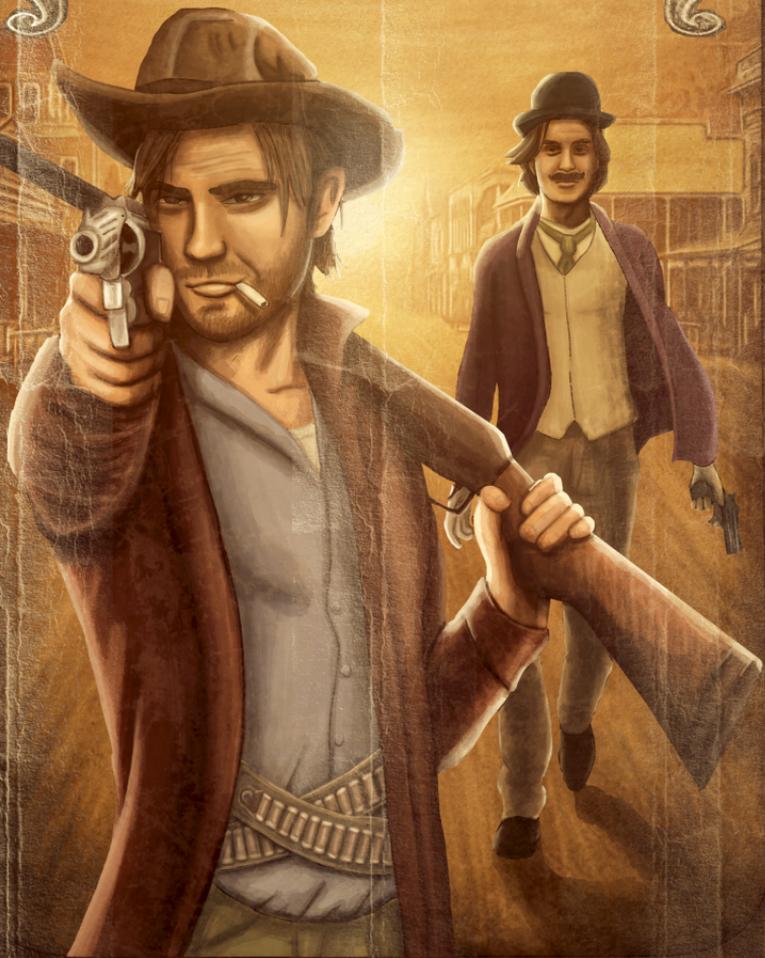


DELIRIUM TREMENS;

OR. the timeless skies incarnadine



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JASON HUZA

DELIRIUM TREMENS;
OR,
THE TIMELESS SKIES INCARNADINE

By Jason Huza

About the Author

Quintessential Libra; at home with cognitive dissonance; exceedingly humble egomaniac. Jason lives in New York with his wife, Denise, and their three sons.

For Jon & Kevin, Jim & Tony, Neil, Josh, and
Christopher.

Chapter 1

Traxton

September 5th, 1881

"I ain't dead! You hear me?! Hey! I ain't dead in here! I AIN'T DEAD!"

Shit. Stuck inside a casket... again. 'Least I can feel the cart movin' 'neath me which means I ain't buried yet. How long was I out? I 'spose it don't matter none. Long enough to find myself trapped in a goddamn coffin! What sort of mortician can't tell the difference 'tween dead and drunk? The lazy kind, I say. And just 'cause I were dead-drunk don't mean he ain't got a job to do.

Well, ain't nothin'll change that now; no sense frettin' 'bout it. May as well hunker down and enjoy the ride. Matter of fact... let's just see here... oh, hallelujah! Smokes still right there in my pocket. Now if only this match'll strike...

Yessir, a stroke of luck, this is. The match flares up illuminatin' my confines and... aha! There's why that mortician took me for dead... I'm head to toe covered in blood. Ain't my blood. I'm right as rain minus a ringin' in my head and bein' in a damn pine box.

I recall nothin' of the night prior but tequila and more tequila. Mezcal proper with the worm and all. Remember racin' some squat Chicano to the bottom of

the bottle. I daresay I won. Well, as much as my present predicament can be named winnin'.

Draggin' slow on this bent smoke, I do my darnedest to piece last evenin' together... there was cards... ladies... brunette... no, blonde... blonde *and* brunette. A fella in a purple coat. I may have killed a man. Shit, I may of done in a few...

Aww, it's no use. Last night's gone to drink. Gone for good. Chances are I'll never know who I fought, why I fought, what men died or how. My guess is there were a number of them. My next guess is they're here in pine boxes with me bumpin' 'long the road to be buried. Ain't that forever the way? Sure as shit, cheap tequila'll make a monster of a saint.

Not that I'm no saint. Hell no. Committed more trespasses than I can count. Wanted in Colorado and Texas both for some of the stunts I pulled. In Boulder, me and some roughnecks dressed up as injuns and took over a wagon destined for Jenkin's Safety Deposit. Woulda got away with that too but for a freak rainstorm rolled in and washed off our war paint. Knew we were white folks and recognized my mug right off.

Damned wanted posters. I tear 'em down as I find 'em.

Texas is another ball of wax completely and ain't nothin' I'm very proud of. Simple "white widow" routine gone sour. This here's the fix... with a clean shave and my best bib and tucker, I can look downright gentlemanly. I posed as a man about his business from Baton Rouge. All over this country one can find women made widows from large wars and small. Usually don't take more than a nod of the hat and these randy widows up and forget they're ladies.

Gettin' petticoats over a woman's head has long been a specialty of mine; dowagers and strumpets both.

Well, down in Dallas I'd just introduced a jolly widow to my finest bedside manner. This damn female asked me to do things what would set her preacher's ears aflame were she to confess her sins.

Most times, I leave these ladies snoozin' while I make off with candlesticks, baubles, and any other fine accouterments what ain't fixed to the floor. But this one occasion, I was makin' my exit carryin' her goods, when who walks through the door home from the saloon? Her damn husband, that's who. Lyin' trollop weren't no widow, dammit...

This intoxicated boob takes one look at me and goes for his pistol. What was I to do? I clocked the man with his own ivory clock and fled in the commotion. Turns out he were a man about town, so my name, Traxton Rhodes, is mud south of Oklahoma.

Yea, I've had some fun of it that's for sure. And I'm hopin' whatever scuffle I got into last night'll gimme some room to breathe for a while. If folks be thinkin' I was done up in a barroom tussle that's just fine by me. Let 'em think it. I'll be reborn when I leave this coffin, just you watch...

Ain't no sunlight to be seen through the cracks in the wood; shoddy workmanship, this casket. I must've been out all day. Seems I needed the rest. Any man does. A night of heavy drinkin'll do that I 'spose.

How far are we goin'? Weren't nothin' but a two-horse town, so it seems a might bit far to go for the cemetery. Matter of fact, why they doin' this at night? We're entitled to a Christian burial ain't we? Don't make

no difference law abidin' citizen or no; folks deserve a cross and a prayer. Where the hell are they takin' us?

Like I said, this ain't my first time stuck in no casket neither. No siree... had to hide out layin' on a corpse from Bennett Wilcox and his gang for damn near ten hours once.

What happened was me and Curly Cyrus held-up a bank out by Kansas City. Folk's hands were already in the air when Bennett and his gang rushed in to rob the same damn bank. I told them scat, safe was ours, but that buffoon gave me the count of ten to vacate.

There were five of them and two of us, but I'd faced worse odds than that, so we kept the loot and shot our way out. Curly Cyrus fell dead of a bullet to the back; I ran and hid in the first place I could find - face to face with a dead man 'til the heat died down. Crazy Bennett searched high and low, would be searchin' still, I reckon, had he not been bit by a rattlesnake two days after.

Yea, makin' money the easy way ain't always so easy...

Was another time I done a job with a one Loretta Rowe, and I tell ya, that there'll be the first and only time I partner up with a female, believe you me.

We had on good word a stagecoach full of the governor's personal possessions was bein' transported from Yuma to Phoenix. Night before the job, Loretta and I shacked up in a little inn close by a ways, one thing led to another, and the next thing I know, Loretta's in love.

Caught all sorts of feelin's for yours truly. And, as is their way, Loretta jumped from bein' smitten to

makin' rules overnight. We were standin' there, guns drawn on the stagecoach driver, when she comes upon the notion to tell me I should cut back on my drinkin'.

"I ain't doin' no such thing, woman. Now focus on this here stick-up!"

She wagged her bony finger. "But you partake far too often, Traxton!"

My eyes surely went big. "Why'd you have to go and say my name for? Now I gotta shoot this man."

"My father always said drink does the devil's job for him."

"This is a robbery. Ain't no place for your father's sermonizin'!"

She looked at me, solemn. "Promise me you'll put down the bottle."

"THIS IS A ROBBERY!"

She stared at me a moment longer. "So is that a promise?"

I didn't want to shoot no woman, so I took the loot and her horse. Last I heard, Loretta's doin' time at some woman's jail in Maricopa County.

The right partner on a job is mandatory. And believe it or not, with all the shady characters roamin' 'round these parts, there's far too few what can hold their own when the time comes. Most can't shoot for shit, run their mouths in the saloon, turn on ya for a nickel, or go holy after their first taste of violence.

I knew two kids, Isiah and Jeremiah, who turned themselves in after we held up a few men on a cattle run. Said they had a crisis of conscience and wanted to make right with the Lord. Well I hope they made right, cause not five minutes after they marched into that

sheriff's station all high and mighty, they found themselves danglin' from the gallows doin' a short-drop.

No, it ain't every man what can live the way I do and come to see their thirtieth birthday. I celebrated mine in Baton Rouge not four months back on May seventh (I'm not sure that's my real birthday, but seems as good a day as any). Rife with cheated winnin's from the riverboat casino, I hired three of the finest fillies to join me in the room I rented. We were havin' ourselves a grand ol' time 'til their owner came callin' sayin' he had to make off with...

Oh, that story's gonna have to wait. The cart's stopped. Hallelujah, the cart's stopped! We must've arrived...

I get to shoutin'. "Hey! I'm alive in here! You hear me?! I'M ALIVE IN HERE!"

I can make out a voice outside. "You hear that, Jed? One of these bodies be screamin'."

A different voice. "Ain't no way. We done checked 'em all."

"What d'you reckon' we do then?"

"If he's shoutin', that there means he's the dead alive and we'd do well to put a bullet in the coffin and make him rest easy. Which one was it?"

"I ain't sure, but there's smoke comin' from that one..."

These lame-brained simpletons think I'm the dead alive? What on earth is...

BANG!

Oh shit! A hole the size of my finger opens up inches from my face and the bullet lodges behind me just next to my ear.

Jed's shoutin'. "Go back to hell, demon!"

"D'you get him?"

"I don't rightly know. He ain't screamin' no more..."

"Well, that's that then. Toss him in the pile with the others."

I feel myself bein' lifted up and walked over a ways. Then, doin' no favors to the headache I'm sufferin' from, these morons toss the coffin into what must be a shallow grave. I can't risk callin' out again; they'll just fire off another round and finish the job.

Next thing I know, dirt's bein' piled up on my coffin. Through the little hole I can see the moon straight above. It's a good thing these curs is lazy, cause they call it a night without even half coverin' this thing. I hear their cart turn 'round and head back from wherever I was.

I reach down and light up another smoke. Well ain't this a fine mess I've found myself in? If only I'd listened to Loretta's advice and gave up the drink. But... dyin' here in this casket right now is far better than bein' alive clean and sober...

Chapter 2

Alistair

September 6th, 1881

Tumbleweeds and troglodytes. This American expansion has done nothing but give a name to tumbleweeds and troglodytes. I had such aspirations for this new frontier. Head west, they said. Discover a new country, they said. And who answered the call for this proposed heaven on earth? The most riotous bunch of hustlers and ne'er-do-wells imaginable.

I began my tour in Boston, landing upon the shores of a municipality so vitally integral to the birth of this great nation. But not five minutes from the gangplank, I was set upon by a ghastly mob of intoxicated Irishmen attempting to prize the valuables from my person. If I'd wanted to keep company with that sort, I may as well have stayed in London.

In Pittsburgh I thought to make introductions among the various men of industry spoken of in all the tribunes. Iron smelts billowed grand plumes of dark smoke; indeed, Mellon and Carnegie are men for the future age. As I patrolled about in search of a proper meeting hall, I was set upon by a mass of young, inebriated Polish men who did their best to leave me penniless and destitute. Not a favorable second impression...

Then came the booming town of Cincinnati, named in honor of this nation's first hero, George Washington, whom they so lovingly deem a modern reincarnation of the lauded Roman statesman,

Cincinnatus. I was dually set upon by a stout mob of drunken Germans who accosted me for my attire (as if these heathens had never laid eyes upon a lilac portmanteau!).

Of all places, the good word came from an Anglican minister who bid me head west; that a man may make of himself as he saw fit in the virgin lands God bestowed upon His most favored people.

I decided against the railroad; against simplicity. I rode out by horseback instead, intent on seeing this vast and commanding land for myself.

But not fifteen miles from that town did I happen upon a newborn babe, swaddled and left in the sun. I looked about for the child's mother, but she was nowhere in attendance; her ward forsaken. What a land!

I carried with me this child and attempted to find accommodations for her at an orphanage in the next town. The nun bid me pay twenty American dollars for its upkeep. No mere pittance given my travelling fund of one thousand dollars. I declined to remit the amount and chose instead to leave the babe, swaddled as I found it, upon the doorsteps of one of the more established abodes in the vicinity. I can only pray they were decent people...

Next came one small village after another. Denizens no better than feral dogs in their nightly hijinks. Firearms brandished about as if the end were around every corner. I witnessed three men laid to waste over unpaid saloon tabs and another man met his maker for absconding away with a chicken.

What have I gotten myself into? I was forced to leave my beloved England - home of refinery and culture; birthplace of civility - for this... for this foreign land of ragamuffins and vagabonds. I ask again, what have I gotten myself into?

Many weeks and miles later, I found myself in a flea-ridden saloon in Wyoming. All eyes upon my lilac overcoat and top hat. I ordered a nip of scotch in the hopes of attracting even a modicum of heightened conversation. Anything beyond talk of horses and bulls and beef that so preoccupy these folk...

I queried one particularly burley stranger as to his thoughts on their President Garfield; ailing these six months following an assassination attempt in Washington.

The man looked me up and down. "Who?"

"Your president, James A. Garfield, assailed upon nearly half a year ago."

"I ain't shoot him."

"You misunderstand, what I mean is..."

He regarded me, one eye open. "That sure is a funny coat you got on, mister. What is that?"

"This is a velvet cello-coat. I daresay I wore it first, but the style was popularized by the noted humorist, Oscar Wilde. Are you familiar with his writings?"

"I meant, what's that color?"

"Oh... it's lilac. Some would say mauve, but the differences are profound, wouldn't you say? It was hemmed at my request by Ophelia Southworth of Southworth fame in..."

His smile grew. "Ophelia? Sounds perty... you fuck her?"

"Good day, sir."

Is it too much to ask for a spirited exchange of ideas? I was led to believe this was a nation of thinkers. A nation of men set to mold the future in the spirit of brotherhood and mutual respect. However, in total, I have encountered naught but marauding skinflints and the worst of what the world may offer.

I fear the road ahead shall be plagued by nothing better and perhaps much worse.

As I gave in to despair and set upon retiring, a comely, though disheveled, gentleman I had not previously caught sight of, burst forth from the boudoir on the second level and addressed the entire saloon: "A hundred and ninety-two goddamn minutes! Yee Haw! My new best! Bartend! Tequila all 'round!"

The room erupted in cheer as the mob pressed forth to take the man up on his generous offer. The man himself all but skipped down the staircase, chuffed with pride. He wore a long coat, gun strung loosely at his hip, dark hair, seemingly uncombed in perhaps forever, a mean scar and bright eyes with a grin Don Juan would envy. A hundred ninety-two minutes?

One can only imagine what dubious personal record had just been bested.

A fellow in well-fitting, pin-striped attire and brandishing a generous mustache took a seat by the standing piano and struck up a lively tune which set those dusty field-hands and painted women to dancing. The man from upstairs indiscriminately interlocked arms with female after female, setting them spinning with laughter. Skirts a flurry of color and motion; white bestocking legs revealed without a shred of decency.

The fellow certainly had a way about him. I contented myself to observing the spectacle; slowly partaking of the watered-down swill the den named their finest. Thrice, I was propositioned by lascivious women, but I'd neither the funds, nor the inclination towards the probable French Pox contraction, so I declined their wares as politely as possible.

The man who set these festivities in motion approached and slapped me quite briskly upon my shoulder. "Howdy there, Purple. Fine coat. Where you hail from, partner?"

"I? I am a proud and loyal subject of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria. How do you do?"

He nodded politely. "England, huh? Me too. Well not really, but my granddaddy's granddaddy was. We're like kin almost. What're you drinkin'?"

"Scotch at the moment."

He slapped his currency down. "Ever tried tequila? Bartend, mezcal, mezcal, now, now, now..."

"Oh no, I really ought not to..."

He slid a glass towards me. "Bullshit! Drink this cup and let's toast to old England!"

"Very well then. But - oh bother - the bottle seems to have gone sour. It is presently infested with an insect of some variety..."

The man grimaced. "That worm 'sposed to be there. To England!"

We touched and raised our glasses. The drink was sweet with a hint of cinnamon. Not bad. Not bad at all. My drinking companion was then distracted by a raven-tressed dancing girl and left with nary a word to twirl her about the tavern.

Reinvigorated by the chance encounter, I decided to stay a while and take in the display. Such rowdiness as I had never seen seemed to trail in this man's wake. A true bon-vivant. Lifting women above his person to their imminent glee, he sauntered about for the better half of an hour with seemingly ceaseless reserves of stamina.

The cacophony was imbued with a sense of reckless abandon. These primitive peoples celebrated without cause or even a thought as to what their actions may bring come sun up. Surely these men had many arduous tasks to perform upon waking, but none took notice of the hour or how their monies depleted.

Some men were engaged at flats, others were still about their women, the man at the center of it all

was imbibing to excess with a short dark man, crisscrossed bandoliers upon his chest. Truly this is both heaven and hell manifesting themselves in tandem...

A beast of a man burst through the swinging wooden gates serving as a doorway, accompanied by five lackeys all begrimed in dirt. Nigh on six-and-a-half feet tall, he wore a massive black hat (which complemented his grizzly charcoal beard), and had no less than three pistols affixed to his person. All in the room fell silent, that is, except, the man who began the rumpus seated with not one, but two ladies upon his knees.

The giant addressed the crowd. "Where's Traxton Rhodes?"

The man so encumbered with females finally took notice and waved to the newcomer with congenial familiarity. "Big Bill Sanders! Come on over and have a lady for yourself!"

"Damn you, Traxton, you slept with my wife!"

Chairs pushed back and men began to exit in droves. The man named Traxton extinguished a cigarette upon the surface of the table, gently bid the ladies leave his lap (with a smack upon their bottoms for good measure), and rose himself with little regard for the imminent danger all others immediately recognized.

Traxton slowly sauntered away from the table. "Now, Bill, what says you and me settle this over some tequila? What's a woman 'tween two longtime friends, huh?"

"I ain't your friend, boy. We done one job together. And now my wife up and says she wants a damn divorce 'cause she fell in love with ya. Says you made her feel some kinda way I ain't never have..."

Traxton tilted his head, very much the rogue. "Well shucks, I weren't even givin' it my all. How's about that?"

The brute aimed his pistol. "How's about this? I told her a man would have to die before I gets made a fool of. Where ya want it? In your chest or your face?"

"Hmm, unfavorable choices them. How's about you turn 'round and walk on outta here and we call it square? I'd hate to make a mess of this fine establishment."

Big Bill smiled. "Oh, I'll walk outta here alright. With your damn scalp in my hand."

Traxton was visibly intoxicated; swaying as he glared through blurry eyes. The tension was palatable. I watched from behind a column as the men flirted with disaster. And then he struck! In a flurry of motion the man named Traxton pulled his pistol from its holster and made quick work of three of Big Bill's men, their bodies crashing lifeless.

After that all else was pandemonium. The remaining lackeys and Big Bill himself unloaded a barrage of bullets unseen since Gettysburg. Traxton overturned a table and reloaded his pistol, munitions splintering his barricade to pieces.

Several of his drinking companions had taken up arms against the invaders, firing, as they were, from behind columns, the piano, and even the bar itself. The floor became sticky with blood. Each shot echoed in my ears until I thought I'd suffered a rupture of some kind. How do men maintain composure during such a fracas?

Traxton benefitted from a moment's respite to reload then scrambled up the winding staircase positioning himself behind the simple wooden balustrade. "I don't want no more hurt, Bill! Lay down your weapons and let's call it square!"

"Burn in hell, Rhodes!"

The onslaught continued. Traxton fired blindly over the railing and managed to subdue another of the belligerents. The short man of Spanish descent he had been drinking with earlier sprung from cover and placed his weapon directly against the back of the last lackey's head.

Traxton shouted from above. "It's over, Bill. We got your man within an inch of his life. Do the right thing, amigo."

Then, in perhaps the vilest act of villainous betrayal I'd yet encountered in these godless lands, Big Bill Sanders raised his pistols and murdered his own man and Traxton's Hispanic accomplice.

"You damned fool! That were yer own man!"

Big Bill was fuming. "Weren't just my man, that were my cousin. Now get on down here, ya scoundrel, and face the business!"

Bill heaved slowly as Traxton weighed his options. "Alright, Bill. I'm comin' down..."

A bright grin of brown and missing teeth widened on Big Bill's visage; content with the retribution he would soon exact. Traxton emerged from behind the bannister, hands empty and raised. Bill slowly reloaded without taking his eyes from the capture.

Then, in a feat rife with cavalier disregard for personal safety, Traxton Rhodes did leap from the balcony, land on the high-strung wooden chandelier, and sever the tether in one seamless motion. Big Bill Sanders had no time to prepare as the immense fixture, and Traxton with it, plummeted down and upon his person, rendering both men presumably dead.

Moments after the collapse, the sheriff and his deputies burst through the doorway guns drawn. "Alright everybody! Lay down your arms immediately!"

But there was no combatant left standing; to a man, both sides had suffered from a complete loss. So senseless, so utterly senseless...

The sheriff found me hiding. "Hey you, in the funny-looking purple coat..."

"It's lilac, but..."

"Never mind that. You saw what happened here or no?"

I withdrew myself from cover. "I, uh, I did. This man, Big Bill Sanders, came seeking revenge from this man, Traxton Rhodes for... uh..."

"For fuckin' his wife? Oh well, they done each other in so no harm, no foul. I'll have the ditch diggers over to collect all this. Our job's done here, boys, how 'bout a drink?"

I departed the saloon just as the sheriff and his deputies began a whole new round of festivities despite the corpses scattered about. This is no land for temperance, that I can say. I acquired lodging in the quaint town and set off early in the morning. My God, I can only hope California may offer some hope for civility. For if not, I'll have exhausted the entire world...

Chapter 3

Traxton

September 6th, 1881

Big Bill Sanders! Now I remember! I killed that man with a chandelier!

A bit of relief comes over me for piecin' together that mystery. Poor Bill... his wife weren't even that good a poke, truth be told. Oh, she were pretty enough, but what's a man to do with a female what don't stop cryin' in bed? I ain't that good am I?

I've been breathin' out this damned bullet hole for hours now and am down to my last one of these smokes. Strainin' to listen for travelers, but each time a horse gallops by, their hooves be makin' too much noise for the riders to hear.

I done tried every which way to Sunday to push this confounded lid off the coffin, but the nails is in too deep. Ain't enough room to get my knees up and give it a good kick neither. Nope, flaggin' down a passerby be my only hope at salvation.

I can see the sky turn from dark blue to blue proper as the day begins. This part of Wyoming got some of the clearest skies a man can see in his lifetime. Might be the last thing I do see in my lifetime if don't no traveler come to my aid.

Yea, bein' in this box gives a man much time at reflection; ain't nothin' to do in here but think...

I recall one time I was out on the prairie rustlin' cattle for John David and his boys. Made an honest wage for honest work. One of his sons went after a

stray sow wandered from the group a ways. Damned snake spooked his horse and the man - not but between hay and grass - fell off and knocked himself dead on a patch of rocks. Saw John David hold his boy in his arms and weep like a woman. Life ain't easy out here, that's for certain.

Another time I witnessed lightnin' strike a man where he stood. Honest to God the feller were there one minute and were nothin' but bones the next. Funny thing 'bout that was the heavens called him back just after a heist we pulled and he were carryin' on 'bout how his cut weren't on the up and up. That bit of lightnin' settled the score for us mighty quick it did...

Yet another time I... Well hallelujah! A horse is approachin' at a trot, not a gallop. Might be this one will hear me... "HEY! I'M DOWN HERE! DOWN HERE IN THIS COFFIN! I AIN'T DEAD!"

The horse stopped! He heard me. Sweet Jesus, the man heard me! I can make out his feet hittin' the ground out the stirrups. He's makin' his way over...

The man talks with a funny accent. "Pardon me, is anyone down here?"

"I am. I'm in this box. Let me out, will ya? I'll make it worth your trouble."

"You are *within* one of these coffins?"

For cryin' out loud. "Yes, goddammit, yes! Some know-nothin's put me in here by mistake. I ain't dead."

"Yes, well, I don't want any trouble."

Who is this fool? "Ain't no trouble, mister, just pry open the lid and you'll have done me a great favor."

"My apologies. I haven't the requisite tools for such an errand."

You gotta be kiddin' me. "Dagnabbit, find a stick, or rock, or anythin' that'll work."

"Again, my apologies, I am hardly the man for the task. Someone more suitable will surely happen along. Bon chance."

"What?! No, no goddammit! Let me out this box or I'll skin ya alive!"

