way.* Andrew thought to himself. However, the deep compulsion to share overwhelmed his usual instinct to be polite and silent.

"Previously in my life, I would have described my experience on the train as bad timing or misfortune. Now I see that I was first placed there at that specific time to help the innocent passengers aboard the train. Secondly, I was meant to tell you of a loving God."

The Sheriff groaned, then chuckled. "The widow I told you about, she's the closest thing I've ever known as a mother. She took me in to do some chores when I decided I needed to go straight. She vouched for me to the sheriff for my first job as a deputy, and she's been telling me she's been praying for me every day for the past twenty-five years. Haha! This is loco!"

"Sheriff Clement, I believe my life's story is an answer to her prayers."

Clement leaned back into his chair and sighed happily and wiped a tear of laughter from his eyes, "Yep, son, I think you may be right."

CHAPTER THREE

“Leave, Mr. Freeman!” *Boom!* A double-barreled shotgun fired its first payload over the head of a man in an expensive suit. The blast knocked the dude’s black bowler hat off from 12 feet away as Mr. Freeman’s face turned a few shades lighter.

Wielding the scattergun was a tall, black man in a butler’s uniform. He was a handsome, older man with a long streak of grey, which ran across his head’s right side. He had a deep, rich voice and large gentle hands firmly caressing the shotgun as if they were old friends. If you didn’t know it, you might mistake the servant as soft; however, he had been chasing off looters, thieves, and con-men from this estate for more than eight years. He was not about to let this no-good hustler talk his way into the big mansion, even if he did *represent* the bank. “This house belongs to Mister Andrew now, and it’s been in this family for generations, and you know it! I will keep it for him no matter how long it takes!”

After steadying his nerves, Freeman brought confidence and charm back to his face with the grace of a stage performer, “Now, now Fredric, that is no way to treat a guest. Especially representing the institution that owns quite a large loan taken out against this property. We can agree on that, can’t we? This estate owes the bank?” He drifted back to collect his hat and determine if it was salvageable.

Fredric growled lightly but nodded his head in agreement.

“Now, please listen to reason. You have been here, trying to keep this old building from falling over or being burnt to the ground for eight long years. Master Andrew is most likely dead or can now be legally declared dead.”

“You don’t know that!” Fredric snorted.

“No matter, the time has passed that he may now be declared legally dead.” Freeman suddenly remembered himself and took his hat off his head and pressed it dramatically against his breast. His tone dropped from that of a businessman to a concerned and saddened face, declaring his sympathy. “Oh, I am so sorry, but even if he does suddenly reappear, he still has to answer for that terrible business of...” He raised his eyebrows and paused for effect, “...shooting his own father.”

The banker’s voice had too much concern and regret. Fredric wished he could shut the banker’s mouth up permanently. But as enticing as blasting

Freeman was, Frederic used words instead. “You know that shooting was a fair fight, and the circumstances were complicated!”

“I do, but there are quite a few concerned citizens around this area that may not feel that way. So, please, Fredric, allow us,” he pressed his hands against his grey pinstriped suit and stepped back slightly to convey gentle humility, “the bank, to do its job and survey the land so the law can decide who it should belong to.”

“If you or another of your *bankers* steps foot on this property,” Fredric stepped closer, “I will defend myself.”

Freeman’s face subtly changed. “Mr. Fredric, please don’t assume that because you have been allowed your freedom that you now have the same rights as those of us who are, let’s just say, ‘the economic engine of this country.’” The banker finished the comment with a sneer.

Fredric’s retort was controlled and solid as a rock. Still, his insides were on the verge of an explosion, “My Father in heaven determines my rights and freedom, and I don’t care if you bring an army to string me up on the highest tree in Maine.” He marched ten paces towards the antagonist and pressed his shotgun into the thick frilly bowtie adorning the bankers’ expensive suit. “I’ll take you with me first. Now, leave before we have an ‘accident!’”

Freeman’s jaw locked, and his eyes narrowed. Desperately he fought to keep his temper and bladder in check. He could not believe this mere servant, who was not even white, dared to speak to him in that fashion. With wounded pride, he walked back a few steps from the scattergun’s twin barrels and forced out a genuine tone of regret. “Oh...Fredric, Fredric, Fredric.” He slid the bowler hat on again at a slightly crooked angle, then shot a wicked glare in the direction of the old butler. “I wish you had not done that.” Freeman turned and walked back to his horse and galloped away.

Fredric watched him go and then looked up, straight into the sky. “Oh, Lord, I’ve been doing my best, but I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up. I’m old, we got no money, hardly any ammunition, and the ammo I got, I need for hunting rabbits so we can eat.” The old butler turned and walked back towards the estate. Even though he had aching hips and a constant sore right ankle, at 62, he still held a healthy pace. As he strode down the estate’s long roadway towards the big house, he spoke to the dirt. “Ok, Lord, I’ll keep praying and wait’n. Please protect young Master Andrew and bring him back to us. Amen.”

Fredric marched towards the estate's large mansion. He opted for the narrow path along the colossal stone house, around the back, to get home. Scraping his boots on the mat outside, he looked behind him out of habit before entering the servant's quarters.

"Is he gone, Fredric?" Margaret, his wife of 40 years, peered around a corner of the kitchen. She was covered in flour and looked to be baking up a storm.

Fredric smiled, "Nothing more pretty than a fine woman, making some *fine* fresh bread," he set down his 12 gauge against the wall and walked into the kitchen to scavenge anything freshly baked and worth "stealing."

"Do not even think about it, mister. This is not for you! This is for the children at the reservation, and you know that!"

"I know, I know...I'm sorry! But I'm needy too, you know." Fredric added with a chuckle.

Ignoring the comment, the baker asked, "So, are we safe, or will he return to burn us out?" Margaret was serious but focused on her work.

"That's what I love about my Cajun lady, fearless!" Fredric reached around and kissed her on the cheek before plopping down on an old wooden stool.

"I decided that if Mr. Freeman wanted to shoot us, I do not want to see it coming! If he only brought threats, I have far too many mouths to feed, and so we must endeavor to persevere. The Lord's will, He shall decide, and I *will* continue!" The fearless baker shot out her last words with gusto.

Fredric sighed, "I just don't know how much more I got in my veins, Margee?" That was his preferred nickname for his wife, one that took him over a decade to earn.

His wife finally turned to look the old butler over. He had taken care of this family since he was 12 years old; when his family was released as slaves all those decades ago. Fredric's father had chosen to stay out of loyalty. But, now, with no master of the house nor money from the estate, all the other household servants and hired hands had been let go. Fredric was caretaker, manager, butler, and protector; the worry had drawn deep lines into his forehead and filled bags under his eyes. Lines and bags not there a few years ago. The strain was taking its toll.

Margee wiped the flour from her hands onto her apron and leaned into her husband. She placed her soft hand on his cheek and lifted his tired face to meet her eyes. "My man, you listen to me! You are doing a wonderful job, and I am proud of you! We just need to keep going back to Jesus for strength. It is the

mission He gave us to complete; to serve those around us, and so that is why He will make sure we can endure!”

Fredric smiled brightly, “Ok, ok, you’re right as always. I’m just having a moment. He’s faithful, and it’ll all work out.” He wrapped long, powerful arms around his love and squeezed her tight. But when her eyes closed to return his embrace, a frown returned to Fredric’s face as he hid a deep sigh.

CHAPTER FOUR

He squinted his eyes and set his jaw. Andrew clutched his saddlebags in one hand and saddle in the other and stood atop the steps of the train station leading onto the surface streets. He had made it this far without any more trouble. However, at that moment, Andrew felt as though his legs refused to move any farther.

After his encounter with the bandits on the train and recounting his life's story with Sheriff Clement, the "Kid" stayed with the lawman two more days to share more about his new faith and how Jesus was changing him to be a new man. Part of that journey of change was returning home to allow himself to face his past.

"That's tough, son, but it's also good." Stated the older lawman. They were sitting together at their "usual table" in the Horseshoe Saloon. "I made things right in my life a couple of times 'cause the old widow made me. Even though it's tough, there's just some sorta happiness you get, knowing you did your best to make up for your mistakes. Don't know why, only that it does."

"Yes, Sheriff, so I have heard," Andrew replied with a slightly irritated but polite smile. "That is precisely the reason my advisor, Gray, encouraged this trek back home."

Andrew hissed the phrase *back home* through clenched teeth.

"Haha," the sheriff laughed, "You know you can shout or swear a bit if you get angry, right? You don't have to hold all those feelings bottled up inside like that...do ya?"

Andrew sighed heavily, "Yes, Mr. Clement, I do understand the concept of expressing my momentary emotional state. However, I was instructed, quite harshly, that emotion may be felt but NEVER seen. Therefore, expressing emotions, especially negative feelings, for me, is comparable to a successful ranch owner changing his business to farming. In theory, it can be done, but it would be challenging."

Clement's jovial expression turned to worry, "Boy, if you're on the type of journey I think you are, then all those feelings I told you about are gonna come spilling outta you one way or another. Ya understand?"

Andrew smiled politely but shook his head.

The sheriff explained, “Either you let ‘em feelings out on their own, or they’ll be forced out of ya. If the first one happens, ya might feel a bit foolish, but that’s it. If they git forced from you, then who knows who you’ll hurt or kill.”

Andrew took a deep breath and stared through saloon doors, thinking deeply. “How do I choose to share my emotions? What must I do?”

The wiser man looked at him and smiled. It was evident that the sheriff was speaking from experience. “First, find someone you trust, not just any old body. Second, start talk’n.”

“What about you, Mr. Clement?”

The lawman leaned back, “What about me?”

“Who do you speak with and confide in?”

The sheriff’s answer was thoughtful, “I suppose it’s the old widow lady I told you about. She’s always ready to listen and,” he chuckled, “and talk my ear off with a dozen solutions and reasons.” Then he stopped and gazed into the distance, deep in thought, “But you know, she never once told me I was bad, wrong, or mean. She’s the one person I have always been able to rely on, even before I knew I needed someone to rely upon.”

Now, Andrew was smiling at Clement warmly.

“What? Why are you smiling like a clown at the circus, Andrew?”

“You described Jesus and His love for you quite well.”

“Huh?” The sheriff crossed his arms defensively and looked at him sideways.

“He is always there for you, to speak to, and ready to reply if we are willing to listen. Most accurately, you said your friend, the lady who is widowed, took care of you before you even knew you needed care. Jesus has been caring for us all, much longer than we could ever know.” Andrew smiled and stared at Clement. The sheriff looked away in deep thought.

Andrew thought he might be angry, but still, Andrew waited. When Andrew felt his brain and nerves were about to burst in unison, the sheriff broke the tense silence with a sudden chuckle, “Woa, this is stupid. I feel like a 5-year-old child running from a whooping! I know I shouldn’t be, but I’m just scared; I’ll do it, pray a prayer or something...er whatever I should do.”

Andrew’s face lit up as a smile grew on his face from ear to ear.

Sheriff Clement gave his heart to Jesus that day. The next day, he told the old widow who had taken care of him and offered him a job when no one else would all those years earlier. With tears in her eyes, she almost crushed him with

a firm hug he thought she no longer had. She pushed herself away, “Look at me, Clem, I’m acting like a foolish little schoolgirl,” she said as she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. She looked into his eyes and said, “I prayed for you since the morning you came knocking on my door, asking to trade work for food, and I never stopped.”

After that, Andrew felt great. The following day, he boarded his train and didn’t think about being lonely or question what he was doing. He now knew that God had a purpose for his journey, no matter the circumstances. The following days were a wonderful time spent reading the Bible and praying. All was right with his world.

Then, suddenly, as the train neared Andrew’s destination, fear and worry burrowed back into his thoughts and gripped his mind.

The Kid swallowed hard as he muttered under his breath, “I am a new person; I’m not that same young boy.” He took a final deep breath and stepped quickly down the stairs onto the dirt streets below. Andrew was home.

Campport’s economy was based on a booming shipping and fishing trade. When Andrew’s great grandfather had moved here, it was a coastal town on the rise. He knew that business would do well. There were ironworks for stagecoach manufacturing and many other small businesses due to a new movement rocking the great state of Maine: Tourism.

Wealthy men and their families were pouring in from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and even as far away as Chicago to live in “Summer homes.” On the train, Andrew had overheard two elderly ladies discussing this new status symbol and whether it was good or bad for Maine’s coastal areas. Andrew did not know but thought to himself that it must significantly improve the commerce over the summer months. The town needed the added economy, as the bulk of shipping was now being brought in from the lower East Coast where cities were larger, and the weather was not quite as cold and harsh in the Winter.

Andrew turned to step left. “Oof.” A small body ran into his stomach, slightly knocking the wind from him. The figure crumpled to the ground. It was a boy, no older than fourteen wearing a short coat, suspenders, very worn trousers with patched knees, and a bright blue scarf around his neck. An old fisherman’s hat covered a mop of bright red hair.

“I do apologize, sir; I was not paying attention,” Andrew said, dropping his saddle and extending his hand, “Are you injured? Are you in need of help or a doctor?”

“Nah, I’m fine,” the young man popped up but kept his right hand slightly behind his back, “not a scratch,” he replied with a cheeky smile.

Andrew stared at him for a second, feeling something was not right. A slight breeze caught Andrew’s long black duster, showing off his big two-gun rig. The boy’s eyes grew wide with fright, “Sorry, Mister,” he tipped the bill of his old hat and took off in a dead sprint, away from the train station and down the road towards the docks.

Andrew watched the boy run away. Something wasn’t right. *Why would this young man be frightened of me? Many carry weapons, even some ladies.* He remembered the boy had not allowed him to see his right hand when he stood. Andrew suddenly patted himself down, then exclaimed, “NO!”

He threw his saddle and bag in front of the nearest store. “Hey, you can’t leave that here!” Shouted the shopkeeper.

“I shall pay a rental fee for that space if they are present upon my return!” Andrew shouted over his shoulder as he tore off down the street. He tried desperately to remember where the “bad element” of the town was situated. Since his family was one of the wealthy elite, he had never been there. Nonetheless, he had to try. Anything else he owned, he could part with, but not that billfold. If he had to go door to door and turn over every rock, he had to find that boy! “Please, God, anything except my billfold, please?!” He pleaded under his breath.

Wincing slightly, as he was not used to this much running, Andrew came to a stop on a hill looking down onto “High Street.” The town’s main thoroughfare. From his position, he could see a crowd around several street vendors and almost to the water. There seemed to be a gap in a section of the moving crowd. Like water, the mass was flowing around something in the walkway that was not moving. Andrew sidestepped three times until he could see what the obstruction was. The pickpocket was leaning on his knees, also out of breath. He glanced up just in time to see Andrew starting down the street towards him. The young man took off, and the chase was on.

They ducked and dove through the crowd and street market as angry customers and merchants shouted, “Watch out,” “What the...” and the most popular, “Hey!” The thief tried to run through a crowd of ladies on the left side of the street but couldn’t find an opening, so he changed direction. The Kid had hunted too many men just to follow this boy’s path. He saw the youngsters’ mistake early and wheeled around his right side to cut him off. The boy ran right

into Andrew's waiting arms. However, the pickpocket knew a few tricks of his own. As Andrew wrapped his long arms around him, the red-haired boy exhaled and let his body go limp. He slid through Andrew's arms, like a giant wet noodle, collapsing to the ground. Frustrated and confused, Andrew stared down at the boy lying on his back in front of his feet. The cheeky youngster smiled, winked, and quickly slid himself with a slithering motion between Andrew's legs to escape behind him. By the time Andrew was fully turned around, the boy was running again!

The thief knew the area well. The quick lad ran through alleyways, businesses and even tried losing Andrew in one of the large shipbuilding yards.

"This boy has been chased a lot," Andrew grunted under heavy breath. However, in the end, the young man did not have enough tricks to outsmart the experienced bounty hunter.

Andrew had learned many years ago that when you are on someone else's turf, they are in control. Do not get close until they make a mistake. Then, pounce! Until that time comes, keep them insight. Also, Andrew deduced that every operational business, busy hotel, or factory his prey ran into was a red herring. A sane business owner would never risk losing their business and going to jail for a pickpocket. So, when the sneak ran into the shipyard, Andrew simply ran around to the other side of the building and waited for him to emerge back onto the street. He did, through a door, 200 feet down on one of the docks. And so, they were off running again.

The gunslinger's lungs burned, and his legs ached. He felt a raw chafing begin to develop where his big pistol's holster straps rubbed against his shoulders and chest. Even at his most evil, "the Kid" would never have shot an unarmed boy, but he was questioning whether his aim was good enough to shoot out the heel of the boy's boots or something! "Father, may I shoot him?" Andrew panted out the prayer request aloud, "I'll pray for his soul and call it even? I can't do this much longer!"

As he finished his wishful prayer, Andrew turned a corner into a fish market. Strewn on either side of a giant out of commission wharf were rows upon rows of fish. It was a massive boardwalk built over the sand and into the water for larger vessels to board men and supplies. It was no longer in use as several larger wharfs had been created, so the three hundred-foot-long dock served as the local fish market.

"No, no, no!!!" Shouted Andrew as he spun around; he desperately looked

under tables and asked several fish vendors if they had seen a red-haired boy. Nothing. No one had seen him. The thief was gone, and so was his billfold. The Kid stood in the middle of the long rows of fish. Feelings of disappointment and rage bubbled to the surface. Andrew clenched his fist tightly until his knuckles were white. However, a thought breezed through his mind, which gave him the strength to gain control of himself. He breathed deeply and prayed under his breath with more than a little frustration, "I am a new creation...I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

A calm enveloped him, and his hands relaxed. Suddenly another thought popped into his head. He looked around the market twice more; then, he moved on to search elsewhere.

The vendor closest to where Andrew had almost lost his temper was cleaning fish and barely looked up. One minute after Andrew walked away, he tapped the table with the hilt of his knife and stated: "Ok, kid, he's gone, come on out, now."

The young pickpocket climbed out from under the table, "Thanks, Sam, I'll put in a good word for you with Rocko."

He walked a few vendors down, but suddenly strong hands gripped and pulled him around. Two men in velvet vests, one with a watch in his breast pocket and the other with knuckle dusters in hand, glared down on him. The red-haired boy smiled. "Oh, whew, it's only you guys. I thought you were my mark."

"Rocko wants to know why ya ain't been 'round lately, Simon?" The brute with the gold watch asked. He was missing his left front tooth.

"Tell Rocko, I had to take some time, but I'm back on now. See, I got this dude's billfold. It's got almost 30 dollars..."

"You owe 250, Simon! If ya can't give it, we'll be taken it outta yer skin."

"Now fellas, listen, that's a lotta paper and coins," he started backing up but ran into two more toughs behind him. "Let me make a payment plan...like a bank," he said with bright, hopeful eyes.

"Not this time Simon, ya sista's work'n a soft job in the factory, but since ya can't pay, she gets right back in da game."

"Ok, ok, you got me." Simon pointed down, "I keep it down here in my shoe." He bent down to look, but came up lightning fast with a fist to the groin of the head thug, then turned and dove through the legs of the man behind him. Scrambling to get up, he moved forward like a cat with both hands and feet until he was on the move.

“Get him!” Simon overheard the tough head squeal behind him in a much higher tone.

Simon turned a sharp corner and stopped short. Standing two feet in front of him was his mark, that stranger in the weird western get-up. He held out his hand but took Simon off guard with his request. “You may keep the money; however, please return the billfold?”

Simon had to think quickly, this guy in front, four mean, tough thugs behind him. So he did what any 14-year-old trying to survive the streets would do.

His face dropped in sadness, “Here, sir, I’m sorry.” He threw Andrew his wallet as the thugs approached. He turned around and pointed, “He’s got your money. He’s been running me and won’t let me go. Takes all but a penny from my earnings too. Help me. I wanna work for Rocko again, please!” Simon even forced a single large tear from his right eye.

Andrew was confused, but that lasted only a moment as he looked over at the four approaching gentlemen. They slowed as they approached Andrew’s position, where he stood holding his billfold awkwardly against his chest. He imagined he looked like one of the new “tourists.”

Like a pack of wolves encircling their prey, the bullies surrounded Andrew. The head thug stood in front of him and cracked his knuckles as he spoke, “Maybe you’re new here, so I’ll tell you plain how it is. This here’s Rocko’s turf.” He pointed at the boy, now hiding behind a table, still acting terrified. “And Simon belongs to us!”

Andrew frowned, “Excuse me, sir, did you state that the boy ‘belongs’ to you?”

The thugs’ smile was haughty and evil, “Yeah, and ain’t nobody’s gett’n him. He’s our best sneak.”

Heat released into the gunslinger’s spine, traveling throughout his body to his fingers and toes. Andrew’s reply was polite, but his tone was angry and stern, “I am not acquainted with this young man, nor have I any knowledge of a man named ‘Rocko.’ I arrived on the noon train merely an hour ago. I have been chasing...Simon, I believe you said his name is, for the better part of half an hour to re-attain my billfold.” He shook the billfold above his head as proof, “Now, I will be leaving and taking the boy with me.”

The thugs looked at one another and laughed. They positioned themselves; one in front, one in the back, and the other two to his left and right. A crowd began gathering to see what the ruckus was all about.

Through a labored smile, Andrew continued, "I will warn you once more, gentleman. Please allow me to leave peacefully; otherwise, you will be harmed," Andrew winced and gritted his teeth, "Greatly."

The first attack came at him from the man behind. Andrew heard him step forward. The gunman didn't go for his pistols but quickly leaned forward while he bent his right knee deeply into his own chest. When Andrew's torso was parallel to the ground, he kicked his booted heel out like a mule into the sternum of the attacker. A soft crunch resulted, and the thug collapsed onto the ground, breathless.

The second attack came from the front as Andrew stood up. The lead thug stepped in to make a big roundhouse punch with his right fist, just as Andrew stood up straight. Without allowing his foot to touch the ground, Andrew leaned back away from the strike and countered with a front snap kick. He snapped his right cowboy boot forward quickly into the groin of the leader of the group. The second such attack into his manhood was more than the tough could take. He dropped to the ground gripping his groin as tears streamed down his face.

The third attack came from all directions. As Andrew was kicking the second thug, he noticed two additional men dressed the same way in matching bowler hats running towards the fight. Now he had four attackers, and they weren't going to take turns. Andrew spun and dove headfirst behind him and over the first attacker. He stood and reached into his long coat for his large Remington Pistols, just as the four attackers reached him. Using his pistols upside down as clubs, the Kid struck at his targets in a twirling motion; giving incredible momentum to his hands, he pivoted first to the right and then the left.

The Kid caught the first attacker entirely by surprise and in the jaw with the butt of both pistols in succession. The second thug put his arm up in time, so Andrew came down hard onto his forearm with the first pistol, then switched tactics and used the butt of the gun to punch him square in the face with the second pistol. The third thug snuck up behind him and wrapped strong arms around him in a bear hug forcing his hands to his side.

Borrowing Simon's tactic, Andrew immediately exhaled and squatted towards the ground. This released the man's grip, so the Kid slid through his arms and squatted against the attacker's belly. The last attacker decided now was his time and charged straight on. Still gripping his pistols upside down, Andrew dropped his left pistol to the ground and grabbed the collar of the thug who had moments earlier held him in the bear hug. He slid the barrel of the right pistol up

the man's groin sharply, propping the bad guy up onto his toes. Andrew pulled the thug's collar with his left hand and swept the man's leg's out from under him, so he flew head over heels into the last oncoming attacker.

The fish market crowd erupted into applause and laughter. No one had ever heard of one man defeating six without firing a shot. Especially six of Rocko's boys!

From a hiding spot, Simon watched the entire scene with childlike wonder, "Who in blazin's was this guy?"

After his "incredible performance," the onlooker's applause eventually died down. The bad men fled, stumbling into one another, bloodied and bruised. After several minutes Andrew caught his breath. As his lungs recovered, a question popped into his head. Why had he not been arrested? In a town this size, with this many businesses, moving products, and exchanging money, there should have been at least two constables present, if not three. Even in the west, this much business meant a deputy with a shotgun, always on patrol, waiting for trouble. The only excuses for the lack of lawmen present was that the new booming town was still disorganized, or there was not enough tax money due to a lack of commerce. Given that the large shipping and manufacturing town was on the cusp of becoming a city, money should not be an obstruction.

Contemplating what this may mean, Andrew mused to himself, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

CHAPTER FIVE

Thick white smoke swirled like a gathering hurricane against the ceiling. The white billow escaped from a long, large Principe de Gales cigar. The stogie simmered in a marble ashtray on a large, maple wood desk. The polished desktop was lined with soft, tightened leather and adorned with painted gold edging. Behind the desk sat a man in a huge, plush leather chair. His hair was slicked down tight with grease and parted to the side. He wore a white crisp dress shirt and a dark red striped tie tucked in his shirt; to keep from bothering him as he leaned forward to work. He sported white suspenders to hold up his dark blue suit pants; his matching jacket hung on a rack next to him.

Although the gentleman was dressed like a banker or a wealthy man from old money, he was neither. His name was Rocko, and currently, he was the most feared man in all of Maine. He had started as a pickpocket in New York, lifting billfolds in the early days of the “Dead Rabbits.” After that, Rocko had risen to a lieutenant within the organization. When the gang wars kicked off between the Rabbits and the Bowery Boys, Rocko learned two crucial things. First, warring against another gang is a fool’s errand. No one makes money. Second, New York was tapped out. The city was the proverbial golden goose that was gutted.

Rocko was proven right through tragedy. He got out of Dodge only days before the great riots of 1863. He spent months on the road but finally settled on this sleepy fishing town. The reason? First, it was on the rise, so businesses would only get bigger. More companies, more rich businessmen, and eager sailors would pour into this little city every year. The second and most enticing reason, until he showed up, the crime was all petty and completely disorganized.

After only five years, Rocko had established himself as the boss of the underworld. After another ten years, he became the unofficial boss of the entire city. He had police, politicians, and judges on his payroll. He’d even paid to appoint his own grand jury.

As Rocko was busy double-checking his ledger to ensure that everyone had been paid and that their *payment* was recorded, a light rap sounded on his office door. He did not stop his work but ordered, “Come.”

The door slowly creaked open, and a thug with a split lip and black eye holding a wet rag atop his head peeked inside, “Boss, I think we have a problem.”

Rocko sighed with boredom and looked up. When he saw his man's state, his eyes became wide and angry. "What happened?!" He shouted with anger and worry. Rocko stood behind his desk; his chair creaked as the wood frame relaxed after unburdening itself from his large frame. Rock was only a shade over six feet, but his shoulders were massive and his forearms bigger. His favorite game was still bare-knuckle boxing. He offered a \$250 reward for a man who could stand 15 rounds with him. No one had lasted more than 10.

He quickly stepped around his desk, showing concern for his man, "Johnny, Johnny, what happened? Where's Mikey? Why isn't he here to tell me what happened?"

"He's worse off than me, Rocko! He can't walk." The tough whined as he spoke; every time he uttered a syllable, his face rewarded him with an aching in his head and stinging from his lip.

Rocko took him like a father would and set him down on a chair in front of his desk. "Now, tell me what happened. Didn't you have back up?"

Johnny thought to himself, *Why isn't he yelling at me?* So he answered cautiously and slowly, waiting for his boss to strike. "There were six of us."

Rocko was walking back to his side of the desk but slowed as he digested this new information, then asked, "And how many did the others have?"

Johnny's eyes were huge, his forehead pouring sweat. He whispered hoarsely, "One."

"What was that?" Rocko asked, "Louder if you please?"

The tough cleared his throat but was so nervous, he accidentally shouted, "One."

Rocko's head shuddered in rage as his eye-balls bugged, but he allowed a very awkward smile with a crazed gleam in his eye and kept his tone even and calm. Johnny swallowed hard, and his lips trembled.

Rocko spoke, "One-one...only one...there were six of my men. Six men, I pay to do simple things. I feed you, I take care of you, but if one man fights back.... Hahaha!" Rocko's talking and laughing to himself were rhetorical, but Johnny didn't know that.

"Yes, Boss, he was some sort of magician, didn't even use guns, just swung 'em around like clubs. He did this bizarre throwing thing, and Boss, he kicked like a mule!"

"Oh, no guns either...fantastic." The boss mused sarcastically. He stared at his desk with irritation as he tapped it with his forefinger, "And how did this

happen?”

“I don’t know, boss, honestly. Mikey said we had lost one of our best cut-purse kids, so we tracked him down. When we found him, he took off and ran to hide behind some cowboy-looking guy. The sneak, Simon, said this dude was run’n him now. So we stepped in to teach him that nobody runs on your turf without your permission...and, well, you can guess the rest, boss.” Johnny swallowed hard. “I’m real sorry!”

Rocko rapped his fingers thoughtfully on his desk and sighed. He took his coat down from the dark red coat rack and draped it gently across his leather chair. Rocko smiled and shrugged as he spoke, “It’s not so bad; what’s done is done.”

Suddenly, with the prowess of a cat and the strength of a bear, he snatched up the coat rack with one hand and brought it down hard on the side of his employee’s head. Johnny didn’t see it coming. His lights were out before he hit the floor. Rocko stood over him and struck him over and over again as he shouted, “It’s done! The entire city saw my men get whipped and humiliated!” Finally, Rocko stopped, threw the coat rack down, sneered at his unconscious man, and mocked him. “Oh, but you’re just the messenger, right? Well, now you, Johnny, are also the message!”

He wiped bloodied and perspiring hands on his expensive, white and crisp shirt. He knew the effect of blood wiped onto his clothes would help sell his message to his men outside. Reaching over, he took his cigar from its marble tray and stuffed it between his teeth. Then, he reached down and grabbed Johnny by the collar, and with one arm, easily drug him to his office door and opened it. Seven of his men, his two bodyguards, and the five others stood, frozen in terror, waiting to receive their lashing from the boss. Rocko tossed Johnny’s body at their feet with incredible strength.

The boss faced his men, spread his legs slightly, leaned forward, and spoke with the cigar still in his teeth. Smoke chased the intense words from his mouth. “We don’t lose, gentleman, if we ever allow one loss, even one, the streets will be claimed by someone else, and we will die! Find this fighter or magician, whatever he may be...and bring me his body. His head will do! The one who makes the kill gets a \$100 bonus! Get it done, or no one gets paid!”

In unison, his men swallowed hard and replied, “Yes, boss.”