He's gone. I hear his horse whinny as he mounts her and sets off down the road. Dammit, when I get outta here that man with the funny accent will be the first man I go lookin' for! I swear it!

God, what I'd do for a flask of somethin' strong. This box is hotter than a whore-house on nickel night out here in this heat. Roastin' away in a coffin is how 'Ol Traxton Rhodes is gonna meet his end. I'm so thirsty I'd drink my own piss if I could manage it. Goddamn foreigner...

I swear when I... more horses! More horses! Now's my chance for sure... "HEY! LET ME OUTTA THIS THING! I'M IN HERE! IN THIS HERE COFFIN!"

They get off their horses. "You hear somethin', Curtis?"

"Naw. Is the wind is all. Start with that coffin there, will ya?"

Grave robbers. This here's the worst of men. Stealin' a man's worldly possessions with no way of defendin' himself. Fellas like these is nothin' to trifle with. As likely to shoot ya as to help ya, believe you me. I've done it before...

I can hear 'em nearby. "This one's got a ring what won't come off..."

"Take his finger then. He don't need it."

I can make out the noise of a knife tearin' through skin. This here's the real deal. No remorse'll be found dealin' with these men... best to hold tight...

I watch as a bit of metal squeezes 'tween my lid and the coffin proper. A few good wrenches and the thing cracks and pops off offerin' salvation.

I hop out, right as rain. "Hiyer, fellas. Traxton Rhodes, pleased to meet ya."

The man what saved me jumps back. "Oh shit, Curtis, it's the dead alive!"

"I ain't no damn dead alive. Was takin' a nap is all. Well, I'll just be on my way."

The one named Curtis blocks my path. "Hold up there, fella. How we know you ain't the dead alive?"

"Cause no such thing exists. Good day, gents."

Curtis blocks my path again. "Hold up one cotton pickin' minute. Whether you dead or no, we came for prizes. You got any prizes for us?"

"I... can't say that I do..."

"Then partner, we got a problem..."

The one named Curtis spits a mouthful of 'bacco juice to the ground as they both level their arms in my direction. I ain't got nothin' on my person what'll appease their appetite for treasures neither. This may get ugly. "Gentlemen, gentlemen. Let me start by thankin' y'all for the service rendered. I can assure you that..."

Curtis cocks his hammer. "'Nuff talkin'. You ain't got no prizes we can walk away with, but you sure as shit got one we can have right here."

"And what might that be?"

He spits again. "A corn-hole. Drop your drawers."

Well, I didn't see that comin'. Buggery is common enough in a man's travels, but tends to be a result of too much whiskey and not enough ladies. This, I daresay, is a worse predicament than bein' locked up in that box was.

"Look, fellas..."

Curtis elbows his friend. "We can do this alive, or we can shoot ya first and do ya anyhow. Your choice."

How can I get the drop on these two while keepin' my manhood intact? And then I hear it. From two caskets over comes my name bellowed by a man I thought dead. "TRAXTON!"

The lid pops off and out emerges Big Bill Sanders as rough lookin' and blood-covered as I am. They were gonna bury him alive too. Lazy damn mortician...

In the confusion, I run up the hill towards the grave robber's horses. Those two can't make heads or tails of what's goin' on neither.

I shout down as I climb my new horse. "Hey, Bill. Let me introduce you to my two closest friends. Say hello, boys..."

As I hop up on the first horse, I watch Big Bill knock one of the dumbstruck villain's lights out. The other low-life fumbles with his pistol and gets his clock cleaned for his troubles. I grab hold of the other horse's reins and spur 'em both forward at a gallop.

I holler over my shoulder. "See ya, Bill, tell yer wife's pink bits I said hello, will ya?"

I leave Big Bill in a trail of dust. Oh Lord, it feels good to be out that coffin! I've a score to settle with that funny talkin' man from earlier but, truth be told, I'm so doggone happy to be out in the open that I don't even care 'bout revenge.

My plan before this whole affair was to ride on to Casper and link up with a few hearty boys I've had run-ins with in the past. Jacob Mortimer has a legitimate cattle trade what doubles for his illegitimate fencin' of stolen properties trade, and I figured I'd make a few bucks to tide me over through the winter.

What effects I did have are most likely divvied up amongst the sheriff and his deputies what had to clean up my mess. 'Spose they earned it... kinda...

With no pistol, I'd be forced to lean on the generosity of Jacob and his boys loanin' me a weapon I'd have to pay for at triple the price after the fact. But I figure I could sell one of these horses and maybe have enough to get some sorta weapon big enough to strike fear. You show up with a wee Derringer or somethin' and a stagecoach driver is likely to laugh himself out his seat.

That there's the plan then: Make for Casper, sell the horse, run with the boys, and rest comfy for the winter in one of them whore-houses that city's famous for. Not a bad plan at all...

The plains stretch on for miles in every direction as I ride 'long the road. Truly this here is God's gift to the poor souls what couldn't make it back east. But, what've they got that we don't got ourselves? Drink, gamblin', and women a-plenty but with constables patrollin' left, right, and everywhere. Out here a man's got a fightin' chance to be a man, I say.

Two hours in and I come 'cross a sight not wholly unfamiliar to a fella like me: Two ladies pulled off the side of the road with a man in a purple coat, his arms reached for the sky. They call it the "woman in distress." No self-respectin' man can ride by as two females do their darnedest to switch out a wagon wheel. Then, when you're down on your knees in the dirt helpin' out, they get the jump on ya.

Why does the man in the purple coat look so familiar? Ain't no way of knowin' I 'spose. But I tell ya what, them shotguns these girls be brandishin' would make a fine addition to my arsenal. Let's just see what 'ol Traxton can come up with...

I ride up cordial as you please. The leader is a wisp of a girl, hair done in braids, cheeks rosy even from a distance. Hold on a sec, I know this girl... "Well, I'll be darned. Ain't you Suzanne Pritchett's little daughter, Constance?"

She does her best to keep from smilin'. "Traxton Rhodes? What brings a scofflaw such as yourself 'round these parts?"

"Just makin' my way to Casper for the winter. What'ya got goin' on here? A bit of the 'ol 'woman is distress' ploy? Your mama taught you that?"

"You jus' go on and leave my mama out of this. I know all 'bout you and her. We caught this one fair and square with a nice amount of dollars on him to boot. Now go on and scat before we take ya for what you got as well."

I drop down out the saddle innocent as a baby. "Ladies, ladies... I was just passin' by is all. Figured I'd lend a hand if it were needed, but you seem to have this plenty in control..."

"That's right. We do. Now scat!"

This one's gonna take a bit of charm, I'm thinkin'. But if I know my women, the apple don't fall too far from the tree. And this one's mama is a bad apple. A bad, naughty apple indeed...

I step closer. "Constance... darlin'... I just wanna help. See? There ain't nothin' up my sleeve."

I lead my horses closer and let their reins dangle. Constance's girl keep her weapon pointed at the man in purple, but Constance turns her gun on me.

"Stay back now. Stay back now, y'hear?"

I raise my hands but keep inchin' closer. Closer. Closer still. See, the reality of the situation is these girls ain't no killers. Probly never even fired off these here shotguns. Slight as they are, I'd be willin' to wager if

either of 'em did get a shot off, the kickback would land' em in the mud 'fore they knew what happened.

I step so close to Constance I can smell her breath; she had honey with her tea this mornin'. I place my hand on the barrel of her gun, push it away, and move in close enough our noses are nearly touchin'... "Constance, what are ya? Seventeen by my count. Why you messin' 'round with robbin' folk? You don't wanna end up in no prison, do ya?"

"Leave us be, Traxton. We were fine here without ya."

"You *were* fine? You will always be fine in my book. Why dontcha put this here gun down and let's just see if I can't find other ways to help ya out?"

I reach down and snatch the gun from her hands. "Traxton Rhodes! You animal!"

The other girl lifts her weapon in my direction. I notice that fella in the purple coat lookin' over his shoulder to see what's goin' on. The man must have some marbles 'cause as soon as he sees the coast is clear, he breaks for his horse, leaps into the saddle, and races north up the road.

The other girl turns and aims her shotgun right at him. She pulls the trigger and the gun flies out her hands just as she falls back and into a mud puddle. I catch the second shotgun as it falls and offer my hand to the mud-slick crook.

Constance ain't happy. "Well then, you up and ruined our catch. What now, Traxton?"

"Ain't no hard feelin's I hope. Thing is, I needed these guns more than y'all do. You can forgive me, right?"

She's mad as a mountain lion with the cage rattled. But I know this girl's mama's told her stories. Stories she'd most likely want to confirm for herself... "Well... no... I ain't mad 'atcha."

"What says you and your friend here hop in the back of this carriage, and I show you the proper way to handle a loaded weapon?"

She's lookin' at me through slits in her eyes, doin' her best to come off tough. But it's there... I know it's in there. Just a matter of appealin' to her basest nature.

I look towards her filthy, perty friend. "How 'bout it? Wanna see if them stories her mama told were real?"

Constance finally allows the smile she's been hiding to break out, motioning towards her accomplice as she pulls the canvas curtain apart behind her carriage. What comes next I won't be repeatin', but believe you me, you'd love to hear it told...

"Oh, my... mama weren't lyin'..."

Chapter 4

Alistair

September 6th, 1881

I happened upon a ditch as I left town and to what did my ears arise, but a plea for help. Could a man have been wrongfully buried? It certainly happened in London often enough; all over Europe as a matter of fact. It was the prevalence for premature burials that ushered forth the advent of safety coffins - caskets outfitted with bells on pulleys and breathing tubes.

As I descended the slope to investigate, I recognized the voice of the man trapped within: Traxton Rhodes. The life of the party last night - in addition to being a staunch purveyor of death. I had no inclination to meddle in this man's affairs, so, despite having been able to rather easily pry his confines ajar, I decided to leave him be. Surely, no good can come from associating with a man capable of raising tempers to the fever pitch I witnessed last night.

I head north upon a dusty road surrounded by steeps of unimaginable beauty. Grasslands so pure and lush the old masters would have had a field day. Oh... I made a joke. But in all earnestness, these meadows and savannahs bring forth a deluge of emotion I may not be able to control.

It's a sad facet of my character that all manner of beauty instills feelings of overwhelming exuberance. It was first diagnosed when I was but a child and my father brought me to The National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. Upon viewing firsthand Sandro Botticelli's

exquisite *Venus and Mars* I quite literally collapsed in rapture. Venus, with her white and gold robe tracing her feminine grace, and Mars languishing in repose, all muscle and God-like apathy... it was simply too grand.

The writer, Stendhal, mentioned the phenomenon in his book *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio*. Speaking plain, some people are afflicted with a weakness for beauty. I myself have fallen victim to the effects on twenty separate occasions: When I first saw Michelangelo's *Pieta*, Jacques-Louis David's *Coronation of Napoleon*, Paris herself in the twilight, a tigress at rest in the London Zoo, my mother's ornate tea service, to name but a few.

I have neither control over, nor a desire, to unceremoniously lose consciousness at inopportune moments, but what am I to do? Cease gazing upon the pulchritudinous? Impossible. As my horse gallops at an even pace, such beauty surrounds in all directions. I felt a spell come over me earlier, but I resourcefully shut my eyes until the moment passed.

Truly, God's splendor is wasted upon the nasty dregs that inhabit this land. But this shall be my land too. And if the British have any purpose in this world, it surely is to convey, proselytize even, to the world that civility is a worthy and noble goal. I shall commit myself anew to serve as an example. A paragon of virtue these heathens may emulate.

As my father would say: "C'est noblesse oblige."

Ah! And here comes my premier opportunity to set forth said example. Two women in distress. Let's just put my Anglo-Saxon manners to good use shall we?

I land sure-footed from my steed. "Ladies, never fear, I, Alistair Evans Harris, am at your service."

A comely young woman sighs in relief. "Oh, thank heavens. You truly are an answer to prayer. We were off to market for mother and ran into some trouble with our wagon. Can you help us?"

"I'll certainly do my darnedest... oh, my deepest apologies for the profanity."

She smiles. "Ain't no - *ahem* - no trouble at all, good sir."

"Now then, what seems to be the problem? Aha! I have uncovered the source of your malaise. Your wheel is missing. Now why would..."

The innocent young woman uncovers a firearm from within her petticoat. "Hands to the sky, dog!"

Oh my! Are these women setting upon me? The proliferation of readily available weaponry certainly seems to be this nation's defining characteristic. Perhaps these ladies may yet be prevailed upon to see reason. "Now see here..."

"Shut your pie-hole, funny man. How much loot you got?"

"Loot? I say..."

She places the weapon to my back. "Cough it up... now!"

"Well, I've just under one thousand American dollars. How much would you say you required?"

"All of it!"

All of it? How do they suppose I would convey myself from here to California without any means? Surely this is an elaborate ruse. They must listen to reason. They're not but girls these two. Not yet of a marrying age, I would surmise.

Confounded western expanse! I've half a mind to...

A man approaches! Their attention's been diverted...

Traxton! Is there nothing to keep this man down? Very well, this may be just my luck. He does have a way of assuming the role of protagonist. Especially with the fairer-sex. I need but be forgotten for even a moment. And here's my chance! Run, Alistair, run!

I retake my horse and lay myself flat against her mane to make of myself as miniscule a target as possible. A shot was fired! Am I hurt? No matter, push on, push on, for all you're worth, push on!

I hazard a glance back in their direction. No pursuit seems imminent. I am safe. I am safe. A moment to collect my thoughts... inspect for damage... what?! No! NOOOO! Damn this accursed country to hell! Mangy vermin, the lot of them! There is a hole in my cello-coat! A hole! My lilac cello-coat tailored for me personally by Ophelia Southworth, now with a fresh bullet hole of all things! Is nothing sacred to these American curs?

My travelling valise is unharmed, thank God, for what is a man if not properly attired? Oh, some would call it a vain conceit to be so preoccupied with garments, but I have always been of the mind that quality habiliments are an investment; a debit one assumes to be remitted in warm favor.

A well-dressed man exudes confidence and should likewise instill confidence in others. I ask you, who would you rather have in your corner: A man wielding the wherewithal to assemble a pleasing jacket, hat, and walking stick combination? Or one of these rubes twiddling about in underwear their entire lives?

The finest outfit I have had occasion to witness firsthand was the Baron of Cornwallis' lounge suit, fur-collared topcoat, and ascot he wore to Christmas Mass in 1875. His high-heeled shoes had a narrow toe one could die for. The effect was so dashing, so completely

avant-guard, that I collapsed in an undignified heap before him, overwhelmed by the beauty of it all.

A man is no man by dint of physical attributes or actions alone. No. A man is the sum total of his body, mind, and spirit. And what better way to nourish the spirit than by fermenting the jealous stares only a well-crafted cravat may command?

Very well, perhaps when I make Casper, a haberdashery of some merit may assist in mending this nefarious hole.

I am some way out in this vast expanse named Wyoming. Truly, in every direction one is treated to vision upon vision of green glades; snowcapped mountains in the distance providing endless opportunity for one to fall short of breath.

As hours pass, the skies turn from pristine blue to burnt orange; the sun a half-orb hazy upon the horizon. It is now the opportune moment to bivouac inland from the road in order to refrain from drawing attention. I steer my equine towards the rough and settle down a mile or so from where passing travelers may notice.

My horse cranes her neck low and dines upon a hearty meal of foliage. I unpack my valise and begin the evening ritual of earl grey and light fare. After the two of us are suitably fed, I retrieve a carrot and allow my steed to eat directly from my palm. A captivating creature, her.

I undress and don my silk pajamas; folding my riding raiments into a neat pile for the morning. I then retrieve one of the three books I currently own, the newly translated *Brothers Karamazov*, and settle down for a bit of repose before I retire for the evening.

Aside this morning's considerable excitement, I find that I am in good spirits. Yes, I was set upon while performing my English duty to care for those about me,

but in reading Dostoyevsky's novel, I allow myself to be carried away in that man's treatise on doubt and faith.

Upon waking, I dutifully perform my ablutions, maintaining, as it were, my appearance as best as this rugged land will allow. Unfolding my straight razor, I use a small cup of boiling water to shave away the remnants of last night's stubble, leaving, of course, my mustache. I then withdraw my sturdy tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax - the sole luxury I yet retain from London.

Once the extreme ends are worked to a needle-point tip, I comb over my riding clothes with a lint brush, attaining a suitable sheen after no less than twenty minutes' effort. I apply an oil to my boots, massaging the lubricant as the leather greedily soaks it in, refurbishing itself in the process.

An apple for myself, another for my companion, and we're off. The cool morning air provides a welcome reprieve from this summer's oppressive heat. My horse and I sojourn at a brisk pace, making headway without nary a chance encounter. For one accustomed to the bustle of cosmopolitan living, this ever-present solitude is long in acclimatizing.

A few miles up the dusty path, I happen upon a small village (if one may name a collection of three partially felled wooden structures a village). A man adorned in tatters lies asleep in the road uncomfortably strewn between a bramble and a pile of horse manure. His half-filled bottle of alcohol yet grasped in his hand.

This man is seemingly the sole occupant of this forgotten town; a waypoint for travelers to rest their horses and perhaps engage in trade of some kind. I decide to trudge on leaving the man to his stupor.

But hold, an outhouse. I happen, at this time, to require the services of a commode, so tie off my steed

to a rail post and enter the none-too-sturdy facility. This is a fortuitous discovery, for I have ever been stricken with what is colloquially known as "stage fright."

No doctor may say why some men cannot reliably relieve themselves in the company of others. All men have need to empty their bladders and bowels, but I have long been unable to evince even the slightest trickle if any are about. Indeed, my body will not comply if even there are persons within earshot of my efforts.

My father was the proud owner of one of the first indoor water closets in England. Had it fashioned with plumbing of the newest technique. A toilet was installed complete with a pull-chain that deposits the matter down beneath our home and on to God knows where. It was truly a modern marvel.

Well it just so happened that utilizing the porcelain bowl would send the noise of water meeting water echoing throughout our home for all to hear. After the very first usage my body refused to allow a second foray. The noise thusly amplified engaged my "stage fright" and I would spend long minutes standing above the ingenious invention compelling my body to comply... to no avail.

On one occasion, my father was entertaining a number of men and women of standing in our parlor, drinks a-plenty. I was quite aware of their proximity and could not relieve myself no matter how hard I tried. A knock was heard at the door as someone else required use of the facilities and my despair grew. Was I destined to retain my water indefinitely?

And then I came up with an ignoble solution: Urinate in the sink. Yes, the relative closeness of our small sink to my person, and lack of noise-distribution allowed for my body to expel what needed to be expelled in a timely fashion. I began urinating in the

sink with nary a noise - which would henceforth be my solution.

But on that occasion, I had neglected to secure the locking mechanism upon the door and a second knock swung the portal ajar granting a view of my pathetic display to none other than the Countess of Shrewsbury. She gasped at my performance and called out to my father: "Good Lord, James, your son has made a toilet of your sink!"

It was a calamitous affair that would be spoken of at gatherings for years to come. From that day forward, I was forced to relieve myself outside with the dogs. My father's prized bloodhounds the sole witnesses to my shame.

No such ill luck would prevail today, as I securely fastened the bolt on this outhouse.

I proceed to lower my trousers when an abusive racket happens upon the door. "Hurry up, will ya? I gotta go!"

That voice... Traxton Rhodes. Here in the same abandoned town as I. It seems our paths lie in the same direction. I wonder if he will recognize my own voice if I reply?

He continues. "Come on now, I gotta take a dump."

A dump? Why do these Americans insist upon denigrating the noble language we bequeathed to the world?

More knocking. "Nature's callin', son! Pinch it off and let's go!"

I shall not be harried any longer by this man. By rights, I was here first, and may take whatever allotment of time I deem necessary. "I have not yet urinated. Please be patient."

"Urinated? Hold up, you're pissin' in there? Goddammit there's a whole world to piss in! Get outta there and let me do a man's business, you ninny!"

I must stand my ground. "I will not. You must please be patient."

The man tests the door's lock. "Wait a tick... that funny voice. You ain't leave a man for dead in a casket just yesterday, did ya?"

"It, uh, must be a case of mistaken identity."

He knocks even louder. "I'm callin' you a liar! Get outta that box so I can pummel ya for leavin' me in that other box!"

Oh bother, now this miscreant desires an alteration... and I haven't even had time to relieve myself. Well I shall not give him the satisfaction. I will stay here until this ruffian loses patience and departs. "I have no wish for fisticuffs. You were presumed dead and thusly disposed of. I did not bid you jump from a balcony. You toppled that giant man with a chandelier by your own volition."

Realization dawns upon him. "The purple coat! You was there! Dagnabbit, come on out so we can have words."

As I contemplate my next move, another voice emanates from outside. "Traxton Rhodes? That you?"

Traxton moves away from the outhouse. "Juris Leland, you old son of a gun!

I chance a gaze through the crescent-moon carved into the door and watch as the man formally dormant in the road approaches Traxton with apparent congeniality. "What brings you to these parts, Rhodes?"

"Was thinkin' on settin' up with Jacob Mortimer for a while. Good a ways as any to ride out a winter, I reckon."

The man named Juris scratches his chin. "That so? Guess you hadn't heard then..."

"Heard what?"

"Heard that you still owes me that quarter I gave ya in '78."

Traxton nearly laughs. "A quarter?! Hell Juris, I can't remember last week let alone a one quarter debt from '78!"

"Well let me freshen' up that memory of yours!"

The man in tatters named Juris dives onto Traxton and they begin rolling around in the dust exchanging blows. I use this diversion to exit my confines and make for the open road. I'll simply have to locate somewhere else to relieve myself.

I speed past the two cavorting in the dirt as Traxton yells. "Jesus, Juris! You smells of shit!"

I smack my horse with a riding crop and leave the man Traxton Rhodes to settle his affairs. Surly this man cannot withstand the trouble he seems to find in all corners of the earth. I decide to pay him no mind as I set off for Casper. Goodbye, Traxton, and good luck.

Chapter 5

Traxton

September 7th, 1881

I hopped out the back of that carriage leavin' Constance Pritchett and her friend snoozin'; full of tales they'll one day tell their daughters, by God. A roll in the hay with two youngin's ain't bad for a man with a busted lip and covered in old blood. I still got it... whatever *it* is.

Can't rightly say why females get the way they do 'round me. All I ever do is look 'em dead in the eyes and let 'em know exactly what it is I want. Seen countless other men do the same and wind up gettin' slapped for their truthfulness. I'm just lucky, I guess.

I tuck one of the shotguns I made off with 'neath the saddle hitches and carry the other in front of me as I set off with my horses. Not a bad score if you ask me.

I ride all day and set up camp a few miles from this waterin' hole I knows of from way back. Most likely I can find someone there to trade off one of these guns for stores I can use. Tonight I bed down aside a fire and doze off listenin' to the coyotes howlin' somewhere in the distance.

I wake up with a crick in my neck for sleepin' on a rock. The horses made a meal of the grass all about me, but I ain't eaten but a bite of biscuit in two days. One of these guns'll bring me a good breakfast, I reckon. Ham and eggs and a biscuit besides. Lord I can taste it now... I dust myself off and make for the road.

As I come near a deserted town I see one man laid in the road. Dead or sleepin' don't make no difference to me... ain't my affair. But I do spot an outhouse I used once before and, despite not havin' nothin' in my stomach, just the sight of it sends nature to callin' somethin' awful.

I hop off my horse, pull on the door, but find it's locked. Someone's in there takin' their sweet time. But I ain't got no time, this here turd's doin' what they call prairie doggin'... I never understood folks what take too long in the outhouse. What's to take time for? You do your business and get on. This fool's wastin' the day lollygagin' in this here toilet...

The man in there says he ain't urinated yet. Urinatin'? What in blazes? Who in the Sam hell would bother with an outhouse just to take a piss? You can piss anywhere. Hell, I've pissed while ridin' my horse more times than I can count. This here's a madman I'm dealin' with, pissin' indoors. I tell him again to get a move on...

He answers and this time I know it's that funny accent again! This be the man what up and left me to rot in that damned pine box! I inform him as to my intention to beat him upside his head when he's done but am interrupted in my revenge when I hear my name called...

"Juris Leland, you old son of a gun!

Juris Leland... I ain't seen this man for damn near three years. Don't look to be doin' so good if he's taken to sleepin' in the road. Used to be trouble with a Colt if memory serves. I also be owin' him a quarter I borrowed for a roll in the hay with a fine half-breed. Perhaps he won't recall...

He recalls... "A quarter?! Hell Juris, I can't remember last week let alone a one quarter debt from '78!"

Now I got him to deal with. Seems the Englishman'll have to wait. I'm all set to give this man some excuse when he up and knocks me to the ground. As we're sluggin' each other left and right, I see a flash of purple run out the shitter and hop his horse. Damn, got away again. Before I can think on that, Juris bends my knee the wrong way and winds up with his ass-end in my face... "Jesus Juris! You smells of shit!"

His breath ain't no better neither. "It is shit. You come up with that quarter ya owe me maybe I could afford me some new britches..."

"I ain't got no quarter!"

"You got somethin'! Gimme a horse then!"

I push him off me and get up. "I ain't givin' you no damn horse for no quarter debt!"

He grabs my ankle, lyin' in the dirt. "Well what then?"

"I dunno. Just you stop wrastlin' me and let's talk 'bout it!"

This fool Juris lets go of my leg and offers his hand for me to help him up. I swat it away instead. Truth be told, I coulda walloped him at any time, but a friend's a friend even if he's sluggin' ya in the face. Seems he's on some hard times too... don't need to add missin' teeth to his troubles. "Let me see what I got cost a quarter and we'll call it square."

I went through the grave-robber's saddle bags and turned up a few items what might catch Juris' eye. A full canteen, some rounds of ammo for a gun I don't got, a biscuit... "You want a biscuit?"

He licks his lips. "A whole biscuit?"

"I took some bites this mornin'."

"It's more than half a biscuit?"