The road to his family estate was muddy. The color of the earth was mostly grey. As he led his stallion on foot, Andrew frowned at the grey mud sticking to his neatly polished leather boots and thought to himself, *removing this mud will prove to be most tedious.*

The leaves were changing color, turning from their olive green into a majesty of red and gold. Ironically, the contrast between the lifeless grey road and beautiful fall colors described Andrew's feelings. Excitement and warmth did escape from his heavily guarded feelings, as the scenery and essence of the air reminded him of warm memories. However, he was still terrified to see his family's estate. Questions swirled around his mind. Would his father's grand home still stand? Was it owned by one of the culture's newest unknowns, *the tourist?* A rich man from Boston, perhaps, who only 'summered' in Maine? If the estate was still in his family and well cared for, can he brave the memories of his family: the good times, tragic and vengeful? All this and more flooded into his mind simultaneously.

"There's still time to turn back." Like a Jack-in-the-box, the voice seemed to pop into his head as soon as he reached the mile marker from his old home.

"Yes, I suppose I can," Andrew spoke aloud. Entertaining the thought, he stopped walking and stared down the road, imagining what it would be like to see *that* place again. The internal battle raged in his mind. If he turned around and headed back west, not a soul would ever know he was ever here. Yet, the Kid knew what he should be doing and why and he would regret the decision to turn and run. Andrew sighed and prayed aloud, "God, I need your assistance. I do not believe this is a logical decision."

"What's logical mean?" A voice leaped at him from a bush only a few yards away and startled the Kid so much that he dove around the other side of his horse and returned with his arm under his stallion's neck with a pistol in hand, aimed and ready to fire.

Simon shot his hands up in the air with sarcastic, wide eyes and a sly smile. "I give up; I'll tell ya where the gold is!"

Andrew glared at him as he depressed the hammer on his big Remington and holstered the weapon. "That was an unwise action, master Simon. Concealing yourself without warning may cause an accidental discharge of my pistol, ending your life!" Andrew's voice was stern as he delivered his lecture.

Simon didn't care. He slapped his knee, "It'll make an accidental discharge

happen, alright. You almost discharged all over yer trousers! Haha!!!” Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“You are rude and crass. I do not have time for your childish games. Good day!” Andrew huffed as he snatched up his horse’s reins, mounted his ride, and continued down the road at a trot.

“Well, you’re a goody-goody puritan!” Simon retorted.

Turning around slightly, Andrew mockingly bowed, “Thank you, I appreciate the compliment,” and continued onwards.

Simon slapped himself in the forehead, suddenly remembering why he was following the “mark” he had spent the better part of the afternoon running from. The sneak ran up just ahead of Andrew’s horse and began speaking as if they were the oldest of friends. “So, the reason I’ve been following you is I need your help. Ya see...”

“Excuse me, sir!” Andrew stopped his horse, politely covered his mouth as he chuckled, and stared at the presumptuous young man with utter disbelief. “In case your memory has escaped you, please allow me to refresh it. After stealing my billfold and then accepting my generous offer of keeping the bills inside for its return, you succeeded in convincing six men to attack me instead of you.” Andrew now laughed loudly, “And now, young man, you have the gumption to request my assistance? Again, I say good day!”

Instead of admitting defeat, Simon leaped up and grasped the saddle horn dangling on the side of the walking horse while staring into Andrew’s eyes, “Please! I’m desperate!” His patience wearing thin, the gunfighter was about to force the boy away aggressively until he looked deep into the boy’s eyes. Simon’s expression was terrified and desperate.

This was the first time Andrew noticed how young and gaunt he was. His charming, cheeky smile and confident talk drew attention away from his deficiencies. Without them, he was a young child, barely surviving on the street. But there was something else in his eyes that caught Andrew’s attention. Something he had seen as a boy in the mirror long ago: fear. Nagging, never-ending fear. Not for himself, though, Andrew saw that the boy was not scared to die or get hurt, not with the way he had handled the local toughs back in town.

“Please, mister!?! Just hear me out. It’s my sister.” Simon begged.

A bubbling mass of emotion rumbled in the Kid’s stomach. Andrew pried Simon’s fingers from the saddle horn, and the boy dropped to the ground, onto his backside. “I do apologize, Master Simon. I must go now.” The fearless

gunfighter galloped down the road, terrified of possible unfettered emotions breaking loose from his soul.

After reaching a safe distance from Simon, Andrew drew up to catch his breath. His teeth ground together as he looked up into the sky.

“AHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” He released tension and anger from the pit of his stomach, resulting in a deep bellowing cry followed by a growl that could have woken the dead. The release echoed from tree to tree, sending rabbits back to their holes and birds fleeing for safety. After the growling cry had quieted, the wild was hushed. Even the leaves seemed too frightened to move. Feelings of loneliness and frustration pulled the gunfighter’s head into his chest, defeated.

Then something changed. A soft breeze blew through the trees and swirled around Andrew as his spirit lifted. *“Andrew, you asked for my guidance, and so I sent you Simon. He will guide you as you serve him. Cast your burden upon Me, Andrew. I will sustain you. I will never allow you to be shaken.”*

“Jesus, I do not comprehend these emotions and how to predict them. What is my preferred course of action? Please instruct me! I am too weak! I am not emotionally capable of being of assistance to this young man. If I attempt to help, I could lose my faculties and hurt anyone around me, including him. I know you promised to be strong for me when I am weak. However, I do not feel that strength.”

“Faith without works is dead. Act on your beliefs in My power, no matter how you feel. I am always with you.”

After several moments of silence, Andrew felt an invisible soft blanket of peace laid down onto his chest and inside his guts. His countenance relaxed, and a soft smile grew on his face as his jaw relaxed and the raging storm of emotions in his stomach was calmed. The gunman bowed his head for several moments. When he picked his head up again, he stated, “Ok, I shall help master Simon... in Your strength.” He turned his horse around and rode hard the way he had just come.

Andrew caught up to Simon, slowly strolling back to town, head down in defeat as his last bit of hope had been stolen. The young man turned his head slightly to see who was approaching. He smiled to himself, a grin that grew from ear to ear. But, he kept his back to the approaching gunman so as to not “tip his hand.”

“Mr. Simon, I do apologize for my sharp words and abrupt departure. If you still desire my assistance, I shall gladly offer my services.” Andrew leaned down

on his horse and reached out to offer his hand.

Simon finally turned around and stared straight-faced at the outstretched hand. Suddenly, his face broke into a giant grin, and he grasped the gunfighter's hand with both of his and shook them violently. "Are ya kidding!? Of course, I want your help! I need your help! Thank you, thank you! But, I only got 14 dollars on me, but I'll give you more over time, I swear!"

The Kid pulled his hand free of Simon's overly excited mits. "First, please do not swear. That is neither wise nor polite. Secondly, I have been commissioned by the highest and most wealthy of all Powers!

Simon leaned back a bit and furrowed his eyebrows, "The president?"

The gunfighter sighed but took a deep breath and tried to explain again with more vernacular. "Your debt has been taken care of."

"How? You didn't know me 'til today."

Andrew grinned, and without thinking, blurted something out, which left Simon speechless, "Yes, my new friend, but Father God knew you before time began."

It was official, the Kid had been hired for a new job, and this time the bounty came from heaven.

CHAPTER SIX

“Kat’s my big sister. She’s the only family I got left in this world. I’ll do anything to get her safe from those sons of B...”

“Excuse me, Master Simon, if I help you, then we will operate by my rules of conduct. Rule number three is: the usage of swearing by God or His son Jesus as well as curse words are prohibited.”

“What’re rules one and two?”

“The entirety of all rules shall be handed to you when I have ample time to complete a suitable copy for you to memorize.”

The gunslinger known as the “Kid” did not notice Simon’s perplexed expression. Simon decided it was a fate he would have to get used to, being around this crazy but deadly stranger.

Figuring the young man could use a break off his feet until they found a place to rest, Andrew allowed him to ride while he led his black stallion down the road to what was once his home. Besides, after Andrew’s sudden hard galloping, his horse could use the break with a smaller load.

“Tell me more about these ‘thugs,’ as you referred to them. What do you know about them? How many will be guarding your sister? I need accurate, current information in order to be successful and to avoid bloodshed.”

“Well, that’s the thing.”

Andrew slowed his walk and came alongside the horse, then looked into Simon’s eyes and stated, “Yes, continue.”

“Ummm, I only have one name for the guy holding my sister.”

“Ok, Master Simon, which name is that?”

“Mic. Which you know is fake, half the townsfolk around the docks are Irish, so many of them could be a *Mic*.”

“Or, possibly not one of them.”

“What do you mean?” Simon enquired.

Andrew continued leading the horse down the trail as he spoke. “Master Simon, I have hunted gentlemen with two or three bounties on their heads, all in different names. That inconvenience does not include the other ten aliases they used, changing their identity in every town.” The Kid’s eyes darkened as his brain switched into bounty hunter mode. “I do not worry about the name, I find his men,

his operation, that which he needs to survive, and it is first with the smaller pawns that I must make my move.”

“I only understand half of what you said, Drew, but we’ll give ‘em hell!”

“I said no swearing!”

“Sorry...” Simon was defensive, “Gee...whiskers...”

“And, by what name did you refer to me? My name is Andrew. It is not any longer, nor is it shorter.”

“I just said Drew, it’s good, cause if we gotta talk real fast...hey, Drew, lookout...like that!”

Andrew growled and was about to say something more but was interrupted by a terrifying sight: home.

Andrew and Simon stared at the property with disbelief. Simon because he had never seen any home this large before and Andrew because a wave of familiar smells, sights, and feelings washed over him. They walked forward slowly, Andrew leading his stallion.

To the left of where they stood was the north side of the property, a gentle stream poured into a small dam and a fishing pond. On the south side stood a large stable and giant barn. In all his travels, it was still the biggest barn Andrew had ever seen. Behind the barn were rows of small, nicely decorated cottages built for servants and their families.

Rows of large maple trees, proud and full of color, draped themselves over the road to the main house. Three hundred feet before the front door, the road split into two directions, making a massive circular passing in front of the grand entrance. The centerpiece of the impressive spectacle, built within the meadow, was the giant stone mansion. Six massive white support pillars stood erect, holding up a spectacular awning for the front entry, and supported a large wraparound balcony.

The main structure was constructed entirely of custom hand-cut stone, stacked almost 200 years earlier by Andrew’s ancestors. The mansion was built to impress and impose: to act as a house of glee and merry or as a place of the last stand: a crown of glory, leading to an eventual tomb.

As the story went, Andrew’s Great-Great-Great-Grandfather settled this valley, but was burnt out of two cabins by Indians, lost his entire crop to raiders, and two sons to dysentery. So, he finally decided to build a foundation to stay higher than the moisture and any future irrigation. Next, a home that could not be burned. He and his sons spent three years building the first three rooms. Year

one was dedicated to excavating the land and creating controlled irrigation; the second was finding and establishing a quarry for the rock. The final stage was cutting and stacking rocks, one piece at a time.

When finished, they were the only homestead in the territory with a fort and an irrigated property. The mansion became the haven whenever a raiding party was on the prowl. It was also the most profitable farm in the area. It didn't take long before they acquired other properties and land. Thus, Andrew's family dynasty was born.

At one time, his family holdings were the largest in New England; however, since his father drank and gambled that all away, all that was left was this magnificent property, *which could belong to anyone by now*, Andrew thought.

They strolled closer to the main house but froze in unison at the sound of a metallic 'click.'

"Who's there? Don't move, or I will be forced to cut you in half; you too, youngster!" A booming voice commanded.

Andrew put his hands up and slowly turned, sliding his hat off to reveal his face to prove he meant no harm, "I am sorry for the intrusion, sir. I once lived here as a child but did not know to whom this property now belongs. I will be happy to leave without incident."

Both the young men turned to the sound of rustling bushes off to their right. A large and powerfully built black man with a snow-white head of hair stood with a double-barreled 12 gauge leveled at his waist, staring with disbelief. "It can't be!" Words would not form in Frederic's mouth as his excitement got in the way. Then finally, he was able to sputter out, "W...Why...it's you, Mister Andrew!"

"Mr. Fredric!?" Andrew exclaimed.

The old butler slung the scattergun over his shoulder and gripped Andrew by the shoulder, and looked deep into his eyes. It was unexpected and awkward. Yet, at the same time, it made Andrew feel like he was home again. He smiled warmly. Fredric's eyes widened, and deep, joyful laughter erupted out of pearly white teeth. "I did it. I kept your home safe for you," tears streamed from the corner of his eyes, "By His strength, we never gave up, and here you are!" He wrapped large arms around Andrew and almost squeezed the life out of the returned prodigal son. "Thank you, Jesus, thank you, my Jesus, oh, thank you for answering my prayers, Lord Jesus!"

Completely out of character, Andrew returned his hug, and for the first time since he was a child, one solitary tear snuck its way out of the corner of the Kid's

right eye and down his cheek. Deep in Andrew's soul, the concrete stone wall guarding his heart against the world shuddered, and a small but definite crack formed. Soon it would crumble.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Simon was confused. “Drew, why are you so happy, and why is an old man hugging you? And why is he crying like a little girl?”

“Simon!” Andrew snapped, “Mind your manners if you please. This gentleman is Frederic, the oldest friend I have in the world.”

“Master Simon, pleased to meet you, sir.” Frederic outstretched his hand to the young tough.

Simon wiped his nose and crossed his arms, “I don’t know you, and I ain’t no master, and I ain’t yer sir!”

Frederic sat up straight and looked down at Simon, “Yes...ok then, Simon, is it? Pleased to meet you.”

Simon looked at the old butler sideways and released a defensive grunt.

“Please excuse my young companion, Frederic; there is still much he must learn about the intricacies of showing respect in society,” Andrew declared with a glare at his young companion.

“I see.” The elder and wiser man smiled gently.

The two old friends turned and began strolling down the road towards the grand home. “Well, Mister Andrew, I am afraid I was not aware that you would be here, so the manor is not ready. However, I’m sure Margaret will be happy to fix us some supper as we ready accommodations.”

Andrew’s face lit up with delight, “Margaret is well then?”

“Yes, she is in the house right now and still runs the world. All I have to do is remember where my boots should be placed.”

“I am pleased, Frederic, that you two are well. I did not know what to expect, but certainly not in my wildest of fantasies would I have believed that you would still be here and the house would still be in my family name.”

“Not for long, Mister Andrew. All your father’s debts were called in, so I’ve had to sell everything but the land to keep a hold of this property from the bank. Your timing, Mister Andrew, was impeccable.”

“Yes, I suppose, Mr. Frederic. However, it was not my timing....” He stopped walking and looked slowly to the right. After a closer look, the property’s true condition was revealed. Frederic had done his best, but he was only one man. It was a mess and needed years of work to restore it to its former glory. Then he

looked right and froze. There it was. The last spot he had seen his father alive: the spot Andrew had stepped up to the man writhing in pain from the bullet he had put into him. Then, staring him in the eye, Andrew had ended his life with a .38 through the forehead.

In the past, he would have stuffed these emotions into a sealed pit, somewhere in his subconscious, and he would do anything and everything to avoid that area of his soul. The problem with such a plan is that emotions have to be released somehow. Andrew had experienced shingles and other blemishes on his skin, ulcers, lack of appetite, and depression so debilitating, that he had once not moved from his hotel bed for three days.

The gunslinging bounty hunter was now free from this shame and guilt. Although, he was quickly learning that his recent freedom was merely the beginning of a journey and a learning curve steeper than he had ever experienced. This could be the toughest ride of his life!

Now, he did the only thing he could. He tried to force these emotions of shame and bitterness back into that hiding place in his soul like he had a thousand times before. This time the feelings just would not stay! He tried to stuff them down again and again, but they would not fit. It was as if that hiding spot had been removed. “Go away, you infernal annoyance!” He groaned to himself.

A small, gentle hand touched his arm. “Sweetie, Jesus already healed that hole.”

“Huh?” Andrew’s face was pale, and his eyes were tired. He was baffled. It was Fredric’s wife, Margaret. She looked almost exactly the same as she did those eight long years ago. She still had the same gentle, kind, and patient smile on her handsome face. It dawned on him that Fredric and Simon were gone, and the afternoon sunshine had turned to dusk. He had been staring at this shameful patch of earth for an unknown amount of time, lost in his thoughts.

“I am extremely pleased to see you, Auntie Margaret.”

“As am I, Andrew, as am I!” She squeezed his arm.

“However, I must ask, what did you say?”

She stepped several feet past him and spoke over her shoulder as she fixed her gaze on the same evil patch of earth. “I said, Jesus already healed that empty hole you’ve been looking for. You can’t hide in your shame anymore, Andrew. When you gave it to Him, He took it away. Now, you have to deal with it and accept His forgiveness.”

“How could you know...” Andrew’s voice trailed off; this was too much for

his brain to process. It was as if she knew his thoughts. The only other person he had met who had made him experience that supernatural feeling before was... Gray: his mentor. The only one to see a scared kid tormented by demons instead of just a crazed killer. When he spoke to Andrew, it was as if he spoke to his soul, down to the pit of his stomach.

“Nah,” Gray had once said with a chuckle in his usual nonchalant manner when Andrew asked him about that ability. “I don’t have any way to talk to yer soul! But, I do have the Holy Spirit, and He has all the power in the universe. When He decides it is time to speak, you’ll be convinced a thousand butterflies are living in your guts.”

A thought struck Andrew like lightning, “Was it you, Auntie, you and Mr. Fredric?”

“Was it us that what?”

“The gentleman who introduced me to Jesus stated that God had his hand on me because special people had been praying for my soul for a long time.”

The sunset sparkled on Margaret’s smile, and her eyes flashed with joy. When Andrew turned to look at her, he thought how amazing it was that even at her age, she was still such a passionate woman with such a handsome face that hadn’t seemed to have aged in the past decade.

She turned squarely to Andrew, “Mister Andrew, your Uncle Fredric and I have been praying for you every day since your mother passed.” She smiled and took a step towards Andrew. The gunfighter nervously rolled his hat back and forth in his hands. She placed a gentle hand on his arm and looked up into his eyes with a maternal grace. “And we knew Jesus had big plans for you. I cannot wait to see what they are.” They both turned to join Fredric and Simon at the little home behind the giant barn. Margaret took Andrew’s arm as he politely offered it with an outstretched elbow. She stopped suddenly and looked at him, “And I think that young man you brought here, Simon, I believe is his name?”

“Yes, Auntie, that is correct.”

“I believe the Lord just told me he will be a large part of His plans for you in the future.”

Andrew smiled cynically, “Oh, great, thank you for sharing that piece of information.” But, inwardly, he moaned to himself. *That cannot possibly be God! I don’t know how much more of the little ruffian I can endure!*

After a little supper and some coffee, Andrew relayed the basics of his story

and his adventures over the past decade. Margaret and Frederic both cried and cried when he told them his story of accepting Jesus Christ as his Savior. “We’ve been praying and believing for this ever since you were a small boy and never stopped believing that Jesus would bring you back to us after you left!” Margaret said between wiping tears of joy from her face.

Frederic added, “I tried to give up several times, but Margee was always there to say, ‘it ain’t over, till it’s over!’”

“Language, Freddy!” Margaret hated the word “ain’t” As an educated black woman in the 19th century, she fought hard to make anyone around her, no matter the color of their skin, as respectable and educated as possible.

“Yes, ma’am,” Freddy winked at Andrew. “She’s still at it! Remember, Margee and your ma together? Haha, if you didn’t sound like William Shakespeare, then a tongue lashing was going to get you...tell you what, son!” The old butler chuckled; his wife was not impressed.

Andrew’s usual polite smile grew to a larger smile than Simon had believed the somber gunslinger was capable of displaying. “I do remember, Mr. Frederic! After confronting Apache’s, lawmen, and killers, Auntie Margaret and Mother are still the most terrifying duo living on this side of the equator.” The kitchen erupted in laughter, and even Margee joined in the chorus.

After the laughter died down, the smile on Andrew’s face quickly faded. “Excuse me,” the gunfighter choked on his words as they were larger to swallow than he had realized before releasing them from his vocal cords. “I intended to state that Auntie Margaret and my mother *were* the greatest duo.” After that, the Kid stiffened as he laid his hands gingerly to his left and peered at the floor, steadying himself. “I must turn in for the night. Thank you both.” Abruptly he stood and nearly fled from the room.

Margee tried to say something, but Fredric placed a gentle hand on her arm, “Let him go, sweetie, now’s not the time.”

“Time fo whot?” Tiny white crumbs exploded from Simon’s stuffed mouth. He had been eyeing all the grown-ups as they spoke. He was also trying to finish the rest of the old biscuits with tea Margaret had given him and was clearly going to fit anything and everything he could into his belly.

The wise butler leaned back into his chair and looked wistfully into the fireplace, “Time to forgive himself.”

Golden clouds hung high in the air, and a thin fog blanketed the ground. Although hidden behind a golden wall, the rising sun's power was still undeniable and more prominent than Andrew had even remembered. The sun set in the west, but it rose in the east, and it was magnificent!

The tall, lanky gunslinger strolled around his property alone, a sketch pad under one arm. Every morning, before starting his day, he had learned from his friend and mentor, Gray, that connecting with the Creator should always be the first priority.

"If you make time for friends and family, then how could we ever deny the need to make time to talk with the Creator of the universe?" Gray said in his usual down-to-earth logic. "It's gotta be yer number one mission. No questions asked."

Andrew had spent the past hour looking for a place to pray and sketch. Generally, he would sketch something he felt from God. At times it was inspiration from the Bible he carried or a picture in his mind which God gave him about Jesus or sometimes a specific message of His love or instructions.

Yet, he had no joy. He had felt something but refused to think it was from God. It had to do with the last time he saw his father...but he JUST COULD NOT do it. He couldn't face the shame of what he had done. Not yet.

"It's okay, son." A gentle voice said to him. *"We'll come back to it when you are ready. I love you."*

"Thank you, Lord Jesus. I love you too."

"But you are not off the hook, that easily... 'Kid.'"

The Lord using his gunslinger's nickname took Andrew off guard. *"Is that really You, Lord?"*

Andrew felt the Lord smile, and that made him nervous.

"Good morning, Mister Andrew. Did you have a nice walk?" Back in the house, Margaret was making breakfast but stopped long enough to pour Andrew a strong, black cup of coffee fresh from the stove. Andrew shook the cold morning air off his body as he took his duster off and hung it next to the kitchen door.

"Yes, Auntie Margaret, I did. Thank you for asking, and thank you for the coffee."

Margaret placed a tin cup full of coffee in front of the young man as she spoke. "Mr. Andrew, you do not need to continue that nonsense anymore. Not at your age."

Andrew took a sip and looked up at her with cold blue eyes. His manners had been branded into his behavior since before he could walk. “I shall, Auntie, if you and Mr. Frederic can do without the “Mister” before my name.”

Margaret’s eyebrows raised, and her lips pursed as she jokingly exclaimed, “Eww, you better be careful, or I’ll tell Mr. Frederic that you developed yourself a sense of humor!”

Andrew’s eyes turned serious, and a hand flew up to caution her, “Shhhh, I don’t think a sense of humor is....”

“Who has a sense of humor?” A yawning Simon asked as he stepped into the kitchen, chasing down the smell of frying meat and eggs. He looked at Margaret and then back over at Andrew. “This guy?” Simon pointed at Andrew with his right thumb while sitting down. “I seen more humor come from a dog with rabies.”

Clutching a large wooden serving spoon, Margaret turned and glared at the young man with her hands on her hips. “You, young man, have NO manners!”

“That is correct. Please say good morning to Auntie Margaret.” Andrew skewered Simon with a cold wordless threat.

“Ok, ok! Good morning, Ma’am.” Simon said, only half-serious.

Margaret then turned her attention to Andrew and pointed her wooden serving spoon for emphasis, “and you, Mr. Andrew, have too many manners and need to learn grace! Now, if I could combine you two, you would be the perfect man, like...”

“Like me,” Frederic bellowed as he busted through the doorway with a cheeky smile and an arm full of firewood.

The other young men burst into laughter, but Margaret glared, “Frederic, you better be careful not to trip over the pile of pride in front of you! Now put the wood by the fire and sit down for breakfast so that you can pray for the meal!”

The four sat down around a large skillet of potatoes, corned beef, and eggs. Simon, not understanding why anyone would wait, snatched up a spoon and plate and began digging in, “This is amazing!”

Andrew yanked the over-eager boy back into his chair by the back of his shirt, flinging corned beef and potatoes onto the floor. “Please wait until after grace has been said, and you have been invited to begin,” the Kid’s voice was irritated and impatient.

“Ok, ok.” Simon raised his hands in surrender and rolled his eyes mockingly. *These people are nuts!* He thought to himself.

Before an awkward silence had a chance to ruin the breakfast mood completely, Margaret spoke up, “Yes, Mr. Andrew, grace first, please.” She gave him a look that only a woman of grace and wisdom could display.

Andrew sighed and took a deep breath. “Simon, I apologize. Please wait for us to say grace, and then wait to be served.”

Oh, ok, I will...pray,” Simon lowered his head, “Grace!” He lifted his head back up and looked expectantly at Margaret.

Andrew groaned and buried his face into his hands in defeat.

However, Frederic was very patient. “Simon, when we say ‘grace,’ we are saying thank you to God for the food.”

“Oh,” Simon said with a smile. “Why? Did this food come to you from heaven er someth’n?”

Again, Andrew groaned, then shook his head in disbelief.

Margaret apologized. “I am sorry, Simon, sometimes we assume that you know what we are thinking because we have been thanking God for our meals for so long. We believe all good things come from Him, so we say ‘thank you’ to the Lord for all of our food. You do not have to do anything; just wait for us to say thank you.”

Simon nodded his head with understanding, but he was blushing, “Ok, thanks, I understand now, sorry.”

“Hey, son.” Fredric leaned forward and placed a large gentle hand on Simon’s arm, “There’s no reason to apologize. Never stop asking questions, especially when it comes to understanding God. He always wants you to know more about Him. Ya understand?”

Simon smiled, “I guess?” But he was still confused.

Margaret chuckled, “It’s ok, Simon, one day you will.”

They all bowed their heads, and Frederic thanked God for His provision and for bringing an old friend home as well as a new one.

Simon cautiously eyed the three “crazies” as they prayed with their heads bowed and eyes closed. *Yep, I think there ain’t a marble left between the lot of ‘em! He thought to himself, As soon as Kat’s safe, I’m cleaning these suckers out, and we’re tak’n off!*

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Master Simon, please read this list as we ride into town.” Simon’s confused and strained eyes glared down at a sheet of paper filled with a numbered list of “do’s” and “do not” from top to bottom. Andrew continued his instructions as they swayed back and forth in their saddles, “I require your signature as a commitment to me, that you will abide by them, as I serve you in reacquiring your sister.”

“I’m on horseback, genius. How am I supposed to sign this stupid thing?”

“Must you always be sarcastic?”

Simon’s brow furrowed. “What’s sar-cas-teek?”

“Marked by or given to using irony in order to mock or convey contempt.” Andrew’s patience was already growing thin, and the pair had only just passed his family’s property marker on the hour-long journey into town.

“Huh?”

“Be serious, do not always mock or jest at others’ expense.”

“Oh, I understand now.” Simon smiled. He was proud of himself, so with the same smile, he turned to Andrew, “Yes, Mr. Andrew, I always have to be saarcaasteek.”

“It is pronounced...never mind,” he snatched the paper away from his associate, “I believe that we will need to take another approach with you.”

“*Ha, sucker!*” The young pickpocket muttered to himself.

The two young men rode in silence for quite a while. Andrew was riding his black stallion while dressed in his usual apparel: a long black duster, which except for the two bullet holes in the back from the train incident, it was immaculately clean, not a speck of dust on it, atop his neatly combed hair rested his mint condition black felt hat. He rode with the confidence of General George Washington and the purpose of Chief Geronimo. Combined with his tall frame, the Kid was a terrifying sight.

Simon: not at all.

Although Margarete had mended the holes in Simon’s britches, his oversized bowler hat was still filthy; he wore one of Andrew’s old coats, which was two sizes too big. He was riding one of the only remaining horses on the property, an old white mare with black spots speckling her haunches.

None of this bothered Andrew too much; however, his mannerisms

demanded attention. *This child will not sit still!* He would glance one way then the other. He would settle into his saddle for two seconds, then shift his weight to look back in the other direction. As soon as the gunslinger relaxed, the boy would spin all the way around in his saddle and look behind him again. Andrew shuddered with irritation but did not show it. However, his eyes were narrowing, and his jaw tightened a little more with every fidget. Andrew had already made a move for his gun six times since they left the house...twelve minutes ago. His previous occupation required constant vigilance for sudden movements and things out of place. That was impossible with the bouncing ball of energetic annoyance next to him.

After another half a mile of Simon jumping, bouncing, shifting, and spinning in his saddle, Andrew had to do something before saying or doing something he would regret. "So, onto important matters. Where is your sister?"

"I don't know." Simon shrugged his shoulders.

"Wait? You don't know? You told me that you are employed by the same men forcing your sister to work for them!"

"Ya...But she has ta live with all the other gals, and I lived with a bunch of kids in an old warehouse. I used to know where they were keeping her, but that was months ago. She kept gett'n moved around, and I don't know, no-mo'."

"Ugh," the bounty hunter moaned. "I do wish that you would have informed me of this setback before we left the house, Master Simon." Andrew hissed through clenched teeth.

"Woa, sorry, ok. I thought a bounty hunter wouldn't need to know where a bounty was ta hunt her!"

"Yes, well, it is quite preferable to at least have a lead!" The Kid snapped. "Can you at least show me where she was last seen?"

"That won't work. The information these thugs would leave behind would be false."

Andrew's face dropped. This confirmed what he had thought he heard from God this morning during his prayer time. The gunslinger knew he had been told to trust God and do something he didn't understand, which terrified him. He felt God tell him to see the local sheriff and enlist his help in finding Simon's sister. Andrew had no idea what type of man he was enlisting to help them. The local law could shoot him on sight, call it self-defense and make a name for himself. The sheriff could be on the payroll of the mob and throw him in prison for several reasons, the chief among them - murdering his father. No matter what, he knew

that without help, he would never find Simon's sister. Not after she had fallen prey to the dark world of crime; they were far too ruthless and paranoid. He had witnessed that the previous day when the six thugs had attacked him. What was most troubling was the lack of a police force. Simon said they had plenty, but no one was present during any of the trouble at the fish market. Andrew knew that meant the market was either "off-limits" and too dangerous for cops, or the local flatfoots had been bought off.

"We need local help." Andrew finally said after several minutes of contemplation.

Now Simon was confused, "Local?"

"Yes, the local sheriff may be precisely who we need to help us."

"What!?" Simon shouted, "You outa the looney bin, or what? Don't nobody go to the cops!"

"If you want to find your sister, then we must go to law enforcement. They will direct us to a section of the municipality, which means city..."

"I know what it means!" Simon snapped back, but he had no idea. He was just scared and already sick of needing this wacko's help. "We ain't going to the sheriff!" Simon twisted his body slightly away from Andrew as they rode on.

"I understand, my young friend," Andrew observed his companion's annoyance and coughed to keep himself from chuckling at the defiant child, "I suppose we can begin to speak to others in the area one at a time, house to house and business to business. The last time I tracked someone using this method, it only took me two and a half months."

"Yer lying!"

"No, and that was after speaking to only half the population of one neighborhood. I was quite fortunate. However, that town's population was 5000, since we are planning such a feat with an entire town, actually, a small city, I would estimate it would take ..." Andrew became lost in thought, adding imaginary numbers together in his mind.

"Fine."

"I am sorry, what was that, Master Simon?" Andrew prodded.

"I said..." He turned to face the gunslinger, "Fine! Let's go to the flatfoots! But only 'cause it's my sister!"

"Ok, ok, but only because you insist" Andrew took a deep breath, and a cheeky smile grew on the bounty hunter's face. He spoke one word barely loud enough for Simon to hear, "*Sucker!*"

This time, it was Simon's jaw that tightened a bit.

The coolness of the coastal fog began losing its battle of survival. The grand and golden sun was breaking through, and with it, a new level of warmth. Only minutes before, the main street felt slow and small as customers and shopkeepers kept more to themselves and preferred the indoors. But, as the sun broke through the misty air, so did the large fishing town's personality. Shopkeepers left their doors open and set up displays and merchandise stands outside on the walkway.

Half an hour later, the awkward riding partners trotted into town. The main street was bustling. After leaving their horses in a local stable, Andrew strolled down the road. Heavy saddlebags drooped over his shoulder. For the first time since his arrival, he took the time to look at everything since returning. Yesterday, he had been too busy chasing Simon through the streets.

"Magnificent!" The gunslinger exclaimed.

"What?" Asked a confused Simon.

"The main thoroughfare! It is more than doubled in size and has become so metropolitan!" The two continued walking as Simon stomped on the wooden planks used for the main street walkway. Andrew's feet almost floated atop the wood. Both hands clasped behind his back.

"So what? You saw it yesterday." Simon muttered, but he was more focused on a well-dressed businessman walking towards them.

They passed two ladies, and Andrew smiled politely at them as he tipped his hat and bowed forward slightly. He continued his polite smile as he replied. "Master Simon, please, do not be remiss and forget that my focus was on retrieving my billfold from a very swift child intent on escape."

They were almost past the well-dressed businessman, and Simon knew he had to say something else to get Andrew thinking long enough to keep him distracted for a few more moments. "So did you come to town much when you were a kid grow'n up here?"

Andrew's brow furrowed as he recalled. "Every second Tuesday, we came to browse the local boutiques and to piano instruction." Andrew slowed and turned around so that he could see the other end of the street, "I believe there was a sweets shop and bakery just over there. I was allowed one thing from the store." Andrew's eyes lit up as he spoke, remembering that happiness as a child. As always, those warm memories turned cold as his mother was in everyone.

Andrew shook them from his mind just as Simon bumped into the well-dressed businessman walking past them.

“Excuse me, young man, I’m sorry.” The polite businessman smiled.

Simon’s smile was too nice, “Don’t worry about it, boss, no problem.” Simon barely slowed but kept himself moving down the road next to Andrew. Simon was sure he did not have a clue as to what had just happened.

Smooth as butter! The young pickpocket smiled to himself as he tried to slip the businessman’s billfold into his pants.

In one swift motion, Andrew twirled around and swiped the billfold from Simon’s hand before he could finish securing it in a secret pocket of his britches. Andrew trotted after the businessman leaving a helpless and shocked Simon standing on the walkway. The Kid handed it to him and said he just saw it fall out of his pocket. The businessman offered Andrew a reward; *Of course, you’ll refuse!* Simon glared at his new do-gooder partner.

Andrew approached his new companion with the same gliding walk and hands clasped behind his back. “Perhaps when our business is concluded, I shall take you to the confectionery so we might taste a sweetie.” Andrew strolled past, ignoring his partner’s indiscretion. Simon stared after him, undecided if he should be confused, angry, or impressed.

They both stopped short at a small but well-built structure. A sign above the door stated its business, “Bank of New England.”

“Please, wait here, Simon; I shall not take long.” Andrew stepped inside the bank, and Simon was all too happy to oblige. Nine months ago, he discovered that banks were impossible to rob without a gun and a very dull place in general.

Twenty minutes later, Andrew stepped out of the bank, no longer carrying his heavy saddlebags.

This fact did not escape the young man. His jaw dropped as he realized what was in the saddlebags. “You mean to tell me--”

“Shush!” Andrew instructed harshly with a finger against his lips as they continued their journey down the street. “Not with so many ears around.”

“All that, for the house?”

Andrew rolled his eyes and whispered back nonchalantly, “Eavesdropping is very rude, Master Simon.”

They both turned around slightly to check behind them. As they did, a bank clerk suddenly exited the building and hurriedly made his way back up the street—the opposite direction to that of Andrew and Simon.

Simon nodded his head at him, “Well, it looks like someone’s not happy your debts cleared. You’re stepping on somebody’s racket, Drew.”

Andrew slowed for a moment and looked after the hurried clerk curiously, “My name is Andrew, Master Simon. However, I do believe your observation has merit.”

Andrew mulled this thought over in his head as they turned down the walkway and continued on their way, looking for the Sheriff’s office.

The Sheriff’s office was small, too small. The pool hall across the street was almost double the size. The tiny *Law Enforcement* sign was faded and not well placed. If one did not know better, they would have thought the office abandoned.

Next door was a tailor and a laundry shop bellowing steam onto the peacekeeper’s office windows. The dirty mist made a foggy mess of the front window, and a blackish mold had begun creeping several inches across the window panes.

“This government office can no longer be functional,” Andrew stated with disgust as he bent low to look through the front window.

“Don’t look at me, Drew. I didn’t even know there was a sheriff.” Simon spoke over the Kid’s shoulder.

“Why did you tell me, approximately two hours ago, that you were scared of law enforcement?”

“Huh?” Simon’s confusion subsided as he recalled the conversation. “Oh them, I care about ‘em bent cops, not whoever’s in here. Cops will smack ya around, and if they’re dirty, shake you down for your loot. I got NO IDEA what a sheriff does.”

“Are you referring to being wary of the City Police?”

“Yeah, them.” Simon nodded

“Now I comprehend.” This was another word too big for Simon, and his face showed it. Andrew sighed. “I’m sorry, I understand.” This constant explaining things to this young man, keeping him out of trouble and excusing his lack of manners, drove the bounty hunter, turned nanny, crazy!

I genuinely have no idea as to my capacity of handling this PERSON, Lord Jesus. Please help me! Andrew prayed silently.

“Hey, Drew, snap out of it!” Simon snapped his fingers in Andrew’s face. Andrew swallowed hard, and for a momentary lapse in judgment, began

fantasizing what he might have said or done to Simon a short five months ago when he was still a crazed killer. Instead, he quickly refocused his mind, opened the sheriff's office door, and slid inside.

The place was a mess! Even with the brilliant sunshine outside, the dirty windows kept most of the natural light from coming into the building. There were at least three desks piled high with paper, rolled-up maps, and files. Andrew and Simon strolled deeper into the paper jungle until they reached the jail cells' hallway. The companions simultaneously leaned a little left so they could see down the hall into the jail cells. They were all filled with more stacks of paper and rolled-up maps. The only remanded prisoner might have been a rat who got swallowed in the sea of bureaucracy.

"What the blazin's...I don't get it." Simon's language described what Andrew was thinking.

As Andrew began to turn around, a sharp command from behind sent shivers down his spine. "Don't you move!"

CHAPTER NINE

“Now slowly turn and make NO sudden movements.”

The voice was agitated.

Andrew had grabbed his gun when he heard the movement, but he knew it was too late. *My destiny must be to face the consequences of my actions.* Andrew thought. He resigned himself to the fact that he must surrender himself.

Andrew raised his hands in submission and slowly turned as instructed, “It seems, you know who I am, sheriff, and that I must now account for my actions and misdeeds.” Andrew’s statement was honest and bold, feeling that was what God wanted of him. He continued his slow turn, expecting a scattergun or colt pointed at his chest. However, the scene which met Andrew and Simon’s gaze was anything but expected.

Half crouched and staring at a mountain of paper stood a young man who looked like an accountant or school teacher. His arms were outstretched and balancing a massive pile of paper. He could not have been more than 25 or 30 years old and wore an old tweed coat and wire-rim spectacles wrapped around the back of his ears. With his hands full, he still found room to hold an ink pen. The writing utensil looked to be permanently attached to his hand as he had ink stains all over his right hand, the collar of his shirt, and right ear lobe. After a second of digesting all this information, Andrew put his hands down, and Simon came out from hiding behind his partner.

“Ok, we are going to be alright. You almost knocked this stack over, and THAT would have set me back a week!” The paper-pusher plopped into a chair and sighed deeply with relief.

Andrew and Simon looked at one another awkwardly, wondering if the funny little man at the desk was going to say anything else. After several long and awkward moments, Andrew spoke up. “Ah, so, yes, good day, sir,” Andrew removed his hat and politely held it in his hand. Simon just stood there until Andrew nudged him.

“Oops, sorry. How ya doing, boss?” Simon tipped his hat.

“As stated earlier, good day. My name is Andrew, and we are here to see the sheriff.”

The little man smacked himself on the forehead, “Kitten’s whiskers, I’m

sorry fella's! Of course, you are." He pulled out a piece of paper that looked to be a form of some kind. "So, what kind of property complaint do you have? Livestock, business, boat, or estate?" He looked up at the two from his desk with sincerity. Andrew got the feeling that this was a process he went through several times a day...every day.

"Ah yes, I think you do not understand, sir; we require assistance from the sheriff immediately."

The accountant looked confused; he looked away thoughtfully and snapped his fingers, "Oh, right! Sorry," He popped up from his chair and thrust out his hand. "I'm Sheriff Millstone, JT Millstone. Most folks call me JT or Millstone. Never 'Sheriff,' it's a bit too formal for me."

Andrew drew in a deep breath and grinned to hide his frustration, "Of course you are." *God, why did you send us here? I don't think I even heard you... what am I doing? This is insane.* All these thoughts swirled in a whirlpool of doubt around his head. He needed a salty fighting man to work with in order to find Simon's sister, not a greenhorn file clerk. Regardless, Andrew would be polite and get any information he could from the sheriff.

"Nice to meet you, Sheriff. This young man is my traveling companion, Simon. May I enquire, why are you not carrying a gun nor appear to have any deputies?" Andrew took another look around the room, "As a matter of fact, there is not a weapon in sight."

JT nodded his head in agreement, "Yes, I do see how this might be confusing to someone from out west. But, you see, I am more of a detective than a law enforcer."

"Wait a minute there, smart guy. A detective? What the heck you jabber'n about?" Simon asked.

"How did you know I have been west? I did not tell you." Andrew added.

"A detective is someone who finds something, Simon, such as the truth or something missing or stolen. And as far as being from the west, you are wearing a thick and long riding coat, commonly referred to as a duster, which is generally used only for traveling on horseback or ranching. You, sir, do not have the physical abuse on your hands or face that would indicate a rancher or ranch hand. Also, you wear a wide-brimmed hat, much wider than the style of the day, which means you learned to wear it out of necessity because there is a LOT more sun out west. Texas, Arizona, California, maybe even Mexico?"

Andrew nodded, "Yes."

"Fascinating!" JT exclaimed with childish glee. "Lastly, your boots!"

"What revealing facts can you glean from my boots?" Andrew was becoming intrigued by this method.

JT's excitement of someone's interest in his method took over. He shot his hypothesis in rapid-fire. "Oh, they are the most revealing. They are very nice, but they are hand-made Mexican-style rancho boots, with custom silver work. No one would wear boots like that anywhere East of the Mississippi River. They are too uncomfortable to walk in for long, so that leaves out the cities, and they will not suffice in wet terrain, and this side of the country is often wet and muddy. No, sir, those boots are made for horseback and rough-dry weather. Unless you wanted to look like you were from the west, to be different, which I have heard about, what you westerners would call a 'dude.' I can see you have put hundreds of miles riding on those boots, so you are not a dude. Furthermore, as you turned, I glimpsed that you carry a serious pair of pistols. Remington .44s? Since you are not a lawman, I would guess, you are a gun for hire or a bounty hunter referred to commonly as a gunslinger!"

As the realization of who Andrew was dawned on the young sheriff, his face went white. "But, you're not here to kill me, are you? I sometimes think out loud faster than I realize the importance of my words." He opened his coat slowly, "I don't carry, so please don't draw on me?"

"What?" Andrew frowned and shook his head more to ease the tension of the awkward situation than to reply to his question. "Sir, I have come to seek your assistance. I don't even know you."

JT exhaled harshly, "Oh good, thank you." He gripped his chest and swallowed, "I need a new job; this is not good for my heart."

Simon scoffed, "Yer bout the strangest lawman I ever heard tell of. Have you even bagged a bad guy before?"

The sheriff pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose with his middle finger as he took in the loaded question. "Oh sure, I take in a lot of 'bad guys,' the only difference is that they dress in a suit with clean white collars."

Andrew stiffened and stared at JT with disbelief, "Are you implying that you have successfully indicted men of wealth who were then subsequently convicted?"

"Yes, I have. Not a soul around thought I could, but you see, it's a different type of policing. And since I studied to be a lawyer, I have already acquired the

skills necessary to hunt down the perpetrators.”

“So you are good at tracking people?” Simon asked hopefully.

“Of course I am; why do you think I have all this?” He waved his hand at the thousands of stacked documents piled around the old jail.

Simon slumped onto the nearest chair. “Never mind.”

“Oh, I see,” JT said. He knelt in front of Simon, trying to relate to the young man. But, it was apparent he was just as bad with handling children as Andrew. Whereas Andrew wanted to hold Simon to an adult’s expectations, JT spoke to Simon as if he were a 2-year-old barely eating solid food. “I’m so sorry, big guy. Do you need to find your mommy?”

“What? No! Get the tarnation away from me.” Simon snapped at him. He stood and stormed outside.

JT looked at Andrew and stood. He pushed his spectacles back upon his face. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Please, do not take offense, Sheriff. Young Simon has been out on his own without parents for a long time.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“That is quite alright. We are looking for his sister, but the men who have her are not the kind of criminals you...” Andrew paused until he discovered a delicate way of proceeding, “...would be used to, nor know from your previous dealings. However,” he shook the Sheriff’s hand, “I thank you for your time.” Andrew placed his hat on as he stepped outside.

The sheriff watched him leave.

Andrew stepped into the morning sun and exhaled skyward, “What now, Lord?” The prayer was more of an exclamation than a question. Simon stood waiting, two shops down past the laundry shop and tailor; the gunslinger strolled towards him, trying to figure out their next move. *Lord, I thought you told me to come to the sheriff, but I just don’t know why. I question if I can hear your voice or if you even listen.* As the Kid came alongside Simon, he felt discouraged.

A man in a long grey coat and matching hat quickly stepped around them on the boardwalk but slowed as he slid in front of them. Simon started to run, and Andrew reached for one of his guns as the grey-clad figure swiveled his head towards them. It was Sheriff JT!

He didn’t even slow down. Instead, he commanded, “Follow me, I need to show you something,” and picked up his pace.

Simon and Andrew slowed long enough to look at one another inquisitively.

Andrew shrugged his shoulders at Simon. Simon rolled his eyes and nodded his head. Without a word, it had been decided. The companions chased after the young sheriff and a glimmer of hope.

CHAPTER TEN

When moving quickly through a crowd, Simon was nimble and quick. He used his small stature to his advantage, dodging in and out of unaware men and women before they even knew he was there. Andrew, on the other hand, was tall with long powerful legs and his stride was graceful. Sporting his long trench coat, which almost touched the ground, the “Kid” looked like he was floating. Then there was JT. He was a bull in a china shop, single-minded to the point of being completely unaware of anything or anyone he bumped or almost knocked over. But his march was practiced, and his walking technique flawless. He practically galloped down the walkway on his mission. Simon and Andrew were all but running just to keep up.

After half a mile, he abruptly stopped and pointed at a large white building with four large hewn columns supporting an extended awning. A lovely fountain spewed water out of a sculpted jar, and atop the jar stood none other than lady justice: blindfolded and holding out scales. “This is the county courthouse and hall of records and why I use that rundown little building down the road. In this building are all the county records, and most importantly, deeds to land.”

Andrew nodded his head thoughtfully, “Very clever. I understand, sir.”

“Well, I don’t!” Simon blurted, slightly out of breath.

“I had a jail on the other side of town that was really nice. The building I’m in now was the decommissioned jail built over 100 years ago, but I need it because I spend so much time digging through property rights, records, and deeds that are sometimes older than the country! This morning I came across a deed written in a form of English that looked much more like Latin from 1650! I’ve had to dig through and translate records written in French, Spanish, Dutch... Mohawk! It’s not an easy job.”

“Who cares!”

After losing his patience with Simon, Andrew snapped, “Simon, you lack imagination; think about it!”

As he released the words, the gunslinger felt a twinge in his gut and felt a soft voice remind him, *“Love is gentle and kind...especially when you are irritated.”*

Andrew glanced at Simon, and although the youngster returned a cynical

glare at Andrew with a sneer at the end, for the first time, the maturing gunfighter looked into his eyes. They were desperate and hurt.

Andrew sighed, "Please, forgive me, my friend, it was wrong to be angry with you. I am terribly sorry."

Simon's cynical sneer wavered. Andrew could see he was happier but also unsure whether he should accept the bounty hunter's apology and let his guard down, leaving him open to future wounding.

"Ah, yeah, thanks," was all Simon finally managed.

Confused and feeling a bit awkward, JT interjected, "Anyways!" to change the subject. The sheriff readjusted his short-brimmed hat tighter onto his head and leaned over Simon ever so slightly, just enough to make a point, "Listen here young buck, anyone who owns property, owns a business, pays taxes, pays a fine or goes to jail has their name on a piece of paper in that building." He pointed an index finger at the grand white municipal building with conviction and then reversed the action to point his thumb into his chest, "That means they all go through MY jurisdiction!"

"Huh?" Simon was still lost, so Andrew helped out.

"Simply put, if the men who forced your sister into their employment have done business in this municipality, excuse me, I meant in this town, their name is in that building, and JT can find it."

"Oh," Simon stepped back and nodded his head thoughtfully and then looked at the young sheriff inquisitively, "Why didn't you just say that?"

JT turned a new shade of red, clenched his jaw, and shot a look at Andrew.

Andrew returned a patient smile, "Welcome to my world, Sheriff," but suddenly the Kid had an intuitive thought he couldn't ignore, "The courthouse and hall of records are not what you want to show us, Mr. JT, is it?"

"Huh? Why did you say that?!" JT was confused.

Andrew smiled and rocked back on his heels to emphasize his belief that there was more. "I believe you have another reason for helping us."

"Wait. What? How did you know?"

"I believe, at this moment, it is most important that you share what you intended to." Andrew did not mean to sound so ominous or confident, but at that moment, he was.

JT pursed his lips and resisted for a moment but then slowly turned as he sighed. He called over his shoulder, "Follow me." And just like that, the race was on again!

“Ugh...” Simon and Andrew both whined in unison as they took off after the sheriff.

This could have been classified as the march of death. They zigzagged through streets, up hills, downstairs, and then marched up an old main street long enough for Andrew to experience Simon’s entire vocabulary of swear words - twice. The gentleman gunfighter decided that the size of Simon’s vulgarities was both impressive and sad. After much toiling and two more blisters on his feet, Andrew would have to deal with later; they finally made it.

The three of them stood in front of an old storefront with all of its windows smashed in, most of the interior lumber stripped, and the floor charred. Andrew was confused and going to say something to the sheriff when he happened to look up at the sign mounted above the storefront. It was almost unreadable, but after he focused on the shapes, two letters slowly revealed themselves. The letters were J and T, and he was reasonably sure the last word on the sign was sons: “JT and Sons.” Simon opened his mouth to make another smart comment about all the walking, but Andrew elbowed him in the shoulder and shot him a look. Simon scowled but kept his mouth shut.

The young lawman wet his dry lips with his tongue then spoke. “My father, JT the 2nd, was a cobbler. He loved making and mending boots and shoes. He built this store with his bare hands. That was almost thirty-five years ago. My mother and father moved here from Russia before I was born. When my family moved here, only two cobblers were in town, so it was an ideal place to set up. However, my father soon found out why there were so few shops. Most had been scared off, and the local gangs owned the rest of the small businesses. Everyone had to pay “protection” money.

My father hated this. It reminded him of the “extra” tax he had to pay police in Russia. Yet, he had a family to care for, so for a while, he paid off the crime boss to keep us safe. But...” JT’s voice trailed off.

“It became too much; they wanted more,” Andrew finished his thought for him. “Blackmail is never satisfied.”

JT’s eyes turned cold, and his jaw clenched. “That’s what my father said, now he’s lying next to my sister and mother in the potter’s field!” The sheriff turned his head and locked eyes with Andrew. “The law couldn’t do anything. Because, as it turns out, the thugs that had been collecting our money worked for the real boss. He was untouchable, a ‘legitimate’ businessman, they say; who rubs shoulders with the right people!”

He slumped his shoulders and looked tired, “I didn’t see it happen, I was only informed of the fire, but neighbors reported the truth to me. It was murder. I had moved to New York City three years earlier to go to law school when I was sixteen. After my family died, I decided to join the New York City Metropolitan Police Force. After I felt I had learned all I could from them about criminal behavior at the lower levels, it became clear I had to get creative to put men who had money and looked respectable behind bars. So, I took a job with the Assistant District Attorney as his clerk and soaked up everything I read and heard. I finally could not wait any longer. I came back here, after being gone for ten years, and took the one job no one wanted: County Sheriff.”

“Wait a minute here,” Simon said, “In a crooked town like this, why don’t one of the crime bosses just have one of his cronies be the sheriff?”

Andrew answered for JT, “Because, Master Simon, with almost the entire population living within the city limits, the sheriff has very little power.”

JT walked up to the old burnt-out building. He affectionately patted the front door frame with the palm of his hand, “That’s what everyone thought until I got here. If you think like a lawyer, the county seat has most of the power. Ninety percent of the population lives within city limits, but the city itself sits on eighty percent of the county landmass. Plus, according to the town charter, the sheriff has access to all city records because our county and city laws state that if any person or business owns holdings both inside and outside city limits, they fall under county jurisdiction. And since the wharf and the factories are outside of city limits, so are the large businesses, which I can investigate.

When I ran for office, I had 200 hundred dollars and my father’s old friends, the store owners who were our neighbors. Jews, Germans, Irish, all backed me ‘cause I promised to end the shakedown. There were 12 votes against my eight thousand and fifty-four” He turned from the building and walked back to them, chuckling. “Until I brought my first case to the district attorney, there wasn’t a soul in the area that knew about our jurisdiction law. I had to educate judges, attorneys, and the police chief on the law. The city and county council too, they all fought me, but I won.” He stopped and looked at Andrew inquisitively. Then he cleared his throat, wiped his nose, and straightened up. “You know, I don’t even know why I’m telling you all this; I just met you fellas.”

Andrew smiled warmly, something Simon didn’t realize he was capable of, “It’s because, Sheriff, God provides a means for justice when the time is right.”

“Right!” JT grumbled sarcastically as he walked past Simon and Andrew; he

spoke over his shoulder, “If God cared about justice, He would have fried these thugs long ago, with a bolt of lightning up their kiester!”

But when he stopped his outburst, his voice got low and determined, and he spoke as the other two caught up to him, “The truth is, I’ve put away some powerful men over the last three years, and I’ve been threatened plenty, but last week was the first time someone took a shot at me. So, I must be getting too close.” He looked up at Andrew, “This is going to sound crazy since I just met you, but I just have a feeling you’re some kind of a sign or Godsend...if there is a God!” The young sheriff rolled his eyes.

“JT, what are you speaking of?” Andrew questioned, unable to follow JT’s lengthy thought process...

“Yeah, spit it out, lawman!” Simon blurted.

“I can’t do this alone anymore. But, I am a man of my word; I will help young Simon here, no matter what. But...” JT furrowed his brow and smiled nervously as he straightened up and looked Andrew in the eye. “I’m only one man, and I’m taking on a small army. I need firepower, and I NEED a deputy.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was cold, but the sun was still rising, so a slight relief of warmth was on its way. The dull grey sky was losing the battle to a new color, a soft red, which crept its way through the pale shade like a merciless invader. Soon the grey was all but gone, and the red began its brilliant but brief reign. The crimson transformed to become lighter and brighter until the iridescent tone melted into an orange, announcing the king of the sky, the sun. It began its journey peeking from behind the horizon, shooting even more brilliant colors into the world, lighting up the atmosphere, and waking up all of creation. All soaked in its warm embrace.

“Exquisite!” Andrew exclaimed softly to himself. He had been walking through the overgrown gardens on the east side of his family estate. With all the staff being laid off, Frederick and Margeret had to prioritize their work. The extensive gardens away from the house were not a priority. The march of nature had begun to reclaim its land, swallowing benches, walkways, a faded white gazebo, and anything else man-made.

Without awakening anyone, Andrew had slipped out of the house and gone for a walk long before the sky had even begun turning grey. He knew his body would repay him with a protest for any activity he would attempt in the afternoon, but after living a decade on a saddle, chasing men until they were seized from exhaustion, he knew how to make his body do what it was told.

However, pushing oneself past physical exhaustion was not Andrew’s idea of a good time. Growing up, he would often find a tree far away from the trail on his property, where no one would look and curl up for a nap. Andrew loved to sleep. However, when you learned to make money by hunting men, operating on little to no sleep was necessary for survival. This was not why he had not been sleeping. Andrew was worried and felt pushed so far out of his comfort zone that his stomach was tight to the point of wrenching. He could not even stomach food at the dinner table the previous evening.

His anxiety could be broken into two parts. The first was Simon; he was a hurting soul on a desperate search. Yes, he was looking for his sister; however, even more than that, he was searching for purpose, a way to live, and most importantly, family. Andrew felt that somehow, God was putting it on him, Andrew, the killer known as “the Kid,” to provide that for Simon!

The second half of his anxiety was the badge! He knew there were plenty of men out west who would classify Andrew as nothing more than a vicious, cold-blooded murderer. Andrew knew these men had every right to do so. When he had gone into old Mexico hunting men, the locals always made a wide berth. They tolerated “the Kid” because he would rid their town of a menace, but to them, he was always “loco en la cabeza” or “crazy in the head.” Now, he was supposed to just pin on some tin and pledge to keep the county safe and ensure justice?

This is too much! Too absurd. Me? Andrew groaned as he spoke to God silently through his thoughts, Why me? I was a possessed, insane murderer six months ago, using bounty hunting as an excuse to legally execute anyone I judged to be similar to my father. I am a terrible choice, Father God, dreadful! You want me to be a deputy for Mr. JT, who is an agreeable gentleman. I yield the point that he is also plagued by bitterness and grief from the horrific injustice that befell his family. Therefore, these two young men, who You have placed in my path and who You are compelling me to serve, need more wisdom and experience than I can offer! Your choice is not a wise one.

Father in Heaven, I know you are God and created all things, including wisdom, but please consider this. I have so many problems I do not know which one to focus upon first. I am often overwhelmed by how many issues you must still repair. Please -

A firm yet calm voice interjected in Andrew’s soul, “May I speak?”

Andrew smiled and sighed heavily before shaking his head yes. “Forgive me, Lord, yes, please.” Andrew prayed aloud to himself, then waited silently to hear a response. He did not have to wait long.

“If I did not push you, you would spend all your time looking at what is wrong with yourself and never do anything for those around you. As you serve Me, serve someone else, and your problems will seem so much smaller and less significant.”

Andrew sighed in silent agreement.

“My grace is sufficient for You. That is not just for your sins and going to heaven, but for your ability to help others right here and right now, specifically Simon and JT.”

“Praying?” Margaret’s voice shook the gunman from his thoughts.

Andrew turned with a hand on his gun, a muscle reflex he knew would stay with him for a long time. He took his hand off his weapon and instead extended

his arm with a warm smile as any gentleman would. “Auntie Margaret, have you been tutored by the Mohawk on stealth? I can hear just about anyone, but your feet are deathly silent!”

Margaret chuckled, “Oh, Andrew, you have a lot to learn. A lady does not reveal secrets unnecessarily. Besides, when you pray, your attention is where God is, not worrying if someone will ambush you. When you pray, Jesus will protect or warn you. No matter what, when you are with Him, His will is done.” She finished with a smile and a slight nod of firm belief.

They continued down a hedged path with wild blackberry bushes on one side and thin, golden elm trees on the other. Small bits of dew dripped from the leaves.

After several minutes, Andrew finally broke the silence, “You and Mr. Frederic are amazing people. Your devotion after so many years and love for one another is remarkable.”

“Yes, we have been blessed. But, you know, son, I have to say that the older I get, the more I believe all people can be that happy. You only need to make two tough choices. One, let Jesus run your life. Only He can make you truly happy. And, two, choose to love one another, no matter what! No matter how angry or frustrated you become, choose to love. If you live that way, every single day, you will be happy.”

Andrew raised a cynical eyebrow as he simultaneously raised a tree branch out of the way for Margaret, “That was neatly summed up. However, the effort to accomplish such a feat would seem insurmountable. To use the vernacular I learned from the west, it would be ‘A tall order.’”