"It's more than half a biscuit."

I watch him size me up. "Well... that there's a deal."

Golly... a smidge more than half a biscuit to settle a three-year debt. Not exactly no John D. Rockefeller type transaction, but that there seems a fair trade. I give that man his biscuit and he gobbles it up in one bite.

I remember most of the night last time I saw Juris Leland... we were in Casper of all places tradin' hands of poker with two Mexican fellas what didn't speak no good English. I lost all I had on two fours and a pair of queens. After that, this injun gal took a seat on my knee and I couldn't rightly say no.

Hit Juris up for the quarter she costed and damn near broke the springs on the bed upstairs. Perty girl as I recall... dark hair like an injun; blue eyes like white folk got. Probly the daughter of some cowboy and injun... maybe a bastard... maybe somethin' worse. But she were worth every penny. Worth that biscuit too, now that we're square...

I catch my breath and take this man's measure. "So what happened to you, Juris? Why you sleepin' in the road?"

"I seen you sleep in the road more times than one, Traxton."

Well that's true. After a night of gamblin' and drinkin' hard, ain't always the time to sort out accommodations. Sometimes sleepin' on the road's the only choice left.

I take a swig from my canteen and offer it to Juris so as to wash down that hard biscuit what were his breakfast. He fills me in on what he's been up to these last couple of years, and believe you me, it's a yarn worth sharin'.

Turns out he met a man in Denver what clued him in on a freight train worth nabbin', so he rounded up some boys and took a crack at it. This damn fool bent the rail up silly and sent that train careenin' off the

tracks and into a gully. Couldn't find no money after the 'splosion, but did manage to spark a conversation with a man what survived the wreck.

That man, in considerable pain from the crash, and from the hot irons Juris was pressin' against his cheek, did divulge that there'd be another train full of gold makin' it's way to Grand Junction, Colorado in the spring.

As far as Juris goes, he's down and out 'cause he couldn't pay his boys for the train robbery and they beat him within an inch of his life for holdin' out on them. Now he's lame and in no position to round up no posse... "Tell ya what. Somethin' comes from this information, you'll be the first one I call on to help."

"Thanks, Traxton, thank you very much. Would be nice to be on top again."

"When was you ever on top of anythin' in your life?"

He smiles, showin' his gums. "Been on top of some whores, by God."

"Yes, yes you have. And you will be again one day, Juris. Just go on and change your drawers now and then, will ya?"

"I ain't the only one..."

What's he mean by... oh dammit. I shit myself. That turd what was prairie doggin' must've come loose durin' our scuffle. This ain't no way to ride into town lookin' for work. Wyoming ain't Arkansas...

I yank off my breeches and do my darnedest to give 'em a wash. Ain't happenin'. I'm soiled and smellin' like I ain't got no sense. This'll make for one hell of a ride. Chances are my hindquarters'll be redder than the day is long. I make due and mosey on over to my horse after shakin' hands with Juris. I stand in my stirrups as often as I can to keep from sittin' down in my mess.

Boy did mama ever say there'd be days like these...

My mama were a tough woman. Killed three injuns herself when we circled the wagons one time, I seen her do it. On our way through Oklahoma some Comanche chose to get themselves killed ridin' against my pa and his kin. Seen him take down ten of them screamin' devils without breakin' a sweat. Ma was reloadin' for him, but took up arms when they got too near. Naw, they don't make women like that out east, believe you me. Worse come to worst and she done cooked them Comanche up for dinner...

Not a great deed eatin' humans, but what was we to do? Starve?

More than one way to die on the range: Rattlesnake, coyote, Comanche, brawl, gunshot, or danglin' on the wrong end of a noose... and that's how my mama went. She was hanged in Tulsa for bustin' the sheriff over the head with her kettle. The man came by told us move along when she weren't good and ready. Learned his lesson that day, he did. The man were struck brain dead by that kettle.

After that it were just me and my pa until he got scalped by injuns himself. Had a run in wranglin' cattle and some redskins got the drop on him in their sleep. Lookout were drunk and cost ten lives. That drunk watchman were the first man ever I killed. Shot him through the head in El Paso.

Anyhow, I show up in Casper and all I can think 'bout doin' is cleanin' my crack, havin' a few drinks, and seein' what the ladies is about this evenin'. I trade off a shotgun and one of my horses easy enough, buy some new drawers to replace my shit drawers, and hand the reins to a stable boy out front of my favorite saloon and brothel in town.

The place is packed with the usual assortment of roughnecks playin' at cards and makin' time with the women folk. I slap down my legal tender on the bar and order up a round of whiskey. "Whiskey and a room for the night, bartender."

He spits. "Place is full."

"What're you talkin' 'bout, boy? Gimme a room dagnabbit or it'll be your hide."

He don't frown, smile, or nuthin'. "Can't. Last room went not a minute ago to a fella in a funny coat."

"What fella?"

He points at the steps. "That man there luggin' his effects up the stairs."

Tarnation! The man in the purple coat. I swear this'll be the last time that man thwarts 'ol Traxton, so I head on up to give him what for...

Chapter 6

Alistair

September 7th, 1881

Casper, Wyoming. I was led to believe this was an actual town, but all I see before me are wooden shanties built around an aging log fort. No matter, in this dingy village I will surely find suitable accommodations, a general store, and somewhere to enjoy a decent meal.

I bestow upon a stable boy the reins to my steed. And, as I've done countless times over the last few weeks, enter a saloon of assuredly dubious repute. Inside I find dirty men at cards, painted ladies waving their fans, an employee charged with sweeping the floor using a broom with but three remaining sprigs of straw.

In the corner, I spy a large woman, flanked by two brutes. She is a horrendous monstrosity scanning the room with a watchful eye. Heaven help the man who keeps her warm at night.

Behind the bar, a young proprietor with both hands on the counter top is expectorating upon the floor of his own enterprise. I approach the churl. "Good day, sir, have you any vacancies?"

He dislodges a curious brown fluid from between his gums and allows it to hang from his lips until it breaks and lands on the wooden planks.

"What?"

I remove my hat. "Vacancies, in your fine establishment."

"You want a room?"

"I third time, I say yes."

His eyes turn downward. "That sure is a funny jacket you got on, mister. What is it?"

"This? This is a cello-coat, popularized by... oh, why bother? It is a lilac coat, although some inexplicably deem it purple."

He is not impressed. "Never heard of it."

"You have never heard of the color purple?"

The man spits a glob of brown. "Nope."

No, of course not. In this drab, mud-hued village of logs and dirt, how could this boy have ever made acquaintance with anything but earth tones? I would do well to curb my judgmental disposition. It was not this boy's fault he was born in a hovel...

I spend the trifle for lodgings plus two extra pennies to have a hot bath drawn in my quarters. Then, I heft my considerable valise up the grand staircase one crickety stair at a time. The chambers are nothing to celebrate sparsely accommodated as it is: Cast iron bedframe, small circular mirror, an appalling floral wall-covering curling at each possible corner.

I set my luggage down and take a moment to...

A knock at the door. My bath! Well... at least one may say the boy is punctual. I open the door. "Welcome. Please do draw my bath just over..."

Traxton Rhodes! "I ain't runnin' no damn bath. I got a bone to pick with you, Purple."

"I say..."

He barges in and closes the door behind him. "You left me in that goddamn casket yesterday, and where I come from that can't go ignored."

"I swear on all that is holy..."

He pokes my chest. "Can it! Ain't nothin' what'll save you from the whoopin' I'm set to deliver."

From outside my room a new voice bellows forth: "Traxton Rhodes, get out here! I got a baby by you!"

His eyes widen. "You gotta save me, Purple!"

This man, who moments before meant to accost me, is bouncing about the room in search of escape. He tears apart the curtains seemingly in an effort to defenestrate himself, but discovers only the wall of the building directly adjacent firmly pressed against the frame. He then slides under the bed, but is too stout to fit.

The scoundrel then unfastens the latches to my travelling valise and begins strewing my effects about the floor. The nerve! Once empty, this man does crouch within and bid me finish the task. "C'mon, Purple, hide me."

"You'll have to excuse me, but isn't my having kept you in such confines precisely what you barged in here seeking redemption for?"

He is desperate. "Just do it! I'll make it worth your while."

I cannot say why I decided to help him, but as I snapped my valise shut, the mountain of a woman (loosely termed) I saw downstairs burst into my room joined by her burly brutes. Truly, for lack of better words, she is a fat pig. Her upturned nose far more resembling a snout, her pig-colored pink skin covered in thin white fur, her hoof-like hands always at task scratching her stomach or crotch or both in tandem...

Her voice is a squeal. "Listen up, where's Traxton Rhodes?"

"Traxton Rhodes? I swear on all that is holy that I have never met that man."

One of the two men break open my patent leather case and hold Mister Rhodes aloft by the scruff of his neck. "Found him."

The woman eyes me menacingly. "Swear on all that's holy, huh? I'll deal with you later. Traxton Rhodes... after all these years..."

Traxton adopts his boyish grin. "Piggy Sue... uhh... *Peggy Sue*..."

It seems I am not alone in recognizing this lady's porcine attributes. Honestly, she might do well to recruit herself in some sort of travelling grotesquerie.

"Don't get familiar with me, Traxton. What, you think you can up and leave me with your whelp to rear? I done the right thing and kept the kid out the orphanage, now I want you to do the right thing and pay me for my troubles."

Oh, thank goodness. She means him no bodily harm. All he must do is remit upon her some amount and this nightmare will soon come to an end...

"But I ain't got no money, Piggy... *Peggy*."

She shakes her head, loose skin flapping. "Well ain't that a shame? Now my brother Flynn's gonna have to take it out your hide. Flynn, shoot Traxton's cock off for him, will ya?"

"Oh, my heavens!" I unexpectedly blurt.

Peggy Sue turns my way. "What do you care if we blast his cock off, fancy pants? You two bum-boys or somethin'?"

Traxton defends his honor. "I ain't no bum-boy, Piggy Sue."

"So what if you are, Traxton? Don't bother me none. Least it'll keep you from spreadin' your diseased seed all 'round... Flynn, his cock..."

The brother named Flynn aims his pistol directly at Traxton's... area. He is flailing to and fro in an attempt to make a more difficult target of himself. I cannot even fathom what must be coursing through this man's mind right about now.

What was he thinking engaging in congress with this specimen? He seems an affable enough man; quite capable of attracting the fairer sex. Why would he reduce himself to near animal husbandry? The thought of it...

It seems this man has finally expended his cache of excuses... and of fortuitous luck. This is gruesome to the extreme. I mentally prepare myself for the impending bloodshed...

Traxton points towards me. "He's got money. Some strumpets on the road said so. He'll pay you, Piggy!"

What?! I?! How dare he entangle me further into his nefarious schemes? I refuse to be party to this dark extortion.

I divulge, solemnly. "I swear on all that is holy that I..."

"Found it."

Zounds! Flynn rummages about the piles of formerly pristine fabric and uncovers my stack of American dollars. He callously tabulates the trove as Peggy Sue's eyes glimmer in delight. "There's a problem, sis... I can't count this high."

Her eyes light up. "Can't count that high? That there's a good sign. Well, I 'spose your lover purchased your cock for you, Traxton. We'll give you two your privacy so he can receive his payment. C'mon boys."

The other brother unhands Traxton, leaving him in a heap on the floor, then the siblings depart with a discernable cackle from their leader. What a fine mess I've found myself in: Penniless and destitute in Casper, Wyoming.

Traxton stands and brushes his shoulders off. "I thank you kindly there, Purple. How's about we call the business of you leavin' me to die in that casket square?"

"Square? They made off with the sum total of my travelling funds. One thousand American dollars."

He nearly jumps. "One thousand dollars?! What the hell you doin' with one thousand dollars?"

"Making an attempt at survival."

He makes for the door. "Tough break. Well, see ya around, Purple."

See you around? The nerve... I can sense my anger beginning to get the better of me. A sensation my father always instructed to quell as best I can...

My father was a congenial man; able to form acquaintances into genuine friends with the turn of a phrase or strategically deployed bon mot. The secret, he said, was to remain convivial with a subtle undercurrent of perceived strength.

To that end, I have since youth maintained my physical conditioning with the utmost care. Aggressive calisthenics, fencing lessons, and even Greco-Roman wrestling were a daily part of my childhood routine.

On one occasion, a children's circle antagonist received a hearty blow to his thorax for making a jest of my rose-colored vest. Father praised my vigor, but cautioned against resorting to violence in all but the direst circumstances. Thankfully, I have been able to live all these years without having to intercede in a physical manner upon my own behalf.

Until, that is, this very moment...

I strike quickly and force Traxton Rhodes' arm backwards pinning him in what is a decidedly painful grip. I torque his arm against his shoulder in a manner that would subdue any man...

"Oww! Goddammit. What're you doin', Purple?!"

"You have cost me a tremendous amount and are now in my debt. How do you plan on remunerating me?"

He shakes his head, inches from the floor. "One thousand dollars? Ain't no way."

I push his arm even further in the opposite direction of how joints typically dictate. He howls in pain. "Oww! OK, OK... I'll make good! I'll make good!"

I release the man from my grasp and he retreats to the corner massaging his wound. I begin the task of returning my haphazardly strewn clothing to my valise; folding each item with prodigious attention. No man ought ever place possessions they truly care for about the floor. It is an unsightly and barbarous practice. "Well then. What scheme are you hatching in order to pay your debts?"

"There's a man in town what runs a business I have a certain skill at. I meant to go speak with him this very evenin'."

Theft? I am to be repaid by theft? Impossible. I have never engaged in any sort of scandalous behavior. Well, minus the infraction that set me upon this grand adventure. But even that was no real crime... at least in my eyes. I will not partake of any sort of thievery. "Theft? No. You will have to remit payment in a gentlemanly manner."

"Gentlemanly? You know how long it would take to get my hands on one thousand dollars? Women'll have the vote before I could get that sort of money by honest means."

He has a point. These cowboys trudge their whole lives for just enough to see themselves fed each day. But theft? Oh, how my mother would be so ashamed. But, if I am to continue my venture to San Francisco I will have need of funds. Oh bother... "Very well. But you, sir, shall not be allowed to leave my sight until the debt is paid. Are we in accordance?"

"Fine, fine, whatever. Just don't get in my way, Purple."

Resigned to illegality, I close the lid to my valise with a tender care neither Traxton nor the pig's brother bothered to show such a fine trunk. "I am set. Shall we depart?"

"Sure. Just follow me..."

Chapter 7

Traxton

September 7th, 1881

I'm in another goddamned box! How the hell did Piggy Sue find me?

Piggy Sue... face so ugly it could stop a clock. I've had an untold number of conquests in my day, and this woman (loosely termed) is by far the worst of them. Was a few years back we rode together stealin' cattle from a rancher down south. Davis Williams and Shane McCray started out with us, but both of 'em fell from their horses and were trampled to death in the stampede. Yea, there's a fair amount of bondin' what comes with doin' work like that. I daresay 'ol Piggy Sue saved my own life at least twice on that mission.

We were havin' a hell of a time wranglin' all that cattle ourselves; had a hundred miles to go up to the rancher what was goin' to pay us for services rendered. A few hours on and the winds got to blowin' and the skies opened up a torrential downpour. Piggy Sue and me found shelter under an outcroppin' so as to weather out the weather.

I was havin' the darnedest time keepin' a flame goin' what for all the breeze, so I took to the bottle to keep warm. But once them prairie gusts get to howlin', there's not much a man can do to fend off the chill. Even the whiskey were gettin' cold.

Big Piggy Sue bid me draw near to stay warm and damned if she weren't pipin' hot as a stove. I finished that bottle cuddled cozy with that cow while

the real cows mooded at the thunder. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, that pig was ridin' me like a horse buckin' and wavin' her hat in the air somethin' awful.

I was bein' trampled worse than Shane and Davis while she were havin' the time of her life. With all the pain I was sufferin', I got to bayin' like a coyote at the moon. Done scared off the entire herd we stole, but Piggy Sue didn't care not a whip. "Damn them damn cows, Traxton. That were the best lay of my life. You go on and let me know when you're ready to go again. That be exactly what my coochie was needin'."

Somewhere in the night I lost my mind to unconsciousness and thank God for that. But now I got this woman sayin' I got a baby by her and she wants my money or she'll shoot my damn dingus off.

Hell no, that can't happen. What use is a man what ain't a man? No use in my book. I'd rather be dead a thousand times than live my life with a cooter... So I do the only thing that comes to mind...

"He'll pay you, Piggy!"

She took the money and ran, but now this fool in purple says I gotta pay him back for what she stole. If it comes to it... well... I'd hate to shoot this man, but a thousand dollars is a debt better repaid in blood than in currency.

We make off 'cross town to where Jacob's got a fine little home of his own. Damn near every passerby's starin' at Purple's damn purple coat. This ain't no way to stay inconspicuous, that's for sure. Might be he'll need a change of clothin' 'fore we get to doin' whatever Jacob got up his sleeve.

We come close to the shut gates at Jacob's home and...

BANG!

The dirt 'neath my feet kicks up in a cloud of dust as a bullet comes near to takin' my damn foot off! I hear Jacob hollerin' in the distance. "Traxton Rhodes, you better turn right around or the next one'll be in your mouth!"

Purple seems shook. "I was under the impression you knew these people."

"Said my name, didn't he?"

Damn. Now why would Jacob Mortimer have a problem with me? I ain't done nothin' to him... *that I recall*. And that there's the one small dilemma with how I drink. I ain't always sure who's mad at me. "Jacob... just comin' 'round lookin' for work is all..."

He calls back. "Work? You got a lot of nerve showin' your face 'round here after what you done."

So, I did do somethin'. Well... best to play dumb and see where this goes... "Aww, c'mon, Jacob. I was just havin' a bit of fun was all..."

"Bit of fun? You killed my nephew, Stuart!"

Killed his nephew, Stuart?! Stuart... Stuart... oh... I did kill Stuart... "That weren't my fault, Jacob. Caught him cheatin' at cards... he pulled first!"

"I don't care if he pulled his dick out and pissed in your face. That was my kin!"

What do I say to that? I gotta find somethin' what'll appeal to his nature... "I'll work for half."

Jacob pauses a moment, then answers. "Half? Alright, come on in..."

The gates to his compound open up and Purple and me make our ways inside. 'Ol Jacob Mortimer. The man's wiry as a scarecrow with the bristled hair to match. Got a permanent black eye from all the scraps he's been in. The old coot comes down from his lookout position and up and slugs me direct in my jaw. "That there's for my nephew, Stuart. You do my family

sideways again, and I'll make you eat your own butt whole, ya hear me?"

It rare the man who could hit me like that and get away, but I'm in a pinch. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now come on in and let's talk business."

We follow Jacob and his sons into the home and find a comfy lookin' sittin' area with a round table and six chairs. We sit down as instructed and Missus Mortimer brings us all a spot of whiskey to drink. 'Round the table is me, Purple, Jacob and his two twin sons, Swinney and Ryland - both barrel-chested and bald.

Jacob takes his whiskey in one gulp and slams the glass on the table. "First thing's first. Who's this guy, and why's he dressed so funny?"

"Him? This here's my ridin' partner. Don't let the crazy get-up fool you. He's mighty tough with his hands."

Jacob don't believe me. "That so? Swinney, why don't you go and see if this man's worth his weight in salt?"

The man in purple shoots a glance like he wants to murder me. Ain't my fault though... I ain't the one what insisted on his comin' here.

Purple stands up, removes and folds his purple coat, then takes on the queerest fightin' stance I ever seen: Both hands in fists, one about eye level, swayin' like he ain't got no sense. This'll be a hoot...

Swinney all but laughs. "C'mon, you jerk... Let's dance."

Swinney steps forward and the man in purple knocks him one good one in his nose sendin' blood onto the fancy rug.

Jacob's none too pleased with that. "Dammit, Swinney, now you owe me for your mother's rug!"

Swinney's got steam comin' out his ears for bein' embarrassed in front of his pa. That man charges at Purple again and damned if he don't get flipped upside down by some chop suey business I ain't never seen before. Purple really is good in a fight. Who'da thunk?

Jacob's gone red in the face. "Jeez O'Pete, Swinney. I shoulda had your mother fight him. Alright, alright, he'll do. Let's just get one thing straight. Ain't no way you can get to burglarizin' wearin' a funny lilac coat like that."

"Actually, sir, it's lilac," Purple says, all high and mighty.

Jacob snorts. "That's what I said. You think I don't know what lilac is?"

"Oh. Yes. Quite right."

Now it's time for business. "OK. I got a job I been waitin' on the right time to perform. And, seein' as you're workin' half-price, Traxton, I'd say the time is finally right. There's a rich lady what moved to these parts a few months back from Atlanta. Got a right big home over yonder ways full of serious booty. Paintin's, candlesticks, jewelry... hell, even her dog drinks from a silver bowl, I heard..."

"How you know what all she got in her house, Jacob?"

"Not that it's any of your damn business, Traxton, but Missus Mortimer goes over there once a week for the woman's prayer group. Become bosom pals, she has. Now, normally I wouldn't mess with a target in our own backyard, but this 'ol biddy got too much treasure to ignore. She also has two sons what live with her spendin' away their parent's fortune... like two *other boys* I know. If they catch on, they'll surely be trouble. I don't got to say it, but if they catch ya... well... there can't be no witnesses, you hear me?"

Purple clears his throat. "If I may but interject... I am here in a supervisory capacity and therefore..."

I jump in to stop him from makin' a fool of himself. "What he means to say is... yes, sir."

"Good. Now Missus Mortimer's been kind enough to draw up these here floor plans so you boys'll have an idea at what you're doin'. For her troubles, she'll be entitled to half what y'all bring home. That clear?"

Ryland almost cries. "But, pa..."

"Shut up. Well... seein' as it's night and all... I'd say you boys ought to take a gander at this here map then get to goin'. And that's all I got to say on the matter."

Chapter 8

Alistair

September 7th, 1881

We leave Jacob's compound and trek across the outskirts of this town in an attempt to remain concealed. Am I really doing this? Am I truly set to crouch as a thief in the night and perform such a scurrilous deed? Oh, my mother would be so ashamed...

But what are my options? I have no means with which to complete my travels, and no means to establish myself once I arrive. It seems my hands are tied, so to say. I resign myself to the task at hand and swear a silent oath that if we succeed, this shall remain the sole illegal transgression I ever take part in.

We walk down and climb the stone and daub barrier encompassing the perimeter. This truly is a fine estate. Perhaps the debit will be remitted after only one dark sojourn... I must hope...

Before we left, we made a study of the map Jacob's novice cartographer wife drew from memory and decided to enter the abode by way of the storm-door on the western side of the home. And there, in front of us, just as the plans dictated, is the very same storm-door.

Across the wooden paneling lies a metal lock. It will be no easy task disbaring this portal. I wonder if we came prepared? In answer to my unasked query, Swinney withdraws a thin metal rod which he slides beneath the encasement and leverages it off with an audible clang.

We each of us hold our breath and wait for any movement from within. Nothing. We open the storm-door and descend into darkness.

The cellar is outfitted with numerous large items of furniture draped with cloth. Surely none of these will prove suitable treasures, so we make our way on to the staircase. Our path is lit by thin streams of moonlight breaking through the tiny apertures in this basement. The light, however, is sufficient enough to guide us to the stairs leading into the home proper.

We each of us climb and, upon ascension, are rewarded with the finest sitting room I have yet seen since leaving England. This truly is a rich woman...

The Brothers Mortimer begin filling their satchels indiscriminately; lining their bags with a silver tea service, ornate trinkets, porcelain figurines, and commemorative plates a-plenty. Traxton, however, seems unconcerned with any item this room offers.

We next move into a well-decorated parlor. The Mortimer's make away with bottle after bottle of quality spirits, crystal snifters, and even a genuine silver absinthe spoon. Again, Traxton seems uninspired by the parlor's contents.

From there we enter into a grand foyer, staircase ascending with immaculate grandeur. Standing sentry at the base of the stairs is an actual sixteenth century suit of armor. The ancient warrior has a pointed face-guard, a shield displaying the Second Earl of Essex's coat of arms, and held aloft in his right hand, a stunningly massive battle axe.

Swinney makes an attempt at prizing the war-time accoutrement from the knight's grasp, but to no avail. He pushes and prods and even hangs like a monkey from the arm held high in an attempt to steal the axe, but nothing seems to weaken this ancient warrior's resolve. Good show, old chap!

Next, we happen upon a pantry rife with cooking utensils and food. Swinney and Ryland exchange glances, drop their satchels, and begin to feast upon the open banquet.

Traxton whispers. "What're you two doin'?' This ain't chow-time!"

Ryland answers, mouth full of lamb. "We're here to burgle, right? We're burglarin' their food."

The logic is sound in a perfectly gluttonous fashion. Traxton takes me by the arm and leads on out of the pantry. "C'mon, the good stuff's upstairs."

We return to the foyer, pass the radiant armor, and climb the staircase; soft rug dampening our already gingerly-placed steps. Traxton seems to have a sixth sense for this type of endeavor as he intuits our path to a pair of double doors near the end of the hall. He deftly turns the knob and we find ourselves within a fine bedchamber complete with two chests of drawers, a delicate vanity, and a mirror that nearly touches the ceiling.

Slumbering upon a four-post canopied bed lies the woman of the house herself. She withdraws a nasally breath after each intake of oxygen and is wearing a long sleeping cap draped across her pillow.

Traxton places his finger to his lips in a call for silence... as if I needed any such reminder...

The man opens a small jewelry box placed upon the first chest of drawers from which emanates a quaint rendition of *Dixie*. He quickly closes the lid and we await with bated-breath the lady's awakening. But she merely passes gas and rolls over onto her right side. Traxton places the music box in his satchel. "C'mon, here's the real treasure."