Margaret cocked her head back and laughed, “I forget how much I missed speaking with another human being who understands how to sculpt the English language.” -She held her hands up apologetically- “Do not get me wrong, I love my husband, and we have a very special way in which we discuss matters and communicate. However, that man can butcher a word quicker than any animal on God’s green earth, and believe me, that man can dress an animal like no other!”

They both laughed, partially from the joke, but also from the excitement of sharing their love of English with another soul. Andrew remembered how comfortable he had always been around his Auntie Margaret.

After the laughter died down, Andrew steered the conversation into a serious direction, “If I may be so bold, Auntie, why did you and Mr. Federic stay all this time? You owe nothing to our family. In actual fact, I am sure I owe you much

more than I can give at this moment. Why stay?"

"Andrew, we learned long ago, when you were first born, that God had called us to your family. You can point back to slavery and some pretty awful things that happened to us and our parents and grandparents and then say that's why we are here. But we believe that what Satan wanted to use for evil, God turned to good. We learned to forgive through Jesus and His love. He forgave us, so we chose to forgive white landowners, including your father and grandfather, and how they treated Frederic's family.

"At one time, we thought we would leave as soon as we had saved up enough money. I wanted to move down to Louisiana to be near my family, but God always said no. We have a job to do, and I was to make every effort to show His love to your father and mother."

"Wait!" Andrew paused momentarily and turned to look at Margaret, "You told my mother about Jesus?"

"Of course, sweetie, she became my sister in the Lord more than a year before she passed away."

Andrew's gaze drifted left as he made sense of this new information. Then, a smile grew on his face, and without warning, he bent down and wrapped his long arms around his small Auntie Margaret. He moved so swiftly his hat was knocked from his head, but he didn't care. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." That was all the gunslinger could say.

Taken aback, she chuckled as she returned the hug and expressed, "I think I like this new Andrew. He reminds me of a gangly little boy I used to know."

After Andrew finally released her, Margaret looked up into Andrew's face and patted him on his cheek. Two tears had escaped his left eye. "Now, the good Lord has given you two things. A sense of justice and the ability to dish it out!" She reached down and picked up Andrew's hat from the ground, stretched up as high as she could and secured it firmly on his head, and then locked her gaze into his eyes. "You do whatever you can to get that little boy's sister back. It's your turn to accept the mission God has placed before you."

Before he could respond, a booming voice cut off their conversation.

"Margee, we need your help!" It was Fredric, and he looked worried.

As they ran back to the house, Andrew spied a group of various aged children dressed in faded buckskins. They were from one of the reservations either Pennacook or Maliseet. They stood in a semi-circle around a tiny body wrapped in old deerskin. Long, dark hair poured from the buckskin framing a tiny

female face. Her lips were purple, and she was not breathing.

Once a part of a prosperous and proud people, these children were reduced to whatever the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) could offer. Unfortunately, Andrew had seen some of these atrocities firsthand. Horrific living conditions, lack of fresh food; some were not allowed horses, and those who were, could not afford to keep them.

What created the fiasco was the massive distance and lack of oversight each tribe had. Each tribe had to rely on their BIA agent for help. If that agent became unhappy or angry at something a tribal elder or chief did or said, then a shipment could be “lost.” The agents decided if you were “safe” enough to own weapons. Usually, only rifles would be permitted. Then, if by chance the reservation was allowed new weapons for hunting and protection, the ammunition could be marked up, and the agent would make a profit. Sometimes, the markup would extend to blankets, ax heads, hammers, nails, and other essentials for the winter.

He could understand both the actions of Geronimo, breaking out with his people to freedom, and the steps of the U.S. Calvary, keeping them from raiding and killing settlers on their way south. No matter which perspective you chose, it was a terrible situation.

Since the inception of the new world, almost 400 years ago, Europeans, with no money, status, or opportunity, risked it all to begin a new life in a new land. Tens of thousands from more than a dozen countries flooded into the Americas. They were looking for land to call their own and opportunities European authorities reserved for only those deemed of noble blood or who already had money and influence. What it meant to be noble had been defined by the United States, Canada, and many of its sister countries to the south, from Mexico to Chile. Now, for the first time in recent history, hard work and a spirit of adventure were all that was required to one day call oneself a landowner or business owner.

However, as has been true throughout the annals of history, the “discovery” and *new-worlds* “ripe for the taking” were already home to many other peoples. Of course, it was inevitable and essential to connect the continents, and the value of the trade route opened by Columbus and other explorers was undeniable. Yet, the truth is that Europe simply flooded a weaker market with its less desirable but considerably more powerful population of less educated and less wealthy people.

These *new worlds* were not as well settled or populated as Europe, but only a fool would deny that they first belonged to someone else. Other, much smaller, yet very distinct nations had owned the soil from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Nearly 600 separate nations in the United States alone. Now, no one would claim all these tribes as purely peaceful; that would be as untrue as to claim that they were all savages “out for blood.”

The truth was that the Americas were much the same as Europe, constantly fighting and at war for more territory. The difference was that England, Spain, and France had much larger *tribes* than any American Indian had ever comprehended.

At first, the Cherokee, Comanche, Mohawk, and other warrior nations could hold their own against the European onslaught. But the technology and incredible numbers of the white man wore them down through a war of attrition. Year after year, decade after decade, until many American Indian Nations went extinct. The extinction of these nations was a significant problem, only being brought to the surface and in the arena of public debate quite recently.

One day, Andrew had read in an old newspaper a quote from Abraham Lincoln, “You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow, by evading it today.” According to Andrew’s thinking, that was what the country did. Just as the early American founding fathers had delayed action against slavery, ultimately resulting in the civil war, the post Civil War fathers had spoken with kind, soft words towards the plight of the “noble savage,” yet buried their head in the sand when the nation’s economy demanded their reservation land for mining, ranches or more farms.

Now, these poor kids had to deal with generations of stubbornness and pride of their tribe’s decisions and the constant promise-making and backstabbing of the Federal Government. They had been born into families desperate to retain their traditions, yet fighting for every meal.

One such story his father had passed to him was a good example: “Back in the old country, son, it was only the king who could kill a deer or give permission to take one for a meal. Now, we make those choices.” Then they would raise their whiskey glass, “Here’s to our new world!” Yet there were many times Fredric, in his younger buttlings days, was made to chase Iroquois hunters from their lands, “Nothing’s free. If they want to hunt, they can pay for a permit or use their own lands.” His father would say as he drained his third brandy of the day. As he had always been pragmatic and blunt, a ten-year-old Andrew asked his father why he

told the story of “the king’s deer” and then would not allow the poor hunters to share his deer. His father’s backhand nearly knocked him off his feet. “Don’t ever talk down to me, boy. You’ll never know what our forefathers did to keep this land and how brutal those *poor* hunters can be.”

That seemed to sum up the attitude of most of the country. A mass exodus from Europe, a majority of whom, had left a privileged ruling class for a better life, was now becoming those they hated. Not because the people or government did not want to help, but possibly the issues of the native peoples seemed too big and too complicated to face. The white population also had their poor and destitute to think of, many of whom were on their doorstep, not a long train ride away.

As these thoughts swirled through Andrew’s mind, he approached the lifeless body of this young girl. It suddenly occurred to Andrew that problems usually were much more straightforward. He tended to overthink issues and search for elegant and perfect solutions. However, these children simply needed food and warm clothing, maybe just fresh blankets to take home. If they had some warm food and nice blankets, then this little soul may never have perished so young.

Margaret shooed the children and her husband aside then knelt over the small body. She wept. “Oh my, little White Rose. You sweet little child.” She said nothing else for several moments, only sobbed. The hardened gunfighter was also on the verge of tears, sadness enveloping his soul. The group all cried together.

“NO!”

The somber group collectively popped their heads up in shock.

“NO! Not this time,” Auntie Margaret shouted. “White Rose, I speak to you right now. This is not your time. In the name of Jesus Christ, death we bind you. Leave! Jesus, we ask you to loose your spirit of life over this child right now. White Rose, you come back right now, breathe!”

Frederic wiped a tear from his face, then took the hands of the little one nearest to him, then the subsequent child took the hand of the one next to them, and soon the group formed a human chain around Margaret and White Rose. Andrew joined the circle, hoping beyond hope that something could be done. With all their might, they prayed. Andrew didn’t know how long this lasted, but slowly the sadness lifted and the slightest feeling of hope breathed life into his

heart. The belief that God was indeed God and that death no longer had the last word.

“Why are you standing around me? Auntie Margaret, when did you come over?”

It was White Rose; she was speaking! As color returned to her face, joy exploded through the group.

Fredric jumped with glee and danced a few steps, “Thank you, Jesus, for your power, love, and glory!” The greying butler raised his hands and spun around.

The other children screamed, hugged one another, and yelped with delight. Several of the older children thanked Margaret over and over. After everyone calmed down, Andrew’s auntie took charge, “Now listen. This was not my doing, but the Lord Jesus Christ. We must never lose faith in His power and His will. The devil tries to do evil, but Jesus makes it good. We must never stop believing that He is the Great Spirit and the God of all lands. Now, this little one needs some water and food. White Rose, you still need rest and care. Andrew, please take her to the sofa in the sitting room. Andrew!”

Andrew snapped out of his shock. Then, mouth agape and mind swimming, he numbly obeyed and scooped the little girl into his long arms.

Rose smiled at the tall gunfighter and wrapped her little arms around his neck. On his way inside, the little girl looked up at him and said, “I saw heaven, and a beautiful man of light told me I could come back someday, but not until I am old like my grandmother.”

“Incredible,” was all Andrew could say. In his spirit, a voice told Andrew that this miracle would change everything he thought he knew.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Ain’t you ready yet?” Simon reclined against the outside wall of the sheriff’s office. He absent-mindedly picked loose pieces of wood off the planks with a pocket knife.

“Patience, Simon!” Andrew hissed. It was not even 9 a.m., and Andrew was already growing aggravated. “At times, I would prefer a saddle sore,” he growled under his breath. He then noticed Simon picking the wood off the sheriff’s building, “Stop that! Put that away! What are you thinking?”

Simon shrugged his shoulders, “Dunno...I wasn’t thinking much of anything.”

JT peeked his head out of his office and whispered to Andrew. “Do I have to wear this gun? I think it’s gonna stand out too much if I’m walking around strapped: just too aggressive, not my style.”

Andrew closed his eyes and turned to face the building. He whimpered as he beat his forehead against JT’s office wall. Simon and the lawman winced every time his head impacted the wooden planks but remained silent, afraid to speak. Finally, after three frustrated head butts, Andrew straightened himself and his black felt hat, brushed dirt from his long duster, and cleared his throat. He looked past Simon and pointed down the main thoroughfare as he spoke. “I will be walking that way, to the docks, to begin inquiries regarding Simon’s sister. If you two would like to join me in my investigation, do so at your convenience. Thank you.” At that, he stormed off in frustration.

The other two hung their heads slightly and gingerly set off after him. Twenty minutes later, the trio approached the fish market just as it was coming to life. This helped them out, as the traffic was thin near the docks and industrial district, where they would begin their search. As they reached the edge of the industrial district, Andrew stopped and surveyed a dozen footpaths, alleys, and roads. The trio could go in virtually every direction. First, however, they needed a starting place. “Ok, Simon, where was the last place you saw your sister?”

“The old cannery. I told you that. Don’t you listen?” Simon retorted with his hands on his hips.

“I apologize, Master Simon. Please could you take us there?” The walk had given Andrew’s nerves a chance to relax and had given him time to pray and time

to breathe.

His mentor, who had brought him to Christ, Gray, would say, “When you feel yourself getting frustrated, you know Jesus isn’t in control because Jesus is always patient. All you have to do is ask God to make His Spirit in charge and remember, you’re a new creation, full of Jesus.”

Simon sighed and muttered to himself under his breath as he turned right and began marching towards the old cannery. “You could have just asked me to take you there from the beginning, but, no, you know *everything*.”

After another thirty minutes of chasing after the quick-footed lad, they reached their objective, or what was left of it. It was burned down, almost to the foundation.

Simon plopped down on a mound of dirt where the factory’s front door should have been. He chucked a rock at one of the would-be windows and swore under his breath, discouraged.

Andrew didn’t give up. He stepped inside the disheveled building and surveyed the fire damage. He had some experience with fires, as he had investigated and even created many structural fires when he was still known as the “Kid.” “Mr. JT, I believe I have found something.”

JT picked his way through the burnt debris towards Andrew, “As have I, Mr. Andrew.”

“Look here,” -Andrew pointed out with his forefinger- “Thus far, I have discovered four different origin points. These various starting points indicate arson. Whoever lit this wanted this building gone.”

JT nodded his head as he followed his new partner’s logic, “I agree; also, I think I remember seeing the deed to this address, and I may know who it belongs to.”

Andrew sighed, then frowned, “I cannot comprehend the reasoning behind burning a building in this manner.”

JT slapped himself on the forehead, angry at himself. “You tunk-head, JT, I can’t believe you didn’t see this sooner. That’s why I can’t find any money!”

“Sheriff, should we step outside while you have a nice long talk with yourself?” Simon asked as he picked his way around burned debris towards the other two.

“Ah, yes, I’m sorry. Insurance, can’t you see, they use insurance!”

“Huh?” Andrew and Simon were still lost.

JT suddenly snapped his fingers and pointed in the air as a thought

flickered in his brain. “Follow me!” And with that, he tore off through the wreckage and back the way they had come.

Without anything else to do, the other two raced after the Sheriff. Twenty-two minutes later, they caught up to the young lawman just as he skipped up the granite steps of the City Hall. Andrew tried to ask him what they were doing there, but JT was already lost in his thoughts, debating aloud which section of the records he should look through first.

Once through the large white double doors, the other two witnessed JT’s true talent. He was the real danger to wealthy criminals: those who hid behind nice clothes and had money to spread around. The sheriff knew what he was looking for and how to find it. The hall of records was his war machine, and only he knew how to aim and fire it.

Simon and Andrew stood back and let the master do his work. The Sheriff thumbed through files, ledgers, and papers, stating “No,” excluding each one after a quick scan. After ten minutes of “No’s,” he stopped, pulled out a faded black ledger, and opened it up. After beginning a furious read, Simon thought JT’s gaze at the paper in his hand might actually light the file on fire! When the sheriff reached the bottom of the page, he raised his hand in triumph, then began bouncing around the building like a mad jackrabbit.

“I knew it...it’s Rocko! I got you, you scumbag! I have you this time!”

Simon’s ears perked up, and his eyes narrowed, “What? Did you say it’s Rocko? How’d you know that?”

“It says right here, bought by one of his thug cousins, Marko.”

“Do you know either of these men, Simon?” Andrew asked.

Simon clenched his fist and hissed through his teeth, “Yes.”

JT didn’t notice Simon’s change in mood, “You see, these new big-time crooks have dozens, sometimes hundreds of men who run multiple scams around the city. But if they want to live in public, they have to pay taxes, which means the crooks need to show how much money they make every year. If they make a lot more than they can legitimately prove, then they have a problem. So how do you hide money so that you can look legitimate? Well, that’s what I just figured out...insurance!”

Andrew shook his head, “I still do not understand how that helps. If I pay you for insurance, burn down the property, I may make a little money, but only one time, and I would have to recoup the money, pay the insurance premium and the other expenses.”

JT shook his head again, “Look, here it is. This is the building. It was sold for \$100. HAHA! There hasn’t been a property sold for that little in or near city limits since 1834! I’m sure of it!”

Andrew racked his brain as he scratched his head, “I still do not understand...”

“Look,” JT cut him off, “If you buy a piece of land worth \$1000 for \$100, then have the insurance company appraise it for \$1000 and burn it down. You will make \$900 profit.”

“Oh,” Andrew understood now.

“But that is not enough,” JT continued, “I have estimated that these guys hide a total of \$100,000 a year. So, because this scallywag needs the insurance company to overvalue the property, he buys or muscles into an insurance company with a cousin or brother of one of his top men and then uses his own money to pay his claims, leaving a legit paper trail! It’s elegant. You can run the same scam on gold, jewels, art, and even those fancy life insurance policies!” JT furrowed his brow deep in thought, “So clever; I almost have to respect him.”

“Yeah, real slick, Sheriff!” Simon’s tone was full of shock and sarcasm. “Never mind, he’s making that money through kids like me lifting wallets and mugging old ladies or using my sister as a hooker!”

JT stepped back, mouth open. He stammered, “I, I...I’m sorry.”

Andrew sighed, “Simon, JT is only excited as he has been chasing these men for a long time, and...”

“Don’t you handle me, Drew!” Simon shot back as he shoved Andrew in frustration. “These guys are evil and should be shot dead for what they do.” Bitterness and frustration forced a tear from his eye. Suddenly remembering who he was, Simon swiped the tear from his eye and snorted. “I don’t know where that came. Whatever, I’m fine.” He cocked his head towards the door, “I’ll wait for you outside.” The young tough turned and stormed out of the room.

JT’s eyebrows furrowed, and he winced as he watched Simon walk outside, “What was that all about?”

Andrew leaned back against a file cabinet and folded his arms, deep in thought. Then, finally, he raised his eyebrows and sighed, “Believe it or not, *that* was a good sign.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The building was large, and at one time, ocean green in color. Unfortunately, the salty sea air, time, and a lack of maintenance had faded the paint job down to a dull shade which was almost impossible to describe with any other word than “dirty.” However, the horse flesh Andrew spied around the back was cared for and from good stock. The wagons and coaches parked in an outbuilding looked clean, and even from a distance, he could see the wheels were well kept, greased, and ready to ride.

A faded sign held up by two small chains tied to two fence posts swayed back and forth from a slight breeze. It read, “Rollins and Baker Transportation.” At one time, it must have shone nicely in the seaside sunshine, but without upkeep, the name painted on the wood was almost unreadable.

Next to the property was the most significant highway in the county. It went north to Lincolnton, Northport, and eventually to Canada. Alternately, south led to Rockland, then turned inland and continued down the east coast to Providence, eventually to Pennsylvania. Since the expansion of railways, overland highways became known as the ‘rough way’ to travel. However, it was much cheaper for a large family with a team and a wagon and the best alternative to the railway if you wanted your trip or delivery to go unnoticed. There were also many fishing villages to which the railroad did not run, so pulling supplies through these roads was still in demand, as was the short stagecoach ride from the train station to the coast. It was no longer the heyday of the stagecoach business, but there was enough business for some to make money.

Simon sighed and stopped, “Why are we here?”

Andrew didn’t stop walking but continued slowly to the front steps, wary of his surroundings, “This was the company that sold the burned-out property to Rocko.”

“So, how does that help us?” Simon asked with a shrug.

JT shook his head in frustration. “He sold it to Rocko for \$100, when it was worth at least \$1500, maybe even \$2000! You don’t lose that kind of money on purpose unless you are in on the scam or you’re scared.”

Simon, deep in thought, stopped and raised his eyebrows a bit. Then, after a few moments of deep thinking, he exclaimed, “Oh, I get it...I think.” Then he ran

to catch up, “Hold on, don’t leave me behind.”

The three companions crawled up the front steps. JT led the way and almost stepped into a hole from a broken first step but saw the danger just in time. He skipped it, stepping up one more instead. Every step the sheriff took creaked loudly under his weight until he stood at the door. JT glanced at Andrew, and he nodded. Andrew kept a wary hand inside his coat, ready to draw a weapon.

One at a time, they slid inside and peered around the room. The large office was filled with empty shelves carrying nothing but a few cobwebs, a couple of books, and three cans of food. The trio wandered up to the front desk. At the top of the counter was a ledger book, pen, and about a year’s worth of dust. The only thing not covered in dust was a brass bell. Simon shrugged his shoulders thoughtfully and snatched it up.

The eager boy rang the bell obnoxiously. “Anyone here?”

Andrew wrestled the noisemaker from the youth. “That is enough; thank you for your help, Simon, but now we must wait patiently.”

Simon crossed his arms defiantly. A cheeky smile grew on his face when Andrew placed the bell back down on the counter. Then, as the gunslinger turned away to peer over the counter, Simon reached over to snatch up the brass bell again.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar voice bellowed, “Touch that bell again, son, and you’ll lose that hand! Now, nobody moves till you tell me what you want and why ya’ll are here? I can’t see too well, but I reckon my new lever-action .410 is enough to get the job done. State yer business or get!” The harsh and hoarse voice sounded like it belonged to a tough old coot on the prod.

Andrew and JT had their arms up and spread wide. Simon, used to this treatment, rested his hands on the counter with legs spread wide.

JT tried the official tact, “Sir, I’m the County Sheriff, and we just need to ask you a few questions about your property in town, the old cannery. Specifically, who did you sell it to?”

The shotgun loaded behind them, cutting off JT’s words. “Is this a trick? You’re here to test my loyalty and see if I’ll squeal!? Well, you tell that dirty, low down, New York rat you serve to take his loyalty and stuff it with goose liver!”

“May I turn around and explain our situation, Sir?” Andrew interjected.

“Oh, a fancy talker, huh? Are you another one of those no-good dandy bankers here to steal what little dignity I have left?”

Andrew slowly twisted around to speak. As he did, burning, vicious air pulled at his pant leg, and a significant hole exploded the floor only two feet away.

This time, the hidden voice growled, “I said don’t move! Now you go tell your boss....”

Simon rolled his eyes, turned around, and walked straight at the hidden voice, “Look, old-timer, I don’t have time for your games. I’m just a kid, so shoot me if you want to go to the pen, but we gots things to do. We’re trying to find my sister, who’s been hooked to nanny by old scratch himself, Rocko the pimp. So now, you can talk, shoot me, or let us leave.” Simon had found the gunman’s perch, a 3-foot hole in the ceiling. Simon stood with feet spread wide, hands on his hips, staring into the ceiling.

Silence momentarily reigned. Both Andrew and JT slowly turned around to face the gunman but kept their hands up. When the shooter spoke again, he was wary but a shade more gentle, “What’s her name?”

“Huh?” Simon asked.

“Your sister, what’s her name, or you just spin’n yarn?” The shooter challenged.

“She goes by Kat.” Simone retorted.

“Hmmm, never met her. But I hope you find her. Now, the three of you, git!”

“Wait, that’s it? You ain’t gonna help? Not even for my sister, a girl?” Simon demanded.

As comfortable as a feline from a tree, the “old man” dropped through the ceiling and landed gently on the floor. He was only a few inches taller than Simon and had thin gray hair pointing in every direction. His cold blue eyes darted back and forth at each “intruder.”

“How can I, son? I don’t know your sister. I’ve never been a part of that! I should whoop you just for implying something so foul!”

The shade of Simon’s face matched his bright red hair. “I never said you did; you dimwitted old....”

JT stepped closer to calm things down, “Sir, we are sorry to interrupt your day. We just need some information you might have on Rocko. We’re not working for him but trying to get enough evidence to put him away for good.”

Andrew didn’t say anything but observed the three talking. He had a sudden thought. He had not asked God for help. *God give me wisdom here; I do apologize that I did not ask for your help first. Please, Father in Heaven, we need*

your help. Andrew prayed to himself silently, then focused inwardly to feel what advice God might have for him.

“Humph! You’re a constable; the law ‘round here’s been bought off!” The old gunman snorted and spat at JT’s feet.

Andrew’s eyes grew large as he continued the silent conversation with God. *You would like for me to say what?* The help Andrew felt he received from the Spirit was not what he expected nor wanted.

JT was saying, “I’m the County Sheriff, not City Police. Behind me is my deputy Andrew, and this is our young friend Simon, who used to work for Rocko. He escaped those thugs, so he could find a way to free his sister from that villain.”

No one noticed Andrew wince as he debated with God whether or not to use God’s wisdom. *Making a statement such as the one you suggested is quite hazardous. If this is not you, God, then I will be made out to be a fool or insane! I shall lose all respect in its entirety. Assist me, Holy Spirit; I am unsure.*

Suddenly, Andrew remembered something his mentor, Gray, had said, “*Andrew, don’t try so hard to hear from God, just listen. Don’t know the verse exactly, but Jesus said, ‘If you ask for fish, yer own Pa won’t give ya a snake, and if you ask for bread, He ain’t gonna give you a rock. So, if we on this earth are always making mistakes and yet know how to give good gifts to our children, then don’t you think our Pa in Heaven will too?’ He will not allow you to be deceived if you’re focused on Him and letting Him run your life as the boss; then He will make sure you hear Him right. Think of this; you have faith that He can talk to you, not that you can hear Him.*”

Andrew took a deep breath and, with determination, told God. *I will obey.*

“Ha, villain!” The old man said as he threw his head up in the air and scoffed, “That only half describes that four-flusher. But I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“You were right for backing down to Rocko’s men; there is not any shame in that.” Andrew blurted out. He felt awkward and immediately wished he could take the words back as soon as they had left his lips.

Simon sighed and buried his face into his hands in embarrassment, “Not again with the religious jibber-jabber,” he muttered to himself.

JT, confused and shocked, stared back at Andrew with his mouth slightly open. No one knew what to say.

The room’s thick tension was only broken when the little grey-haired gunman stepped closer to the Kid and poked him in the chest with his repeater shotgun. “Who told you that! Is this some devil work?”

Realizing that his words were on target, Andrew stood up straight and smiled warmly, “No, this is NOT the devil, but the work of a God who loves you deeply.”

“Ah, loco bible thumpers, you’re all the same!”

“No,” Simon said with an emphatic headshake; he pointed with his thumb at Andrew, “This dude ain’t, he’s crazier’n a loon!”

“I don’t have time for this,” the old gunman dismissed them all with a wave of his hand and turned to walk away.”

“What is more,” Andrew continued, “You also have a job that you need doing, yet it is too dangerous and large for you. So we will deliver your freight in exchange for the information we need.”

After a few moments of muttering to himself, the silver-haired gunman stopped, exhaled deeply, turned towards Andrew, and stared into his eyes. “How are you doing this, son? Oh, that’s right, God, well, never mind all that stuff. What I wanna know is this, how do I know you can even ride and shoot?”

The Kid grinned, “Sir, I believe you sized us all up long before you made yourself known. Furthermore, I spent eight months riding shotgun for Wells Fargo and another six months driving a six-horse team with high-value freight in the Arizona territory.”

The old gunman retorted, “Well, this ain’t Arizona, and that’s just you.” Then, he pointed at JT and Simon, “How about them?”

JT leaned into Andrew and whispered in his ear, “Can we discuss this?”

“He’ll be fine,” Simon piped in, “So you gonna deal, old-timer?”

“Well, probably shouldn’t, but I’m up a creek without a paddle, so we’ll see if you can make the trek alive. If so, I’ll tell you what ya wanna know. I’m Rollins,” he quickly shook Andrew’s big hand, then turned and spoke over his shoulder while walking out the door, “And for the time being, you’re riding for Rollins and Baker till you get back with my rig or git shot dead.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The “freight,” in question, was not freight at all, but an elderly couple; wealthy Chicago natives who had booked passage to a small village a few miles past Rockland. The tourists had purchased a new holiday home on the beach. The couple was eager for their first holiday away from the city. However, the real estate agent who sold them the property failed to mention that road agents controlled the main road. Bandits, who demanded pay, valuables, or both as a “toll.” These Chicago folks had plenty of payment and valuables to give. Delivering them to their new home without paying the “toll” would take speed, skill, and a little help from the Almighty Himself.

The trio followed Rollings around the back to the stables.

“How tough are these road agents, and how many should we expect?” Andrew asked.

Instead of answering his question, Rollings asked one of his own, “Can you handle a six-team?”

“Yes,” Andrew nodded his head.

“Good, I’ll give you my six fastest horses,” Rollins spoke over his shoulder as he went to work hitching a team.

“Is that necessary?” Andrew asked.

“If you wanna live, sonny, yes, it is!” Rollings stated over his shoulder.

Andrew spun around and took a few steps away from the stage, digesting this new information. He closed his eyes and breathed out slowly, intentionally controlling his heart rate and emotions—the gunfighter sighed as he looked over his temporary employer’s two different corrals. One held eight large horses, the other twelve mules. Most would hitch six mules to pull a stagecoach that wasn’t expecting trouble. If speed were required, a wise man would switch to four horses for the relatively short trip of twelve miles. The four big beasts Andrew looked over would have no problem pulling a stage with only four adults and one boy; unless greater consistent speed were necessary. Using a six-team of horses to pull a stagecoach for half a day’s journey meant you knew you were riding straight into trouble. Most would consider it not worth the risk.

Rollings knew his stuff; he had his stagecoach and horses hitched up in fifteen minutes. He shouted instructions to the three as he finished preparing the

stage, “Ok, young whippersnappers. Listen up! Your fare and their luggage will be waiting for you at the train station first thing in the mor’n. If you see a Wells Fargo wagon, give ‘em a nice nudge from me. If you ain’t their early, they’ll try ta steal yer fare, so don’t give ‘em an inch! Those snakes t’ink they can muscle in on my territory! Anyways, make sure yer nice and polite to the customers, but the most important t’ing is you get them there alive.”

JT’s ears perked up, “Excuse me? I thought we’re helping to carry heavy luggage?”

Rollings stooped down, checking that the traces didn’t have any tangles. The old bull-wacker sat up from the inspection to scoff at the young sheriff, “Ha! Still ain’t met me a chest of drawers or any furniture I ain’t been able to handle!” --He went back to work-- “I need some young fellers to run and gun against those road agents!”

JT’s jaw dropped, and his face turned a shade whiter.

In contrast, young Simon grinned, “This’ll be fantastic!”

“One more thing,” -Rollins pointed a finger in Simon’s face- “This one doesn’t go. Sister or no sister, I know a sneak when I see one. My customers will have enough to worry about without trying to keep one hand on their purse or billfold.”

Simon’s face turned red, and he spat on the ground, getting ready to say something Andrew would regret, so the Kid stepped in front of his young companion and forced a smile, yet his body still tensed, “That, Mr. Rollins would be a deal-breaker. Master Simon stays with me.” Andrew emphasized his point by stepping up into Rollin’s face, bracing him. Neither the sheriff nor Simon had seen this side of Andrew, and neither wanted to.

Rollins sensed he was out of his depth in a fight with Andrew, but his pride would not allow him to back down either, “Ya should step outa my face kid or grab iron.”

Andrew’s eyes narrowed, “Mr. Rollins, I do not require grabbing iron to get the bulge on a dub like you.”

Rollins’ tense eyes softened. And he rocked back on his heels with an inquisitive look. “Wait, what? I ain’t got a clue what you just said.”