He proceeds to unceremoniously heap precious gems, a silver-gilt hand mirror, gold bracelets, and even a jade-encrusted white-gold tiara into his burlap bag. I

can do nothing but stare in confoundment as this woman's heirlooms are absconded with.

Traxton whispers again. "You want your money or what?"

Traxton withdraws a fetching diamond and gold necklace from a drawer and places it into my own satchel. I look down at the lonely treasure and come to terms with reality... I am now a thief.

I attempt to ignore my ethical dilemma with the curious predicament and begin filling my satchel with all this lady has to call her own: Emerald baguette-cut brooch, sterling silver and gold rings, earrings, and gems and jewels and all manner of priceless bauble.

After the final drawer has been picked clean, we exit the room and head back downstairs. In the pantry, we are none-too-pleased to discover the widow's two sons laid out in repose upon the floor, the figures of Swinney and Ryland standing above them.

"What happened here?"

Swinney shrugs, ham hock in hand. "Came for a midnight snack, but got a wallop in' instead. Don't worry, they ain't seen us."

"Fine. I think our work here is done, boys. Let's go out the cellar."

The Brothers Mortimer retrieve their satchels and we all retrace our steps back through the foyer. As we pass the knight aside the staircase, we are startled by a thin voice calling out from behind us: "Stop right there, you hooligans, and raise your hands!"

We turn to discover the lady of the house, sporting her night cap, and brandishing a genuine seventeenth century blunderbuss aimed in our direction with a barrel as wide as a funnel.

Her eyes go large with recognition. "Swinney and Ryland Mortimer!? Just you wait until I tell your mother!"

Ryland attempts a feeble defense. "Aww, it ain't nothin', missus. Wrong house is all."

"Wrong house, my foot!"

Oh, we are destined for the gallows for sure. Her weapon would, from this angle, dispatch each and every one of us if she so chose to discharge. It really is a fine piece. In fact, I would wager if put to fence the artifact would command a comely price indeed...

Oh! Why did I just think that? Am I embracing the life of a ne'er-do-well so expeditiously? I would benefit from a bit of caution.

But we are caught! What good is caution now? Even with her two sons unconscious in the pantry, it would be no trouble for her to lead us directly to the sheriff's office in town. We are doomed for certs.

Traxton straightens out his shirt and grins. "Ma'am, I'm Traxton Rhodes. Perhaps you've heard of me."

"I sure have, you deadbeat. Left poor Peggy Sue to rear your child unassisted!"

"That ain't my child neither! But... I was more wonderin' if you've heard of my... reputation. In the boudoir..."

Is he... is he propositioning a septuagenarian? Oh, good Lord what sort of business is this? Surely this woman would never accept such a trade. Or would she?

She lowers her blunderbuss. "Are you making an offer to escort me upstairs, young man?"

"If you're so inclined. Yes, ma'am."

She trains the weapon at Traxton. "Well I do declare... I'll have you know I've only ever known my husband, God rest his soul, and if you think I would dare make time with you, then you're stupider than you look."

The lady, in directing her aim towards Traxton, did leave me uncovered by her weapon. If anyone is in

a position to alter our course it is unfortunately myself. I look about for any item that may be of use. Aha! A blue and white Chinese vase currently occupied by a lovely orchid arrangement. I hate to hurt a woman of any age, but this does seem our sole path to salvation.

The woman takes a few steps off the stairs.

"Alright now, I don't know where my good-for-nothing sons are, but we're going to march right out this door and head for the sheriff's office."

It is now or never. I grab hold of the vase and send it hurtling in her direction. The container douses the dowager in flower-water, but misses her head by inches smashing against the polished suit of arms instead.

I cannot say if it was the vase alone, or if Swinney's pulling earlier played a part, but the impact did somehow loosen the soldier's right arm, causing the great battle axe to swing down furiously and - oh no - land upon the bed-capped head of our assailant, cleaving her in half!

Traxton drops his jaw. "TARNATION! You chopped that lady in two!"

"Oh God, what have I done?"

Ryland and Swinney chuckle uproariously as Traxton places the deceased woman's blunderbuss in his satchel. He then pats me on the back and offers this meek consolation: "Don't bother yourself too much, Purple. You didn't do it... *he did.*"

He did? The armor? As if an inanimate object may be held culpable for rending this woman in half. I am the guilty party. I, and I alone. I am not only now a thief... I am a murderer.

My partner in crime makes the sign of the cross, erroneously signing right to left. "Well... can't nothin' be done to save this one... so I say, with them two

asleep in the pantry, we go on upstairs and finish the job."

Swinney, Ryland, and Traxton all scamper up the stairs leaving this poor woman in a desperate state of affairs. I say the Lord's Prayer for her soul and close each of her eyes - a job not easily performed given one side of her face is lying approximately ten feet from the other.

What can I possibly do to atone for such a diabolical act of villainy? I will forever be known as Alistair Evans Harris: Murderer of Very Old Women.

Oh, my mother would be so ashamed...

Chapter 9

Traxton

September 8th, 1881

My Lord I ain't never seen nothin' like it. Purple opened that old coot head to toe, spillin' her brains and breakfast out for the world to witness. Golly...

He turned a right shade of red and looked set to lose his lunch. I ain't never been one to fret over the "coulda beens" though, so Jacob's boys and me head on upstairs to find what we may have missed. I take the room on the right while they check out the room on the left.

On first sight I could tell this spot won't have nothin' worth takin'. Looks like the son of the split woman lives much as I do. I ain't never understood no man what keeps hold of fancy items. What's to hold on for? Anythin' I get hold of is traded in for drinkin' money. That's how *a man* lives.

I take a gander just to pass the time; nothin' 'neath the dresser, nothin' 'hind the curtains, nothin' worth takin' at all. I'm set to leave when I get the notion to lift this man's mattress.

Holy Moses! Boy am I happy I did...

Tucked 'tween this man's bed I find a stack of nekkid lady pictures. A whole lotta them too! Pictures like these is damn near impossible to come by out here. Nekkid ladies with small ninnies, nekkid ladies lookin' all bashful, nekkid ladies squeezin' their big 'ol watermelons together. I say this here may be the finest

treasure I found in the whole darned house. Maybe in my life even...

Heard told this practice begun in Paris.

Photographers get pretty young things believin' they'll be rich and famous but for strippin' nekkid and lettin' him shoot 'em as God made 'em. Of course, none of 'em ever do get rich and famous. The most what happens is their likenesses wind up hidden under the mattresses of men young and old.

There's infinite uses pictures such as these serve too: Not enough money for a whore, ain't no whore, out alone on the prairie... and I tell you what... it's every man what would love to use pictures like these when they be by they lonesome. Every man. You show me a man what says different and I'll show you a goddamn liar. Even mister fancy pants Purple.

In fact...

I close the door to the room and set some of these pictures out along the bed. Then I take down my drawers and get to business...

Hey now! Here's a picture of a nekkid woman smilin' and holdin' an apple; here's a picture of a tall nekkid lady bent over so as to pick somethin' up off the floor; here's a picture of a nekkid woman squattin' over lookin' like she's mad as hell; here's... whoa nelly! Here's a picture of two females doin' somethin' they'll be goin' to hell for for sure! Oh boy... oh boy... yee haw!

Purple opens the door wide. "Excuse me, Traxton, but do you think... oh God!"

"Don't nobody knock no more!? Get outta here, Purple!"

Purple turns even redder than he was before and closes the door on his way out. I fix my trousers then stack the pictures in a neat pile, roll 'em, and tuck 'em in the back of my pants for later.

I make for the balcony above the stairs where everyone's waitin'; Purple can't even make eye contact... ain't that cute?

I nod as I approach. "Alright then, let's get to goin' 'fore these boys wake up and see what you did to their mama, Purple."

Ain't no sense in makin' for the cellar what with the house either dead or asleep, so we climb down these stairs and walk out the front door easy as you please. "Mind the blood now. Don't want to leave a red path to your father's house for the sheriff to follow."

We break for the outside of town, bein' mindful to lose our trail by zig-zaggin' and crisscrossin' in the grass yonder. After we're sure not even an injun could track us, we make our way back to Jacob's just as the sun starts to risin' proper.

The old man meets us at the door. "Well, well, well... you're all here and ain't dead. And I'm mighty pleased to see your sacks is full too. Go on and make your piles now..."

A fine white cloth's been laid out on the large table in the sitting room. We sort out our loot in neat little piles so Jacob can go over and tally up our take. He takes one look and gets to fumin'. "Goddammit, boys! Why do they got all the gold and you two got nothin' but pots and pans? Ain't you ever learned nothin'?"

Swinney keeps his eyes on the floor. "Sorry, pa..."

Jacob sets a pair of spectacles on his nose and begins jottin' down notes in a black ledger he's got. "So? You fellas run into any trouble?"

Ryland points at Purple. "This one chopped the old lady in half, pa."

Jacob almost smiles. "*In half*?! Now what'd you go and do a thing like that for? Missus Mortimer won't

be too pleased with woman's Bible studies bein' over with..."

As Jacob continues his tabulations, Purple hurries back into his purple coat while I pour myself a glass of whiskey and doze off in the corner with my hat coverin' my eyes.

I wake up a good while later as Jacob kicks me in the boots. "Alright everyone, listen up. I got the numbers. So, after Missus Mortimer's cut, and my cut, Swinney and Ryland both get three hundred dollars."

The boys jump out their seats. "Woo Hoo!"

"But... Seein' as you two don't ever pay me no room and board... I'm deductin' that from your total! So you boys get a measly ten dollars."

"But, pa..."

"Shut up. Now, after my cut and Missus Mortimer's cut, Traxton also gets the "killed my nephew Stuart in cold blood" cut. Leavin' him with three hundred dollars. Mister lilac here's the big winner with seven hundred fifty dollars for his troubles. We all square? Good. Now don't you go off and blow it all on whores, mind ya. In fact, don't go out makin' a scene at all. Sheriff'll be on the lookout for folks what recently came into a heap of money. 'Specially after Lilac here up and turned that old lady into a twin of herself."

I gotta pay Purple the two hundred fifty, that'll leave me with fifty dollars to pass the winter. I'll need more work for sure. I pocket my winnin's and shake Jacob by the hand. "Say, Jacob, you ain't got more work do ya?"

"What? Three hundred ain't enough for ya? How much can you drink, boy?"

"I got a debt or two I gotta settle with this..."

He sneers. "I'm sure you do. Well, I might get somethin' next week. Also... I heard told of a train what

should be comin' through in the spring what might hold a king's ransom. Give me a little while and come back."

I shake his hand again. "Will do. Thank you, Jacob."

"Yea, yea. Now go on and take Lilac here and scoot."

Purple and me leave the sittin' room and enter the light of day. After so many hours in the dark, the sun stings a bit in my eyes. We pass through the gates and I hand over two hundred and fifty dollars to Purple, makin' us square.

He counts his money. "This is a fine start. But I believe you owe me another seven hundred and fifty American dollars."

I stop dead in my tracks. "What? Now you wait just one cotton pickin' minute..."

"I earned my money last night. You hold no claim to that amount."

"Was me what introduced you to Jacob."

He's gettin' all uppity. "You also introduced me to thievery and murder. I earned that money."

"Listen here, Purple..."

"My name is Alistair Evans Harris..."

I take a step towards him. "And my name's Traxton Rhodes. Now I know you're good with your fists, but I ain't the type of man to up and roll over. You did have to get your hands dirty last night, that's true, but it's every man what has to get his hands dirty from time to time livin' out here, and if you don't like it, you should head straight back to England. We're square, Purple, and that's final."

"We are not square. You still owe me seven hundred and fifty American dollars and I'll see that debt paid."

The man in purple raises his hands like he's gonna try somethin', so I level the blunderbuss I kept

and aim it directly at Purple's face. "We square, ain't we?"

He stands there frozen, anger in his eyes. I can tell he wants to make a move, but is far too smart to test this here weapon. He opens his mouth to say somethin', but it's big 'ol Piggy Sue what shows up with her damned brothers and some Chinese kid in tow. "What's this, lads? A lover's quarrel?"

I keep my eyes on Purple. "This ain't no damn lover's quarrel. We're settlin' a debt is all."

"Uh huh... You look like hell, Traxton. Ain't got no sleep last night?"

"What're you gettin' at, Piggy?"

Without even lookin' I know she's wearin' a shit-eatin' grin. "Ain't nothin'. 'Cept an old lady over yonder a ways got separated from herself."

Look at how news travels in a small town. I 'spose it wouldn't take too long given the horrific nature of the crime. These folks see their fair share of trouble, but an old lady split in two ain't somethin' nobody's used to seein'.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout no lady gettin' put to the axe."

She spits and answers me slowly. "I ain't never said nothin' 'bout no axe, Traxton..."

Well shit... I just gave her the upper hand now didn't I? Piggy Sue always did have a good head on her shoulders for findin' things out. I 'spose that were God's way of makin' up for the snout-nose, pink skin, and hooves he gave her in trade.

So now I got her to deal with. I got this blunderbuss already drawn, so it ain't like these brothers of hers'll be able to get the drop on me. But I don't wanna shoot these folks out here on the street like dogs...

I will... but I don't wanna...

She gets all serious on me. "You hand over five hundred dollars and I'll forget we even had this conversation, Traxton. If not, I'm sure the reward for takin' you in would be mighty fine too..."

Five hundred dollars? What is she, crazy? I'd have to up and borrow even more money from Purple to pay the sum and that ain't somethin' I'm like to do. Maybe if I change the subject... "So, uh, who's this kid you got with ya, Piggy? Peggy?"

"Not that you'd care none, but this here's your son: Quon."

Quon! This is the whelp what up and cost me a thousand dollars! There's no way this here's my boy. Just look at him. He's Chinese! "This here ain't my boy! What do you take me for?!"

She tussles his mop. "He got an eye condition is all."

"That ain't no eye condition! He's a Chinese!"

"He ain't Chinese!"

"You named him Quon!"

"I was always partial to the name Quon. This here's your boy, Traxton, and that's the end of it. Now how's about that five hundred dollars?"

I've had just about enough of these people playin' me for the fool. I know this ain't my boy and I ain't the one what carved that old coot in two. So I up and do the only thing I can do in this moment... I trigger the blunderbuss directly in the dirt, kickin' up a mighty dust cloud, and run like hell.

"C'mon, Purple, if you wanna live!"

Chapter 10

Alistair

September 8th, 1881

Traxton has dragged me into his affairs once again!

With the discharged blunderbuss creating a veritable sandstorm as diversion, I break into a full-fledged sprint, collapsing one of Piggy Sue's mountainous brothers in my mad dash. The village of Casper is quite awake and about their affairs as we are compelled to bob and weave amongst the marketplace crowd. Traxton inadvertently spills a cart of assorted fruits and legumes in his haste. Then, a man driving a four-horse carriage is forced to pull up on the reins or risk collision with the felled vendor. The barrels in the rear of his vehicle come loose after the abrupt halt and roll into the stunned populace - increasing the mayhem tenfold.

Horses are bucking, women are crying, children are in peril of being trampled... and to make matters worse, some of the lesser-moraled of the citizenry exacerbate the confusion by looting from the various outdoor merchants. For the second time in three days, Traxton is responsible for unleashing pandemonium upon an habitually even-tempered populace.

But if this commotion can be of any use at all, we are now essentially inconspicuous within a living tornado of chaos.

Or so I thought...

Somehow - impossibly - Peggy Sue bellows and holds the crowd's rapt attention: "Hey everybody! That man in purple and his bedfellow are the ones responsible for choppin' up that old lady! Grab 'em and let's have a hangin'!"

It is an amazing sight to observe the minds of over two hundred people come to the same conclusion at once; each and every man, woman, and child refocused their efforts immediately to our apprehension. It seems the allure of a public execution rivals even free goods.

Traxton and I are each agile men, able to maintain a brisk speed, but these people are out for blood. They are gaining on us! I hazard a glance over my shoulder at the riotous mob and see Peggy Sue's colossal brothers leading the pack as they draw ever near.

I am not a particularly devout man. Of course I spent my youth obediently attending church, learning the scriptures, and performing the incumbent rituals. But my connection with the Lord has been troubled ever since the incident in London which bid me leave. I therefore resort to prayer only in the most dire of circumstances...

This is one such circumstance.

I bid the Lord, within my inner monologue, to please, please, please deliver us from this untimely end. I have scant faith that after the murder I took part in He would even deign to listen, but what else am I to do?

And then - in the most lascivious miracle imaginable - a large stack of photographs tucked in Traxton's pants is whisked up by the wind and rained upon the filthy mob like so many leaves.

Someone in the crowd shouts. "IT'S NEKKID PICTURES!"

Page after page of women in wanton poses falls into the crowd. The chase comes to a complete halt as even Peggy Sue's brothers are seen to be flailing about in an attempt to capture the sordid material.

Traxton screams. "My nekkids! I gotta go back!"

"Are you insane?! They'll kill us!"

"I need them pictures!"

"Traxton, get a hold of yourself and live to fight another day!"

He resigns himself to the inevitable loss of his nasty trove. And... I believe I even spot a tear running down his cheek as we speed away to safety.

My, my. These people were content to loot from their neighbors until the more desirable prospect of a hanging swayed them. Then, perhaps the only thing in the world more powerful than wrath - lust - swayed their resolve even further.

As a man of reason, I can attest to my prayers having been answered. But would God truly use such fetid material as His vessel? I suppose the ministers always did counsel that God works in mysterious ways. But abject pornography? This may be a query best left to serious theologians...

I can hear Peggy Sue admonishing the masses from behind: "You idiots! They're murderers! They're murderers!"

But her squeals are to no avail. The entire city of Casper, Wyoming is at present intent on securing even one nude female picture. My, is man a strange creature...

We lose sight of the base mob just as we arrive at the saloon from yesterday. "Go on up and grab your effects, Purple. I'll be down here handlin' some business. But be quick, mind ya, that crowd'll come lookin' soon enough."

"It will go faster if you assist."

"I said I had business, dammit. Get up there!"

I scale the stairs, three at a time, and drag my valise back down, scuffing the leather with each splintered step. When I reach the bottom, I notice Traxton pouring shot after shot down his throat. This is his pressing business!? "You might have helped. Now my patent leather is forever marred!"

He raises another glass. "Fuck your patent leather, Purple. This here's the only business that matters."

I shake my head at the futility of arguing with such a man and heft my valise outside, paying the stable boy a penny to retrieve my steed. Traxton barges through the swaying wooden doors and belches unrepentantly. "You tell him to grab my horse too?"

"You did not request I do so."

He removes his hat. "Goddammit, Purple, why do I..."

"My name is Alistair. Evans. Harris."

"Who. Gives. A shit?"

I step towards Traxton. "Now see here, if we are in any way to form a bond of comradery, we must at the very least..."

"You'll have to save your speech for later there, Purple... Here they come!"

Around the corner spews the vanguard of the encroaching mob. At the fore marches Peggy Sue like some cantankerous Madame Lafarge leading the rabble towards worldly salvation. We haven't much time at all...

Oblivious to the impending clash trots a two-horse carriage that halts directly in front of us. The driver wipes his brow. "S'cuse me, boys. You know which way is the farmers market?"

Traxton nods towards the tavern. "You found it, hombre, go right inside."

The farmer pulls on his beard. "My readin' ain't so good, but don't that say 'saloon'?"

"Naw, says 'farmers market.' Go on inside, we'll watch out for your wares."

He tips his hat in gratitude. "Well thank you kindly, partner."

The farmer climbs down from his carriage and walks into the saloon. Traxton vaults into the cart and takes hold of the reins. "What're you waitin' for, Purple? A fancy invitation? Get on!"

I heft my valise into the cart among the turnips and potatoes as Traxton cracks the whip. I fall over backwards into a large burlap sack of tomatoes which squish and stain my lilac coat. For heaven's sake!

Traxton drives the cart straight for the mob and plows right through them sending people diving for safety. I watch from my tomato sack vantage point Piggy Sue commandeer a similar two-horse carriage as her brothers and Traxton's son Quon climb in the back. This is now a vehicular chase!

We speed outside of the city limits, Peggy Sue hot on our heels; each and every bump in the dirt road sending produce flying about and out of the cart. The countryside opens up and we're all alone except for the racing cart behind us.

Traxton hands over a shotgun and implores me fire upon our pursuers. I take up the firearm and discharge in their general direction, but was not anticipating the violent kickback which sends the weapon flying from my hands to land in the grass below.

Traxton is clearly disgruntled. "Goddammit, Purple!"

The shot phased them not the slightest; indeed it may have strengthened their resolve as Peggy Sue cracks the whip with furious anger. They're gaining on us!

Traxton stands from his seat. "Come here and take the reins!"

I scramble to the fore and take place aside Traxton as he passes the lash. He then leaps into the rear of the cart and begins hurling potatoes at the antagonizing party. One potato lands squarely in Peggy Sue's face causing their whole cart to veer from the path and into the soft earth. I watch as she regains control and corrects the cart's trajectory.

Traxton is hurling all manner of legume, one after another, in an attempt to distract Peggy Sue and her brothers. One of her siblings catches a carrot and devours it in one bite, bushy leaves and all...

Before long, their cart draws perilously close and one of the two men is able to leap into the back of our cart necessitating hand to hand combat for Traxton. Peggy attempts to ram us, but strikes a large rock forcing her to fall back behind. Her brother is a menace; he delivers blow after blow upon Traxton's face.

"Purple. Weave the cart!"

"But you'll fall!"

"I said weave the cart, dammit!"

I jerk the reins hard to the right and the horses obediently swerve, sending both Traxton and his nemesis tumbling over the side and into the dusty path where they skid to a mangled halt. Traxton regains his composure and kicks the other man in the head. He then sprints to catch us and vaults back in with the vegetables.

I crack the whip and watch behind in horror as Piggy Sue drives right over her own fallen brother in pursuit. This is surely a deranged woman...

Her other brother is now in command of a large pistol and is firing at us over and over again, each shot sending a report one could probably detect for miles. I notice the wooden bench shudder as a bullet lodges mere inches from my posterior. Heaven help me!

In an attempt to return the volley, Traxton is hurling potatoes. One such potato bursts into a million pieces as a bullet puts an end to the vegetable's intended parabola.

I plead without looking. "You must do something, man!"

"No shit!"

I observe over my shoulder as Traxton withdraws fresh ammunition from somewhere upon his person. He then proceeds to wrench the shell casings open and deposit the loose gun powder down the blunderbuss, after which he injects a potato into the massive funnel-like nozzle and takes aim at the belligerents.

With a decidedly muted thud, the potato is launched from the de facto cannon and hits none other than Traxton's six-year-old Asian son in the stomach, evincing a child-sized yelp in response... "Whoops, sorry, little buddy!"

The man repeats the process of emptying the shells and loading a potato, but this time manages to send the vegetable screaming into Peggy Sue's forehead. She is rendered instantly unconscious and drops her reins beneath their carriage. Huzzah! The day is won!

But Peggy Sue's brother must have been through this before as he expediently slaps his sister about her porcine cheeks. Piggy shudders awake and retakes the reins with renewed determination. "Traxton Rhodes! We're gonna kill you!"

I can see in the distance an enormous ravine and make to steer the horses clear following the road, but Traxton reaches over my shoulders and holds our direction true... "Head straight for the canyon! I got an idea!"

Chapter 11

Traxton

September 8th, 1881

We're in the middle of a gull darn cart chase and all I can think 'bout are my damn nekkid pictures littered all over Casper! I 'spose the fact I had them at all is evidence enough that I was in that house burglarizin' last night. Guess I won't be goin' to that town ever again...

Gotta focus on the task at hand for now though. Piggy just crushed her own damn brother 'neath her carriage, then I nailed that kid, Quon, and his mama both with a damn hot spud from this blunderbuss. I got just enough ammo to make one more shot of it, so I'd better make it count.

I take off the ends of these bullets usin' my handy knife and pour the powder down the big-ass hole. Then I shove a heavy spud in makin' sure it's tight so as to fly better. I told Purple to keep the horses runnin' towards the cliffs yonder as I think I got a plan a-cookin'.

We're speedin' 'long through the fields at a pace damn near that of a locomotive. But locomotives run on rails and this here's one of the bumpiest rides I've ever been on - aside the time Piggy Sue mounted me, that is. Gotta make sure I aim straight...

I can see Piggy Sue breathin' heavy and even foamin' at the mouth like a mangy dog as she whips her horses into a frenzy. How those poor animals is pullin' that heifer and her big brother I'll never know. It's a

damn shame little Quon's back there with 'em, but they're out for blood and somethin's gotta be done quick-like... "You stop these horses just shy of the ravine, you hear me?!"

Purple is red in the face and red in the coat for all them tomatoes he squashed back here. I can bet he ain't too pleased 'bout that, but he better not get to blamin' me for those damn tomatoes. "Now slow down so they get right on top of us!"

I get the sense our horses are goin' a wee bit slower and recognize that Piggy Sue is catchin' up. I gotta make this shot count...

Just as she's gettin' closer, I see that big bitch pull a gun from her coat like I ain't never seen. It's a revolver, but the barrel is damn near long as my arm. She's near enough now I can smell the stink from her pits. Piggy Sue takes aim and blows a hole big as an apple into the wood next to me. Goddamn, why'd I tell Purple to slow down?

Piggy Sue uses her hoofy hand to cock the hammer. No man could survive a hole like that gun makes. She's close enough now to where there's no way she'd miss. Piggy lines her sights, not at my head, but at my manhood! She's dead set on makin' me a woman! "Kiss your cock goodbye, Traxton!"

She pulls the trigger just as Purple yanks the reins only a few feet from the cliff. I hit the front of the carriage hard and Piggy's shot misses me by an inch. I keep my senses and aim this blunderbuss straight at their horse's legs. Bull's-eye!

The spud pegs the left horse square in the knee and causes it to spill in a right proper mess. Their cart launches 'em like a catapult into the air and I watch as Piggy Sue and her brother fly over us and into the canyon below. As she's straight overhead I can hear 'ol

Piggy shout: "Traxton Rhodes, I'll haunt you for this you son of a biiiiiiitch!"