Andrew tried again, “I stated, I do not need to grab iron to get the bulge on a dub like you.”

Rollins looked at JT and Simon. The looks on their faces relayed that they also had no idea what he was saying.

Andrew's face also softened, and he rocked back on his heels and sighed thoughtfully, "Do you not use the phrase "got the bulge" to describe 'gaining the upper hand?'"

All three shook their heads no.

"And you do not use the vernacular "dub" to describe a man of inexperience or one that is unskilled?"

Again, all three shook their heads no.

Andrew's head dropped into his chest, and a bizarre noise passed from his lips. It was so foreign that Andrew clasped his hand on his mouth in shock. But he couldn't help himself; he was chuckling.

"Now, what's so funny young feller; you some sorta nut-case?" Rollins slowly backed towards where his scattergun leaned against a fence, just in case. "I've had bad experiences with nut-cases."

Andrew raised his hands in submission, "No, no, excuse me, Mr. Rollins, it is simply ironic and humorous. I have witnessed so many men out West face off with many exchanges of that vernacular, and I have always wished to attempt it. However, now that I have the chance to finally replicate all of the correct phrasing and pitch to make myself even more intimidating and impressive," Andrew chuckled even more as he shook his head at his own foolishness, "You have no comprehension as to what I am attempting to say!"

Simon and JT were also laughing by now, and eventually, even Rollins joined in.

"Yer right, son, you did sound like a bally fool!"

After they had all calmed down from laughing, JT got the group back on topic, "How about a compromise?"

Rollins raised an eyebrow. "I'm listen'n."

"Simon never rides in the coach. He can come as a hanger-on; besides, we can use some help with the luggage."

Rollins swore under his breath but finally answered, "Fine, but he stays up top! And tie him off, too; it's gonna be a rough ride!"

Simon and JT looked at one another, both feeling a lot more nervous about this trade arrangement for the information needed. But, they continued helping Rollins ready the stage.

Andrew was perplexed about something completely different...himself! He had just been the light-hearted "funny" one of the group. Of course, it was only for a few moments, but still, that was something Andrew had never thought

possible. Well, not at least for as long as he could remember. But, then, he recalled what his Auntie Margaret had said. *She missed the fun-loving Andrew he had been before he had been sent away to school.* Was there an Andrew like that buried somewhere deep in his soul? Was that a glimpse of the Andrew who once was and is meant to be again? Suddenly, the hardened, experienced shooter and leader of this quasi expedition was feeling unsure and nervous.

Lord Jesus, what are you doing to me? Andrew threw up a frantic prayer in his mind.

He didn't hear anything specific in response, but he felt a bit of a smile and chuckle from Jesus.

Andrew gritted his teeth. *Ok, Lord, I will continue forward.* Andrew was quickly discovering this journey with Jesus required constant faith and toughness, especially when he felt none.

His friend Gray explained it this way, "You're a soldier of Christ, and as a soldier, you obey orders. If you have to march up a mountain, through a lake, and then straight into fire, you do it. If you're only willing to obey orders when you feel like it, then God can't ask you to do hardly noth'n. If you want to do great things for God, He has ta know He can count on you. You gots to be willing to walk straight into fire 'cause He says so, or...talk to that umbre or lady that makes your skin crawl or will talk your ear off all day, simply 'cause Jesus says they need someone to show them His love. If you ain't willing to love or do good when you don't feel like it, you're missing Jesus. Simple as that."

Andrew grunted to himself as he glanced over at Simon and JT, who argued about the carry-all compartment on the back of the coach. "Gray was not exaggerating," Andrew groaned to himself under his breath. "Tomorrow will be a long day."

The next day was overcast; the sun hid behind thick, soft, white clouds which carried very little threat of rain. Although the clouds did not release water upon the earth, their presence added moisture to the air, as evidenced by the warm breeze that pressed Andrew's long black duster against his body.

That morning the trio had picked up their fare and freight without incident. The wealthy elderly couple barely acknowledged the "help" and the "driver." They pointed at their luggage and then stood impatiently by the stage steps,

waiting to be assisted into the cab. Andrew, the driver, remained atop his seat, called the “box.” He wore his black leather riding gloves and a long thick tan duster borrowed from Fredric. Andrew was the only one who knew how to maintain control of the six-team of horses and thus was forced to witness the chaotic luggage loading unfold below. There were five large pieces to load. Both Simon and JT refused Andrew’s advice, telling him they could handle “some dude’s plunder.” The problem was, Simon and JT were barely strong enough for one piece, and the carry-all in the back would only hold two. The other three had to be loaded and strapped onto the top of the stage. JT stood atop the stage with a rope on one large wooden chest, pulling with all his might, Simon underneath pushing with all his worth. The battle raged for more than a minute before the chest claimed victory, slamming hard into the ground.

JT plopped down atop the roof and took his hat off to wipe the sweat from his forehead. On the ground, breathing heavily, Simon shook his head with disgust after falling hard onto his rump. He did not feel like getting up to try again. A cane with a carved ivory elephant’s head adorning the top stuck out of the stagecoach window and tapped angrily against the side, “Young man, please quit your loafing and hurry up!”

Simon started to say something smart but was cut off by Andrew, “Yes, Madam, thank you for your patience.”

“Ok, how do we do this?” JT asked, admitting defeat.

Andrew showed the two how to use a simple roping method by tying off each piece of luggage to the top rack atop the carry-all stagecoach. It was a custom rack, probably built and installed by Rollins. They wrapped the rope around the bar several times to use it as a breaking pulley system; Simon pulled the rope tight while JT pushed from below.

After JT had safely stowed the last piece of luggage, he informed their customers they were ready to be underway.

“Why are you wasting my time telling me? We should have left a half-hour ago!”

“Dear, dear,” The husband patted his wife’s arm patronizingly, “It’s ok, we cannot expect too much out of these small-town locals.”

The young sheriff grew red around the ears and tipped his hat, “Have a comfortable ride, and I hope we don’t hit too many potholes on the way.” He then stepped up quickly with Rollin’s repeater .410 shotgun in hand and took his place on the box as the “shotgun” rider. Andrew was the whip, and the hanger-on,

Simon, lay on top, tying himself off with a rope as instructed.

“What do you think of our new guests?” Simon pestered playfully.

JT scowled, then leaned in close to Andrew’s ear and hissed, “I would appreciate aiming for every pothole from here to the coast.”

Andrew grinned as he depressed the break with his foot, raised a fist full of brown leather reins, and snapped them down sharply with a bellowed, “Ha!”

They stopped for a short break and checked the horses. Andrew grunted to himself as he rolled a handful of dirt in his hands, observing the road ahead. The scene was picturesque. Fields and rolling hills of long, thin green grass boarded the aquamarine ocean. In the distance, two seagulls pecked at bugs hiding beneath an old rowboat, which had been abandoned by the roadside. He knew they would eventually turn east to travel along the bluffs. The bluffs....that would be the perfect place to set up an ambush.

“What’s wrong?” JT asked. A long-barreled hogleg Smith and Wesson was strapped to his thigh, a snub nose .44 Bulldog stuffed in his coat pocket, and the .410 scattergun resting in the nook of his arm, plus a large hunting knife protruded from his belt.

Andrew turned to answer JT but instead only managed a chuckle. The sheriff looked to have weapons coming out of every part of his body.

“What?” JT asked innocently.

Andrew shook his head, “I apologize. It is nothing to concern ourselves with at this moment in time.” -He turned his attention back to the road- “However, the state of this road and our proximity to the dangerous bluffs are troubling me. The dirt is very soft and prone to giving way under the weight and stress of the wheels. If indeed, we are ambushed, as I suspect we will be, we must act quickly or fail in our commission completely. Disturbingly, we will be unable to maneuver once the stage is moving at full speed!”

JT nodded his head thoughtfully; when he finally did reply, all he could say was, “Andrew, you sound like a law book when you speak.”

The tall gunman turned towards the sheriff with a grin on his face, “Considering the depth and accurate wording required of books on legal analysis; I will receive that as a compliment.”

JT turned around and walked back to the stage, muttering to himself, “Of

course you would.”

“Excuse me? I am sorry, sheriff, what did you say?” Andrew asked.

JT almost repeated himself but instead changed the subject. “How do we survive an ambush? Seems daft to charge in headfirst without a plan.”

Andrew ran to catch up to JT as they made their way back to the stage, “I do agree, but I do not see a solution to this problem. When the stage becomes unmaneuverable, the bandits will control us on either side and climb aboard, one from the back and one to attack the front. At least two more will be on either side of the stage, covering their compatriots with pistols.”

They reached the stage but did not board, continuing their deliberation.

“Is it even possible to keep them from boarding?” JT thought aloud.

“Not if they attack with superior numbers. Which I am quite positive they will.” Andrew replied glumly.

Andrew knew they needed a miracle, so in his mind, he prayed, *Father, please give me your assistance. I need your help, or we shall fail. Thank you for your faithfulness.*

Simon, tasked with sitting on top and keeping the luggage from falling off, leaned over the top of the stagecoach to add his two cents, “Let’s just hit ‘em in the heads with some rocks.”

JT rolled his eyes.

But, the gunslinger grinned, “*Out of the mouths of babes, He has ordained praise to silence the foe and the avenger!*”

“Huh?” JT was confused.

“Enough with the fancy religion talk; what ‘er you on about, Drew?” Simon demanded.

Andrew took the higher road and ignored the hated nickname from Simon, “A rock may not work, but something simple like a rock may be precisely what our plight requires.” He turned and ran back down the hill from which he had just come up.

“Where are you going now?” JT shouted after him.

Andrew shouted as he ran back down the path, “To our solution, the rowboat!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They made their move when the road had narrowed. Bluffs were on the left side and a 30-foot cut-out to the right. It was the perfect spot for a trap. Two gunmen, one with a rifle and the other a drawn pistol, leaned back like clerks waiting for shoppers at the local five and dime. The bandits lazily lowered their weapons at the stage and held up one hand. Next to them stood a pile of rocks and several large pieces of driftwood to barricade the middle of the road. Andrew's peripheral vision spotted movement on the hillside cut-out up and to his right. There was probably a rifle or two pointed down at them. The stage was still 100 yards out and moving at a moderate pace.

Andrew smiled, and his eyes sharpened, then glanced at JT. They both grinned and exclaimed, "Plan 'A'!"

The two men had devised two plans of attack to handle the roadblock, "Plan B" would be put into effect if the roadblock was impassable and would be incredibly dangerous, but the best they could do. However, the lazy road agents had left a small gap on the same side of the road as the cutout; it would be tight, but the stagecoach's best shot.

JT pounded his fist against the stage to alert their passengers, "We're going through...Hang on!"

From the roof, Simon popped his head between JT and Andrew from above, "This is going to be fantastic!" The eager youngster was giddy.

"Oh, the ignorance of youth," JT mused to himself.

"Master Simon, please get back and get down, right now...or I shall shoot you myself and be done with it!" Andrew growled.

"Hell-fire, Drew! I ain't doing nothing; I'm just excited!"

"And please refrain from that vulgar language while in my company."

"Son of a gun..." Simon growled under his breath as he slid back to lay down next to the luggage as instructed.

"You don't have any siblings, did you, Andrew?" JT inquired.

"No," the gunman snapped back, "I do not! May we please focus?"

JT smiled, "Sure, okay..." he paused for a moment, "...and just to let you know, I'm used to working alone, so having someone to lean on is a nice change of pace! No matter how this shakes out, thanks for trying."

Andrew looked at him, his eyes focused as the irritation dissipated from his voice. "I understand and appreciate your gratitude, but do not worry, my friend," he focused back on the approaching roadblock, "We do not have to worry. However, these road agents would be wise to make peace with their Creator."

His voice was so steady and the statement so matter-of-fact that JT had to ask, "How could you know that?"

Andrew grinned ever so slightly and replied, "Faith."

The young sheriff was about to ask another question when Andrew snapped the reins hard and screamed, "Ha!! Ha!!" JT aimed and fired a long-barreled Remington pistol at the bandit with the rifle. Then, since the stage was only 20 feet from the bandits, JT switched weapons, turned his body, aimed the lever-action scattergun, and pulled the trigger. Fire spewed from the gun as two men went down. Bullets zinged past the stage on the left, followed by the report of a rifle, then all hell broke loose. Gunfire seemed to hail from everywhere.

Meanwhile, Andrew steered the six-team slightly off-road to the right, riding alongside an embankment to escape. He had to aim at a narrow gap and hope the heavy stage would not tip. "We're not gonna make it!" JT screamed. The coach leaned left at a right angle, the wagon wheels nicked the roadblock, kicking driftwood down the road.

Andrew grinned, and JT let out a holler of joy as the horses and wagon shot past the debris. Andrew began guiding the stage off the hill back onto flat ground, but he had to be very delicate at top speed with six fast horses. Then, suddenly, the right wheel struck a medium-sized rock, tipping the entire stage into the air.

The violent bump bounced the two wealthy passengers up into the roof and to the left side of the carriage. The stage careened and toppled as the passengers screamed. Andrew fought with the reins trying to compensate, managing only to slow the tipping. JT tried pulling himself further over to the right side to balance out their weight but could barely keep himself from sliding down the box onto Andrew.

A high pitch scream and a flash of movement pierced the air, "Yeehaw!" Andrew glanced up just in time to see Simon diving over the edge of the teetering stage. With the tie-off rope around his waist, he stood on the edge of the suspended wagon wheel and muscled all of his 100lbs to force the stage back upright. It was only just enough to keep the wagon from tipping over but not enough to pull it back onto solid ground.

Frozen with fear, JT clung to the handle of his seat, Andrew tried to balance the stage on the two left wheels, and Simon whooped and hollered on the ride of his life. The young coach riding buckaroo had to dodge and duck a few obstacles, mostly a few small branches. Simon smiled to himself, beginning to feel that they would be OK until a bullet whizzed by his head, followed by the crack of a gunshot. He twisted his head around, then sneered at the scene behind him. A dozen mounted gunmen were on their tail, looking furious!

“Ah...Drew, we’ve got a problem!” Simon screamed over the screeching stagecoach while still surfing the outer wagon wheel.

Andrew gripped the vast stack of reins in his hands tightly before glancing back to see how bad it was. He turned around and snapped the reins even harder with a loud “HA!!”

“How bad is it?” JT asked through clenched teeth, still clutching the stage’s box with a death grip.

“It is not good, my friend; not a good situation at all!” Andrew shouted over the sound of the stage and gunfire. He was spying on the road for something, and about 300 feet ahead, he thought he might have spotted it. “Master Simon, ready yourself to jump back on board!” Andrew shouted over his shoulder.

“Right!” The fearless buckaroo hollered back.

Andrew steered the stage over to an embankment on the left side of the road. That side of the road had a small wall. Below were 50 to 150-foot bluffs, the ocean water, and jagged rocks. However, this small barrier was the only way Andrew could see to correct the stage without stopping. He had to guide the horses slightly up and then back down at a very tight angle. If the horse didn’t turn fast enough, they would go over the bluffs, taking everyone with them, but if they were to turn too tight, the stage would tip and roll over onto the cliffs, sharing a similar fate. In that case, everyone would slide rear-end first, to their deaths.

“Jesus! Please, send your angels to make this just right!” Andrew prayed aloud, then winced and held his breath as the big animals started up the slight embankment. Finally, Andrew released his breath enough to shout, “Simon, now!”

The horses began their sharp turn as the right wheels found the ground again. At that moment, Simon’s surfing platform became a death trap moving at 135 revolutions per minute. He leaped up and grabbed the luggage rack and hauled himself up, just as the wheel straightened and began to spin—the powerful horses “S” shaped the carriage back onto the road. Again, the rear

wheels responded by losing traction for a moment, but this time, the earth allowed the slide, and there was no rock to knock them over onto their side.

“Yeehaw!” JT shouted with a huge grin on his face. Perspiration had fogged up his spectacles. It made it difficult for him to see, but the sheriff didn’t care. He nudged Andrew and commented, “I believe we are invincible today!” Just as JT began enjoying the ride a little too much. He felt something slam into his right shoulder. “OWW!!” He checked his arm and red crimson glistened back at him. “I’ve been shot!” He exclaimed.

Andrew looked around and peered at his shoulder, “No, Sheriff, I believe that to be a mere flesh wound, usually referred to as a ‘graze.’ I strongly suggest you defend yourself if you do not wish the experience repeated.”

JT’s mouth dropped open, a little hurt by the comment, “They shot me! It felt like a horse crushing my shoulder,” JT grumbled to himself as he turned and traded bullets with the thieves hot on their tail.

Simon’s survival instincts kicked in, and he slid through the stage window next to the wealthy couple, who hugged one another tightly, whimpering. The boy sat across from them, grinning, “Best job ever!” He said aloud to no one in particular.

Meanwhile, upfront, the sheriff had managed to reload the lever-action shotgun and a big Smith and Wesson. However, as they were both quickly emptied again, he moved on to his final weapon, a Winchester 73’ lever action.

Since the creation of “Dime Novels,” the 1873 model Winchester had become very famous and was even called “the gun that tamed the West.” However, all settlers, ranchers, and farmers on the Pacific side of the Mississippi would disagree. The real weapon that tamed the west was the old reliable shotgun or scattergun. Anyone who could hold it steady could shoot it well enough to defend themselves, especially against a Comanche attack or bandits on horseback. Besides that, most of the time, settlers needed a gun for hunting or protecting their livestock from animals, not to shoot humans. So again, the shotgun was the most practical gun for both. Right now, JT wished he had about five loaded scatterguns ready to shoot instead of this overrated ‘73 rifle, as he was not a crack shot.

The glistening rifle was being jostled in every direction. JT was not good enough to shoot moving targets, especially those shooting back at him. He did have fifteen rounds in the Winchester, but that did not seem to help. Finally, after his 12th shot, he breathed softly with a man in his sights and ignored the bullets

whistling past his head as the rifle leaped in his hands “pow!” It winged the badman, who almost fell off his horse, but soon recovered, only slowing from the impact of the bullet. *Great, now there are only 9!* JT thought to himself.

“This isn’t gonna work, Andrew! There’s too many of ‘em.”

Without a word, Andrew handed the sheriff a massive fistful of leather reins. He stepped up on the box and hopped onto the roof. Andrew balanced himself on one knee and untied his secret weapon, and waited.

The road agents thought they were in control, so they surrounded the stage. Two gripped the side and hopped on, trying to take control of the reins. That’s when Andrew’s trap was sprung.

Lying between all of the luggage was an old weathered seven-foot boat oar. Andrew had taken it from an old rowboat they had discovered a few miles back. He had a nagging feeling down in his gut that this was something they needed. So, when he and the sheriff had walked back to the stage, Andrew began to pray silently to see what God might show him. *Father, please give me your assistance. I need your help, or we shall fail. Thank you for your faithfulness.* In his mind’s eye, he saw what looked like a long flat rod or stick. It didn’t make much sense until Simon’s suggestion triggered what God was saying to him.

“Let’s just hit ‘em in the heads with some rocks.” Simon had said.

Andrew laughed a bit to himself as he ran back to the abandoned rowboat to find the oar. *God of Heaven, you are often simpler than us.*

However, as bullets whistled past his head, Andrew began to question whether he had heard from God or just had a fantastic delusion that sounded good at the time. “At present, there is only one method of discovering the truth.”

Andrew locked his feet against two pieces of luggage and hefted his weapon. But instead of holding it out or readying to swing it, he held it tightly against his hips and kept watch on both sides of the box. JT controlling the team would now be the target of the bandits.

A gray hat slid into view on the right side. As a face popped up, Andrew shouted, “Good afternoon, two bits, please?”

The badman turned to look but got a heavy wooden oar in the nose for his trouble. He fell from the stage, screaming, then smacked the ground awkwardly into the path of his oncoming comrades. One horseman was bucked off his mount in an attempt to avoid trampling his fellow bandit.

The gunman sneaking up on JT’s left side got wise from the commotion and was ready for Andrew’s attack. He emerged over the top with a pistol and

hammer back, prepared to fire. But to his frustration, all he got was a pink hatbox in his face. He took hold of the box and was about to toss it when something flashed at him, “What the...” He saw the flash of weather-worn wood too late, “Crack!”

Andrew thumped him hard atop his head and quipped, “Excuse me, sir, be a gentleman!” The blow only stunned him, so Andrew finished the job with a quick strike to his face. Instead of falling from the stage, the bandit clawed to stay on but lost his footing and then his grip. He went belly first to the ground, grunting in pain as rock and dirt sliced into his skin.

The remaining six bandits knew it was now or never. Four of them surrounded the stagecoach and climbed on simultaneously. The remaining two continued firing at Andrew, forcing him to keep his head down. Then, the two in the rear went for Andrew to keep him busy while the other two went for the reins.

The experienced fighter had figured on this; he knew he’d have to be swift and on target. But, above all, he had to keep his balance. So he waited for the two bandits in the back to begin crawling their way to his position, forcing their friends to stop their firing in his direction, or they might hit their comrades. Then, armed with his oar, Andrew stood tall facing them and went to work.

He locked the big hunk of wood against his waist and swung back and forth with his hips. This was several times stronger than if he swung the large, heavy chunk of wood wide with his arms. He twisted one way and knocked one badman onto his backside and then cracked the other’s knife welding hand with a quick jerk of his hips in the other direction. Andrew then knocked him back with a jab to his solar plexus. The Kid’s smashing blows bought him the time needed to turn to the other two attacking JT.

The sheriff was fighting off one to his right side, while the bandit on his left was about to attack his blindside with a long slender knife known as a Tennessee Toothpick. Andrew popped him in the side of his skull. The knife dropped from his hand as he fell unconscious right on top of JT. The lawman and the badman both felt the weight and fought to keep their balance. The intruder clawed at JT to keep from falling off the stage, managed to find his center, and then pushed JT back.

“Duck!” Andrew screamed. JT obeyed, and the bandit caught a mouthful of oar wood before he could react and fell from the stage screaming in pain.

Andrew spun back around with his oar to find the two badmen had regained their footing and rushed him at once. The bounty hunter tossed his

large wooden weapon at his attackers. They found themselves sharing a large rowboat oar cradled in their arms like firewood and a priceless look of confusion. Andrew wasted no time. He leaped as high as he could and bent his knees into his chest, leaned back, then kicked with all his might. The heels of his large black boots smashed into the oar. The bandits lost their balance and, with some help from a bump in the road, slid off the back of the stage. Andrew, in the meantime, paid the price for his fancy acrobatics. He landed awkwardly on his back. Searing pain in his left shoulder blade told him he had connected with a sharp piece of luggage.

Simon, who couldn't stand not knowing what was happening, had pulled himself through the window, observing the fight by peering over the luggage rack. He pulled himself up to the roof to see if Andrew was okay. He found the bounty hunter still lying where he fell, moaning in pain.

"That was incredible!" He exclaimed.

Andrew was about to scold him for not staying below when a bullet zinged overhead. "Get down!" Andrew screamed and pulled at Simon's collar to get him to cover, but it was too late. Instinctively the boy turned towards the sound and a second bullet smashed into his chest. Andrew caught his body as it fell and pulled him close, "NO!" He screamed.

Fresh adrenaline surged into the gunfighter's veins. He snapped up to one knee as his Remington hand cannons zipped from their holsters. Blasting away in a rage, Andrew screamed with fury until the pull-on the triggers of his pistols were only met with dry clicks. Sweat dripped into his eyes as he calmed down enough to notice that the pursuing horse's saddles were empty. The enemy was dead.

"Stop, JT. Stop! Simon has been hit!" Andrew shouted as he turned back to Simon's tiny frame.

"Woa, Woa...," JT called to the heaving beasts, coaxing them to a trot.

Andrew leaned his ear close to the boy's mouth; he was not breathing. Simon was dead!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“No, no, no...JT, he is not breathing!” Andrew heard himself scream.

JT pushed him aside and felt along his spine until his hand found something wet and warm. It was blood coming from a fist-sized hole through Simon’s back.

JT shook his head and adjusted his glasses with his other hand, “He’s been shot through to the chest. There’s nothing we can do.” Simon’s warm blood dripped from JT’s hand.

Andrew felt sick. He turned away from the tiny frame and stared motionlessly, feeling as empty as the seaside road upon which he stood. He had seen so many men die, personally killed so many, but this felt so different. It was wrong. It was as if a cruel joke had been played on this poor boy. Hope was not taken away but ripped out of his heart from a bullet that should have been meant for the old scumbag “the Kid.” It should have been Andrew lying there dead!

“This should be my final resting place,” Andrew muttered under his breath. Tears welled in his eyes, and shame crept into his heart. “God, why? WHY!?!” He moaned. With his head in his hands, Andrew wept.

After several minutes of silence, something changed. A soft breeze pressed his clothing against his chest. Andrew did not notice it at first until something odd began to happen. The wind felt as if it was not just blowing against his body but through his body. A shiver swept into his core and shook the gunfighter from his grief. A low but powerful, unmistakable voice echoed deep through the depths of his soul. *Is that what you think? That you should be dead? Do you think so little of yourself?*

Andrew’s reply was a whisper, “I have killed and hated for so long; I should have been the one you took, not him.”

Son, I don’t recall asking your opinion. Besides, who said I had anything to do with this? I love that boy more than you can ever imagine.

“Then why didn’t you save him?”

Who says I haven’t already?

Andrew’s eyebrows furrowed with frustration. “I do not understand.”

The memory of Aunt Margaret praying over the young girl who had been brought to her flashed through his mind. He turned and looked over at the lifeless

young figure on the ground. JT had just covered him with a blanket and then sat next to him, not knowing what else to do. Finally, the wealthy couple had gained enough composure to come out of the stagecoach to see what was going on. The gentleman held his wife as she sobbed quietly into a handkerchief.

“Faith,” Andrew stated as he turned and strode slowly, unsure yet determined, back to the group. His head said, “Impossible,” but his heart screamed, “Do it.” The closer he got to the body, the faster his heart pounded. By the time he stood over Simon’s corpse, he felt that his chest might explode out his ribs. He looked up into the heavens, then clasped his hands and closed his eyes. The others followed suit, thinking he was asking for Simon’s spirit to be taken into heaven. A supernatural calmness stilled his pounding heart.

The old gunfighter looked down and opened his mouth, but the words he spoke came from a place so deep inside of him that it scared him. “Simon, you come back into this body, right now! I command your heart to be healed, in Jesus’ name!” Then, still confused where this boldness was coming from, he reached down and grabbed the boy’s arms and pulled him to his feet and screamed, “Simon, stand and awake in the name of Jesus Christ.” He released his grip.

Simon’s body hovered over his feet and balanced in the air for what seemed like an eternity. He swayed back as if to flop over. But then suddenly, his eyes opened, and he popped up straight as an arrow and stared, shocked into Andrew’s eyes. He spun around, looking from face to face, and finally said, “Oh man, I just had the craziest dream ever! I dreamt I died.”

A campfire under a night sky was something Andrew would never have entertained when he lived life as “the Kid.” It impaired your night vision, made it far too easy for someone to sneak up on you, as well as announced your position to anyone who happened to be within a mile or two of your camp. Yet, tonight was different; Andrew felt as if everything he had believed in and thought over the past decade was wrong. So did any of it even matter? With all the evil he had seen, with all of the evil he had done, the Kid had always known what to expect.

Seeing Simon healed of a gunshot wound to the heart was not a part of those expectations. Not only that, but it was him, the killer, the bounty hunter who, only seven months prior, was controlled by evil. He had been used by God—even being permitted to speak with God! This unmeasurable generosity and kindness shocked and terrified the former killer down to the very marrow in his bones. But then, to grant such a person the power of healing? That made no sense!

Andrew swallowed hard as he stared into the fire. These thoughts suffocated and warred against the current pathways and logic seared into his brain from a life of surviving and being one step ahead of his enemy. Now, he honestly had no explanation. It was as if, for the first time in his life, he finally touched the flames of a fire only to discover that it was cool and wet, finding that all he had been led to believe was wrong.

“Wanna nip?” JT offered a flask to Andrew, who declined with a shake of his head. “Please don’t judge me, but after that day we had, I might need a few more bottles after we get back!”

“I understand your trepidation, Sheriff,” Andrew replied without looking at him. “It..” He paused and thought, “It is perplexing.”

JT took another swig from his flask and blurted out, “What happened, man! I mean...I ain’t never heard of that, EVER. Are you joshing me? That’s about the most amazing; I mean, my folks used to talk to me about God and stuff, the whole...” JT slugged another clumsy gulp from the flask and continued, “...parting of the Red Sea and Sampson, David, and the giant. But this?! This I never...well, I never...well, I... .”

Andrew speculated that the lawman’s thoughts drifted beyond his current ability to articulate words. Then, silently, he thanked God for it, as he too was trying to come to grips with what had happened.

After the *incident*, they had continued to transport the wealthy couple to their new property. Simon still rode as a hanger-on, up top. Seemingly unaware of what had happened. He whistled, sang, and chatted annoyingly at the bounty hunter and sheriff for the remaining seven miles.

As for the wealthy, elderly couple, their time spent on the way to their home turned out to be very significant. After the roof and boot of the stagecoach had been unloaded, they asked to speak with Andrew. Simon spied him walking and talking with the couple, hat in hand. Then Andrew shocked the young man. The bounty hunter became excited and animated! Simon figured whatever he was saying must be worth a lot; because Andrew was the coolest customer the young sneak had ever met.

But the real shock happened after Andrew’s animated talk died down. They all bowed their heads and prayed.

JT strode up alongside Simon while munching on a green apple, “What’s going on over there?”

“Most dangerous, incredible man I’ve ever met, and he’s as crazy as a loon, Sheriff. The guy’s praying!”

Apple pieces exploded from his mouth as he coughed out, “What! Are you nuts? Show some respect!” JT took off his hat, bowed his head, and nudged Simon so hard; he almost fell over.

“Ouch! Fine!” He snapped back at JT and then pulled the cap from his head and rolled his eyes, “What’s the big deal anyway? Big lemons...” he muttered under his breath.

It was too dark to make it back to Rollin’s Ranch, so they decided to set up camp and build a fire halfway back to town. After they had settled down and eaten a meal of corn cakes and jerked meat, they could finally explain to Simon what had happened. He laughed at them. That was until he finally agreed to take off his coat and vest. As he did, a few shiny silver spoons fell from the inside pockets. “Whoops, how’d those get there?” He grinned.