And then she's gone. Dropped down near a thousand feet into the crevasse never to be heard from again. Thank the Lord for that one!

I ain't see the little one go over the ridge, but given how small he was, I'm sure he flew farther than the rest. Damn shame, that. No kid deserves to go out that way, Chinese or no... I do the sign of the cross for his little soul then pick myself up from all this mess in the back of the cart. "Well then, Purple, that was some fine drivin' if I do say so myself."

Purple ain't doin' nothin' but starin' off into the distance with a vacant look on his face. "You alright up there?"

No word. What the hell's the matter with this one? He's actin' like he ain't never been in no high-speed chase with people shootin' at him before. If he wants to make a life for himself out here he better grow some bigger balls than these. "You awake there, Purple?"

I put my hand on his shoulder and he jumps in fright like I startled him or somethin'.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

"Well now, welcome back. As I said, that were some fine drivin'."

He looks at me, tears wellin' up like a woman. "Did... did the child... where's the child?"

I look down over the cliff. "Don't rightly know, to be honest. Down there somewheres I'd reckon..."

Hand on his heart, the man blubbers. "Oh God. Oh God. Oh God..."

"Get a hold of yourself, Purple. There was no way to save that kid. It was either us or them, and I chose us."

He takes off his hat. "Well you chose poorly. He's a child!"

"*Was* a child, more like. Anyhow, what's done is done and we can go 'bout our business in peace."

Now you know, I've seen some wild things in my days: Lightening strike a man, a bullet ricochet off a rock and go right back in the barrel of the gun what shot it, a coyote eatin' a man still alive... But I swear I ain't never seen no man cry in open air over the death of a stranger.

Purple's cryin'... what in tarnation am I 'sposed to do with this now? A cryin' man - goddamn... "There, there, Purple. It'll be alright..."

"Do not speak to me as if I were a baby!"

"Well you cryin' like one! How else am I 'sposed to talk to you?"

He's near hysterical. "In the course of only a few hours, I've been complicit in murdering not only an elderly woman, but now a six-year-old child! Oh, my mother would be so ashamed..."

I wave off deciding to let this man console himself while I unhitch the horses. Luckily there were two saddles in the back of the cart, so I set on fixin' 'em ready to ride. I even carry that man's clothing trunk and tie it off on the back of his horse for him.

After that, I dig through what's left of the fruits and vegetables to save for later. Apples, carrots, a few potatoes what I ain't thrown... and, oh hell... look at what's sittin' there smilin' as if his world ain't just been turned upside down...

"Hello, Papa."

It's Quon! Landed in a big 'ol bag of plums, safe and sound. Well ain't that just a miracle? "Hey, Purple, quit your blubberin', will ya? Look who's still alive after all..."

His eyes light up. "Quon! Oh, thank heavens!"

Purple picks that kid up from his sack of purple plums, huggin' him as if they've known each other their entire lives. I nod at the boy proud that he ain't dead, but if we wanna stay that way ourselves we'd better scoot before the sheriff of Casper rounds up a posse and comes lookin' for our hides. They'll find Piggy Sue easy enough a right mess, but I want to make sure I'm as far as possible just in case he got some good trackers with him.

Ain't no room on Purple's horse what with that damn box of his, so I throw the little Chinese boy behind me and we head due west. I gotta figure a new plan for the winter now that my name's mud in Casper...

But first we gotta do somethin' with this kid; only right I guess. Bein' six and all, I wonder if he knows what life and death are. He done seen his own mama go tumblin' through space and into a canyon, but ain't cryin' none for losin' her. Maybe they weren't too close.

Plus I got the other thing to figure out, how to tell him I ain't his pa. That was a right dirty thing to do fillin' his head with ideas that I were his daddy. Don't take a genius to see the boy and me don't look one bit alike. Hell, he don't have a snout neither so who's to say he were actually Piggy's whelp?

I speak over my shoulder as we ride. "Say, Quon?"

"Yes, Papa?"

"You speak pretty good English for bein' a Chinaman."

"What's that, Papa?"

He sure is curious. "Well... you are."

"Is Chinaman a good thing to be?"

"What sorta question is that?"

Purple rudely interrupts. "Quon, what your father means to say is, this world is filled with all sorts

of people. Good people. Bad people. People of myriad hues. Now good people honor those hues, and instead weigh a person's merit based on the content of their character."

"Am I a good person?"

Purple addresses the boy like he's grown. "Do you litter or use curse words?"

"No, sir."

"Then you are indeed a good person."

Little Quon taps my shoulder. "Are you a good person, Papa?"

Am I a good person? My God where do these kids come up with questions like these? Of course I'm a good person. 'Cept I done a great many bad things. But those things had to be done. A man's gotta live don't he? And, more importantly, a man's gotta drink don't he?

I oughta slap Purple for fillin' Quon's head with ideas on good and bad. In my mind it ain't all black and white like he says. There's levels of good and bad. Piggy Sue were bad, and not only 'cause she were fat and ugly... though that does play a part of it I'm sure...

I've done some rotten things in my life, but in most cases it was a rotten situation to begin with. I ain't never shot no man what didn't have a gun pulled. 'Cept for the drunken lookout what got my pa scalped. But that were revenge. I robbed some folks and stole a fair number of cattle in my day. I can't rightly say that were good, but like I said, a man's gotta drink don't he?

I don't like all this talk of morality - makes my head spin. I also don't like that this kid keeps callin' me pa. If Piggy Sue weren't already dead in a ravine, I'd kill her for tellin' this kid that. What's he gonna think when I drop him off in the next church I see? He's gonna think his real pa did that to him when really it was a

stranger he had no business bein' with in the first place...

Purple again answers for me. "Quon. Your father is an exceptional individual."

There he goes... fillin' this boy's head with nonsense...

It's gettin' dark out so we might as well set up camp. We run our horses 'round in circles a bit, crossin' a stream a few times back and forth then walk up in the water a ways to lose our steps, so I think we'll be safe from the trackers.

I start a fire with little Quon watchin' my every move. I don't envy him livin' his life so far with Piggy Sue as his ma. She ain't probly taught him shit. No wonder he followin' me 'round like a dog. A boy needs a man to show him how to be a man. 'Less you got a mama like I did. She were twice as tough as most men...

But I ain't this boy's pa, dammit!

Don't make no difference no how. After tonight the boy'll be someone else's responsibility and I can get to spendin' this money on some whores and drinkin' as was my plan.

I lay my horse blanket down by the fire and little Quon takes a spot right beside me, fallin' asleep in an instant. Now I can't even do what I normally do 'fore I go to sleep. Not without bein' a true scoundrel that is... whatever. One night. One night then my life'll be back to regular.

And thank God for that...

Chapter 12

Alistair

September 9th, 1881

I am so unbelievably relieved young Quon is alive!

The moments I thought him dead were hell. A genuine hell. I blamed myself. I blamed Traxton. The sub-moronic burglary imbroglio. The lynch mob. The confounded potatoes hurtling through space. Taking part in a child's murder is the lowest a human may hope to morally descend.

But he is alive! Assuming his rightful place behind Traxton astride the horse, and nestled up aside his father asleep by the fire. Oh, thank God, the boy is alive...

Upon waking, I perform my ablutions, as per usual, which for some reason fascinates Traxton to no end. "That some sorta wax you're usin' on your 'stache?"

"Indeed it is. Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax. A rare delicacy among all mustache waxes..."

He nudges the boy at my expense, snickering. "Can you imagine, Quon, payin' good money for somethin' to make you look so silly?"

Harrumph! As if Traxton is a man who deserves an opinion on gentleman's fashion. His morning ablutions consisted of plugging each nostril with his index finger and expelling phlegm into what remains of our fire.

I return to my boots their glorious sheen,
exchange undergarments behind a timely bush, and blot
the tomato stains from my lilac coat with sustained
vigor.

Once presentable, I mount my steed and doff
my top hat. We ride with the sun to our backs,
westward toward the hills. This land is all so massive.
With the distance I've traveled in America thus far, I
might have traversed from London to Edinburgh five
times over, or circumnavigated Ireland in its entirety
with room to spare. Truly a wonder, this magnificent
expanse.

I've not yet decided how to deal with the debt
still owed. If given to debate, I would surely emerge
victorious. If given to fisticuffs, I would almost
certainly triumph. If given to firearms... Traxton would
indeed prevail.

I've no desire, however, to raise this topic in
front of the child. When last we spoke on it, Traxton
pulled a weapon wide-brimmed as a cornucopia horn
and zeroed in mere inches from my person. Not again...

I haven't an inclination as to what Traxton
means to do with his winsome progeny either. He has
existed thus far as a complete rogue, free from civic,
inter-personal, or even personal responsibility. Rearing
a child is no light task, and it seems exceedingly
doubtful that a man like Traxton Rhodes would, indeed
could, rise to the occasion.

Not that I am any model aspiring fathers ought
to emulate. No. A parent taking their cues from one
such as myself would positively succumb to grief and
unparalleled disaster. I am at once ornery,
temperamental, and woefully inadequate for the
challenges therein.

As our horses casually trot towards the west, I
notice little Quon has decided to indulge in a bit of a

repose, leaning against Traxton for support. I decide to put the question to him: "So, Traxton, what are your plans for this child?"

"Orphanage or church, whichever comes first I reckon."

"You have no desire to see this child raised?"

The cowboy winces and wrinkles his weather-beaten nose. "What're you crazy? I don't know the first thing 'bout raisin' no kid. Most likely get him shot 'fore the weeks out as his pa."

"He does seem to have taken to you."

Traxton regards the boy behind him. "He did, didn't he? But hell, after growin' up with Piggy Sue as his ma, he'd probly take to a cross-eyed mule just as quickly."

We ride through envious fields, enjoying a midday repast of apples and carrots. As the sun sets, we happen upon a small town bearing no signage of introduction for wayward travelers. There is a saloon, a number of ranches, a mortuary, a general store, and a quaint church with an unimpressive steeple in serious disrepair.

Traxton dismounts and makes an attempt at opening the door to the rectory. He finds it securely fastened for the evening so proceeds to knock a few times, sending a racket echoing within. A humble looking, bespectacled minister answers the door, taking in Traxton's appearance with relative unease. "May I help you, son?"

Traxton pats Quon's shoulder in introduction. "I gotta ward here for you, Padre. Name's Quon."

The minister touches his cheeks in shock. "But... he's Chinese..."

"Yea, so?"

The man of God can't quite meet our gaze. "So, it is quite difficult to find adoptive parents for the

normal children we receive. A Chinese boy... well, he'd most likely be here until he's old enough to strike out on his own at thirteen. We simply don't have the resources..."

Traxton sneers understanding. "Oh, I get it... fine... how much to take him?"

"We normally ask for a twenty-dollar stipend, but in this case I'd say we would require no less than a hundred."

"A hundred dollars?! Ain't this your God-given duty or somethin'?"

"Traditionally, it is the parent's God-given duty..."

"Well I ain't givin' you no hundred dollars!"

Quon tugs on Traxton's dusty shirt. "Papa, what's happening?"

Oh it breaks the heart. There is no lowlier creature than the unwanted child. In London they scurry about the streets, roving in packs, cutpurses and sneaks the lot of them. Poor little Quon has no idea what this world has in store for him.

Traxton lowers himself to meet Quon man to man. "Well, Quon, this fella's gonna be your papa now. A proper papa. One that can look out for you better than I can. Only thing is he needs one hundred dollars to do so."

"You aren't gonna be my papa no more?"

Traxton stands. "Listen up... I ain't no good at bein' nobody's papa, Quon. This man'll teach you things like how to read and count. I can't rightly do that for you."

"But I want you to be my papa."

"Ain't gonna happen, Quon. This here's your home as soon as we settle on a price..."

Quon reaches into his tiny pockets. "OK... If it would help, I have some money, papa."

Imagine! A child willing to offer up the means for his own placement in some destitute orphanage. My heart aches at the innocence of it all.

Traxton rubs the boy's head. "It'll cost a might bit more than the penny or two you got in your pocket, boy..."

"I have more than pennies, papa... look."

Tiny Quon retrieves a stack of money from deep within his little pocket. My... that *is* a tidy sum now isn't it?

Traxton does a double take. "How much is that, Quon?"

"I don't know. Mama never taught me math."

My riding partner takes the wad of bills folded over from his child and counts it. As he continues to tabulate, his eyes widen and is seen to lick his lips.

"This here's fifteen hundred dollars! How the hell you got money like this?"

"Mama always made me hold onto her money for safe keeping. She said nobody would think to rob a kid."

Good heavens. This child was in possession of my thousand American dollars plus a substantial sum in addition. How fortunes may reverse in an instant...

The minister speedily interjects. "If that's the boy's money, we'd be happy to take him in."

"Shut up, Padre, I gotta think on this."

The holy man has found his spine. "I witnessed the boy withdraw the funds. If you choose to make away with it I shall be forced to notify the sheriff."

"If that's the case then I'm keepin' him. C'mon, Quon, we're leavin'!"

The boy smiles a radiant grin and raises his arms towards Traxton for help mounting the horse. The minister shakes his head dolefully and closes the door

behind him. It seems we shall be accompanied by the tyke once more.

We make for the saloon and hand our reins to an eager stable-boy only a year or two Quon's senior. Upon entry, I approach the proprietor - a grizzly, wizened old man - and inquire after accommodations. We settle in and then return downstairs in search of dinner.

The bartend dusts off the table with a dusty rag. "What'll it be, gents? Pig or horse?"

"How much for pig?"

"Five cents."

"We'll have the horse."

A man delivers us each three bowls of dubious content. This is ostensibly horse meat, but I get the sense canine may be a surprise ingredient. In fact, I wonder if we would have received the exact same stew regardless of which meat we requested. No matter; I'm famished. We each of us eat heartily, but Traxton is done and wiping his mouth on his sleeve before either Quon or I are even halfway through. "Alright boys. Goodnight."

The man rises from the table and heads directly for a painted woman. She behaves in a most familiar manner; taking his hand and whispering in his ear in plain sight. The two retire upstairs leaving the boy and me to dine by ourselves.

I am not so naive as some would attest my appearance implies... I am well aware monogamy falls between dubious human convention and comforting solace. Women favor the institution as it hedges against their spending golden years alone; men endure the charade for fear of women scorned.

Traxton, however, lives by no such code of conduct. He maintains a woman in every port, as it were, and seems all the more pleased for it. But there

are others none too pleased for his behavior. Big Bill Sanders and this illegitimate child Quon for starters. Perhaps I shall engage in a heart-to-heart if the opportunity arises.

Myself, I've known but two partners in my thirty-one years. The first was a summer fling. Casual rendezvous in the countryside; trysts as time would allow. From May to September in the year of our Lord 1871 I was genuinely a contented man. Life was bluebells and rainbows.

My second affair lasted quite a bit longer. Eight years we were constant companions; taking in theater, gallery premiers, poetry readings. All was bucolic perfection. Except for the unfortunate cessation of dalliances mandated by my lover's spouse.

Yes, I admit... I was in love with one taken.

We conspired in secret for a year longer.

Dispatching correspondence by false moniker; renting rooms in squalid, off-beat lodgings outside of London. Our engagements sub-rosa smacked of intrigue and excitement. That is, until the jilted party discovered us once again and smacked an actual smack across my face in challenge to a duel.

I had no desire to play at mortality, especially given the innocence of my aggressor. I declined, and my lover's spouse went to the authorities with all manner of scurrilous (however true) accusations. These were people of standing, so a warrant was issued for my arrest, therefore, in lieu of seeing my family's name begrimed in scandal, I made for the New World with not but a hastily-conceived wardrobe and a relative pittance in means.

I long for my lost love whole-heartedly, but know I made the correct decision...

A grizzly voice behind us. "What's he, a Chinese?"

My ruminations are interrupted as I glance from my bowl and find a swarthy man with unconnected patches of facial hair dotting his square jaw. He is staring at Quon with hate in his eyes; clearly this man is deep in his cups.

"My good sir, is something amiss?"

"We don't serve his kind here. Or foreigners. So the both of you gotta go."

"But we are hardly even begun with our dinner. If you could..."

The man takes both our bowls and pours them onto our heads. Unforgivable!

My rage is ignited. "NOW SEE HERE!"

He growls menacingly. "I told ya... get out!"

Poor little Quon is crying; the contents of his dinner sliding down his innocent face. This man is a monster of the utmost caliber. Someone must address this grievance.

I stand to confront the brute, but before I even have time to engage in a proper fighting stance, the beast wraps his hairy paw around my throat and bangs his fist on the table.

"Now I said..."

A voice from above. "There a problem here?"

Traxton! Thank goodness. Except - oh my - Traxton is completely nude but for his hat, aiming his empty blunderbuss in my aggressor's general direction. And... well... suffice to say the reason for this man's natural appeal towards women in up and on display for the world to see. My, my.

The beast prepares his defense. "The problem is, he's a Chinese and the other one's a foreign."

"You'd do well to ignore that, friend."

"Or what?"

Traxton flashes his winning smile. "Or I blast your hide from here all the way to somewhere *you'll* be a foreigner, that's what."

I observe, neck yet ensconced in a meaty grip, as this xenophobic churl weighs his options. He snarls a grimacing grin, spittle trailing down what tangles of beard his face can manage, and slams my head with force upon the table rendering me uncon...

Chapter 13

Traxton

September 10th, 1881

Yee haw! Now this here's the life! Little Quon's flush with cash, I got a good bowl of horse in my gullet, and right before me on this bed is one of the pertiest strumpets this side of the Rio Grande.

Yea fortunes have a way of swingin' back and forth, now don't they? Not but a few hours ago I was near broke and soon to be starvin' for the winter, and now I got more money than God. Sure 'ol Purple out there'll lay claim to some of these funds, but I made good on his thousand dollars so this money's mine, by rights.

I gotta do somethin' 'bout Quon, and seein' his little face light up when I said I'd keep him did have some effect, truth be told. But just 'cause he had a good sum of money don't change the fact that I ain't cut out to be no father. We'll ride to the next town and I'll pay the proper amount to see him put in an orphanage. Only thing I can do, I reckon...

That's neither here nor there though as this woman is butt-ass nekkid here before me and I got a name to protect. I get to work breakin' the springs on this here mattress like a real professional; bed's carvin' new grooves into the wooden floor 'neath the legs.

Oh, this here's the life. I'm watchin' as her big 'ol ninnies spin 'round and 'round... damn... I'm like to get hypnotized starin' at these paps... hot damn... so it's a

right pain in my ass when I hear Purple holler out even louder than this whore's hollerin' out...

"NOW SEE HERE!"

Goddammit, what's he gone and done this time? Trouble seems to land on this guy like a fly does shit. I don't wanna stop what I'm doin', but I don't wanna risk havin' the sheriff showin' up askin' no questions we don't have no answers for... So I get up, ignorin' the fact that I'm nekkid 'sides my hat, and grab hold of this empty blunderbuss.

Some dumb cowboy's got Purple by the neck and I see he emptied their dinners on top of their heads for them. I give him the choice of lettin' go or losin' his own head, and the big idiot calls my bluff and knocks Purple's face into the table, hard. Dammit... I ain't got no ammo for this thing.

The brute laughs. "See what I done? I'll smash this here Chinese next if you don't go on and scram!"

Guess I gotta fight this man. Nekkid as I am, I run down the steps and stand myself 'tween the cowboy and Quon. He's had a might bit to drink as I can smell the tequila on his breath. Purple, useless as always, is lyin' face-first on the table snorin' like Old Man River.

I try to be friendly. "What's your name there, partner?"

"Bluto. And if you don't get outta my face with your nekkid-ass, I'm gonna..."

That there's the trick; get 'em speakin' on what they plan on doin', then break the closest thing you can get hold of over their head. There's nothin' cowboys like more than blusterin' on 'bout what they'd like to do. And while they yammer, you just go 'head and wallop.

I bring the blunderbuss down on top of him, front-side first, stuffin' his head up the wide-ass barrel. And damned if that thing don't get stuck with him in there past his eyeballs. He can't see a thing and takes to

spinnin' 'bout trying to pull it from his head. The whole room sets to laughin', which only angers 'ol Bluto all the more.

He's swingin' every which way; where ever he hears laughin'. Hits the wall straight on with his first punch and howls in pain. Decks the piano next and places a fist-sized hole in the wood.

The bartend is none too pleased. "You gotta pay for that piano, Bluto!"

The man named Bluto can't seem to get the blunderbuss off his head. Cryin' shame losin' a useful weapon like that, but for the laugh we're all gettin' I'd say it were a fair trade.

I boot Bluto in his rear-end, sendin' him flyin' out the swingin' doors. Then I cover up my manhood with my hat and make for Purple and Quon.

I hold the boy by his shoulder. "You alright there, Quon?"

"Yes, Papa. You really showed that man who's boss."

"And you will too one day, once we get you big and strong. Hey barkeep. We need another round of horse here for the boy and this man in purple!"

"Thank you, Papa."

I nod and head back upstairs where my real work is waitin'. I gotta figure somethin' that'll get the idea that I'm this boy's papa out his head. But like I said, there's more pressin' business to tend to right here is this room. I place my hat back on my head and get to makin' this girl earn her twenty cents. Yee haw!

The next mornin' I wake up and pick my clothes off the floor. Then I knock on the other room to wake my two ridin' partners up and have the barkeep pour a couple shots of whiskey for breakfast. After that I head on out and toss the stable boy a penny to fetch our horses.

As I stand there smokin' a half-crooked smoke, 'ol Bluto from last night walks up with his posse lookin' mighty angry. It seems he couldn't get nobody who could pull the blunderbuss from his head, so some blacksmith chopped the top part off and cut two holes in the barrel for eyes. The man'll probly have to wear my gun barrel as a mask for the rest of his life.

Bluto points right at me. "You the one what did this to me! Out in the road now so I can fill ya full of lead!"

This fool wants a shootout here in the street? Boy oh boy some folks just don't know when to quit.

I pat my belt where a gun ought be. "But, I ain't got no weapon."

"No gun? What kind of man are you?"

"You're wearin' my damn gun on your head, Bluto."

He shoves his man towards me. "Cecil, give this fool your gun."

Bluto's henchman undoes his holster and hands it over. I strap the belt 'round my waist, check the weight of the revolver, and make sure there's ammo loaded. This man Bluto's got no sense at all havin' his man hand over the weapon of his demise. Only thing is... "Don't seem fair you wearin' a helmet though, does it?"

"Blacksmith said I'd have this thing on for the rest of my life. You're gonna pay for that, you dog. Twenty paces..."

Quon comes out the saloon. "What's going on, Papa?"

"Ain't nothin', Quon. Just some unfinished business is all..."

Purple and Quon post up outside the saloon as I'm makin' for the center of the road. Ain't everyday out here an honest to God shootout goes on, so half the

town's busy tellin' the other half to come out and look. By the time Bluto and me are standin' twenty paces, fingers lightly touchin' our weapons, we got an audience of damn near fifty people.

I'm a fine shot if I do say so myself. And even if I weren't, this man's got a damn metal hat pulled down over his eyes that's gotta hinder him for sure...

It's so quiet I can hear a chicken peck the dirt a ways lookin' for feed.

Bluto spits into the dust. "Get ready to meet the devil, ya yella bellied varmint!"

There's a lot of ideas what run 'round a man's head as he's starin' death in the eyes. Mostly it's women I made time with. But I see other things as well. My pa makin' a gift of his grandpappy's huntin' knife, my ma offerin' up the good portion of cooked Comanche, my first taste of whiskey when I was five, my last taste of whiskey not but ten minutes ago. There's a lotta good in this world if you really think on it.

I know I done my share of bad deeds over the years. Things I ain't rightly pleased to have done. Mostly it's women what would sooner spit than say my name. Some cattle rustlers too. But I lived a good life. Had some fun of it. And truly... what else is there?

I'm watchin' metal-headed Bluto playin' at grippin' his weapon a few times. The trick when you're in a situation like this is keepin' your wits about ya, aimin' down the sights, and waitin' for the other guy to draw.

I don't know why it's the second shooter what usually walks away from these things. Maybe it's 'cause whoever pulls second is defendin' themselves. Maybe it's 'cause they're reactin' to somethin' 'stead of causin' somethin'. But the folks who live to tell all say they shot second. Gotta be some reason for it...

Bluto gets to throwin' lead!

I feel his bullet singe off a bit of my hair as it flies by my damn face. I pull my tool, line up the sights, and send my answer screamin' in his direction. I nail that man clean in his forehead, but with that mask he's wearin' the shot bounces off him and strikes the minister I tried to sell Quon to last night in the foot.

"Goddammit, my foot!"

"Sorry, Padre!"

The good news is my shot spun the barrel of the blunderbuss 'round a few degrees so Bluto ain't got no eye holes to see out of again. He gets to shootin' blindly in my direction. Folks duck down and lie on the ground as he breaks windows, kicks up dust, and kills the chicken I heard before.

After his last bullet's spent, I walk over and boot him in the rear-end once more. On the ground, I take a fistful of dirt and shove it in that man's mouth. "You done? You done here, Bluto?"

He spits out dirt what turned to mud, none too pleased to be blinded again. "Imma kill you! Imma kill you!"

I make the man eat more dirt, holdin' my hand over his mouth to let him think 'bout what he's done. When he can't take no more, I move my palm so he can get the mud out his mouth and even a little bit of what looks like bacon and eggs from breakfast. He also smells of whiskey, but I can't fault him for that none. I probly do too...

"I yield, I yield! Just don't make me eat mud no more."

"You got some grit there, Bluto. You just need to be nicer to folks is all. That there Chinaman's my son."

Even with half his face covered I can tell he's surprised. "Your son? But you ain't no Chinese..."

"Long story. Look. I may be in need of a big fella like you. Keep your head 'bout ya and I'll come callin' one of these days."