Andrew grunted, grabbed the stolen goods off the ground, and searched him for anything else. He found another spoon, a fork, a gold tooth, old socks, and spectacles. Andrew handed all the contraband to the lawman. “I require water to bathe my hands, posthaste!” He tried to use a handkerchief to wipe them, but the grimy muck on his fingers felt permanent.

JT threw the stuff to the ground. “Forget that Andrew, look, right here,” He poked Simon with his forefinger in the center of his chest several times. Simon and Andrew followed JT’s gaze to a large blood spot and an acorn-sized hole through the center-left of the breast pocket.

Simon turned around, “Is it...?”

Andrew nodded slowly.

Simon practically tore his shirt off. He held it up to the campfire and peered through the matching holes, straight through his heart. At the back of his shirt, there was a massive bloodstain shaped like the state of Florida.

“You know what this means?!” Simon leaped in the air and clicked his heels. “I’m bulletproof, and this is the luckiest shirt ever!” Then he laughed and laughed and laughed some more. For the next half an hour, the great bulletproof child explained his incredible abilities; describing his powers as though he was some sort of ‘superman.’ “Not only that,” he went on, “But, I’m fast, real fast, faster than a train, no! Faster than a bullet. And, I can fl...”

“Simon, why are you not taking this more seriously?” Andrew butted in.

“No, wait, this is the great makings of a story.” Simon protested.

JT cut in, “Hold on, Simon. As someone who reads fiction, it’s just too fantastical; what’s the point of some *superman* who can do anything, no one will ever beat him, so why would you even wanna hear about that? Unless you make a case like Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s Monster, except the monster is the good guy. Now that could work, I suppose.”

“Excuse me...” Andrew cut back in.

“Sorry.”

“Ah, come on, Drew, we’re just having some fun.”

“Simon, God, brought you back from the dead. Why are you pretending as though it did not occur?”

The boy snickered a bit, “Don’t worry about it,” and turned his back on Andrew.

Andrew walked over to the lad and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

“Why, Simon?”

Simon snapped back around and stood, “Fine, you wanna know why, fine, I’ll tell you why! Yeah, maybe there’s a God, and He can do what He likes and make me come back from the dead. Maybe I even saw ‘em in my dreams when you say I died. But the way I see it, we ain’t even yet. He’s still got a ways to go to make up for the bull He’s put my sister and me through in our lives. Sure, He’s got all this power, but I don’t give a.....”

When Simon’s language devolved into something only vaguely English and mostly profane, Andrew knew there was nothing else he could do. The young man would just have to cool off. Forty-five minutes later, Simon fell asleep, still mad at the world.

The gunslinger tucked him in with his own blanket to give him extra warmth. As he did, he realized once again how thin and small Simon was; he was just a child, forced to live like a man, with no help, no money, no skills, no gun, and no hope. But, all things considered, he was a pretty decent kid. Andrew straightened up and mosied over to JT, and plopped down next to him. They said nothing for a long while but only sat, staring at the fire, trying to make sense of an indescribable day.

“This is nothing new to me,” the sound of Andrew’s voice even surprised him.

“Huh?” JT asked.

“Six months ago, I awoke in a bar I did not know. Apparently, I had

planned to slice the throat of the local marshal because he wanted to have a conversation.”

JT slid back away from Andrew out of instinct, “Why, what..what happened?”

The gunfighter grinned, “I am no longer dangerous.”

“I beg to differ, Mr. Andrew; after I saw you with those big Remingtons today, I know you ARE very dangerous.”

“Allow me to rephrase, sir. I am no longer without restraint.” Andrew paused, “You see, I was very bitter towards my father for a long time. He was, by most definitions, an evil man. I hated him. I hated him so much that I killed him in a duel. However, vengeance is never satisfied, and what felt righteous through the taking of life one day was no longer satisfying the next.”

JT looked confused.

Andrew hung his head and drew a deep breath, “I craved more death.”

JT’s eyes went wide, and an awkward silence threatened to end the conversation right there, but Andrew was determined to finish. “So much so that I seemed to never be able to restrain myself. Strangely enough, I never committed murder but would look for any provocation to shoot men down.”

The ‘Kid’ grinned to himself, “Then I met Gray and his partner Flint. They were on a journey of discovery and *happened* to be in town when I arrived. Gray had an air about him that seemed to draw him, or one could even say, carry him to try and help people like me. He helped me in a way I shall never be able to repay.”

“He helped you?”

“Much more than that, JT. He taught me to be free! As if the weight of life... no, a hundred lives, quite incredibly lifted from my shoulders, suddenly, I was free. So you see, Mr. JT, I was not surprised to see a miracle today. I was not surprised to see Simon raised from the dead because only six months ago, I too was brought back to life!”

JT pushed his spectacles back against his face with a slow, deliberate forefinger, “So then how did this guy help you get...uh, ya know, git, right?”

A warmth filled Andrew’s heart, and joy lit up his face. He placed a jovial hand on the curious lawmen’s shoulder, “I am overjoyed, you asked.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The trio arrived with all the gusto they could contain. It was a sunny day, and the warmth made everything feel alive. As the stage rolled onto Rollin's property, the three compadres grinned ear to ear and tipped their hats in unison at the intense older gent. The stage eased up to the barn as they all turned to share their cheeky expression with the stagecoach owner. Their confidence shone from their shared adventures like an extra ray of sunshine: a ray of sunshine that made Rollin's teeth grind and his stomach knot.

The stagecoach owner leaned against a post on his front porch; an old double-barrel shotgun cradled in the nook of his left arm. Rollins spat tobacco juice from between his teeth and rolled a plug around his jaw before shouting, "Ahhh, ya'll just pulled off one job. That don't make you Bat Masterson or Hickok."

"No siree-bob, but that does hold up our end of the deal." JT shot back as he tossed the fancy lever-action shotgun back to its owner. "Besides, you could have mentioned there's about ten of them!"

"Ah, Betsy, I missed you. Had to make do with Daisy here." He shook his head and spat again, "ten sounds like a fish story to me."

The Kid hopped down from the stage and placed his hands on his hips, "It is accurate and more to the point; we have done much more than our fair share!"

JT interrupted, "And so, Mr. Rollins, if you don't mind, I need all the information you have, please?"

"Oh fine," the grumpy bachelor snapped back, "I ain't no barrel border; I square my debts. So what do ya wanna know?"

Andrew leaned in with intensity, "Who coerced you into a sale?"

"You know who...it was that low down skunk 'n brand artist, Rocko." Rollins spat with disdain.

"No, Rollins, who did Rocko send to squeeze you?" JT rephrased the question impatiently.

Rollin's eyes narrowed, and his lip curled into a snarl at the thought, "This double-dealing huckster. A smooth, gentleman type. Dude came in a buggy. Said he was from the bank, hold on." He strode swiftly into his dusty dark house, carrying both shotguns. He came back out, with only the double barrel, and palming a small business card. "He left this after I almost killed him- twice. Tell

you one thing. The dandy'll be wearing a new hat; what a princess, HA!"

JT looked the card over and handed it back to Andrew, "What do you think?"

"I do believe we should make use of this card and call upon Mr. Freeman from the City Bank."

"Get off me, Simon!" JT snapped.

"I can't see nothing!" Simon whined.

Andrew growled inwardly, "Master Simon, the correct phrase is, 'I cannot observe the target, please would you allow me more room?'"

Simon pulled a sour face, "Nah, I ain't gonna say all that...never!"

"Hopeless," Andrew muttered under his breath, then turned to the young man, peering over a squatting JT, "That is your prerogative, Master Simon; however, please may I request you both keep the level of noise down to a zero? Thank you!" Andrew hissed.

Simon and JT gave Andrew a perplexed look for a moment, then glanced at one another and promptly burst into laughter.

"That's how you say 'shut it'?" JT managed between bellows of laughter.

"Funniest thing I ever heard, partner." Simon leaned back, holding his belly, chuckling.

Andrew rolled his eyes in disgust, "It is as if I have been tasked to journey with two infant cretins."

With a chuckle, JT turned to Simon, "And that is his way of saying, 'I'm work'n with fools.'" And the two burst out laughing again.

"Enough," Andrew growled and grabbed both mockers by their arms and dragged them to the other side of the alley where they would not be seen nor heard. Cries of laughter echoed between the walls as the man and boy tried to calm themselves.

Andrew stuck an angry finger at their faces, "Remain here until you two are composed!"

Seething, Andrew stormed back to their *hiding* spot and went back to work observing the bank, but not before throwing up a quick prayer to the effect of, "Never again, God, never again."

Fifteen minutes later, the trio was once again huddled in their hiding spot. It was three buildings away, but they had a clear line of sight to their target, the largest bank in town. Finally, around three in the afternoon, they caught sight of

their quarry. He opened the bank door to a debonair young couple and tipped his hat to the lady. He was a handsome man with an easy, white toothy smile and sported a pinstripe suit and slick greased hair.

“Wow, he sure does play the part well, doesn’t he?” The young sheriff commented with disgust in his tone.

Andrew sighed and mused aloud. “Yes, Mr. JT, he is a man of veiled evil intentions. Although he is most definitely a man of interest, I fear his corrupt nature and experience will prove most difficult to overcome.”

Simon pushed his sour face in between both men. “So what? You two can just beat out of him where my sisters at, right? Shoot, I’ve been beaten on plenty of times, ta give up a friend for the boss. Now, it’s that dandy’s turn!”

Andrew shook his head, “No, Master Simon, that is not an option.”

JT shrugged his shoulders, “I don’t mind, he almost definitely has it coming, and I’m sick and tired of losing to Rocko and his hooligans. It’s time I take the kid gloves off.”

Andrew was taken aback, “Sheriff, that is against your oath of office and your training with the law! Since *our* first declaration from the Empire of Great Britain, we chose to hold sacred the rights of freedom. One of the most important is the right to a trial!”

JT rolled his eyes, “First off, I never said we would kill him, only knock him around a little. I probably wouldn’t even have to take my spectacles off, going a few rounds with the delicate lily. Secondly, I’m sure you’re one to talk, a successful and alive bounty hunter!” JT raised his eyebrows and smiled a bit, adding a little humor.

Fortunately for JT and Simon, neither one could ever understand how much temptation was eating its way into Andrew’s heart. Andrew leaned back, deep in thought. Of course, a man with charm, wealth, and respect who secretly took advantage of others, including street children, was enough for the Kid to execute on the spot. As a matter of fact, with a bit of luck, they could probably “take care of” the overdressed shill and then “discover” the evidence later they needed to justify themselves. This slick banker was such a scumbag, the way he could smile and charm upstanding citizens day in and day out as bankers do, but then turn around and be party to extorting hard-working small businesses and running street children like slaves. A man like that was all too familiar to Andrew. He was a man that he had fought, feared, hated, ran from, and killed all his life. He was his father.

“No, stop!” Andrew accidentally said aloud.

“Stop what?” JT asked.

Andrew looked away and focused, then sharply held up his index finger, indicating he needed a moment.

Simon rolled his eyes, “He’s gonna get all weird and religious again.” He stood to turn and leave.

“No, wait a minute! The last time he went ‘all weird,’ as you put, he brought you back from the dead with the loudest prayer I’ve ever heard. Something tells me we need ‘weird.’”

Simon sat back down, “Fine, whatever the cuckoo wants, I’ll just wait another few weeks while we can’t find my sister and who knows what they’re doing to her.” Simon shoved JT with a bit of irritation, “And don’t say I’m ‘back from the dead’ sounds downright spooky.”

JT feigned regret with a sarcastic tone “Well now, *miss* Simon, how would your highness like to be described? A walking corpse, would that be more agreeable to your delicate nature? Deadman walking, or how about...”

“If I were 40 lbs heavier, I’d kick your teeth in,” Simon growled.

JT scoffed, “Ha, no need to wish, I’ll get on my knees - is this better shorty?”

“Silence.” Andrew massaged his temples. He was in no mood for the *children’s* fighting, “Why, why?” He muttered silently to himself.

He had dealt with the anger, the fear, and the shame. He was forgiven, and Andrew knew that his heart was pure. But was it? He felt those horrible and dark emotions all over again. They pulled on him, beckoning him back to the abyss of power, excitement, and depression he had happily escaped.

“My Father God, help me; I do not know what to do?” He prayed silently, desperately. Something in his mind turned a different angle, and a voice softly commanded, ‘*Look again*’.

Freeman exited the bank, his hat in hand, but this time he wasn’t alone. A man who looked to be his partner or maybe a bodyguard followed closely behind the broker. He wore a jet black suit; with a black tie and bowler hat to match.

Both men walked in the direction of the trio. The three quietly slunk into the shadows.

Freeman and his “shadow” passed without saying a word; however, the unknown man suddenly turned and made eye contact with Andrew. His eyes were blood red, and his face, ashen grey, he opened his mouth to speak, but only hot breath escaped like a thick fog. It was chased with an intense fear burrowing

itself into every one of Andrew's brain cells.

Andrew's jaw tightened, and muscles flexed, ready for a fight. He instinctively grabbed for his gun and began to rise. Fortunately, the same calm voice from before reminded him of his true weapon and the real fight.

The Kid sat back on the ground, and a knowing sly smile grew on his face.

Both Simon and JT noticed the change of expression on the Kid's face.

Simon rolled his eyes again, "Ah, for a guldarn box of snakes. Here we go again."

"What, Andrew, what?" JT demanded.

Andrew's response was very coy, "The valiant may never taste of death but once..."

JT thought for a moment and then snapped his fingers as recognition broke free in his mind, "But cowards die many times before their deaths."

Simon shook his head in disgust, "Foggy fools! Got nothing under 'em hats but hair."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was morning, the sun was shining, and the city's top financial broker, Freeman, could not stop grinning. The bank's new expansion program with an introductory low-interest rate loan was tantalizing bait. Also, a free \$5 bonus with any new savings account of 50 dollars or more would guarantee some new clients with fresh pockets to victimize.

Freeman was not an evil man, so he thought to himself. But, in fact, because of him, many businesses grew, and families obtained larger homes, better horses, and buggies as fine as cream gravy. He was a man who saw himself as a purveyor of "better things."

"Better this, and nicer that - after all, that's what life was all about."

His sixth-grade education had been enough to get him into a "runners" position in the New York City financial district, which he did better and faster than any of the other boys. It took only a year for his supervisor to see that Freeman, even as a 13-year-old, had enormous drive and ambition. So he took him under his wing, and for the next three years, schooled him on the art of accounts and finance.

Feeling he had outgrown his employer, Freeman moved up to a major bank, starting as a clerk. Three years later, he was the city's youngest broker and the toast of the financial life and times of the city. The world was his oyster.

Then the Collapse of '73 hit, and his 'oyster' was exposed as fleeting and grossly inflated. Freeman was leveraged to the hilt and within days found himself over one-hundred thousand dollars in the hole. At the very edge of ruin, he readied himself and his books for his boss, gathered everything in his arms, and set off for the big NYC bank's corner office, prepared to fall on his sword.

Yet, the closer he got, the hotter he felt. His palms became moist, his heart slammed against his ribs and threatened to burst. Every step became heavier. Just as he was about to rap a knuckle against his boss's office door, thoughts of ridicule, deprivation, and the loss of his status flooded his thoughts and made his blood run cold. Then, just as Freeman was about to knock, his soft white knuckles froze half an inch short of the door.

"No, wait, there has to be another way." He thought to himself as he turned away and hurried back to his office.

“Freeman, you need something?” It was his boss. He hadn’t been in his office but only just returned.

“Nope, fine, just wanted to check in and see if there’s anything to be done about this mess?”

The boss winced a little, “Well, I sure do appreciate your enthusiasm, son, but unfortunately, only the wise are going to survive this one, and the wise made their beds years ago. No matter what, everybody’s gotta lie in the bed they built.”

Freeman flashed his charming boyish grin, “Ah, we’ll be ok, sir. I sure won’t be going anywhere.”

That was the start. The first of many lies and twisty turns: perversions of truth that soon tangled his life into so many knots that when he was finally discovered by his boss five years later, not even Freeman could tell which money he had earned, invented, invested, or laundered for one of the dozen organized mobs in the city. It didn’t matter; he was quickly and quietly ousted from the bank, “blackballed” from the New York City Financial District, and told by almost everyone to “Never show his face there again or it would be cut off.” At least he hadn’t lost everything; as he saw the bottom of his little shell game beginning to fall out, he had grabbed his emergency stash of cash out of his hidden account from Philly and ran.

He was thinking of exploring further south between D.C and the Carolinas, but he remembered two things. First, he couldn’t stand farmers. Second, there was a tiny uptick in real estate and construction around the northern New England area. So, he found himself in this quaint little nothing of a town. However, he thought, “Since I can’t swim with the big fish, I’ll just make my little pond understand what a big fish can do, and maybe this pond will grow into a lake one day.”

He was still making money, any which way but loose. “Beg, borrow, and steal” was his new motto. He would resort to violence if needed. However, the violent experience taught him that letting go of a potential investment or hiring a “professional” for bloody dealings was ultimately more profitable and safer.

Now, he was a man who hedged his bets with other bets and yet other hedged bets against those bets; this made him more financially robust than ever. But, instead of leveraging this time, he had cash reserves, ready to stuff into saddlebags, an account in London with enough money to retire under a fake name, and much more.

Yet, this paranoia of suddenly losing all his money meant he had to expand

his client list to even more despicable men than he had ever associated with before. Whenever a wave of convicting guilt washed over him as he passed some of their pickpockets running the streets, half-starved or young girls dressed as women and waiting on the corners, he focused on security and that *fear*. The fear he had felt those many years earlier when he had almost lost everything!

He checked his gold Waltham pocket watch and grinned, “Nine o’clock in the morning. Time to make some new money, the tastiest.” He straightened his suit coat as the banker moved to the door to welcome any “early birds.” Sure enough, his latest lucky victim strolled in through the mahogany doorway.

He stepped through the entrance with a stiff back and a crisp assuredness in every step. He wore a dark, fitted Brooks Brothers suit with a red striped tie and carried a gold crested walking stick. He was clean-shaven, and his hair was freshly trimmed and greased into an Ivy League style.

Freeman’s wide eyes nearly bulged from his head, “This is a man of breeding. A peacock with *real* money. Most likely, daddy’s money needs a new home.” Freeman grinned inwardly and couldn’t help but lick his lips with anticipation, “This is shaping up to be a great day.”

The banker strolled up to the fancy young man and offered his hand, “Good day, sir, and how may I be of service?”

The young man glanced at him with slight relief, “Yes, sir, thank you so much. I require assistance.” He shook Freeman’s hand lightly with quick dignity. “I am in search of some financial advice.”

“Well then, sir, I do believe you have found your man. I am Mr. Freeman, and I am at your disposal. If you’d permit me, please, come to my office, and we can discuss your needs.”

The young gentleman followed him back to his corner office. “Perfect,” Freeman thought, “Once they sit, my chances of closing are almost guaranteed.”

The banker politely offered a handcrafted leather client’s chair. He had specially ordered it from Paris to add to his sense of absolute success. The chair’s message: Freeman is a winner! Instead of sitting across from the young gentleman dandy, Freeman slid to a small tea service set up in the corner of the office and asked, “May I offer tea, coffee, or something a little stronger?” He added a sly smile at the end, meant to encourage his customers to “live” a little.

The young man looked surprised to be served so well. “That is incredibly considerate of you, thank you. Tea with one sugar, please.”

Freeman obliged and made himself a matching cup with his china tea set,

painted with gold trim. Copying the customer's order was another subtle trick he had picked up. This tradecraft implied commonality between him and the client.

Completing his performance, Freeman ignored his fancy chair behind his desk but instead pulled a third lesser quality chair to the side of his desk. Finally, he placed his saucer and teacup on the corner of his davenport and leaned slightly forward to show interest. This told his clients, "You are a very important person, but I also want to be your friend."

"Now, sir, how may I be of service to you?" The broker flashed his charming boyish grin.

The young man sipped his tea and laid the cup on its saucer in his lap. "I have quite a financial problem, that requires..." He paused for a slightly dramatic effect, "A man with delicacy and prowess." He picked up the fine China cup and sipped again.

Freeman leaned back and reached for his tea, "I see, sir, I have to admit, I do have a certain talent for numbers, especially in finance, but delicacy can be..." He sipped his tea to dial back the dramatic effect, "costly."

"I assure you, Mr. Freeman, the cost is not an issue." The young man smiled confidently.

Freeman's years in the business had taught him the importance of a poker face; he betrayed nothing but a slight flash in his eyes, "I've snagged a whale!" He thought, "And first thing in the morning, too! What a wonderful start to the day!"

"Why don't we start with the problem, and I'll offer some solutions and estimated expenses." Freeman placed his tea aside, stood, stepped to the other side of the desk, and readied paper and pen to take notes.

"Why, thank you, sir. However, I do prefer this specific delicacy to be done without the benefits of notes, nor paper of any kind."

This took Freeman by surprise. He did handle such business, of course, but *those* clients were very specific and referred by a trusted source.

The broker managed to play his hand calmly and collected, but a slight tension in his voice was unavoidable, "I see...and what makes you think I can help you with such a transaction?"

"A recent acquaintance relayed it to me."

"And *who* might that be?" Freeman placed his pen back in its place, eager to hear which deadman was flapping his gums.

"Mr. Rollins, do you remember him?" The *gentleman* sipped his tea again.

Freeman's exterior cracked. His face flushed and he swallowed hard as the belligerent image of the old fool flashed in his mind, especially the shotgun blast that nearly killed him and ruined his favorite bowler hat. Finally, the slick broker managed an unconvincing, "Should I know that name?"

At that moment and unbeknownst to Freeman, the bank door opened, and another "customer" silently slid inside.

The young gentleman placed his cup and saucer on the desk. He reached into his breast pocket, "According to a document, obtained from the city hall records room; you brokered quite an economic deal with...well...shall we say, certain dubious parties."

Freeman's eyes flashed. He placed both hands on the table and glared at the young man, "What do you want?" He growled.

The young man picked up his tea again. "As I stated earlier, I only require financial assistance, and the cost is not the issue. Rather, I will rephrase." He sipped his tea, "I require guidance, and it will cost you nothing."

"Is that a threat?" Freeman's hand slid toward his desk drawer.

"Sir, if you pull that palm gun, I will be forced to disarm you and, regrettably, assault you with it...repeatedly." The young dandy's eyes flashed as he grinned ever so slightly.

The broker froze and slowly raised his hand, "How...what...who are you?"

"He works for me, Freeman."

Freeman glanced up, and his eyes widened with shock and disbelief. "How did this happen?" He asked himself. Since the New York incident, a unique intuition or "voice" had always warned him if something was not quite right. It had saved his skin numerous times over the past nine years.

But what Freeman could not have known was that before commencing their plan, Andrew had forced JT and Simon to pray with him to force the banker's "silent partner" and shadow away until their business had concluded.

Freeman finally managed to make his mouth work again, "You...you can't do this. Do you have any idea who I am representing? Are you INSANE?"

JT stepped into the office and stood next to Andrew, who was still enjoying his tea. "No, Freeman, I am not insane; I am right. I choose to do the right thing, even when it doesn't benefit me. You should try it sometime; it really helps a man sleep at night." He looked over at the tea service and pointed at it, "Ah, coffee, why thank you so much for your hospitality." The sheriff poured himself a cup, ignoring the need for a saucer. He slurped on his coffee as the other two men

glared at one another in silence.

Freeman broke first, "No, I will not, no, no, I cannot help you!"

"Ah, Freeman, Freeman....Mr. Freeman." JT gazed sincerely into the terrified and angry eyes of the banker. "You already have helped us. As a matter of fact, I have a little thank you note planned for the papers tomorrow. You see, it's about the brave bank broker whose conscience forced him to help local law enforcement indict a very dangerous crime syndicate."

"But that's a lie; you can't do that!" Freeman's eyes went wild with fright, and he cowardly thought of what Rocko would do if he read something like that in the newspaper, true or not.

"But it is true, Freeman," Andrew offered. "You helped me." He held up his tea, "I am a deputy of the Sheriff, and this document in my pocket will help indict you both. Although you did not give it to me, without your involvement, its discovery would not have been possible."

Freeman dropped into his chair in defeat, "No, no, no." He shook his head as a lone tear streamed down his cheek.

"Or..." Sheriff JT implied as he slurped more coffee.

The defeated man looked up and begged with a whine, "What do you want to know?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Full house, you losers! Ha!” A stubbled man with a soggy cigar stump stuck between swollen lips slammed down weathered and creased playing cards before gathering his winnings with big hairy arms.

“Come on, Beef, I had three of a kind, ya gotta let me win one, or I ain’t gonna be playing.” Beef’s babyfaced companion tossed his cards onto the table with a bandaged hand.

“Shut it and quit your whining, Sally! We ain’t playing fer charity or happy feelings, but to win!” The voice came from another tough. This one was missing three front teeth and had two swollen eyes.

Defeated, the fourth man said nothing but tossed his cards into the middle of the table. He sported a bandaged head and a large gash on his left cheek.

“Yeah, Sally, we ain’t here to be soft.”

“It’s Sal! Not Sally.” The youngster quipped angrily.

The older thug pointed a fat finger at the kid. “I’ll call you whatever I please, and you’ll like it. Cause we’z here to win and make sure everyone around knows it. We own this town, and if you can’t get that into your thick skull, you best be moving on.”

“Ok, ok, I just don’t like to always be on the losing end. Especially after that beating we all took from that crazy cowboy!”

The men were all holed up in a small, broken-down building that was previously a feed and seed shop. It was “acquired” when their boss, Rocko, had decided it was a good “way-station” for girls in transit between jobs. It was large enough and secure so that none of the young ladies could escape but not so secure that it would draw too much attention from the public.

They never worried too much about being caught, as half the police force and most of the politicians could be considered their colleagues; however, the perception was half the battle. So they worked hard at making their lucrative business of “employing” young girls invisible to anyone who didn’t know where to look. Yet, it was available enough through “word of mouth” referrals to attract new clients, especially affluent ones.

The silent thug with a head wound up stood and motioned to the back.

Beef waved him on, “Yeah, yeah, go check on the merchandise and make

sure they got some water, too.” He shuffled the deck of cards, “So, how about we do some five-card stud?”

“I hate stud, and you know that.” The toothless thug growled.

“And I don’t care, cause I’m the dealer, and I git to choose.” He chuckled to himself as he dealt the cards out. “And, by the way, that madman who braced us, his luck has run out; he just doesn’t know it. So he’ll never get that chance again. The next time we meet, he’ll never even see me coming.” Beef promised and grinned to himself, then leaned back to admire his injured hand.

Two shotgun blasts suddenly crashed through the front of the building. The men all hit the rough plank deck for cover. The solid oak front door dropped to the floor as a massive black stallion stormed inside. A long dark figure strode atop the ton of horseflesh. The three thugs lay motionless except for young Sal, whose right boot quivered in fear.

The dark figure walked his black horse deeper into the building. The men slowly eased up to a standing position, desperately scheming on how to turn the tables on this intruder. But the rider didn’t give them time. Instead, the dark rider and his big stallion herded them farther back into the old shop. Two thugs carrying clubs joined from a side room, curious about the ruckus; both stopped at the sight of a massive black horse pawing at the floor. An all-black rider loomed over them like the undertaker.

For an eternity, no one moved a muscle or spoke a word.

Finally, the dark rider spoke. “In our last encounter, you did not accept my kind offer to walk away. Even though you did not, I still chose not to assert lethal force. This time, I will not be so kind. Allow me to take all the young ladies held here against their will, and I shall not hurt nor kill any of you.”

“YOU!” Beef exclaimed and pointed his wet stub of a cigar at the intruder, then rubbed his bruised jaw, “Ya got a lot of sand, but this time, you’re a dead man. Get him!”

Andrew growled and set his gaze on his first target, “So be it.” He gripped his reins and swung the horse left and then right as two men rushed him from the left and another from the right. All three were knocked onto their back. Another attempted to grab the reins as Andrew tried to warn him off. “That is an error, sir.” He charged the horse forward a few steps. The massive horse’s head hit hard into the thug’s chest. The attacker flew at an awkward angle through a rocking chair and into the wall. Except for the moans of the injured thugs, all seemed still for a few moments, but Andrew’s years of experience told him it wasn’t over yet.

The Kid's peripheral vision caught quick movement behind him. He ducked as Beef attempted to shoot Andrew in the back with a palm gun. The big thug and the little gun missed, but the rider and his stallion did not. The mighty beast landed a kick into Beef's midsection, exploding chunks of dinner and whiskey out of his mouth and sending him into a corner wall joint. His spine snapped with a decisive *crack*.

"BOOM!" Andrew jerked. JT had unloaded a double-barrel shotgun; a lone man fell face-first to the floor from the shadows.

"Why, thank you, Sheriff." Andrew grinned at JT.

The lawman drooped the weapon over his shoulder and flashed a cocky grin, "I can get used to this! It's like a new sheriff in town..."

A movement to their left forced both men to grab for their sidearms.

"Please don't shoot. I don't wanna die nor get whooped by you again." The baby-faced thug, Sal, raised a bandaged hand high.

JT looked at Andrew and shrugged.

Andrew swung his front leg over the horn of his saddle and slid down the stallion with his big Remington still up and ready to shoot. "What name do you go by, sir?"

Taken back by the manner and politeness, the young tough hesitated.

JT rolled his eyes, "What's yer name!" and then jabbed the captive in the ribs with his scattergun.

"Sal, jeez, it's Sal! Ya could be a little more polite like ya friend here."

"That's an Irish, New Yorker's accent, I deduct?" JT asked.

"So what? Lots of Irish 'round hee-ah."

"Yeah," JT retorted, "and the leader's name is Rocko, ain't it?"

"I ain't never heard of no Rocko."

Something in JT snapped. "We'll see about that," he yelled as he swung the butt of his shotgun.

Andrew stepped between the two and caught the makeshift club midair, "Sheriff! This is not us! We are not above the law, or have you forgotten that convicting those who believe they are above the law *is* the mission?"

JT glared at Andrew with rage in his eyes. The heat from his face had fogged his spectacles, and sweat dripped out from under his bowler hat. "Out of my way before I do something we both regret."

The room's atmosphere changed. The tension was so thick; you could lather it like butter. After a few seconds and what felt like a lifetime, Andrew's face

changed. It started as the extraordinarily calm and polite expression even JT had grown accustomed to but transformed into something cold and dark. His tone went up an octave, and his eyes widened with craze. Most terrifying was a grin that looked almost sickening, like a coyote about to tear into a live rabbit. “Ok, JT, you want to take this road; I am your man. I have disposed of more men than you have investigated: more sons, fathers, husbands, and people than you will ever want to record. So, Mister *Sheriff*, what is one more? What is one more kill to chase the satisfaction and justice written in blood? First, beat his head in; see if that makes you feel better? Next, kill him. Then hunt down his friends and torture then kill them too; see if that satisfies your bloody sense of justice.

“Then, we shall hunt down and shoot Rocko dead, and you may even take your sweet time, enjoy the screams from his agony and moans of pain. However, since there will never be enough agony or screams of pain, you, sir, will have to find another villain, another despot. And another, father, brother or son, and kill, then kill, THEN KILL AGAIN!!!” Andrew’s grip tightened on the shotgun, and he stood to full height, towering his long, lean frame over JT’s shorter body.

JT crouched, terrified, suddenly remembering himself and who his “deputy” used to be.

Feeling he had made his point, Andrew leaned back on his heels, and his voice calmed, “JT, I am not here to hurt you,” he released the stock of the shotgun and dusted the lapels of JT’s coat. “I am here to help you, to be a friend.”

JT hung his head in shame, and Andrew placed a compassionate hand on the young lawman’s shoulder.

With Andrew’s back to him and JT feeling bad about losing his composure, Sal thought this would be his only time for the element of surprise. He brought up a knife to stab Andrew in the back. JT looked up right when Sal made his move, and the change in JT’s facial expression was enough to warn Andrew. He used JT’s shoulder for balance, picked his knee up into his chest, bent forward into his friend, and kicked the boot of his right heel out with a complete extension. His massive boot caught every bit of Sal’s solar plexus. The thug dropped the knife and grabbed for his chest, stumbled around several steps, unable to breathe. When he finally caught his air, he managed, “Not again, twice...stupid, so...” He did not have enough air for the string of curse words planned.

Andrew gestured further into the old feed and seed shop, “Now, Master Sal, after we tie up your companions, you will please take us to the young ladies.”

The room was dark and damp and smelled of death. However, the sounds of breathing confirmed to Andrew that something inside the stench still lived. He glared at Sal.

“Hey, don’t look at me, man; it’s not my idea. Besides, we make sure they ain’t sick and get ‘em food ‘n water every day, I swear!” Sal smiled nervously.

With a glare, Andrew drew his big Remington and ‘accidentally’ smacked Sal in the side of the head with the barrel. The thug’s eyes rolled back into his head as he dropped to the floor.

JT stood stunned, “Oh, and if you do it, that’s ok?”

Andrew shrugged his shoulders and grinned, “Oops...He will recover.” He moved through the door slowly and whispered back to JT, “Move slowly and carefully. We do not know how the ladies will react to our presence....”

Before Andrew could complete his sentence, a scream of desperation and anger split the dark, silent room as a shadow leaped from the darkness. Andrew did not see the attacker as it had concealed itself behind the door. He struggled to get a hand on the vicious attacker, but like a cougar, it locked itself onto Andrew’s back with its heels around his hips and fingernails digging into his chest, trying to bite through Andrew’s neck.

He had to spin his head away from the assailant in a circle to keep the animal from succeeding, but in doing so, he could not steady his feet enough to fight back. He was about to do the only thing he could think of and jump onto his back to crush the determined fighter when JT shone a light upon them, and Simon dashed into the room.

“Kat! It’s me, Simon. STOP!”

The “cougar” relaxed a bit, and jumped down from Andrew’s back, and stared at the doorway with disbelief.

“Simon?”

She rushed to her little brother and embraced him with a tight squeeze, “Ya gotta calm down, sis, you’re gonna crush me dead!”

“Well, I’m so sorry,” the scrappy sister snapped back, “until five seconds ago, I just never thought I’d see you again!”

Andrew smiled and looked at JT. They both grinned as a warm sense of satisfaction and joy filled them. The gunfighter reached for his hat to take it off out of politeness for the lady but stopped short. His right shoulder holster was empty! Andrew held up a finger, “Uhh!”

Kat swung the heavy hand cannon around with considerable speed and

pointed the barrel at Andrew's chest from only eight feet away, "Run, Simon." Then, with a determined glare, she cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger.

Andrew reacted entirely out of instinct. There was only one last chance maneuver if a shooter had the drop on you from a short distance...charge the bullet.

The Kid dove into a sharp summersault and slammed his big boot heel into the top of the pistol just as it fired a bullet into the wooden flooring. Andrew didn't stop his momentum but popped back onto his feet, and with a palm strike to Kat's face, rendered her unconscious. Andrew caught her small frame before her head could bounce onto the hard wooden surface.

Simon stepped back defensively, wincing at every movement with flinched nervous fists. Then, at the sight of his sister trying to shoot his friend and then his friend disarming and laying her out cold, with a clenched jaw and a wince on his face, Simon finally managed to say, "Ahhhh, cretin-afterclaps, come on man!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

“She’s resting comfortably and will be okay. She will have a little extra color in her left cheek for a while, but that’s it.” Margaret patted Andrew on the arm to assure him.

For Simon, that was not enough. He was furious, “I saw you take on half a dozen men, some bigger than you, and a little tussle with Kat, and you lay her out. Lucky ya didn’t kill ‘er!” Simon picked up the nearest object and chucked it at Andrew. The trio of Andrew, Simon, and Margaret were all lumped together in the hallway outside of Kat’s room, so when the teacup sailed at Andrew, all he could do was turn his body and take the ceramic blast in the shoulder. However, Simon’s rage only grew. He reached down and gripped a large clay potted plant and hefted it over his head. His crazed eyes looked to charge at Andrew, but the lady of the home was not having any of it.

“Young man, you put that down, this instant!”

Simon shoved it down to the ground, still panting.

Margaret went on, “Now, the good Lord helped you both rescue your sister, and for that, you two need to thank Him.”

Simon snapped, “Ah, I had enough of you two and your hocus pocus about Jesus. Yeah, sure, He saved my life, but *He* let me get shot first! He helped me save my sister with y’all’s help, but where was *He* when she was getting handed off to those “upstanding” men who used her? Where was *HE* when she was taken?! Nah, I know He’s out there, but He doesn’t give a bosh!”

“Simon!”

“What?” The boy snapped back, “He needs *you* to defend Him? He’s God ‘n all, so why’s all the filth have to happen, or is God just off His nut?”

Auntie Margaret smiled patiently, “Sweetie, that is not how the Lord thinks. He does not need to be defended because He does not get offended, not like this anyway. He loves you, and it hurt Him just the same as it hurt you, all of it. You were not alone. He was taking that pain with you, all the way to His death.”

Simon shook his head, “Nope. He had His chance. I’m done.” The ruffian turned and stormed off.

Andrew stepped forward to chase after him, but his auntie held him back, “Let him go, son; he still needs time. Now, let us see to the other fifteen young ladies downstairs and how we will best accommodate them.”

After the successful rescue of the young ladies, minus the snafu with Simon's sister Kat, the trio decided to take all the victims to a temporary safe location, half a mile away. Then, JT and Simon waited with the girls as Andrew rode hard for Rollins Transportation. Secretly being a softy at heart, especially for some young girls who were in trouble, Rollins got his two best rigs together, one with the horses that Andrew already drove and the other with the mules that Rollins bullwhipped. Then, together they set off to pick up the precious cargo. It took them most of the night, but finally, the troop reached Andrew's estate with first light.

Not knowing what type of retaliation to expect, the men, including Rollins, stayed close to the girls armed with scatterguns and Winchester rifles. Nothing happened that day, so JT rode into town and scouted it out. As it turned out, the word on the street was that no one was talking...about anything.

That made JT nervous because he knew how intelligent and sneaky Rocko could be. One thing Rocko had that most villains did not was patience. However, Andrew was not concerned but only said that the Lord would remain the shield around them. Simon and JT tried not to roll their eyes.

The next day, Rollins went home to pack some things and then returned to stay with the group; as he was a witness against Rocko and his conspirators, he too was a target. Andrew thought he saw Rollins smile when he found out he had to stay. The old stage-driver would never admit to wanting something that felt like family. However, now Rollins could pretend he didn't want to be there but love every minute of it, acting like the doting uncle keeping everyone safe and the livestock healthy. His livestock and stages would also stay on Andrew's estate until everything blew over. "That way, the vermin can only burn out that old house and barn, I don't give a darn about. I only care 'bout my beasts and rides. I'd die before anyone touches them!"

That same day, JT sent a telegram to the Capital in Augusta. He explained, "I need a federal judge to sign a warrant for Rocko and marshals to carry it out. Now I have the evidence to go to trial outside our jurisdiction." The young sheriff was so giddy and excited that he returned twice to collect all the essentials he had forgotten and a third time because JT thought he'd forgotten his eyeglasses. The young lawman finally located them on his face.

That night, the estate housed Andrew, Simon, Rollins, Margaret, Fredric, Kat, and fifteen scared, confused ladies aged thirteen to twenty. With all the noise and worrying about Rocko discovering where they were, Andrew could not sleep. So he tore off his covers, quietly slid on his clothes, and snuck outside through the back. It was almost a full moon and clear skies, so there was plenty of light for a walk. As Andrew began strolling, he heard a faint squeak and a small clank of metal.

“Oh shoot!” Someone muttered.

Andrew rolled his eyes and ran into the woods.

Simon clutched a large white pillowcase, slung over his shoulder like Father Christmas. Inside was a sizable amount of plunder he had spent the past three weeks gathering from around the estate when no one was watching him. He had candlesticks, silverware, a few old firearms, knives, and some other odds and ends he hoped had gold on them so that he could get something from his fence.

His plan was simple, sell the stolen goods, get some cash, and he and his sister would hop a train out west. Maybe one day he could learn to be the new Kid, then nobody would tussle with him or his sister.

“So, Master Simon, where are you going at such a late hour?”

Simon dropped the sack and turned with fright, “Drew, you freaked me out, dude! Don’t do that!”

Andrew smiled slyly, “You thought you could get away with it?”

“Huh?”, Simon stammered, “With what - this? Ah, this is just some old junk I thought I would get a few bobs for, try to get something nice for Kat, you know... so...”

Andrew glanced at him with skepticism, “Sure, my young friend, I know.”

Before Simon could stop him, Andrew snatched up the pillowcase and used the moonlight to peek inside. “Hmm, some nice stuff here.” He handed it back to Simon and reached into his breast pocket towards his Remington .38.

Simon pleaded, “I’m sorry, Drew, I didn’t have a choice; I need to get outa here with my sister before Rocko tracks us down!”

Andrew ignored him but withdrew his hand from his coat with force, “You forgot this.”

Simon shrieked and covered, then checked himself for bullet holes. After finding none, he looked up. Andrew held out a silver pocket watch. “I purchased it when I was in California some years ago; it should be enough to pay for one train ticket.”

Simon did not move; he couldn't. He was shocked, scared, and weirded out all at the same time. Andrew placed the watch in the sack and turned to walk away.

Simon's stunned silence finally ended, when for the first time in years, he revealed a little of what he felt, "Drew, why don't you just shoot me, or hit me, or just get rid of me like everyone else does?"

Andrew glanced back at the young man. Even in the pale moonlight, he could see the pain and sadness in his eyes.

"Because Simon, I am one of the few people you will ever meet who should have been hung from a tall tree many times over but was not. I was forgiven and set free to learn to love..." Andrew paused, and a tear escaped his left eye, streaking his cheek. When he spoke, he could not keep the emotion from cracking his voice, "My dear boy, if I can love myself, loving you is easy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Slow down, Sheriff! This ain’t no racetrack!” Frederic bellowed as JT flew past on his tan mare. The butler shook his head with disapproval and went back to trimming his hedges.

JT slowed his horse down near the big house, only long enough to jump down. He braced his bowler hat as his boots hit the dirt, but he had misjudged his forward momentum, so his balance threw him forward, “Horse manure!” He exclaimed, stumbling into the dirt. “Come on, JT, let’s go!” He muttered to himself as he jumped up and moved towards the mansion with grit and purpose.

“Deputy! Deputy Andrew? I need you here now. It’s JT, please, come to the door.” He pounded on the giant oak door.

“Son, you won’t find anybody in there!” Fredric shouted from his hedges.

“Why the heck not?” JT snapped back.

“We all stay in the back, in the servant’s quarters.”

“Thank you, Sir,” JT tore around the back and muttered to himself, “Giant, unused house, now why doesn’t that surprise me.” He bounded down all three steps at once back to ground level and saw the path to the servant’s quarters and cottage and ran for it, screaming, “Andrew, Andrew, I need you here, now!”

A window on the second story of the cottage swung up, “Hush your yelling right now, Sheriff, or I am marking you for a gravestone by night’s end! Do we have an understanding?”

JT glanced up to see a middle-aged, handsome-faced, black woman with a look that could only come from a mother hen protecting her young. He’d seen it plenty of times when JT had stupidly taken his life into his own hands by sass’n off to his own mom. JT snatched his bowler hat from his head and twirled it nervously in his hands. “Please excuse my yelling, ma’am. I do tend to be a bull in a china shop when my mind is set on something. But, I do have urgent news for the deputy that can’t wait.”

She said nothing, only nodded her head, pressed an index finger to her lips, and slowly shut the window.

A moment later, Andrew came around the house. He was not wearing a coat, and his sleeves were rolled up. “Sheriff, happy you dropped by. I am making myself useful by splitting rails for a new section of the garden. If I can manage that, I may attempt to grow something useful, such as tomatoes or...”

JT held up a hand. "Andrew, wait..."

"Ok, squash, maybe? Do you have a problem with tomatoes?"

"Oh, great...now you have a sense of humor. Can you just shut your mouth for one minute?"

Andrew's face lit up, and he took JT by the arm and began walking him into the house, "Well, of course, I can; I have gone days without uttering one word. It is fairly common when trailing men for a bounty."

As they entered the house, JT blurted out, "Where's Simon?"

Andrew shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know. He is most likely exploring somewhere."

JT rolled his eyes and plopped down into the nearest chair, "Andrew, how could you be so stupid. You know, don't you?"

With a very cautious expression, Andrew asked, "Know what?"

"I knew you were lying. You know where that boy is, don't you?"

"Why would you say that?" JT rolled his eyes, "Fine, we don't have time for this, but fine." He threw his hat on the side table next to him and crossed his arms, "I know Simon didn't take off for good 'cause his sister is still upstairs; otherwise, I wouldn't have taken such a tongue lashing from your auntie. Second, you lied when I asked you where he was, you said, and I quote: 'I don't know, he is most likely exploring.' You have never used a contraction the entire time since we've met. On one occasion, you stated, 'I believe the use of a contraction is a lazy man's expository and is uttered by one who lacks imagination.'" JT pointed his finger, "Which describes almost every man and woman ever born, so you remember that when you judge others with such broad strokes, Mister!"

Andrew sat across from JT on a footstool. "Yes, you are partially correct; I am not sure where he is," Andrew hesitated and chose his following words cautiously, "He was less than honest about his trip. However, as you say, Kathryn is still here. Therefore I know Simon shall return. We will discuss the nature of his trip upon his return."

JT stood up and threw up his hands, "Ah, of all the caked up, dirty blue... Andrew, I already know. That's what I've been trying to say. That idiot kid was caught trying to fence stuff I can only assume came from here. He drew way too much attention. Before I could get to him, the police did. And the only ones more invested in busting up my case than Rocko is the city police!"

"Oh..." Andrew dropped his head into his chest and sighed with a lot of resignation. "So much for Jean Valjean transitioning his life."

JT rolled his eyes and slapped his head, “You caught him and let him go. This is not French fiction, Andrew. It’s real-life!”

Andrew shrugged his shoulders, “And him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to *take thy coat* also. Luke 6.”

“Thou shalt not steal! The TEN COMMANDMENTS!”

“It is not theft if I permitted the suspected thief to...”

“None of that matters now! The dirty cops and Rocko have him. They’ll tear this location out of him if they have to, and you know how stubborn that little sneak is. He won’t talk, not with his sister finally safe. If we don’t get to him soon...” He let his voice trail off.

Both men stared at the floor for several moments. The insane nature and stress of the past few weeks took its toll. They were both tired...dog tired.

Slowly, with soreness in his joints, Andrew eased his knees onto the floor, clasped his hands, and lifted his eyes. JT noticed his partner’s move to pray and ripped his hat off, and bowed his head. “God help us, please send us help. I don’t know what to do. Amen.”

“Amen,” JT repeated.

At that moment Margaret walked in, and she was mad! “Why are you two on your knees acting so pathetic? I would think by this time, you both would have realized that without God’s protection, you would have been shot dead ten times over. Now, get up and finish this,” She put her hands on hips, “or do you think He is not God anymore nor cares about justice or Simon?”

“No, ma’am,” both men shook their heads like chastened school children.

“Are you defeated?”

They both stood, “No, ma’am!”

“Now go, and I don’t want you back here without results.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Both men stepped outside into the sunlight.

They were still tired, so even the hot sun added to the heaviness they both felt, but they knew she was right. They could not quit. They would NOT quit!

“Well, Deputy, I am open to suggestions. Where do we start?”

A thought popped in Andrew’s head. He smiled to himself and secured his hat to his head as he said, “I suggest we visit our new ‘friend’?”

Freeman locked the bank as usual and gave a big warm smile to a couple as they walked by. A big friendly smile from a facade that took more work than

ever to maintain. Ever since he had been ramrodded into giving into those two self-righteous lawmen, he had to sleep with one eye open. Not only that, but his unique “intuition” had left him. No matter what he did, the work he loved so much was no longer the same. It was as if what drove him to be the biggest and best had been removed.

The broker stuffed the key in his pocket and started down the street, one hand swinging his fancy-dan cane and the other in his coat pocket pawing a silver pearled, Smith and Wesson single-shot .32 palm-gun.

As he passed the last alley before his street, four hands grabbed him by the collar and dragged him around the corner, then slammed him against the side of a brick building. He tried to pull his gun and defend himself, but it was useless. Quick hands twisted his fingers around into a wrist flex, tore it from his palm, and tossed it aside.

Andrew stuck his face into Freeman’s and grinned. “When defending yourself with a palm gun, Mr. Freeman, you must be willing to shoot through your \$50 Parisian coat.”

“No, not, you two again; I gave you what you wanted. If that girl wasn’t there, then I don’t know.”

JT grinned, “Ah, shucks, Freeman, you were so much help last time, we decided to hire you again.”

“Are you off your nut? I can’t help you again! I’d be a dead man walk’n.”

Andrew swiftly drew out his left Remington and stuck the barrel into the moist left nostril of the terrified banker. Freeman squirmed, but his body was trapped against the brick wall.

“That suit is not going to be worth much more than mine if you don’t stand still, Mr. Freeman.” JT quipped.

Andrew’s eyes looked glazed, cold, and dead. He cocked the hammer back.

“Sheriff! You can’t let him do this!” Freeman begged.

JT patted his shoulder with sincerity, “It’s ok, that shot won’t kill you. You’ll just get to live with a little reminder on your face as to what happens to a man who helps round up children for money. That, and you’ll never have a stuffy nose again.”

The banker turned as white as a sheet, “Dear God, no, *please*.”

A gleam flashed in Andrew’s gaze, “Yes, Mr. Freeman, you do need God, and I do hope He will have mercy on you because I am struggling to extend any

of my own.”

“OK, ok, whatever you want. Just not the face!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Freeman, why on earth are you here? The city didn’t sell the jail to the bank, did they? Did city hall finally bankrupt us? Hahaha!” A red-faced constable with a bulging midsection and leftover bits of dinner still on his dark blue wool uniform reclined on an overused office chair. He slumped behind the front desk of the city’s policing headquarters. Without much to do in the station after dark, except fill the drunk tank in the early morning hours, this was the perfect job for the fat and lazy *policeman*.

Attached to the constable’s chubby wrist was a thin leather strap tied to a short nightstick he twirled in his hand. He laughed at his own joke, a joke that Freeman had heard far too often from far too many simple minds. The usually slick and confident banker was nervous as a cat. However, handling the local cops was the easy part. “Officer Thompson, of course, they did not. The city, I assure you, is doing just fine. I am only here to ensure concerns from...other friends.” Freeman tilted his head a bit and raised an eyebrow ever so slightly.

Thompson tapped his nose with a thick finger and winked, “Ah...yes, of course, well, there is just nothing to worry about. We have that little ‘issue’ under control.”

Feeling he had been given the upper hand in the conversation, Freeman leaned in over the constable and tapped his fingers on his desk, “I’m afraid your word isn’t good enough this time, Constable. I’m here to make sure.”

Thompson furrowed bushy eyebrows. It took him a moment to understand the insinuation. But, finally, his mind caught up, and his eyes went wide, “You mean, umm, Ro...”

“Shh...you idiot, don’t name names unless you want to get us both killed!”

“Yes, of course, I’m sorry, I just mean...um...” Thompson swallowed hard, and Freeman was in total control of the conversation now.

“Well, let’s just hope that little near slip up doesn’t get back to our ‘friends.’ Of course, I won’t tell them, but...”

“But, *what?*!”

“I do need to check on our little problem.”

“Yeah, I understand, right away, sir.” Thompson hefted himself up to his feet, “Got the keys right here.” He slapped his hip pocket.

Thompson turned and shuffled down a long brick hallway with Freeman in tow.

“Good, good, and I will also need to know how many other guards are on duty at any one time.” Freeman asked with a “no-nonsense” seriousness.

“Oh, well, you see, during the day, there’s three or four, but we hardly got anybody in jail right now, so I’m the only one needed. Nobody comes through that door, and if they do, I only gotta sound the alarm, and I’ll have half a dozen cops here in minutes.”

“Alarm?” Freeman asked.

“Yeah, I’ll just fire off my colt a few times, and hades will rain down on anyone dumb enough to brace me.”

“Yes, brilliant.” Freeman smiled but rolled his eyes.

They turned a corner into the cells, and Thompson pointed his nightstick to the right. In the corner, Freeman spied a small shivering figure. It had to be the kid. He was curled under a prison-issue wool blanket and rocking back and forth.

Freeman’s eyes went wide when he realized that Simon was in such bad shape and that the boy’s friends might just take their pound of flesh out of his hide. “He’s going to kill me.” The words fell from his mouth like a thud.

“What?” Thompson asked.

Fortunately, Freeman snapped out of the brain fog quickly enough to make the statement work. “If we don’t keep this,” he pointed at Simon, “little issue secure, he’s gonna kill me...us.”

Thompson seemed to accept the explanation, “Oh, yeah, well, we are going to be ok, Freeman, trust me. Nothing to worry about, the ‘Lil sneak ain’t’ going no wh...”

The constable’s face went numb, and eyes blank. He tilted forward, slammed against the jail bars, and slid onto the concrete floor. Thompson had a spot of blood and a massive knob on the back of his head.

“What the...” Freeman turned to see what had happened and squealed with fright. “Ahh. Don’t do that; you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Andrew wasn’t concerned with Freeman’s feelings. He was already digging through Thompson’s wool pockets. After locating the keys, he unlocked the cell and gingerly scooped Simon up into his lanky arms.

“Time to go; we got company.” JT rushed into the cells sporting a long dark duster and armed with a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun and a .32 Webley Bulldog revolver.

They set off quickly, with Freeman bringing up the rear. Just as they were about to make their exit, they heard footsteps on the boardwalk outside. Andrew

cradling Simon, wrapped in the gray wool blanket, glanced around quickly for a place to hide or an exit, but he saw nothing. JT peered around the corner then held up three fingers.

Andrew winced; he didn't want a shoot-out. He looked down at Simon; his face was cut up, his right eye swollen shut, and he had a blue and purple bulge on his jaw. Andrew knew that his ribs and legs would be worse. With nowhere left to turn, the bounty hunter turned deputy, once again lifted his eyes upwards. This time he whispered his prayer aloud, "Father in Heaven, we need help, fast, or circumstances will become violent, posthaste."

Hands quickly grabbed JT and Andrew and shoved them against the wall closest to the door. It was Freeman! He pushed a finger against his lips and backed away from them, waiting for the group of police to enter.

As they did, they all recognized the slick businessman and nodded their heads to say hi. But before they could question anything, Freeman took control of the room with some mild amateur acting skills. "Officers, I'm so happy you're here, I got here only a minute ago, and no one was here. The place was wide open, and the cell was empty!"

They all grabbed at their sidearms and looked at each other with shock and confusion. Pressing up against the wall ten feet behind them, JT had his shotgun gun and .32 level at the group but was quiet as a stone. On the other hand, Andrew was trying to keep Simon from making moaning noises with a big hand over his mouth.

Freeman recognized he had little time and so went for the gold, "I don't know who's running this sideshow you call a 'police station,' but if you don't get out there and find that kid, right now, no one can protect you." For extra assurance, he placed his hands on the shoulder of the constable closest to Andrew and JT and turned the cop away and back out the doorway. It wasn't necessary. They all sprinted out of the jailhouse and began yelling orders at one another and gathering more constables to help in the search.

The Kid and the sheriff both sighed heavily and slunk outside into the shadows of the building with Freeman in tow.

As they rounded the corner, JT grabbed Freeman's collar, "Why'd you do that?"

Freeman looked perplexed, "Just because I make money from unscrupulous men, Sheriff, does not mean I like them."

"I do suggest you remain in our company, Mr. Freeman. It will not take long

for the oversized constable to awaken and identify you.” Andrew suggested.

Freeman nodded his head vigorously, “But you are going to hide and protect me, right?”

JT grinned, “That, sir, depends. Are you willing to testify as a witness?”

“But I’ll go to jail too!” Freeman whined.

“Yep, but you won’t be dead!”

Freeman considered this for a moment and was about to scream from frustration, but a sudden thought saved his emotions in time. He snapped his fingers excitedly, “I got it, I can get you all the evidence you need, and I can just... go away.”

“Evidence?” Andrew and JT asked in unison and shared a glance.

“We’ve been spending far too much time together.” JT quipped.

“Agreed,” Andrew responded.

“Listen, you two. I have ledgers hidden in my office, in my handwriting. I will sign an affidavit swearing to everything.”

Andrew and JT stood back and whispered back and forth, ending with Andrew nodding and JT shrugging his shoulders, “Ok, banker-boy, let’s go check it out.”

“However, we need to remain off the streets. And in the shadows, as to not be seen by the local constabulary.” Andrew said as he led the way with Simon still cradled in his arms.

Freeman leaned in and whispered towards JT’s ear, “Does he always talk like that?”

“What? You mean, like a Shakespearean actor turned lawyer? Yep, most of the time.”

“And what about the other times?”

“That, Freeman, is when you want to be someplace other than his bad side.”

It took them an hour to make the six blocks to the bank. The police and Rocko’s men were patrolling everywhere and looking through every building. Slowly and carefully, they moved in and out of shadows, using alleyways and structures when they could. Even then, Andrew knew a few times God had hidden them from the roving patrols.

When they had finally made it to the alleyway across from the bank, Andrew handed Freeman the bloodied youth. “You will remain here, with Simon.

The Sheriff and I will go.”

Freeman took the boy awkwardly and was about to argue when Andrew added, “And if you have not remained but have fled, I shall hunt you down.”

The banker rolled his eyes, “I know, and beat me with my gun.”

Andrew shook his head in confusion, “Of course not, sir.”

Freeman sighed with relief.

“I will just shoot you in the face.”

Freeman’s eyes went wide, and he gulped as the other two raced for his office.

Just as Andrew and JT reached the bank’s red brick walls, Freeman thought he heard several voices making their way down the street. He looked around for a place to hide. Two water barrels sat against a wall near him. It would be a tight squeeze, but he thought they should fit.

Awkwardly, he backed in, trying to keep the boy from banging his head. Simon had to be propped up to a 45-degree angle on the banker’s lap to fit. He eased down onto the ground. A squishing sound met his backside, and his heart sank. “\$30 trousers, of course, everything else in my life is ruined, why not my Parisian fitted suit as well.” He muttered to himself. He could see a little bit of street between the wall and barrel, so at least he would know if someone approached. He looked to the heavens and muttered, “This stinks.” Then he looked back to his charge.

The boy’s head leaned against the stained wood of the barrel. Still unconscious and shivering, his head made a slight tapping noise on the oak barrel. Freeman rolled his eyes and pulled the redhead into his chest, “Fine, kid, just this one time, and don’t say anything to anyone. I don’t want this to become a regular habit...holding children.” The child’s shivering pulsed in Freeman’s arms every few seconds. So the banker snuggled him tighter.

“Wow,” he thought to himself, “they really worked this kid over. Why didn’t he just talk?”

But then another thought hit him, “Why didn’t they wait? They could have just set a trap. Why beat the kid almost to death?” He thought for a moment, they could have used half a dozen different methods to get what they wanted, but it seemed more like they just wanted to beat someone, and Simon was the only one available. But he’s just a child, no more than twelve!

“When I was his age, I was on my own, but I had a job, then started my first apprenticeship.” Freeman recollected. “I was lucky. I had the old man who

saw something in me and took me in. This kid's life probably didn't start much different than mine; lost his parents, found himself on the street, and had to do what he could to survive. It's just not fair; life stinks."

Simon nuzzled into Freeman, subconsciously trying to find warmth.

"Why'd they have to beat you, kid? Why?" A single tear trickled down his cheek.

Scenes from his own childhood flashed in his mind. After he had lost his parents, he found himself living with neighbors he barely knew. Then the day came when they gave him to a workhouse because they couldn't afford another mouth to feed. That feeling of loneliness pulled on his throat and swelled his eyes as he recalled the fear as the older boys jeered him and others checked his pockets for anything to steal as he first walked into the cold, damp and overcrowded workhouse. The beatings he got from the older boys bubbled itself up from a hidden memory vault. More than once he had wondered, as four or five boys encircled him, kicking and stomping at him over and over, "Is this it? Will I die this time?" He was only eight.

These emotions swelled in his chest. He gripped the shivering little body tighter and rocked him back and forth gently, "Why did they have to do that? Why'd they have to beat you?" He caressed Simon's head, "You'll be safe now, nothing's going to happen now, you'll be ok...Oh God, why?" Tears flowed freely now.