I pick Bluto up and even dust that man off a bit. I've known countless fellas like this through my years. May come off a bit rough 'round the edges, but it's only 'cause they don't know no better. Hell, not too long ago I may have tried to kick a Chinaman from a respectable saloon myself. But Quon ain't ask to be born Chinese; no sense blamin' him for somethin' what ain't his fault...

"What's the name of this town for when I need ya?"

"Ain't got no name."

"No name?"

"No one bothered namin' it."

Well that's a new one... A town what ain't got no name. Usually the first man to start the town names it after himself, but sometimes a man comes to a place like this to be forgotten...

The crowd's dispersin' now that they know there won't be no killin' done this mornin'. The stable boy got our horses ready and Purple done put that cockamamie trunk of his up there and lashed it down. I place little Quon on the back of my horse and we make for the hills yonder...

Chapter 14

Alistair

September 10th, 1881

Keeping the revolver after the duel, Traxton hoists little Quon upon the horse and we ride off west in a sea of green once more. It is some time before we speak, allowing the pristine countryside to calm our edgy nerves... "Traxton, I must thank you for coming to my aid yesterday evening."

"Weren't nothin'."

"No... it was a noble effort. I thank you."

He turns my way, face illegible for the sun's glare. "You thank me enough to call this business between us square?"

The man saved my life. I am in possession of exactly one thousand American dollars. I suppose the transaction can be named complete.

"Yes. I forgive you your debt; we are in good standing."

"Well praise the Lord we're in good standin'. I couldn't hardly sleep over it."

The sarcasm of his last statement does not escape me. No matter though. I feel contented for having put to rest our affairs and we may now continue with our plans as they were prior to having met. "Where is your destination?"

"I don't rightly know. West, I reckon."

"Myself as well. San Francisco to be exact."

He snorts. "Why you headin' there of all places? Ain't no more gold in California or ain't you heard?"

"I am in pursuit of something far more precious than gold."

He snorts once more. "Ain't nothin' more precious than gold."

"Freedom, my good man... freedom."

Traxton does not pursue the conversation any further, only shakes his head and drinks from his canteen - offering it to Quon when he's through. We ride all day nourishing ourselves on dried meats and fruits procured from the general store yesterday evening following the fracas.

The earth spreads green before us. Limitless bounty in each direction. I, for one, am glad for the company, but also for the respite in action. It has been but five days since first we met, and yet Traxton has provided me with a lifetime's worth of excitement. I yearn for turbulence no more...

We make camp without having met a soul, and little Quon assumes his position nestled by the fire, asleep beside his father. I am perfectly aware of Traxton's sentiments on the issue, but I would wager that a few more days spent together and he will undoubtedly have a change of heart.

We wake in the morning and I notice a discernable chill has taken us during the night; the first signs of the impending winter are letting themselves be known. I am unsure as to whether San Francisco is an attainable destination before the mountain passes become unassailable.

We ride in perpetuity; utterly alone but for the fauna and flora. Traxton points out to little Quon a small grouping of white-tailed deer and even allows the boy to take a shot with his revolver in an attempt to secure further stores.

The boy sits in Traxton's lap and discharges the weapon (which he miraculously manages to hold on to)

and scores a one-in-a-million, heart-bursting shot, neutralizing the herbivore instantly. We sup on tender venison and Traxton imparts his knowledge of curing meats for long-term sustenance.

Again, we ride, pausing only to water our beasts of burden in a comely stream of shallow, yet swift water. Though decidedly frigid, I take the opportunity to bathe myself, maintaining as fastidious a devotion to my personal hygiene as this land will allow. Quon takes notice. "What are you doing, Mister Alistair?"

"This? I am presently bathing myself. Have you never had occasion?"

He looks guilty for some reason. "Mama always said washing was a waste of time."

"Oh no, dear boy. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Hop in and I'll demonstrate."

The boy strips down to his undergarments and wades in to his waist. I instruct him how to best cleanse his body of loose dirt and to wash away any tainted stench. Being but six, the boy has not yet developed the prerequisite bodily functions that render one malodorous, yet all good habits begin in youth...

Traxton flicks his cigarette into the stream. "Get outta that water, Quon. You'll like to freeze to death."

"I'm taking a bath, Papa."

"Come on now."

The boy heeds his father's admonition and wrings from his undergarments the water to the earth. I complete my advanced ablutions and change into a pleasing navy-blue and cream ensemble. Traxton shakes his head once more as they depart while I've not yet fully comported myself.

There are no roads or even trails where we are. In fact, one may comfortably deduce that each step we take is the first step ever trod upon this virgin soil. We are trailblazers in the most succinct sense of the word.

A modern Columbus, Cortez, or de Leon discovering unadulterated lands for the very first time.

We make camp and dine on dried deer meat. I even take Traxton up on an offer of his flask. The swill he ceaselessly imbibes may double for an engine lubricant it is so foul. But after a number of sips, I find myself giddy and even serenade little Quon to sleep with a rendition of *The Mulligan Guard*:

*"We crave your condescension,
We'll tell you what we know
Of marching in the Mulligan Guard
From Sligo Ward below.
Our Captain's name was Hussey,
A Tipperary man,
He carried his sword like a Russian duke
Whene'er he took command"*

Traxton feeds the fire. "Alright, alright. You'll give the boy nightmares if you keep singin' like that, Purple."

Quon falls asleep, as is his habit, close to Traxton upon their horse blanket. He and I watch the stars in their multitude and listen to the distant call of the wild. Truly, this is God's land.

Minutes pass as moments. "So whatcha runnin' from, Purple?"

"Pardon me?"

"You're runnin' from somethin'. That fact's plain as day. What is it?"

I am unsure how to continue. I have spoken to nary a person of the exploits in London that heralded my grand adventure. And it seems to me a precarious consideration divulging too much information to one such as Traxton Rhodes. Knowledge is power. And I will not cede power in such a cavalier manner.

"I am not running from anything. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You said you were after freedom. Freedom from what, I wonder. If freedom's all you want, there's miles and miles of it right here."

I adjust my makeshift pillow. "The freedom I seek is to live unencumbered in a relatively cosmopolitan location with access to arts and the creative spirit."

"Bullshit. You runnin' from somethin'. That, I know."

I left London with only the sparsest of farewells. Loath to involve my father and mother in my lover's entanglement, I packed my bag and bid them adieu with tears in my eyes. My mother thought it a queer departure as I was ostensibly departing for the countryside. But I knew that was to be our final moments together until we reconvene in the Heavenly paradise.

Since that day, I have confided in no soul save my own. I kept to myself along my voyage to sea, was met with scant evidence a like-minded compatriot was to be found in the East, and have not yet met a kindred spirit in the West with whom I felt comfortable disclosing my clandestine past.

Perhaps Traxton is one such confident. He seems, upon first glance, churlish, but has evidenced in his behavior towards Quon a sentimental attribute perhaps worthy of trust... "I had an affair, and left London to spare my family the embarrassment."

He rises onto his elbow in shock. "*An affair?! Is that all? Hell, Purple, if I skipped out on every town where a man was after my head for turnin' his wife, I'd have nowhere left to go.*"

"Yes, well, this was an affair... of a different feather..."

"Different feather? Whatcha mean by that?"

Dare I go further? I supplied him with the truth of it. Perhaps not the whole truth of it, but enough to stay his interrogation. I think his whiskey has evinced a more pliable temperament that I am accustomed to, for I make the calculated risk to admit more. "I was... am... in love with... another man..."

"Well that ain't... that ain't... what the hell you just say?"

"My consort was a married man..."

Traxton jumps up. "TARNATION! You ain't English, you a Greek!"

"Well, I..."

"Goddammit. See, that's what I get for messin' with a Chinese. Now all sorts of nonsense's goin' on and I ain't even know. Well, enough's enough. Quon, wake up. I'm takin' this here blanket with me and you two gonna have to fend for yourselves."

Young Quon stirs. "What's the matter, Papa?"

Traxton is up and collecting his effects. "Why don't you ask Purple here what's the matter. And while you're at it, quit callin' me yer goddamn papa. I ain't your papa and I never was. I must be crazy ridin' 'round with the likes of you. Turn my back one minute and you're like to make a woman outta me. Holy shit! Here, you two can keep the deer and here's a hundred dollars for you to put Quon in the next orphanage you find. I'm leavin' and that'll be the last you hear of me. Goddamn, I mean, goddamn, man..."

During his tirade, Traxton hastily returns the saddle to his horse, packs up what gear he yet maintains, and climbs up in one full motion. Without another word, the man kicks his spurs into the steed's belly and disappears west into the darkness. Oh what have I done?

Quon is innocence itself in the firelight. "Mister Alistair?"

"Yes, Quon?"

"Are you crying?"

I wipe my eyes. "No... no, I would never... yes. Yes, Quon, I am."

"Mama said no man should ever cry."

I pull the boy towards me. "Well your mother was mistaken. A man may cry for any number of reasons."

"Why are you crying?"

"Because, Quon... the world can be cruel..."

He's as bright-eyed as ever. "What do we do about it, Mister Alistair?"

"Carry on, dear boy... I daresay, we carry on..."

Chapter 15

Traxton

September 13th, 1881

I shouldda known. Was always somethin' funny 'bout that man. The purple coat, his way of speakin', his pissin' indoors. My God, my name'd be ruined if folks knew I was out here with a buggger for a ridin' partner. He ain't got no business foolin' people into thinkin' he were a normal man.

I reckon Purple got more grit than most comin' out this far bein' what he is. But I'd rather run with lit dynamite in my bag. Dynamite'll only kill ya... a man like that'll make sure you burn in hell too...

I hop up on my horse and head west, leavin' Quon and Purple in a right predicament. But it ain't even close to my responsibility to see those two safely to wherever they're goin'. I was only ridin' with Purple 'cause I ain't have no other place to be and he's useful from time to time.

But not no more. I got a type of man what I'm comfortable 'round and that ain't it. Let him and Quon strike out on they own, better this way anyhow. I imagine I make quite a temptin' target for a man what like other men.

Even so... it ain't always the best idea to ride by night when there ain't no moon to guide ya. This damn nag done stumbled twice already and is makin' a right nuisance of herself besides. Yea, I may of been a bit hasty in my departure as I don't have nothin' to start a fire with and not much to eat neither. But that damn

Purple got me so heated he's lucky I didn't swing on him.

I can keep this horse at a steady pace and get some sleep in the saddle. Daylight'll come soon enough then I'll make for one of the towns croppin' up near the base of those mountains. I'm sure to find some work out here if I keep my head 'bout me.

That Quon'll be alright. Purple weren't an evil man. He'll do the right thing and bring him to a church somewheres. I just hope they don't run into any injuns... I'm the only one with a gun and a group of injuns would make quick work of a pair like them...

No sense worryin' 'bout that now. What's done is done. I'll just keep goin' and find myself a nice little saloon where I can spend some of this money... spend some of this money... spend some of this...

I must've doze off a bit 'cause I just woke up and the world's gone the dark blue of mornin' comin'. Looks like this horse kept goin' straight. We ain't movin' now though. Damned horse must've fallen asleep.

I knock her upside the neck. "Wake up. Wake up, ya hear me?"

Nothin'. What the hell's the matter with... an arrow's gone clean through the nag's head. Now how in the...

And then I sees them...

There's seven injuns all sittin' on they horses just behind me with arrows set to shoot. Aww hell I'm in for it now. I climb off my dead horse with my hands in the air. None of them move; not even blink, by God.

"Howdy. One of y'all shoot my horse? It's alright. My mistake. I'll just go back the way I came if that'd be alright by you."

Don't none of them say a word, just stare at me like I were a ghost or somethin'. I reckon they don't see many of my kind in these parts... I must look a sight to

them to be sure. Ain't a single female among them so the 'ol Traxton charm probly won't be much use...

"OK... I'm just headin' east now. I don't want no trouble."

I walk right past the lot of them and continue the way I came last night, headin' straight towards the sun. Maybe they'll let me go with just a warnin'. Maybe they'll...

I feel the lasso wrap 'round me and tighten up like a snake. Aww shit...

Next thing I know these seven is hootin' and a-hollerin' while I'm bein' dragged behind a horse on the ground. Goddamn this hurts! I do my best to raise my neck and keep my head from bumpin' too much on the rocks. But somewheres along the way my head does hit a rock and I don't rightly remember anythin' else.

When I come to - oh Lord - when I come to I'm in some sort of box! No room to move at all; I can make out lots of talkin' outside in injun-speak. I must be at a camp somewheres. This ain't good, not one bit.

I can't reach my holster but can tell from the weight of it that I ain't got a gun no more. Maybe it fell while I was bein' dragged, or maybe they took it. Don't got no smokes neither so my time in the box'll be spent listenin'.

Don't have to wait too long though. The box comes open and two painted injuns pull me out by my arms and set me on the ground. Lookin' 'round, I see a number of teepees, some little injun children at play, injun women with they ninnies flappin' about, and a whole lotta injun men starin' right at me.

A man what's gotta be their chief walks over and I stand up to be respectful. A number of his people

put their hands on their weapons in case I try somethin'. But I ain't so stupid as that. I'm a dead man, sure. No way 'round that. The name of the game now is to die as quickly as possible.

There are all sorts of ways injuns are known to kill white folks: Rip the skin off their bodies, dismemberment, bleed ya slow, I even heard of a man what had to cook and eat his own feet as a meal 'fore they let him die. My only hope is they slit my throat clean.

Goddamn what I'd do for a swig of whiskey right 'bout now...

The chief walks up to me and places his hand on my face like he could read me or somethin'. I don't know what to do so I just stand there like an idiot. Then the chief, movin' faster than what a man his age should, takes out his knife and slices my stomach on the left side.

He shoves two fingers in the open wound and draws lines 'cross his cheeks in my blood. Then the whole tribe takes to yellin' somethin' fierce as the chief goes 'round showin' off his new paint.

Two more injuns come near and shove me back in the box for safekeepin'. I don't rightly know what they plan on doin' with me, but this here box is gettin' hot as hell and I can't even reach down to cover up my wound. I never been much of a sissy, but this here cut is deep and my shirt is heavy with the soaked up blood.

All day these injuns been singin' and dancin' to the same damn tune. Ay yah yah yah, Ay yah yah yah... over and over again. Ay yah yah yah, Ay yah yah yah... don't they know nothin' else?

A few hours pass and they bring me out the box again. This time it's the females what got me. Two ugly old hags inspectin' my body for the tender parts I reckon; tracin' their fingers 'long my sides and arms and

face. They don't plan on eatin' me do they? Injuns don't do that too often as I recall.

One of the injun women takes a knife and sticks me just under my ribs. She pulls the blade out and licks it clean top to bottom. All's I can do is stare at her wide-eyed while she tests what I'm made of. Then the old bitch up and spits my own blood back in my face. I don't care where you're from... that ain't a friendly sign at all...

The tribe gets to screamin' again but different from before. They ain't screamin' at me, but at somethin' goin' on over yonder. Two big injuns put me back in the box and it's all I can do to hear what all the fuss is 'bout.

It's Purple! "Good evening. We are a tad bit misplaced and were wondering if you knew where the closest accommodations might be found."

Oh, hell what'd he just walk into? Soon it's gonna be his and Quon's blood they'll be tastin'. I wish this coulda gone a different way, but that's him out there, sure as shit with his funny accent, and these ain't the type of injuns what'll be kind enough to offer up directions.

I keep waitin' to hear Purple scream out in pain. By now they probly got him in a box somewheres and little Quon in a little box too I reckon. This is a damn fine mess they got themselves into. Had I not been travelin' by night, I'd of seen their tracks plain as day and known to go 'round this section of land.

But these two don't even know left from right and walked straight into a camp of cannibalizin' injuns. Guess Purple and me both'll be findin' out what lies on the other side of this life soon enough.

I can make out laughin' over on the other side of camp. Golly, I wonder what sort of fun they're havin' with Purple. Maybe even took his heart out and some

kids are playin' catch. Or maybe they took his legs off and are watchin' them sizzle away in the fire. Or maybe it's his head they got and it's mounted up on a pole out there.

No way of knowin' bein' stuck in this box. My wounds don't hurt too bad no more. I think I went numb to the pain a while ago. That might be a good thing if they come back to eat me or burn me at the stake.

To think, only the other day I was facin' death at the hands of Bluto in a shootout and now I'm in here thinkin' on death all over again. My mama never did teach me no prayers to say in situations like these. Ain't have the time what with all her chores and killin' injuns she done. I do wish I had a little somethin' to say though. Not much. Just a little somethin' to say since I'm so close to the end...

Goddamn what I'd do for a swig of whiskey right 'bout now...

Chapter 16

Alistair

September 14th, 1881

In the face of adversity one perseveres. We tidy up our camp and return to the horse our effects. With my travelling valise as sizable as it is, there is scant room for little Quon, so it is with great sorrow that I leave behind a fetching olive and taupe tailored suit so as to make space for Quon to ride in my open trunk.

We trot along as the sun rises behind us, oblivious to the world awakening all around. A den of red foxes dart alongside our horse without the merest sign of apprehension. A flock of sheep graze in the distance soundly ignorant of the myriad predators about.

Little Quon questions me on life in Europe. He mentions all he knows of my native land is we are constantly at war and eat fine foods in between. A more distilled summation of my home I have never heard.

I speak on the royal lineage, the museums, and missions of conquest. They say at this very moment, the sun never sets on the proud Union Jack; our holdings in Canada, India, Africa, and the countless islands in between function in tandem to ensure English culture and tradition are bequeathed to so many who are without either serious culture or suitable tradition.

He asks me about China - a subject upon which I am woefully deficient - and what it means to be a Chinaman. I regret to inform him of my lack of knowledge, and suffice to say that to be a Chinaman is

to be any man: Strive to do good, and the world is made better for it.

He then asks why his papa left us last night. This is a subject I shall not be raising ever again, so I leave him with little cause for Traxton's sudden departure...

"But he said to ask you."

I feign ignorance. "I cannot fathom why."

"Does he hate me?"

"No one could hate you, Quon."

The boy's voice is a whisper. "The man with the metal hat hated me."

"Quon, the best thing to do with men such as him, is to ignore them. No good can come from interacting with people who hold you in contempt for matters beyond your control."

"Do you hate me, Mister Alistair?"

I hold the reins and turn to view my charge.

"No, Quon. Quite the opposite. You are the first person I've met in this country with any semblance of manners."

Quon thinks on my response for a while, and before long I hear the light intake of breath signifying he is presently enjoying a nap. I suppose the constant upward and downward motion of the horse does produce a soporific effect. In fact, I could do with a bit of a rest myself if we hadn't so many miles to go...

I notice a bald eagle high above and stay my desire to wake Quon. The creature soars hither and yon, diving and climbing, seemingly enjoying his God-given talent for flight. A sight like this must be a favorable sign indeed!

Around three in the afternoon, I spy among the grass a discarded revolver. I hop down and inspect the chamber... five bullets remain... the precise amount Traxton would have had after his duel. But surely a

man such as he would not be so negligent as to allow his firearm escape him. No, this must be from some other traveler which signifies that we are indeed upon a path to somewhere.

Another hour hence, and we spot in the distance a large fire and a number of those quaint Indian abodes they refer to as teepees. I have been instructed time and again to fear the Native American as savage beyond all hope. But that is simply not the English way. I shall prevail upon our shared humanity and parlay with these good folk.

We fear naught but what we do not understand.

I turn my horse in the direction of the encampment. As we near, I can make out signing and movement; an altogether jovial atmosphere. A similar sight may be seen in many parts of Ireland, and the Irish have been getting along swimmingly with us Brits for centuries... well... more or less...

I steel my resolve and make directly for their home. As I draw near, we are sighted and the whole tribe erupts into a cacophony of commotion. I would be alarmed, but the noise is not so different from that which emanates from the House of Commons on a typical day of jurisprudence.

A group of riders usher forth from the perimeter in greetings. They easily flank our position and provide an uproarious escort to the apex of their encampment. Little Quon is bouncing with excitement and I can just make out his little arm waving to our new friends with glee.

We are brought before the tribal elder who is quite dashing with red decorative paint drawn down his cheeks in parallel lines. The circle of onlookers and well-wishers closes behind us and a hush descends upon the village.

I clear my throat. "Good evening. We are a tad bit misplaced and are wondering if you knew where the closest accommodations might be found."

The tribe elder maintains his silence but regards me, and particularly Quon, with unmistakable interest. He places his thumb and forefinger on either end of his chin and cocks his head ever-so-slightly. A palatable stillness anticipates his address.

His voice is gravelly. "This boy. How he makes his hair?"

"You will have to pardon me, are you inquiring as to this boy's hair?"

The chief nods in Quon's direction and I take a look back in curiosity. Oh my! Quon has managed to open my tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax and fashioned for himself a rock-hard mohawk out of his straight black hair. Doesn't he know a tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax is exceedingly hard to come by?!

The elder points towards his own mohawk. "Our tribe wears the mohawk of the Pawnee to show them we are not afraid of their power. But after time our hair falls flat. How has this boy made such a mohawk?"

"I... well... he's gotten into some of my Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax..."

"Show me."

I climb down off my horse and remove two fingers worth of mustache wax from the tin. I then reach for the chief's head - at which a number of his tribe bristle with weaponry - but he raises his palm to cool their anxiety. I apply the wax and course my hands through his long hair. At full length, his locks reach near his knees, so I actually have to get back on my horse to complete the task.

Once finished, the chieftain has an indestructible mohawk rising nearly four feet from his

head. He looks around for approval, to which the entire tribe hoots and jeers and displays all manner of merriment. Huzzah!

The elder is pleased. "We will trade you for this wax. What would you have in fair exchange?"

Trade for my wax? Oh, but how will I perform my ablutions without proper accouterments? I daresay this tribe has naught that would interest me. But I shouldn't like to offend them. And any business transaction is ever a compromise...

"Please forgive me, but what would you offer in barter?"

He holds up a leather pouch. "We have many elk teeth."

"Ehh..."

An animal skin. "The pelt of a Lynx."

"Closer..."

He raises a mammoth decomposing skull. "A buffalo's head."

"No."

He thinks for a moment. "A white soul."

"I'm not familiar with that creature. What precisely is a 'white soul?'"

The tribe elder waves his hand and two of his acolytes leave and return with a box of rudimentary design. The elder opens the box and... well, well, well... out spills none other than Traxton Rhodes. Unconscious and bleeding from more than one laceration.

Quon scrambles to the ground. "Papa!"

I wish I were the sort of man who could return a vile deed with one of my own. But it takes one look at the adoration in little Quon's eyes and my decision is made for me.

"I'll take the white soul."

Traxton is in quite a state of shock, almost certainly suffering from a fever, and in dire need of

multiple tourniquets. The helpful, indeed delightful, healers in the tribe offer to assist in restoring the man to health (after I fashion their mohawks as payment, of course). The half-full tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax is such a hit, in fact, that the tribe elder agrees to supply us with provisions and even a new horse for Traxton.

I spend the afternoon in lively discussion with their elder and his senior statesmen. Little Quon is cavorting with the kids in the tribe, chasing each other and playing at hide and go seek. In the evening an archery tournament is arranged with all the men, and even some women, taking turns displaying such skill with a bow and arrow that Sherwood's own Robin Hood would be hard pressed to rival their prowess.

We eat among our new friends a delectable meal of bison and greens while singing and dancing around the fire. Their natural exuberance is infectious to the extreme and I find myself joining in jumping, jostling, and waving about.

We stay the night in a comfortable teepee, and make to head west in the morning, sent forth with waves and cheers and good-will all around. If only a plenipotentiary such as myself had first been charged to engage with the Natives, history may not be as blood-soaked as it is; these people are a genuine hoot!

Each of the fifty or so men, women, and children are now proud owners of mohawks reaching for the heavens. They strike quite the spectacle smiling and singing our praises as we depart - hair discernable long after their bodies are not. I look over my shoulder as we ride away from our once, and perhaps future, allies, and feel a genuine sorrow for how they've been dealt with by my brethren.

For who could hate a peaceful group such as these?

Chapter 17

Traxton

September 15th, 1881

I hate these goddamn injuns! First thing they shut me up in that damn box, then they cut me up somethin' awful, then I fell asleep standin' up, and now I find myself lyin' 'cross the back of a horse tied down so all I can do is watch the grass go by.

God only knows where they're ridin' to. Probly off to sacrifice me to some water god, or sun god, or moon god, or some sorta god I ain't never heard of. It's a damned fix I got myself into that's for sure. And heaven knows what happened to Purple and Quon...

Chances are they're sittin' in the bellies of the men what captured me. Last thing I heard was a whole lotta hootin' and hollerin' so I'd wager they're dead by now... most likely in some horrible fashion. Maybe they're even bein' tanned at this very moment to be made into moccasins; guts strung out for one of those damn dream-catchers of theirs.

Poor Quon. No boy deserves a fate like that. I'd imagine his last moments was full of fear. And Purple... well... a man like that probly cried like a baby. Shit himself like a baby too, most like. What I'd give to see that funny man's face again. Hell, I'd jump up and kiss that man if I ever did see him.

A voice above me. "You're awake! Jolly good show!"

What?! Purple?! Impossible!

"Let me just untie you here..."

Purple takes my hands and wraps them 'round his shoulders as he drags me from the horse. I stand on my own two feet and check my wounds. They're dressed and clean and... I'm alive! Goddamn I'm alive! I plant a kiss on Purple like I said I would and jump in the sky high as I can. I'm alive!

"Don't think you'll ever get one of those from me again there, Purple. Damn, son, how'd you save me!? You poison their waterin' hole or somethin' smart like that?"

Quon leaps from the horse and into my arms.
"Papa!"

I plant a kiss on that little Chinese as well. Yee haw! I'm saved!

Purple dusts off his shoulders with pride. "No I... we... bartered with them."

"Bartered with 'em? What'd you trade that was worth my life?"

He looks me in the eye. "My final tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax."

"Oh hell, Purple. I know what that mess meant to ya. I thank you earnestly, I do. Earnestly."

I got Quon smilin' up a storm in my arms and even Purple got a grin ear to ear. I might've misjudged these two. I knew he were good with his fists, but to save me from a pack of injuns like he done takes someone special. Hell, probly not even any other man out here coulda done what he did. A feat like that's damn near a miracle!

I hold my horse and ask for a moment of their time. "Look... Purple... and you, Quon. You won't hear a man like me apologize all that often. But some things is too big to ignore. Now I can't rightly say I understand why you'd want to poke another man on purpose. And I can't say bein' no Chinese in this country's a good idea or no... but you are, and he is, and that's the end of it..."

Purple wears a curious look of amusement.
"Was that an apology?"

"Darn tootin'."

I hold Quon up in my left arm and extend my other for Purple to take. He'd be well within his rights to not take my hand, leavin' them to fend for themselves like I did... but Purple ain't that type of man and I know it. He gives me a once over then smiles and we shake our grievances gone.

Purple then reaches deep in his purple pocket and withdraws the revolver I lost. He hands it to me, barrel facin' him like a gentleman.

"I believe this is yours."

I take the weapon and nod my thanks. Yea... this here's a decent fella. And I won't soon forget it. "So where we headed then?"

Purple points off towards the mountains. "The tribe elder had mentioned a town about one hundred miles from here, South by Southwest."

"South by Southwest it is then. Long as they got a saloon and whores, I'll be just fine, by God."

I prop little Quon up on my horse once again which I can tell is a relief for Purple who'd been lettin' the kid ride in his open trunk sittin' on all his effects. A hundred miles. If we don't run into no more injuns, we should be there in a few days' time no problem.

Thankful as I am to not be gettin' skinned alive right now, I do wish I had a bit of whiskey. Long hauls like these is made for whiskey. In fact, ridin' a horse or drivin' a cart is work made to be done drunk. How else does one pass the time?

Little Quon sets to askin' me all sorts of questions 'bout my parents, 'bout their parents, 'bout where I'm from... I tell the boy I ain't from nowhere. Born in Tennessee... I think... but roamed from there to any number of territories 'fore the age of ten.

"But isn't it good to come from somewhere, Papa?"

I answer him over my shoulder. "Only thing that matters 'bout where you grew up is: Are the folks there still talkin' 'bout the trouble you caused or not? 'Cause if they ain't... well, what kinda childhood is that?"

The boy holds on as we manage some loose rocks. "What will people say of me, Papa?"

"After the way we left Casper? Hell, son, they'll be talkin' 'bout that for years. 'Specially with all them nekkid pictures flyin' 'round..."

"What's a nekkid picture, Papa?"

Is he too young to know 'bout all that? "Uhh... hey take a look over there. That there's a pack of American Buffalo, Quon. Injuns almost done 'em all in so take a gander while you still can. Matter of fact... you wanna have a closer look?"

I don't wait for little Quon to answer, just kick this mare to a gallop and go chasin' after them buffalo. We ride right up to 'em and send the herd runnin' together like a flock of birds. This way then that, we chase them dumb buffalo hootin' and hollerin' the whole time. Even Quon's got to yelpin' as we ride. Yee haw, ain't this livin'?!"

We ride on back to where Purple was watchin' us and I daresay the ride tuckered little Quon out. It's gettin' on in hours anyhow so we set up camp and I spark up a fire. Them injuns sent these two off fully loaded with bison and coyote meat, plus the deer from the other day, so we have as close to a feast as I've had in a while.

After that, little Quon beds down and it's just Purple and me watchin' the stars blinkin' in the night sky. There's a nip in the air so we're closer to the fire than usual and I gotta make sure none of these logs pop

an ember onto my horse blanket and light little Quon ablaze.

With no whiskey to pass the time, I 'spose we gotta talk. There's a question or two I'd like to ask Purple anyhow 'bout the way he is. It ain't every day a man meets a fellow like him and I'm just curious is all. Ain't no harm the way I sees it... "Say, Purple..."

"Yes?"

"Why is it you like to fuck other men?"

I can tell by the firelight the question made him uneasy. I 'spose my reaction the other night is good reason for him not to wanna talk 'bout it... but I can't rightly have no problem with a man what done what he done with them injuns...

I spit in the fire. "Lotta folks bed a man on a cold night. I ain't never done it. But I ain't never met a fella what would choose a man if a lady were there to buy. I'm just curious, is all..."

Purple ponders for a tick. "Traxton, that is the defining query of my youth... has defined my life... and led me on this escapade. I am as in the dark as to the reason as you are."

"So, you ain't never been with no woman?"

"I haven't."

I light up a crooked smoke. "So you a virgin then."

"I most certainly am not."

"You never made love to a woman."

He's growin' cross. "I have loved as deeply as a man may love."

"You still a virgin. How you know you wouldn't like it? I can tell ya there ain't no place I'd rather be than in a clam. Who knows? Maybe it's just you ain't know no better."

"Have you ever been with a man?"

"Hell no!"

Purple's eyebrows raise. "Well then how do you know you would not enjoy that experience?"

"I just know."

"Then I just know I have no interest in sleeping with a woman."

I 'spose that makes sense. Beddin' down with the ladies was somethin' what came natural to me from the age of twelve. Our camp had a Mexican cookin' lady what crawled 'neath my covers one night and even at that young age I knew exactly what needed to be done.

After her there was a whole lotta women what crawled 'neath my blanket in that camp. I don't know if the Mexican cook got to tellin' all them girls 'bout me or no, but it seemed like each and every female what was available - and some what weren't - cozied up with me that winter.

Was one man whose wife I'd slept with came lookin' for a fight. But I was twelve and he were over thirty, so my pa had to fight him in my stead. Walloped him good then bent my ear by the fire that night. Told me beddin' down with females is the best thing a man can rightly do in this life, but if you bed down a married female... make sure it stays a secret.

Since then there's been hundreds of women what came to know 'bout 'ol Traxton Rhodes. Probly at least a hundred what I don't even remember doin'... just wake up and there they are nekkid in the bed beside me.

I wave the smoke from the fire out my face. "Well then... I may regret it... but what were your craziest time beddin' a man?"

"Excuse me?"

I adjust my rump on the blanket. "C'mon, Purple. This here's what men do. Trade stories of women they been with. I'll tell you 'bout my wildest ride. Was a whore in El Paso - perty young thing - couldn't have been more than sixteen. We head on up to

her room 'bove the saloon, right, and I get to doin' what I do best. And damned if her little oil lamp didn't fall and break on the floor from all the bumpin' we was doin'. The fire caught a curtain, and 'fore I know it, the whole room's ablaze. I tell this girl we gotta go and you know what she says? She says you ain't leavin' 'til the job's done. And here I am what hired her! So with the fire spreadin' to the floors and walls, here's me goin' to town and her yellin' like I'm killin' her. A man even burst in the room to save her and she hollered at him to get out! Can you believe it? I made this girl scream again and again and when she were finally done, we had to jump from the window for the stairs bein' on fire. Ain't that somethin'?"

Purple's trying not to laugh. "That... sure is something."

"Well, what's yours then?"

He regards me earnestly. "You really are interested?"

"I asked, ain't I?"

He tugs on his ear, joggin' his memory. "Very well... I've hardly a tale that may rival your mid-coitus conflagration, but there was a chap I was ardently keen on one year at our countryside estate in Surrey. He was a smart and personable fellow - despite his being employed to tend our gardens - and we spent one indelible summer completely enamored with each other."

"And...?"

"Well... we planned a tryst in the upper loft of a long-forgotten barn located on the periphery of our lands. I had packed a picnic basket of sweet meats, aged cheeses, and crème fraîche. I sang to him and we..."

I lift a cheek and fart at his story. "Never mind your singing, Purple. Get to the sexin' part, will ya?"

"Oh, very well... as I mentioned, the barn was a relic from the seventeenth century; rickety and vacillating as you please. But I took the volatility as part of the structure's charm. As we were... engaged... my hard-driving antics with the strapping gardener proved too spirited for the ancient barn, and the loft collapsed beneath us. We were two hours at extricating ourselves from the rubble..."

"You two were at it so hard the building fell? Hell yea, Purple! That's how it's done!"

I can see a genuine grin come upon Purple's face. I reckon he's never got to tell that tale to a livin' soul. And what a tale it is! If I'd caused a whole barn to collapse just from fuckin', you better believe everyone from Utah to Arkansas'd know 'bout it. But he ain't get to do the same for the story bein' 'tween two men...

That does seem a shame... stories like that are made to be told...

Chapter 18

Alistair

September 16th, 1881

I arise to a new day! Yes, yes, I lost my tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax - and my mustache will suffer all the more for it - but I gained something infinitely more precious...

Traxton and I spent hours by the campfire exchanging sordid tale after sordid tale. Who knew the recounting of scandal could be so cathartic? I was raised never to gossip - or, at least, never to be discovered as the source of gossip - and therefore have scarcely engaged in such a discussion. But what a discussion it was!

Oh, to be relieved of my burden of secrecy, if even for an evening, is a gift beyond measure. The last occasion I was able to confide in anyone, we were burst in on my interlocutor's wife! Traxton is a boon companion indeed...

We set out as the sun rises after breaking our fast on dried venison. The path ahead is no path at all, but an endless meadow of green upon green. Several hours in, we happen upon a road. Well, far more a trail than a road, but a trail nonetheless. It is bound in our general direction, so we agree it safe to assume the path leads to our destination.

The morning begins cool, but by midday it is decidedly warm. I remove my lilac coat and fold it neatly before setting it within my valise. On days like

these a canteen is a difficult item to keep full as I find myself yearning for any source of water available.

My wish is granted several times over as we come across numerous shallow flows running down from the mountains in the distance. We grant our steeds a momentary cessation in duties as we all partake and drink our fill.

Little Quon proves to be a clever lad indeed as he poses query after query on topics ranging from why the sun rises in the East to how children are born. Traxton and I answer as earnestly as we can, but find each answered question parried by three more in response. Truly this child will become a font of information one day.

We make camp a mile or so from the trail and bed down serenaded by the call of some as-yet uncategorized manner of bird. I daresay in a land as vast as America, it may take centuries to catalog all the various creatures who call this nation home.

The mountains grow larger with each step we take. As I understand it, this range is one of the final barriers between myself and the ocean beyond. Of course, there is a significant desert to traverse, but how difficult an obstacle is that for one so versed in travel?

As the sun retires once more, we finally cast eyes upon our target. After so many days of perpetual solitude, a sense akin to the thrill felt by the man occupying the crow's nest on Columbus' *Santa Maria* washes over us. Land ho!

We ride into a small, but quaint, town at the base of a formidable mountain. The distinct sounds of a blacksmith's hammer landing upon steel, horses whinnying, vendors calling, and pigs snorting nourish the soul as only civilization can. Well... relative civilization...

This town has not two, but three saloons to choose from. I am unsure as to whether this is a sign of progress or degradation, but either way, Traxton chooses the third - certainly due to the sheer number of women calling from an outdoor balcony affording the women a vantage point from which to peddle their wares. "This here'll do just fine. C'mon, Purple."

We enter the establishment and are treated to a festive group singing along with a lively pianist belting out tunes the crowd seems to know by heart. We take our place at a round table nearest the jovial ringleader. A woman in a citrine, form-fitting dress, breasts packed so tight they seem ready to burst, takes our order, and we are soon feasting and drinking and including ourselves in the merriment.

By now the sheer volume of women in this country plying the world's oldest trade has ceased to astound. My only question is where the seemingly endless supply of consorts go to retire, for each one is younger than the next. Traxton is at home surrounded by ladies, and seems to be biding his time, much as during our burglary, choosing which one to make away with.

One such lady at work, seemingly deep in her cups, even propositions little Quon; tracing a knowing finger down his cheek as she flirts.

Traxton swats her hand away. "That one's only six years old, woman!"

"Do him for half price then, dearie."

"Go on and scat, will ya?"

She shrugs her shoulders at the loss and moves on to the next target. As the evening progresses the festive mood evolves (devolves?) into genuine uproariousness. Folks are dancing, men are singing, and a rotund prostitute is even on her back making money on the table adjacent ours. I believe this to be enough

for young Quon and move to take him upstairs. "Will you be joining us, Traxton? Traxton?"

I make an attempt to gain his attention twice more but the man is transfixed with (what else?) an admittedly stunning beauty presently dancing in the center of the room. My, she is quite captivating...

Long, auburn tresses curl towards the middle of her back. Her emerald gown is light and made of quality material; intricately embroidered bodice uplifting her ample, yet respectable bosom. Incandescent smile, a smattering of pleasing freckles, and sky-blue eyes which pierce upon contact. Yes, she is quite winsome indeed.

I watch as Traxton parts the crowd like Moses, moving as if bewitched; his single-minded focus drawing him ever near. He places his hand on the shoulder of the gentleman she was dancing with, thus arresting their antics. I cannot quite discern the particulars of their conversation, but I understand well enough what she means to say as the radiant beauty slaps Traxton hard across the face.

He returns to our company a cowed, yet determined man.

"What happened?" I ask with a wry grin.

"She ain't a whore."

"Ah... well... shall we retire?"

Traxton is resolute. "No way, Purple. That lady's an angel and I mean to have her."

"That seems unlikely."

"Watch and learn, Purple. Watch and learn..."

I escort little Quon to the room I secured and see him safely tucked in bed. I then withdraw myself from our chambers and assume a sentry position leaning against the upstairs balcony high above the commotion. A waiter brings me a perfectly adequate scotch and I

settle in for what will surely be another Traxton Rhodes disaster...

From my bird's eye view, I monitor Traxton as he makes a grand tour of the establishment, seemingly exacting mirth from all his interactions. Women, men, employees, customers all; he is determined to make acquaintance with the whole town in one night.

I observe the object of his affections cornered by the man she was dancing with. Her demeanor is welcoming, but not as overtly sensual as one completely taken with their counterpart. Is he her husband? A gentleman caller? Surely not a relation... but... one never knows in these strange lands...

Traxton actually seems to be maintaining some level of temperance. From what I know of the man, he would usually be so intoxicated by now as to have nullified his own charms. But he is behaving, if one may believe it, congenially responsible.

A woman's voice beside me. "Hey there, sugar. Fancy a poke?"

Oh my... as I was assiduously making a study of the Western American male's mating rituals, I failed to notice a raven-mopped, buxom tart sidle aside me. Her intent is painfully obvious. What ever happened to the fine art of seduction? Have we truly been so reduced in our passions to settle for: "Hey there, sugar. Fancy a poke?"

I dismiss her politely. "Ah. Thank you kindly, but I am presently at task."

"What's that mean? C'mon, honey. Best five minutes of your life."

"Thank you again, but I must decline."

Her cheeks shudder in frustration. "You don't understand, fancy pants. I'm already paid for. You gotta screw me."

Traxton! Oh, I thought him better than this. I believed he'd come to terms with who I am, but once again I've been laboring under a misapprehension. He purchased this woman in the hopes I'd be made to see the error of my ways. I shall have strong words for him in the morning...

I tend to my collar. "I see. Well, again, I thank you kindly, but please remit upon Traxton the sum paid and I'll thank you to have a pleasant evening."

She expectorates upon the floor. "Who's Traxton? Weren't him what paid for me. So you got a room or we fuckin' on the floor?"

Not Traxton? But who would...

She pokes me in the pectorals. "You ain't gonna take money out my pocket, you dope. I was paid double to pork you! Take off these pants and be a man, dammit!"

Oh! This *woman* pulls my trousers down to my ankles and makes an attempt to completely denude me. I hold on for dear life to my undergarments just as she does her best to relieve me of those as well.

She pulls with vigor. "Take off your unders! Take off your unders, dammit! I gotta job to do!"

By now we've garnered quite an audience as the entire main floor are craning their necks for a better view. I've long since dropped my scotch to the floor and am using both hands to keep this lady from stripping me in front of nearly seventy people.

The entire saloon is cheering her on. I believe I can make out Traxton above the din: "There you go, buddy! Get some!"

She is on the floor using her considerable girth to her advantage, leveraging the angle to gain purchase on my undergarments. Realizing I have no intention of resigning, she removes her right hand and punches me in the stomach.

I instinctively let go to protect myself and the lady of the evening finally succeeds in her efforts to procure my manhood. Oh God! I am nude from the waist down before a great number of people. Oh, my mother would be so ashamed...

"There's a good lad. Now give it to 'ol Esmerelda!"

We receive an extended round of applause. The patrons who were sitting are now offering up a tremendous standing ovation. What manner of respectable establishment is this?!

I can sense a new presence arrive behind me, and am surprised to hear such a mellifluous voice...

"Esmerelda, Esmerelda, my dear. I was mistaken. Please unhand this good gentleman."

She regards him over my shoulder. "Well alright. But I'm keepin' my fifty cents, dammit."

The woman finally removes herself from my person and I do my utmost to remain somewhat dignified as I dress myself. I then turn to confront my *benefactor*; the man responsible for the ill-conceived gift.

And... oh my God... so handsome... I believe I may faint... too handsome... he's perfection... I believe I may... faint...

Chapter 19

Traxton

September 18th, 1881

I found an angel. An honest to God angel. In all my years I've never seen no whore what looks like this. Long red hair. Big ninnies. Perfect face. I may be in love... Hell... I *am* in love... Quick as a lightenin' bolt, I'm in love...

I guess the stories is true.

I ain't never been one to sit on my hands when it came to women, so I march right on over and stop her from dancin' with this little fella she's with. He starts to say somethin', but ain't no bald man gonna keep me from this one. "Shut up, you egghead, I wanna speak with the lady here. Ma'am, you is the most beautiful whore I ever seen. Whatever this bald guy's payin' you, I'll triple it."

SLAP!

She up and hit me! Hot damn she's a feisty one...

She seems genuinely insulted. "I am no prostitute. Now please let us be."

No whore? What in tarnation? I just assume all ladies is whores if they messin' 'round in a saloon. What's this woman doin' here then? Just dancin'? That don't make no sense... I head on back to the table to figure things out.

"What happened?"

"She ain't a whore."

Purple here ain't never seen me give it my all.
Sooner or later they all give in to the 'ol Traxton
Rhodes charm.

Purple and Quon head up for the night and I set
myself to findin' out everythin' I can 'bout the lady in
green. I start at the bar, as always, and strike up a
conversation with a man what looks like a rancher...
"Howdy, partner."

He don't even look my way. "Whatcha want?"

"The lady over there in green. You know her?"

He slowly looks over his shoulder. "Yup."

"What's her name?"

"Whiskey."

"*Her name's, Whiskey?!"*

Damn, she may really be an angel...

The old rancher squints like I'm a fool. "Buy me
a whiskey and I'll tell you her name."

"Bartender. Two whiskeys."

The barkeep pours two glasses of whiskey and
the rancher takes 'em both and slides 'em in front of
him. "Name's Cyndel Sinclair."

The name of an angel... "She from 'round here?"

"Whiskey."

I leave the rancher on his own. I'll be damned if
I'm gonna spend my hard earned money gettin' that man
drunk for one-word answers. I'll find someone else no
problem. Just the fact that he knew her means other
folks'll know her too.

I make the rounds 'round the room and discover
Miss Cyndel Sinclair was born in New Jersey of all
places; lives here in town with her ma and pa what run
the general store. One fella tells me she's sharp with the
tongue, and another informs me she's like lightening on
a horse.

Another man told me the rumor was they lived
in Wichita a few years back but some photographer

talked Cyndel into doin' nekkid pictures of herself and they got loose somehow. A preacher posted up outside their general store and shouted hell-fire and damnation 'til they had to up and leave town.

So, she longs to be rich and famous does she?

I found another man what knows the bald fella she's makin' time with and was set to tell me all 'bout him when who else but Purple starts shoutin' up on the balcony. Oh hell! He done tangled with a heifer and it looks like she's set on earnin' her keep.

"There you go buddy! Get some!"

The whole place is watchin' her yankin' on his drawers and clappin'. I don't know how he got himself into that mess, but it sure is a proper riot. She's on the floor tuggin', he's turned a shade of red tryin' to keep himself decent.

Golly, she socked him a good one and managed to get his undergarments off him. There he is: Purple nekkid for the world to see! He sure is great at makin' campfire stories...

A man in fancy get-up is goin' to his aid and makes that whore leave him be. Purple pulls up his pants and then he... well, hell... he up and fainted by the looks of it. The man he's with caught him, so no sense rushin' up there to help. He'll be fine and I gotta job to do. I turn 'round and get to askin' 'bout the bald man my woman's with. "So who's the man what lost his hair?"

"Him? He's Wayland Wiggle."

This man can't be serious. "*Wayland Wiggle?* What sorta name is that?"

"Richest man in town sorta name."

Money never trumps charm and that's a fact. "Baldest man in town, more like. How'd he make his fortune?"

"Whiskey."

Now that's respectable... "Made it in whiskey, huh? I 'spose that's an honest trade..."

"No, buy me a whiskey and I'll tell ya."

Small price to pay for such useful information. Turns out 'ol Wayland Wiggle's some big bug in town on behalf of the railroad. Came up from Chicago a few weeks back and is charged with gettin' ranchers to sell their lands so as to make more railroad tracks.

A whole lotta folks would like to see him tarred and feathered for his assumin' people'd up and leave the land they'd been workin' all these years. But money's money, and he's almost finished his job. Only one hold-out - the McCradden family over yonder - won't give up their property. But once they do he'll be free to go back to Chicago.

Turns out he's set on bringin' Miss Cyndel Sinclair with him when he goes. Even proposed to her two weeks past in front of the whole congregation. Her family is rightly pleased but she answered him "maybe" which I daresay is worse than a no.

If she ain't said yes right away then there's nothin' this man can do to make her love him. That's just the way of it. I've proposed dozens of times to females and they always say yes. Some of 'em not even knowin' my name when they did it. 'Course I've been dead-drunk each time, and when we wake up in the mornin' I deny ever having done so. But they say yes... they always say yes...

Hell, was one time I even did get married! We tore out the bar drunker than hell and woke up a chaplain. He officiated our weddin' down the barrel of the gun I pulled to make him do it. We got ourselves the honeymoon suite back at the saloon and set to consummatin' the night away.

In the mornin' I discovered she were already married so our marriage ain't count. And thank the Lord

for that, cause who in their right mind really truly wants to be tied down in Tulsa?

Anyhow, if this Wayland Wiggle ain't get her to say yes straight away, then he's yesterday's news, so I strike up conversations all 'bout the room, findin' out more and more 'bout my woman.

A cooper I bought a shot of tequila told me she's always readin' books. A tanner I got a spot of bourbon said she's a crack-shot with a pistol. A whore I paid two pennies says Cyndel gets her undergarments shipped straight from Paris, France. By God I love her more by the minute...

I check on Purple up on the balcony and he seems no worse for wear. Chattin' with the man in the fine outfit probly 'bout art or opera or some such cockamamie thing. Figure long as he ain't got no whore tryin' to rape him, he'll be just fine.

The night's comin' to a close with folks leavin' or bein' tossed out by the bartender's men for bein' too drunk. I stand by the bar and have myself a shot of whiskey - only my seventh one this evenin' if you'd believe it - and keep an eye on Miss Cyndel Sinclair and that damn Mister Wiggle.

They seem set to part for the night as they're sayin' goodbyes to folks they know. I watch as they walk out the swingin' wooden doors to the saloon and hear Wiggle tell Cyndel he's gotta use the shitter. Now's my chance! Wiggle closes the door to the outhouse outside the saloon and damned if I don't move a heavy-ass wheelbarrow right in front of it blockin' him in.

Miss Cyndel Sinclair is by the front, so I mosey on up and start to conversatin'... "Lovely evenin', ma'am."

She gives me the smart eye. "Oh, *you*. I'm not for sale."

"Who's tryin' to buy ya?"

"You were, only a few hours ago."

This ain't goin' how I expected... gonna need to put some things I gathered to good use. "You'll have to excuse me, ma'am. You see, I'm from New Jersey, and bein' as such, my manners ain't what they should be."

That got her attention... "You're from New Jersey?"

"Yes, ma'am, born and raised."

"What part?"

Who the hell knows the names of cities in New Jersey? "Oh, uh, the fancy part."

"Newark?"

"Yup, I'm from Newark."

"I detest Newark. Good evening."

Dagnabbit! That lie ain't work. I'm gonna have to appeal to her interests... but I don't know the first thing 'bout readin' books. May need Purple's help with that one. I did hear she likes to ride and shoot, and that there's two things I do know all 'bout... "Yup, left Newark soon after I was born and went to Wichita."

That got her attention back. "You lived in Kansas?"

"Sure did. Made a livin' learnin' folks to ride and shoot."

She nods. "You must be some marksman."

"Can nail a tin can from a hundred paces."

"Really? Care to prove it?"

Prove it? I've hit plenty of targets at a hundred paces before... runnin' targets too. Thank goodness I only had seven drinks tonight or I'd be a slight bit worried 'bout my aim. I grin and tip my hat to the lady then find an old tin can lyin' in the ditch by the saloon. I walk 'bout a hundred paces and place the target on a hitchin' rail.

I make my way back to Cyndel and draw my pistol. Hell, at a hundred paces this'll be like shootin'

fish in a barrel. Ain't no wind, no ruckus, and no folks walkin' by to be weary of, so I aim down my sights and pull the trigger...

I miss! I never miss.

I give Miss Sinclair a grin then line up my sights again. Steadyin' my arm, I take a breath or two then pull the trigger once more.

I miss again!

Goddamn! I shoot at that damn tin can three more times and three more times I miss. This ain't happenin'. Can't be happenin'. It's never happened before. Hell, I'd be dead if I shot like this all my life. What in tarnation?

Cyndel snickers. "I hope you didn't charge those folks you taught to shoot too much."