"Why God, why?" He wept. He wept for himself and for the part he had played in hurting so many children: children who were just like him. "God forgive me, please! I was just so scared; what have I done?"

"What the heck is going on?" JT demanded, hovering over a sobbing Freeman. The banker in the Parisian suit rocked Simon gently like a newborn.

Andrew observed the situation and was about to yank Simon from the madman's grasp when a feeling gave him pause. Instead, he pushed JT aside, "Please can you go find us transportation, JT?" He knelt in front of the overdressed financier turned au pair.

"I'm sorry, so sorry," Freeman looked up into Andrew's face, "I don't know what's wrong with me? I feel so guilty, and I can't stop crying, but this poor boy didn't deserve this, and I was a part of it. I'm so sorry."

Andrew smiled, and his face warmed. He took off his hat and gently pulled Freeman to his feet. "You, sir, have experienced Jesus, and He is giving you a chance to start over, to be the man He has made you to be. That can only begin

with the acknowledgment of one's faults." He placed his hand upon Freeman's shoulder, "Come home with us, and I will tell you more about Him."

Freeman sniffed, "I would like that."

He tried to take Simon from Freeman, but the banker declined. "No, I'll carry him, really I need to."

Andrew rose to his feet and nodded, and followed JT down the alley. Freeman chased after him, still protectively latched onto Simon. The slick banker looked up and noticed that the night sky had given way to a grey hue. Dawn would come soon; it was a new day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Indian sage and dog fennel swayed gently from a refreshing breeze. The wildflowers danced to the tune of unseen musicians. Sunshine glinted off a slow-moving stream as water lilies gently rolled along the edges of the water's eroding banks. A hummingbird buzzed overhead, pausing in mid-air for a split second before darting off in another direction. Andrew breathed the scene in deeply and smiled. *This beauty may be as close as I can come to heaven in this life*, the Kid thought to himself.

It had been three days since rescuing Simon. JT had left to take Freeman to the State Capital. The two of them providing the banker's ledgers and Freeman's confession needed for the indictments against Rocko and his conspirators, which were to be carried out by federal marshals. Until the federal lawmen arrived, Andrew, Fredric, and Rollins stayed at the old estate, keeping a lookout.

Even without servants, stables full of a dozen thoroughbred horses, nor lavish parties, the old estate seemed more lively than ever. They had returned some of the young ladies to their families; however, half a dozen had no home. So, they would remain. In return, they were helping with washing, gardening, or any other chore needed around the property. If they weren't working, groups of two or three of them were sharing tea on the porch or picnicking with biscuits and cheese near the woods, at the edge of the flower garden. Considering the environment his childhood home had once been, the freedom Andrew observed the young ladies enjoy warmed his heart and brought tears to his eyes more than once.

"Only Jesus can turn a place I feared for so long into something I can be proud of and love." Andrew mused, allowed.

"What was that?"

Andrew turned suddenly, shocked to see Kathryn had approached him undetected. He wondered if she was that skilled or if he was just not being vigilant.

"How do you do, Ms. Kathryn?" Andrew removed his hat and offered his hand as Simon's older sister stepped over some foliage.

She ignored the gesture, gathered her skirt up just enough to hop over the obstruction with ease. "You do know that you don't have to take your hat off

every time I'm around?"

Andrew furrowed his brow, "Oh, but I do, Ms. Kathryn. It is not a matter of choice, but a habit, forced upon me since before I can remember."

"Huh?" Was Kathryn's only reply. "Well, just don't expect me to need help to get over a tiny bush. I got two legs, you know. So I don't need a man to do anything for me, okay?"

"Of course not, Ma'am," Andrew replied with a slight bow and placed his hat back on his head.

Kathryn walked on past him. Politely Andrew followed at her side, with his hands clasped behind his back.

They walked through the garden for several minutes without a word. Then, when they did speak, they spoke at once.

"I would like..." they both stopped speaking suddenly and waited for the other to reply.

Neither did; they tried again, but once more, they spoke over each other.

"What I meant to say was..." Andrew grinned sheepishly, and Kathryn rolled her eyes.

The awkwardness was now thick and making Andrew very uncomfortable.

"Just listen to what I have to say, please," Kathryn quickly interjected before she could be interrupted again.

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you for rescuing Simon..." She lingered on the next part, unsure as to what to say, "and for...finding and helping me. I'm sorry I tried to kill you when you came into that disgusting room. I just didn't know who you were."

"Yes, Ms. Kathryn, that is quite alright, I understand. And I do hope one day you can forgive me..." Now, Andrew struggled with the right words to use, "for incapacitating you the way I did. I am truly sorry."

Kathryn brushed it off, "Yeah, well, I've been hit harder by men much meaner than you. I was just tired and needing water, or I wouldn't have gone down so easily, believe me."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Andrew mused. He admired her fighting spirit and determined mindset. If she had possessed a weapon when she ambushed him, he did not doubt that he would be dead.

They walked on for a few minutes before Kathryn continued, "You're a decent man, a good man, actually...and my brother and I have not met many good men in our lives, so we just don't know how to react. But just know that we may

not say it, especially Simon. That little boy can be the most ungrateful, churlish sneak you'll ever meet, but I do know he looks up to you as God Almighty."

Andrew balked at the comment, "I would not..."

Before he could finish his thought, Kathryn dismissed his comment with a wave of her hand, "Oh, I know, Simon said you take such things seriously. You have to lighten up, Andrew. I didn't mean anything by it, just that he looks up to you as the ideal man to be."

This latest comment made the gunslinger even more uncomfortable, "Has he told you who I was only a short time ago?"

"Yep, he sure has, but it sounds like you weren't the worst man we've come across, and if half of what Simon said is true, then..." She paused again. She obviously was uncomfortable making herself vulnerable to someone she barely knew, "...well, no matter what happens from here on out, I'm just grateful that Simon knew a man like you these last few weeks."

Andrew stopped walking and faced her; she looked up into his eyes. The bruise on her cheek was fading, and color had returned to her face from several nights of sleep and warm meals. Out of habit, her green eyes darted back and forth, searching Andrew's face for signs of ill-intent or deception. The gunslinger took notice of tiny freckles on her nose as she brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face. After realizing he was staring at the young lady, Andrew finally said, "Yes, well, your brother has helped me learn invaluable lessons about myself, which I can never repay. Furthermore, I have no intention of abandoning him. On the contrary, I will make myself available to assist him in becoming the honest, independent man I believe he can become."

For a moment, Kathryn's face softened, and a glow radiated from her eyes as a light wind blew through her wavy strawberry hair.

She caught herself acting "girly" and spun around to continue on their walk. "Mr. Andrew, don't you try going sweet on me. Don't get any ideas."

Andrew turned a deep shade of red which he did his best to hide. He clasped his hands behind his back again and strode alongside Kathryn's swaying skirt, "Of course not, Ma'am, I would never think of such a thing. I must assure you that if I would go 'sweet on you,' my Aunt Margaret would, as the saying goes, 'Tan my hide.'"

The little blonde tough giggled, "That, I can believe."

Andrew suddenly stopped and cocked his head to the right; something was wrong. Behind him, he could hear birds chirping and the sounds of squirrels

rustling through the trees. But, in the northeast corner of the property, dead silence. All the animals had gone quiet. It sounded as though someone or something was trudging through the brush just beyond the tree line of his property. He placed a hand on one of his Remingtons.

“What...what’s wrong?” Kathryn asked, “Are ther...?”

Andrew placed a finger on his lips, then touched his ear. Ever so faintly, he heard a metal click. His entire body flexed, and his breathing slowed even though adrenaline coursed through his veins, which made his heart race, pumping oxygen to his muscles at an accelerated rate, preparing his body for what would come next.

He grabbed Kathryn by the arm in one swift motion, pulled her behind him, and yanked his pistol from the shoulder holster. The gunslinger fired three shots into the trees in rapid succession by holding the trigger down and fanning the hammer back with the left palm of his hand. “Run!” Andrew screamed at Kat just before the treeline exploded from smoke and lead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As Andrew moved, drawing all the fire he could, the girls ran for the house. He had seen some of the ambush locations betrayed by eager, inexperienced shooters. The shootist made two men pay almost immediately with well-aimed shots. The rest of the attackers got wise and took cover, firing with more diligence.

Andrew was not finished. To cover the girl's retreat, he yanked out his second revolver and let out a Comanche scream. Andrew charged the treeline, then dove after three steps firing midair at what little movement he could make out. He rolled once, stood just long enough to fire again, and then barrel-rolled left behind a wooden garden bench. Bits of pine exploded around his head as bullets pierced the milled lumber he had chosen for protection. It was a poor choice for cover, but he had little time to worry about that now. Andrew just needed the bench to hold out long enough for him to reload.

Andrew had only managed to stuff in three bullets when he sensed movement behind him. He twisted and rolled into a prone position and fired. One of Rocko's thugs froze before he could level his rifle, crumpling to the ground with a bullet between his eyes. Andrew rolled quickly to his back, sat up, and fired again, this time into a man's knee cap, dropping him to the dirt and then finishing him with a point-blank shot to the chest.

He was about to begin reloading when a screaming attacker dove over the top of the wooden bench and came down on him with a nine-inch blade. Andrew caught his wrist just as the tip of the knife had begun to enter his shoulder. He groaned in pain but kept enough composure to wrap long legs around his attacker's hips. Andrew used his feet like a monkey to grab and flip his attacker over, putting him atop his would-be assassin and in control. The thug's eyes went crazy with fright as he suddenly found himself in a hopeless position. He tried to kick and scream for help, but Andrew squeezed the thug's ribs with his knees, slammed the knife hand to the ground, and drove his right elbow into the hooligan's windpipe. The Kid rolled quickly for his gun and again tried to reload when the sound of a cocking Colt .45 made him freeze. A cold steel barrel pressed against his head. "Now you finally die!" A gravelly voice hissed.

Instead of a bang, Andrew heard, "CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!!" Metal connected with something solid over and over. Andrew turned to see what it was.

Kathryn had not done what she was told; instead, she returned with a shovel and released a lot of pent-up aggression on the badman's skull. The ruffian would not be getting back up again. The Kid abandoned reloading his weapons, grabbed one of the dead men's colts, blindly firing it behind him as he scooped up Kathryn over his shoulder.

She spat at the man as Andrew hefted her up, "That's what you get, you scumbag!" She continued swinging her weaponized shovel in rage, hoping for another target. Amazingly, a bullet on target for Andrew's back connected with the shovel blade and ricocheted into a wooden flower pot a mere foot from Andrew's next step.

Andrew had no time to notice. Bullets zipped past as he ran as fast as his legs could carry both of them to the house. Unfortunately, his footing betrayed him, and as Andrew stumbled and fell to the ground, Kathryn landed on her backside to his left. He threw up a desperate plea, *Lord Jesus Christ, we will not make it without Your help, please?* The Kid peered over his shoulder just in time to see a line of seven men emerge from the woods, blasting pistols at anything that moved. Shards of rock and dirt sprayed his face as their aim closed in. Kathryn cowered into a fetal position and screamed with fear and anger. With nothing else to do, Andrew crawled to her, took her hand. She peaked at him with one eye.

The Kid smiled as calmly as possible. "It is alright. I am here, and I will not leave you. Just look in my eyes, nowhere else."

Lying in the dirt, she gripped his hand tightly as everything seemed to calm. They didn't feel the whizzing of the bullets, the shards of rock fragments in their faces, only each other, and the warmth of a shared smile.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!" Two of Rocko's men went down hard.

"Crack, Crack, Crack!" Another went down holding his knee, and one more caught lead in his backside as the remaining badmen went for cover.

Andrew glanced up to see JT mounted on a horse and charging through the garden like a madman. He had lost his spectacles and his hat as he charged with the horse's reins stuffed between his teeth, blasting away with two .45 Colt revolvers one after the other.

On their left, Betsy boomed while Rollins rode shotgun for Frederic, who screamed and waved from atop his box seat, "Jump in...now!"

Andrew pushed himself off the ground and, before she could finish standing, grabbed Kathryn around the waist and tossed her into the back of the

buckboard, then screamed, “Go!” Before diving in himself.

Rollins tossed Andrew a .44 Colt Army Model and screamed, “Shoot something!”

With the buckboards bouncing and an unfamiliar weapon, it took the Kid two shots to strike true. When he finally did, his bullets sprayed wood shards into the eyes of one rifleman, and the other hit its target, making a man jump in agony.

Rollins jostled Fredric’s shoulder, “The best time I’ve had in years, just like the old times, right? Yeehaw!”

The bull-whacker’s jubilation was cut short by Fredric, “Rollins, you just got hit.” They both peered down at his bleeding shoulder, then up in the direction it came, “Crossfire!” Rollins yelled over his shoulder to Andrew, who was trying to find another target.

“Crossfire.” Andrew relayed the message to JT, who rode closely behind. Rocko’s men stood and started pushing forward, giving Andrew something at which to shoot. He squeezed the trigger, “click” was the only response. Bullets buzzed over his head and thudded into the wooden walls of the buckboards from two different directions. Andrew knew they were close to losing this fight, leaving them to the mercy of Rocko’s infamous rage. They were still a good 100 yards to the house, so he needed to even the odds fast or buy some time.

Andrew decided it was time to throw caution to the wind and try to do both. “Trade me a gun for the girl!” The Kid demanded of the sheriff as he pulled Kathryn towards the rear.

JT reached under his leg and pulled out a 44.40, 1873 Carbine rifle, and grinned.

Kathryn caught on to what Andrew was thinking as JT spurred his horse closer to the shakey buckboard, “Don’t you dare toss...” Andrew wrapped his big hands on her tiny waist and tossed the little lady towards JT’s outstretched hand. Kathryn managed to get a hold of JT’s arm with her right hand and a gun belt with her left. She struggled to pull herself up, but to Andrew’s amazement, she let her weight drop to the ground, striking the ground hard with both feet and using the impact to bounce herself back up just enough to haul her body onto the painted mare. JT tossed the rifle to Andrew and wheeled his horse away from the buckboard wagon. Kathryn turned to look back at Andrew and winked. *Surely, Auntie Margaret is going to tan my hide.* Andrew admitted to himself and swallowed hard. As bullets whizzed past his head, the Kid shook his head to gather his thoughts and focus on where he was and what he had to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

With four rifles firing at him, Andrew went onto one knee and faced the rear of the buckboard. Before engaging his targets, the marksman turned his head and spied three more shooters emerging from the woods on the other side of the property. Rocko and two henchmen were dead ahead, only 100 feet from the front of the house. Their aim: to keep them boxed in the deadly crossfire.

Andrew bowed his head and asked God for aim and the chance for his friends to survive. Then, he exhaled, stood up, and went to work.

The gunslinger wasn't as used to a rifle as his Remington pistols, but that didn't mean he still wasn't better than the average shooter. He had used the 73 Carbine before and knew it was effective if the shooter didn't try to move too fast.

Wind flowed through his duster as he exchanged bullets with the four men. They missed, but not by much; flying led tugged at his coat and nicked his hat. But Andrew's aim was better; he winged one shooter and kneecapped another. The Kid then spun onto one knee, facing the other direction over the heads of Rollins and Fredric. He emptied his rifle, striking the man on the right side of Rocko and forcing the other to flee. "Turn hard!" Andrew screamed. Andrew's plan worked. Rocko and his men responded by returning fire with blind rage, shooting at one another in confusion.

It gave Fredric time to pull the team to the front of the house, and Andrew helped Rollins inside.

"Thank the good Lord, you three are still alive. Where are JT and Kathryn?" Margaret inquired.

"They are safe." Andrew barked out as he stomped up the stairs. Once to his room, he tore through his gear until he located his spare set of long-barreled colt peacemakers, checked that they were both loaded, and slid them into a brown leather two gun-rig belt.

"Where's my sister?" Simon walked in, head still bandaged and holding his ribs. He was doing better, but his face wouldn't look right for at least another month. His eyes were both circled with deep purple and blue bruises. His lips split in multiple places. Every time he moved his face to speak or tried to swallow, it stung. But he didn't care. The pain just angered him; he spat on the ground and grunted, "I said, where's my sister?"

“She is safe with JT, Simon,” Andrew responded without looking at the boy. His emotions were already beginning to unhinge themselves just from the shock of the surprise attack and the adrenaline that followed. Now, he faced this little boy, scared for his sister, his only family, after he’d almost paid with his life to free her. The Kid dropped his black duster to the floor and snapped up the gun belt, cinched it tightly against his waist, and tied both weapons to his thigh. He pulled both guns from their holsters and felt their weight in his hands. He spun them quickly in several directions, checked their actions by turning the cylinders against his forearms and cocking them, depressing the hammer. Then, just as Auntie Margaret stepped inside, Andrew stated, “I shall end this. It is time for Rocko to die!”

“Oh, that’s just great, you nincompoop!”

Both Simon and Andrew balked at the comment, “Why, Auntie Margaret, you used a contraction and insulted me in the same sentence!”

She, too, spat on the carpeted floor in front of her, “Why not? You are about to throw everything away you worked so hard for just because you are angry and your pride is hurt. So, I have decided that I shall join you on this new cowardly path.”

Andrew stepped up to the little woman, towering over her; his words came hot and fast, “You don’t understand what this man takes from people, from us! Look at Simon, shall I let him win? Shall I just surrender these girls and Simon and just hope he only puts them back on the streets to be used like cattle? I cannot do that; I have to pay for what I did!”

Andrew felt strange when the truth of his heart exploded from his throat. It was like the body rejecting a rotten piece of meat to protect itself. “I have to pay,” hung in the air trapped between the boy, the Kid, and his aunt.

“Now we get to it, son, now we know who this is all about...you!” Margaret was taunting and forceful, antagonizing the Kid’s temper. “Only Andrew can save the day.”

Without thinking, Andrew took the bait and blurted out, “Yes, only I can. Because only I am fast enough, quick enough, and talented enough.”

“Yes.” He said again, “Because I alone deserve to suffer this burden!”

Andrew gripped the small lady’s shoulders and screamed, “Yes! I alone have earned the dishonor of this life of pain and misery! I alone deserve to suffer, do you not understand?”

His auntie smiled and placed her small hands on his big paws, and gently

lowered them. "I do, my boy. I understand that, like every man who has ever walked this earth, you are battling shame. So let Jesus take all of your sickness and dirt, but this time, let Him decide where you go and what you do from there."

Andrew wrapped long arms around his Auntie and sobbed loudly and openly.

The zip from a bullet exploding through the bedroom window stole their touching moment.

"Um, I'd hate to interrupt church'n all," Simon pointed a finger outside the window. "But that no good rotgut, lame-brain, flimflam is still outside trying to kill us, and he ain't shoot'n blanks."

Margaret glanced towards the window, and her eye's changed. The air in the room suddenly felt alive. She reached up, grabbed Andrew by the collar, and pulled him down to her level. She placed a hand on his cheek, which sent a wave of electricity from Andrew's head to his toes, instantly calming his nerves. "I expect you to do your job." She pointed a finger skyward, "But this time, stop and ask Him to take care of this monster."

She turned to Simon and stuffed a finger in his bandaged face, "And you, young man, keep your mouth shut and get into bed or you will die of pneumonia with nothing to blame but your own foolishness!"

Simon, stunned at the intense feelings of power and peace in the room, could only nod his head in agreement and head back to bed.

For several moments, Andrew and his Auntie said nothing. They hardly moved or breathed. Suddenly, Andrew felt as though he could see everything in a different light. The air in the room and around the house danced on him, around him, through him. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, he slowly turned to look outside. The trees, grass, and flowers looked fresher and greener, like a life that had been forever blessed. Everything was beautiful and full of peace, except for a lone dark cloud. It was a sullen black vapor and darted nervously, back and forth 50 yards from the house. Yet, it didn't seem to be able to get any closer. Andrew grinned.

Fredric peered into the room, holding his double-barrel 12 gauge. Sweat and blood trickled from his gray head. "Mister Andrew, what's the play?"

Andrew's face lit up as he reached down to untie his guns, "Why, my dear friend and brother, it is time to send that monster to hell." He dropped the gun belt to the floor and pushed past the butler.

"Oh, Lord Jesus, I think he's finally lost it," Fredric muttered aloud, then

chased after him.

Andrew strode down the stairs past a group of terrified girls huddled and praying as hard as they could. Rollins shouted from the kitchen, “Son, if you can flank ‘em, I can cover you with...” Andrew hardly noticed, didn’t break his stride or explain himself. He knew what he had to do.

He opened the door and stepped out, and walked straight at Rocko and his men. For the first time in his life, he faced down evil without a gun.

With every step he took, a thought attacked his mind, “You are going to die! Your legacy will be a failure! It’s your father in you; that’s why you cannot amount to anything! Your mother died because you are weak!” However, these thoughts were at a disadvantage. Andrew could see the darkness from which they spewed.

He countered with a weapon of his own, “The Lord Jesus is my Shepherd. I will never be in want!” He spoke aloud.

Rocko thought the Kid had gone mad and shouted back, “What! You’re throwing the Bible at me! Now, you’re gonna give me what’s mine, and you’ll get on your knees!”

Andrew did not stop but continued to walk forward, “The Lord Jesus makes me lie down in green pastures, the Lord Jesus restores my soul!”

Rocko could see he was unarmed and no threat to him, but the closer he got, the more jittery the brutal thug became.

Andrew was now 70 feet away, “The Lord Jesus leads me beside still waters, the Lord Jesus restores my soul!” Andrew beamed with joy.

Rocko could not take it. “Shoot this madman *dead!*” He screamed and fired his colt. The two remaining henchmen flanking their boss joined in, and together the three of them bathed the Bible chanting attacker with lead until all their weapons clicked on empty chambers.

Andrew stopped for a moment, looked down, and took notice of the holes in his shirt and trousers, then took off his hat and peered through a bullet hole in the forehead area. He felt as if his head would explode with happiness. At that moment, the Kid looked to have lost all sense of self-control. He tossed his hat in the air and screamed, “YEEHAW!” And jumped, clicking his heels. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear NO evil, my Lord Jesus’s rod and staff protect me.” He was only 30 feet away.

The three attackers were backing up now and trying to reload. Rocko stuffed in two bullets and fired at Andrew to no avail. “Why won’t you just *die?*”

“My Jesus prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies and makes my cup overflow.” He was only 15 feet away.

The other two thugs gave up trying to reload and ran for it.

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will live in God’s house forever!” Andrew stopped two feet from Rocko. “My turn.” Andrew grinned.

Rocko sneered and spat at Andrew. His eyes were crazy, and his mannerisms erratic and unnatural. Then, a craggy voice erupted from his throat, “You can’t have him. He’s mine!”

“Oh, but you misunderstand. I don’t want Rocko. I want you!” Andrew spread his arms wide and lifted his head to the heavens, and prayed, “My Father in Heaven, crush this evil bug and let your creation know that you are truly the God of love!” He looked back just as Rocko threw a massive right hook across Andrew’s face. His fist made contact, but not with Andrew. An invisible barrier crushed Rocko’s iron knuckles.

“Oww...” Rocko shook his hand violently and jumped up and down, screaming in pain.

The Kid shook his head, “Mr. Rocko, the spirit who gave you your power is gone, and the Spirit in me is greater than anything you could ever imagine. So, please, come with me, and we will fix up that hand before you face justice.” Andrew turned around to walk back to the house.

Rocko, still drowning in pride, thought this would be his chance. He pulled a knife from his left boot and lunged at Andrew.

BOOM!

Andrew turned to see JT holding a smoking double-barrel shotgun waist-high; both barrels trickled smoke. Then he glanced back at Rocko, who was on the ground rocking back and forth, gripping his knees like a giant baby in pain.

“JT!” Andrew exclaimed.

JT grinned, “Hey, Deputy, I still got a job to do. Besides, I’m only just on the road to forgiveness, but I ain’t there yet!”

Andrew chuckled and shook his head, “And what an insane road it is.”

JT wrapped an arm around Andrew and pulled him in as they mused over the moaning mob boss, “You got ‘em!”

Andrew returned the affection by wrapping his arm around JT’s neck, playfully choking him, “Actually, my friend, with God’s help, we got him.”

The two men released their awkward embrace and stood side by side,

taking a moment to breathe. Then, finally, they turned and stood to stare back at the house.

“Wow, it’s only midday,” JT observed.

“We did a lot before lunch.” Andrew grinned. “We still have so much more daylight left; who knows where else this day may take us.”

Kathryn cautiously stepped out from behind the house and peered around until she located Andrew and JT. Then, she ran to meet them.

JT noticed his partner’s face light up when he saw Kathryn running towards them; he elbowed Andrew and grinned. “Indeed, Mr. Andrew...who knows where this day will take us?”

EPILOGUE

He stared at the massive oak doors. When they would finally open, that was it, no turning back!

Andrew wiped the sweat from his brow and shook his coat, hoping to air some of the perspiration from his armpits. “Jesus, I do not think I can do this. Please help me?”

“It’s okay, partner, breathe.” JT stepped up alongside him.

“Yes, Mr. JT, you are correct. Just breathe.” A sudden thought occurred to him, “Did you...”

“For the fifth time, yes!” JT patted his breast pocket, “Safe and ready for delivery.”

“Ok, because the timing on this must be precise.” Andrew’s eyes were wild with anticipation, “This took months to orchestrate!”

JT turned and grabbed Andrew by the shoulders, “Get a hold of yourself, man! We thought of everything, double-checked it, even triple-checked it! Everyone is in place and knows their part. They will execute on cue. Now, breathe!”

Andrew pulled on his lapels, straightened himself for the third time, stiffened straight, and tried with all his might to wait calmly.

“We all ready?” Simon walked up from behind the two.

“I am,” JT said, “Nervous ninny over there is terrified. I think we should have asked the doctor to wait out here with us...just in case.”

Simon pulled down on his coattails and straightened a brand new bowtie, “He’s marrying my sister. He oughta be nervous.”

JT placed a hand on Andrew’s shoulder, “The youngster could be right. If love is war, we men are outgunned. You may need back-up.”

Andrew turned to his groomsmen. Each wore matching charcoal gray suits with white roses pinned to their coats. “That’s why I need my partners here, more than ever.”

JT and Simon looked at one another and sighed in unison. “He’s a deadman,” Simon muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Andrew asked.

“You just said ‘that’s instead of ‘that is,’ which means my sister’s already in

your head, and you're whooped!"

"I did?" Andrew's brow furrowed with concern as the final realization set in that his life was about to take an uncontrollable, dramatic turn.

JT laughed and slapped Andrew's back, "Well, partner, if you're gonna marry her, might as well go all in. Come on, let's do this."

The three friends stood ready. They had fought and bled together. They had faced their worst fears and conquered their greatest enemies together. Now, as the large chapel doors swung open, they stepped in together, beginning a new journey, more terrifying and arduous than the others, yet so much more rewarding...the journey of love.

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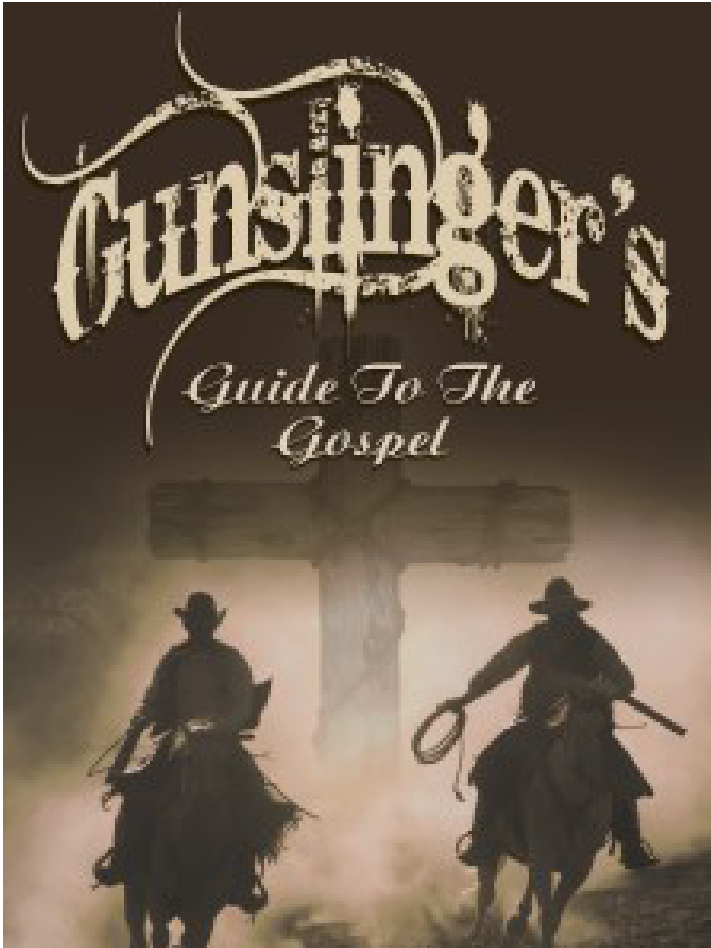
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THE GUNSLINGER'S GUIDE TO THE GOSPEL

GUNSLINGER'S DISCIPLESHIP SERIES: BOOK 1



What if the right friendship could change your life forever? An ageing gunfighter is about to find out.

Flint is an 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 of days, the gunslinger's world and way of thinking have 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 since he was a small boy.

The Gunslinger's Guide to the Gospel is a story of an unlikely partnership between two tough frontiersmen. 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.

Download this FREE novel by Ryan Gray: [Gunslinger's Guide To The Gospel](#)

The heart behind the novel...

I wanted to write a faith-based book about discipleship. A story about taking someone under your wing and acting as a mentor, teaching them a new way of living life. However, instead of another self-help, non-fiction book, I had an idea for something a little more fun and challenging.

What if I could write about discipleship, through my favorite of all genres, a Classic Western. As a story, this book has it all: love, action, adventure, intrigue, and a plot twist.

Most importantly, the story's purpose is to inspire an ideal relationship between teacher and pupil; which I hope challenges the readers to ask themselves, "Who in my life needs a friend, and how can I take them under my wings like a big brother or big sister?"

GUNSLINGER'S GUIDE TO THE GOSPEL

BOOK 1 - PROLOGUE

“Sam!” The out of breath messenger exploded through the red batwing doors and into the saloon. He clumsily 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 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.”

BOUNTY
FROM
HEAVEN

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