"I... I..."

Right then that pesky bald man manages to shove the wheelbarrow out the way and joins us in front of the saloon. He stares me up and down and takes Miss Sinclair by the arm without so much as a word. As they're walkin' off she looks over her shoulder and finally shows me a grin... "See you around, Mister Rhodes."

My name. She knows my name and I never gave it to her! That means she was askin' after me...

I head back in and make for my room, noddin' to Purple who's by hisself now on the balcony wearin' a goofy grin. I head on in and reckon this is the first time I went to bed alone in a saloon with an honest to goodness smile on my face...

Chapter 20

Alistair

September 18th, 1881

Damn my confounded affliction! Why, oh why was I stricken with an inability to regard true beauty without succumbing to fainting spells? This is preposterous... I awoke from my untimely nap, gazed upon the man who caught me, and fainted again at the sight of him!

For heaven's sake, Alistair, get a hold of yourself!

I come to in the arms of the devastatingly handsome man. The onset of yet another episode brings about dizziness, but I close my eyes in time to quell the loss of consciousness. With my eyes presently shut, I address this sculpted bit of mana. "My deepest apologies. I haven't a clue what's come over me. Perhaps the scotch has set me ill at ease."

"No, it is I who must apologize."

"Whatever for?"

"I purchased for you the services of Esmerelda."

Now that's strange. "But why would..."

"I had to be certain..."

"Certain of what?"

His mouth is to my ear. "That you would turn her away..."

"I... *Oh...*"

He is... he is... we are alike! Oh heavens, who would ever have guessed a specimen like him would be found in such a quiet, desolate Wyoming town?

If only I could open my eyes! There must be something I can do. I hazard gazing upon him once more... oh! No, the reflex to swoon is far too intense. But there must be something I can do... "Please excuse me while I get my bearings..."

I pretend to feel about, as if truly blind, and complete my charade by extending a hand to his expertly coiffed mane and tussle it about, ruining his perfect appearance. I chance another look. Oh happy day! That did the trick! His newly disheveled hair is just enough to lower him incrementally shy of divine. I may now gaze upon him with impunity.

I rub my eyes. "Ah, there we are... oh my! Is that a Samuel Covington suit? How in the world did you acquire it?"

He inspects himself. "I spent the last year in London. Samuel and I are dear friends."

"Are you now? He and I supped at the Kings Arms just this October past."

The smile of the gods. "Did Marius wait on you?"

"As if we'd suffer anyone else!"

"Ah! Hahaha. It's a wonder we never crossed paths..."

I offer my hand. "I am Alistair Evans Harris, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

We share a prolonged handshake. "Judas Buchanan, at your service."

"*Judas?*"

"My mother had a touch of the rogue about her."

An aesthete here, what are the chances? Surely I can die now a fulfilled man. This is proof-positive the western expansion, despite its ignoble roots, will someday bear an ambrosial harvest.

The minutes are as moments conversing with Judas; the man is in every way my intellectual equal.

He is versed in Montesquieu, yet likewise detests Robespierre. Favors Locke over Hobbes, Mozart over Beethoven, and prefers Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy. We are in complete ideological and artistic accord.

It is abundantly clear Judas is a man of considerable means. His pocket watch is a marvel of horological innovation; an actual Breguet Resonance, typically reserved for nobility, nonchalantly drapes from a delicate chain. His cufflinks are fashioned of animal claws and gold filigree. Judas' walking stick is topped with a sly fox wearing a devious expression.

I become self-conscious for the first time in months. My dusty riding-apparel has been more than sufficient to upstage these country rubes, but when juxtaposed against a man of such refinement... well... I must resemble some Hackney vagrant.

Judas, of course, is gentleman enough to flatter... "Your lilac cello-coat is quite in vogue. I witnessed Oscar Wilde wearing something similar in plum just before I departed."

"You had occasion to make his acquaintance?"

Even nodding cannot produce a double chin upon Judas' taught features. "I did. Arrived late to a soiree we were having. When asked the reason for his tardiness, he replied: 'I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon, I put it back again.'"

"At perfecting a phrase, he is the undisputed master."

We discuss the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at length, agreeing that William Holman Hunt's *The Hireling Shepard* and John Everett Millais' *Sir Isumbras at the Ford* to be the pinnacle of what that tribe of supernal talent has yet achieved.

In the midst of a particularly poignant observation upon the merits of European suzerainty

upon the underdeveloped, a series of gunshots ring out from just beyond the saloon's swinging doors.

Judas rolls his eyes. "And so begins the gunplay... ever the cue in these lands to call it an evening."

"Oh yes... quite right..."

He holds my shoulder. "Never fear, Alistair, I am in town one night more. Let us schedule an early dinner tomorrow, shall we?"

"YES! I mean - yes - that would be delightful."

"Wonderful. I'll send my carriage."

Send his carriage... how long has it been since I've rode within a carriage? Since Pittsburgh, I daresay. In fact, I've spent more time outdoors than otherwise since I departed Ohio. An evening replete in lavishness is precisely what the doctor ordered. Huzzah!

Judas doffs his top hat and shakes my hand in warm farewell. He turns on his heel and makes to depart when I recall I meant to apologize for my earlier embarrassment... "Oh Judas, before you go, I must beg your forgiveness for how Esmerelda... displayed me... in such an entirely untoward manner..."

He smiles. "Alistair... I, for one, am ever so glad she did..."

And with that, he is gone. I stare in a state of delirium at the swinging doors as they slowly cease to sway; a pendulum depleting its momentum. Judas, Judas, Judas... has a name ever sounded so sweet? Well... perhaps, besides Lucifer, it is the least sweet name in Christendom. But attached to a man such as he, surely there is hope for redemption.

Traxton terminates my waking dream with a gruff slap upon the shoulder. He has adopted what may be the most daffy expression I have yet witnessed him tender; it seems we are each of us hopelessly smitten. I

nod and retire for the evening, succumbing to sleep wearing a smile from ear to ear.

I wake up overjoyed. The room actually has provisions for an upright shave in a porcelain sink. Young Quon is fascinated by the process and I take the time to instruct him on the technique. Despite his obvious lack of need, it remains a touching experience to observe the child lather soap upon his face and do away with what youthful fuzz he maintains.

Traxton greets us over a morning meal of stewed beef and slightly yellowed carrots. The man is a font of energy as he relates each and every detail of his night prior. Wait... a shooting contest with tin cans just outside the saloon? It was *his* gunfire that sent Judas home prematurely... I should have known!

"She's a big reader, Purple, and that's why you gotta tell me all you know 'bout books."

"About *books*?"

He nods, unaware of his request's lunacy. "Yea, all of 'em."

"But there are a plethora of authors and myriad titles... how would we even..."

"You can start by speakin' plain English. Who the hell knows what a 'plethora' is anyhow?"

Honestly, there is no amount of tutelage sufficient enough to convince an avid bibliophile a man such as Traxton Rhodes spends his time engrossed in the great works of our day and yesteryear. The notion is, indeed, ludicrous.

I decide instead to have a little fun at his expense. In part because he is responsible for Judas' early departure, but also for the audacious request that I impart an abbreviated summary of the world's most

grand literary achievements. Great prose deserves to be savored, mulled about, reflected upon... I will not suffer an abridgement in aid of his loins!

I set my canard in motion.... "Very well, let us begin with Charles Dickens' seminal *A Tale of Two Cities*. A riveting study of a calamitous era, love's tribulations, and the disastrous folly of wrath... 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' Seventeen seventy-five, Tokyo, Japan..."

I lecture on how Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Millimeters Beneath the Sea* is a tantalizing yarn on conch-shell procurement. How *War and Peace* manages to convey so much history and human emotion despite its scant thirty-page length. And how *Gulliver's Travels* is all about a man in search of the world's best pie recipe.

Traxton is not impressed. "These books sound dumb as hell. No wonder I ain't never read 'em."

I ought perhaps feel guilty for the ruse, but he made his request in order to deceive the one he purportedly loves. Why should Traxton not be made to speak plain? I trust reason will prevail and he will one day thank me for the hijinks; two wrongs can, in seems, make a right...

After my lesson on revisionist literature, I inform Traxton he will this night be responsible for little Quon as I have matters to attend to.

He laughs. "And by 'matters' you mean you catchin' the late train dontcha? Ridin' in the caboose?"

"For God's sake, there is a child present..."

Traxton agrees to spend the evening minding Quon, but requires the afternoon to himself. We plan to reconvene at the saloon around four and I bring with me the child in search of a decent haberdashery and perhaps a barber if one is available. A helpful fruit vendor informs me the local butcher sometimes plies

the barber trade so we make for his place of business first.

We enter and the door jingles an unwieldy cowbell in announcement. The shanks of beef on display bring the poor woman I cleaved in half to mind and a wave of guilt washes over me at the remembrance. Luckily, a blood-soaked butcher rises from behind the counter, bone-saw in hand, and greets us warmly. "G'day. Fancy a pig-butt?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, a Brit! Merry day! I'm from Australia; we're cousins almost. I know what you want. A good blood sausage am I right? Ain't got one, sadly. But seein' as you have a Chinese with ya, I'll sell ya a slab of mutt just slaughtered for half-price in the name of the Queen. What'dya say to that?"

What might anyone say to that? "Oh, uh, I thank you kindly, but no. We are here for a little trim."

"You wanna fix your mop? Why didn't you just say so? Come on back and mind the blood, will ya?"

Quon and I follow the friendly Australian butcher behind the counter and into his inner sanctum. Horse, cow, and all manner of unidentifiable meat hangs from long metal hooks and chains. Massive bags of salt occupy the southern wall as curing these carcasses before decomposition sets in is this man's stock and trade.

We come upon a wooden stool set before a large circular mirror. The butcher snaps a crimson towel in an attempt to make the stool suitable for use and motions us forward. "Who's first? Yourself or the joey?"

Quon giggles. "What's a joey?"

The butcher-barber squats to speak with the boy. "What's a joey? A joey is a little kangaroo. You know what a kangaroo is? It's an animal with big feet and a big tail and little arms what hops like this..."

The butcher mimics a kangaroo and jumps around providing rampant excitement for young Quon. In this land of rough living and hard realities, one might easily forget the mind of a child is given to imagination. May God bless those who remember that fact...

The barber then grabs the lad beneath his arms and hoists him onto the stool. He trims away the boy's bangs, tapers with a fine-edged blade the hair about his neck and ears, and even applies a pomade of some kind giving Quon an altogether handsome look. Well then... what a welcome surprise. A barber I may trust with my hair.

Lowering the boy to the floor, I assume his position and instruct the butcher in what I would like to have done. A subtle snip here, a deft trim there, and I will be one step closer to making myself presentable.

The Australian man speaks on how his father was shipped off to Perth in lieu of a Bristol debtor's prison. And then, inheriting the family trait of gross financial malfeasance, he was himself deported to America in lieu of a debtor's prison in Sydney. He mentions only a year later, his father...

Oh, God what has he done?!

Young Quon had been hopping to and fro in an imitation of a kangaroo and inadvertently knocked into the barber, who shore off a sizeable segment of hair leaving me with an unsightly groove.

"I can mend that. No worries."

The barber does his best to blend and conceal the offensive blemish, but the humiliation is complete, my hair is irredeemably lopsided! Judas will assuredly feast his eyes on my repugnance and bid his carriage speed along without halting.

I bristle with frustration. "You imbecile! My hair now resembles a crashing wave!"

He whistles. "I could level that out for ya, but then you'd be baldheaded."

"Oh, damn you, sir. Damn you to hell..."

He pats my shoulder. "Tell ya what I'll do, mate... Since I nicked ya, I'll give ya that mutt meat on the house..."

What twisted design of the fates is this? I daresay Judas tonight will be as Apollo, while I shall resemble the gorgon Medusa; and as I swoon from his exquisiteness, so shall he faint from uncontrollable laughter at my hideous disfigurement.

Oh, damn you, cruel world. Damn you to hell...

Chapter 21

Traxton

September 19th, 1881

Now that Purple's schooled me all 'bout books, I gotta go out and impress Cyndel. Seems I'm watchin' young Quon tonight, so I only got a few hours to find and dazzle her. I set out on the street and get to trackin' her down.

First thing I do is make for the general store her folks is the owners of. It's a right respectable establishment sellin' everything from binoculars to tea kettles to canned peaches. A woman what must be her ma is sweepin' here and there, and a man what must be her pa is placin' provisions on the shelves.

I remove my hat. "Good day, ma'am. Sir. I'm lookin' for your lovely daughter, Cyndel. You know where I might find her?"

The smile her pa wore when he thought me a payin' customer turns to the frown of a man concerned for his girl. I've seen that look a million times before. But unlike before, I ain't just after his daughter's chastity... I want everything she's got; I want her whole. I figure it only right to ease their concerns...

"Make no mistake, I want her whole."

Her pa's mouth drops. "Her hole?! By God, you'll have to get by me first, you devil!"

He goes wide-eyed and comes at me with a broom. What the hell did I do? I don't wanna strike the man - he may one day be my pa or somethin'. Instead me and him do a do-si-do 'round a display of nuts and

bolts he got marked down to a quarter-penny each. Her ma is screamin' "rape!" over and over. What the hell's the matter with these two?

Cyndel herself walks in and drops a mess of flowers she's carryin' for all the commotion. I'm struck dumb at the sight of her - what right's a woman got bein' so damn perty? Don't seem fair now do it? Face like that's somethin' that'll confirm God even.

Anyhow, I'm knocked from my thoughts by her pa's broom. I land on my rump on the floor and don't think to block him when he hits me upside the head once again.

Cyndel's screamin'. "Father! Father, stop. I know this man!"

"He said he was here for your hole!"

Now her jaw drops. "He said what?! Hit him again!"

I block the comin' blow. "No, no, no. I said I *want* her whole."

Cyndel crosses her arms. "That isn't any better, Mister Rhodes!"

"*Whole*. Like your mind and affection and such."

That calms her down. "Oh... *Oh*... well, that's something else entirely."

I stand up not wantin' the image of me on the floor to stick with Cyndel. Nothin' makes a woman less interested in a man than seein' him down and out. And there's nothin' worse for a man than bein' seen down and out. A man can be on the ground - been there countless times myself - but only in the company of other men. A woman sees you on the floor and you're forever a ninny in her book.

Cyndel is lookin' mighty spectacular if I do say so myself. Got on a blue number same color as the sky, hair's a mess of curls fallin' past her shoulders, and a

chest what makes me wish I were a baby again. I say, hallelujah, man.

Her ma don't seem too pleased. "She's spoken for."

Cyndel spins on her. "*Mother*, I am not yet spoken for."

"Mister Wayland Wiggle proposed just two weeks ago. The rest is formality."

Cyndel crosses her arms. "I have not yet accepted his proposal. And am not sure if I intend to."

"But, Cyndel...", her ma hisses through clenched teeth.

"But nothing. Mister Rhodes, will you assist me in making a delivery?"

What a stroke of luck! Another thing what sours a girl on a man: An approv'in' pair of parents. Sayonara, Mister Wiggle.

I pick up two big bags of flour and still manage to get the door for my woman, as a man does. We walk through town a-ways, passin' the same sort of wooden homes you see slapped together everywhere west of the Mississippi. Children messin' 'round with no shoes, ladies with their parasols, group of ol' timers at checkers, and there's... well I'll be damned... they even got a pair of stocks in this town.

You don't see these too much anymore. Got 'em down in Mexico still, that's for sure. Nasty punishment bein' locked in the sun all day long; back all bent with your hands and face in tiny holes; kids takin' turns slappin' ya and feedin' ya horse turds...

There's a fellow in there now what don't seem to be enjoyin' himself too much - fat man in a shirt far too small for that gut of his. Someone took the man's pants down and spread hot tar 'cross his backside too.

Cyndel motions with her chin. "That's Floyd America. Payday is every Friday at the ranch, so he

spends every Saturday in those stocks, don't you, Floyd? What'd you do this time?"

Floyd stretches his neck. "Oh hi, Cyndel. Got drunk and pooped in a chimney."

"Not again. Oh well, tell your wife and kids I said hello."

"Will do. Nice seein' ya."

We stroll along, me with my bags of flour, her with a warm greetin' for just 'bout every person in town. She's a popular one now ain't she? I 'spose she would be. Proprietor of the most outfitted general store for three hundred miles. And with a face like that, I'd be willin' to wager these old ranchers be buyin' things they don't rightly need just to get a look.

Well she's mine! Or, she will be soon as I get this wormy Mister Wiggle out her life. Her parents sound awful fond of the man; most likely due to his standin' in the world, not 'cause their daughter has any real interest in him. Matter of fact, that sounds just like one of them dumb books Purple told me' bout...

I clear my throat. "Your predicament with the Wiggle character is sorta like that of Elizabeth Bennet ain't it?"

She stops walkin'. "*You* are familiar with *Pride and Prejudice*?"

"Sure. Elizabeth Bennet's ma and pa wished she'd wed Mister Collins, her kin, but she was after Mister Darcy."

That got her. "Well... I am impressed, Mister Rhodes. I hadn't assumed you one well read."

It's workin'. I could already tell she's taken a shinin' to me, but now with this cockamamie book thing she likes me all the more. "Damn shame what happened at their weddin' though."

"Elizabeth Bennet's wedding?"

"Yea, what with that Frankenstein monster bargin' in, overturnin' tables, and strangulatin' everybody."

She's lookin' at me strange, but surely it's 'cause she ain't accustomed to a man knowin' so much 'bout these silly books of hers. I gotta come up with a way to thank Purple.

She continues along the road. "Tell me, Mister Rhodes, what are some of your other favorites?"

"Oh, well, there be so many. Let me think... I read *War and Peace* last night; that were a good yarn."

"You read *War and Peace* last night?"

"Sure... ain't but thirty pages."

That one got a giggle outta her. This readin' thing is payin' off... I'll show her more of what I know to seal the deal. "Of course, my all-time best gotta be *Hamlet*. You ever hear of that one?"

"I have, but I'd love to know your thoughts on it..."

"Well, I enjoy a happy endin', same as the next man, and that's why I do love Shakespeare."

Another laugh.

"The swordfight's my favorite part, 'specially when the ghost of Hamlet's pa floats in to save the day."

She laughs again. This is goin' perfectly.

"Hahaha! Oh stop, please stop. You sure got a wild imagination, Mister Rhodes. But we're here now, time for business. And watch out, old Lottie is no pushover."

We walk on up to a whitewashed home on the outskirts of town. Once upon a time this house was probly the only structure for miles, but towns have a way of creepin' closer and closer to what used to be a quiet piece of land.

The tract is nice enough; white picket fence 'round the property. There's a red barn with a metal weather vane propped up top with the figure of a

rooster pointing Southeast. A small little windmill's spinnin' in the breeze turnin' the cranks what pumps water up from the well.

Got a wooden swing hanging from a large tree in the front yard what two kids are playin' on together. A few chickens and even a pink little pig is nosin' 'bout the front garden for feed. A little 'ol lady is rockin' in a chair on the porch out front; whistlin' the day away.

Cyndel opens up the gate and we walk on over to the squat woman what lives here. As we get closer, I notice her mouth's full of damn 'bacca leaves she's chewin' like cud and spittin' over the side of the porch. What sorta lady is this?

Old Lottie waves us over. "Howdy, Cyndel. Got my flour, I see. You also got a mighty fine pack-mule with ya. How much for him, I wonder?"

Lottie smiles a big, tooth-missin' grin, and a great glob of 'bacco juice spills out and onto her apron stainin' it black. "Aww, shit. Ever since that bottom tooth fell out, I can't keep my 'baccy from goin' everywhere. You know how it is..."

I don't know how it is. I favor smokin' just fine, but never took to chewin' the damn stuff. I seen a man with a hole for a cheek from where the 'bacca ate straight through. Said it was that much easier to chew more chaw for not ever havin' to open his mouth to put it in...

This Lottie sure seems to like it. Some doctors claim there's healin' properties in the leaf what can't be found nowheres else. Well I can't say if that's true or not, but I can tell ya that after a long night of drinkin', nothin' sets my stomach to ease better than 'bacca.

Makes me have to shit too; sometimes just by thinkin' 'bout smokin'.

Anyhow, I lay the two bags of flour down by 'ol Lottie and damned if she ain't pinch my backside in the

process. This 'ol bat's got some spice in her that's for sure. I don't mind none; puts a smile on Cyndel's face and that's all that matters.

Old Lottie spits again. "You know. I was gonna stiff ya for the flour. But seein' as you brung over a treat like him, I'll pay the fair amount."

Cyndel nods. "Thank you, Lottie. Thank you for paying the fair amount."

"Don't mention it. Now go on and get so I can watch him leave. Ooh, yes siree..."

Cyndel is laughin' to herself while Lottie hoots and hollers. Is this what men sound like when we're callin' after a fine woman? Don't seem so appealin' bein' on this end of it. Maybe I'll be a little nicer next time I yell at one of 'em.

On the way back to her store we pass by a dusty clearin' with an old gazebo in it. Looks like the sort of structure what could hold more than a few folks at dance. I wonder when the last time they used this was. A woman nearby gives me the stank eye; a horse over yonder whinnies and kicks up dust...

Cyndel leans against a chipped gazebo post. "Mister Rhodes. Let's have a little chat, shall we? Good. I've been in this town for five years now. Five, long, slow, monotonous years. We sell chicken feed for five cents a bag, shovels for a quarter, lanterns for a half dollar. Believe it or not, I don't want to be here. I hate Wyoming almost as much I hated Kansas before it. I want adventure. I want romance. I want danger. It's not a woman's way, I know, but hell, what is anymore?

Now where'd this come from?

She swats a mosquito. "Have you ever read *The Count of Monte Cristo*? What am I saying, of course you have. That's what I want. What Edmond and Mercédès have. That's what I've wanted since I was a child."

"You wanna be locked up in a tower wearin' an iron mask?"

She smiles a set of perfect white teeth the likes of which I've never seen, then places her hand on my shoulder... "Now the way I see it, Wayland Wiggle isn't perfect. Hell, he's not even halfway decent. But he's got a nice home in Chicago and a bank account to go with it. It's not an adventure and it's damn sure not romance... but it's something different, and... Mister Rhodes... when you've lived as long as I have in these small ranching towns, you find out quick, *something different* is a prized commodity. Hell, it's all I pray for most days..."

She looks me dead in the eyes; the face of an angel. Oh that Wayland Wiggle don't deserve one such as this. I may not deserve her neither, but he damn sure don't deserve her...

She turns to gaze at the nearby creek. "So I offer you this, if you can show me something... something I've never seen, by tomorrow morning... well... then I daresay we'd have much more to talk about. Good day, Mister Rhodes."

She walks off leavin' me by my lonesome.

Somethin' she never seen... it's Wyoming!

Where the hell I'm gonna find somethin' spectacular out here?

Chapter 22

Alistair

September 19th, 1881

Confound this ludicrous wave! Try as I might, the travesty upon my head is beyond salvation. I would send note to Judas that we ought cancel, but am willing to hazard rejection for the opportunity to make time with a man of such caliber.

Young Quon thinks it hilarious to see me so out of sorts, but I must admit the boy's light laugh is infectious. Perhaps it will not be so bad after all. It's only hair. Judas is not so superficial as all that; he is an aesthete after all...

Departing the scene of the catastrophe, we happened upon a tailor, of sorts, who had the prerequisite utensils to mend the bullet hole in my lilac coat. After a swift negotiation, he agreed to have it sewn just in time for my rendezvous.

While there, I take occasion to notice little Quon's attire. He is at an age when nothing remains a proper fit for long as limbs extend nightly. Why shouldn't this lad have an outfit to wear? I am typically not given to imprudent caprice, but the evening at hand has me brimming with delight...

"Quon. How would you like a new outfit?"

He considers it. "I'd rather have a gun, Mister Alistair."

"A *gun*? Whatever for?"

The lad shrugs. "All the other kids have them."

"Ah, but how many children possess a well-crafted - ahem - *adequately*-crafted riding outfit, hmm? My good sir, his measurements."

The tailor reinserts his monocle and removes the measuring tape from around his neck. He then bids Quon stand upon a slight pedestal; raising and lowering his arms upon request as he takes the young boy's particulars.

As he is being thus assessed, I casually peruse the bolts of fabric on hand. The patterns and material are by and large ghastly, but I do happen upon a charcoal gray and off-white ensemble that, while far too unstimulating for my tastes, would complement the boy's features splendidly.

I pay the tailor and promise to return for my cello-coat at the appropriate time.

I offer the lad a ride upon my back for our return trip. He climbs excitedly upon a stack of wooden crates and vaults onto my person. Such energy. Such exuberance. There is much to be learned from the antics of children.

We arrive at the saloon and the proprietor conjures up a meal of dubious origin. After we are well sated, I pay for a bath to be drawn in my chambers. Young Quon busies himself off in a corner playing with scraps of wood he is pretending are cowboys and indians. I lower myself into the steaming confines of the metal cask.

Sufficiently rejuvenated, I begin the lengthy process of a woefully rare midday ablution. I shave again, pluck my ever-wayward eyebrows, comb my calamitous demi-head of hair, apply what tinctures and perfumes I yet retain... perfect. Well, nearly perfect. In absence of my Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax I have resorted to some manner of adhesive I found in a

general store. The proprietor indicated it would surely secure any item which required securing. We shall see...

Master Quon and I return to the tailor's and I am pleasantly surprised to discover his work not half as shoddy as I anticipated; my lilac coat is in great repair! This evening may yet prove a success. Huzzah!

Just as we arrive back to the saloon, I notice Traxton heading our way. His punctual return must be seen as another positive omen indeed.

"Hiya, Purple, whatcha done to your hair?"

I self-consciously check my hair in the saloon's begrimed windows. "Oh I... I'll have you know this happens to be the vanguard of men's style."

He snorts. "Looks like a buildin' toppled over in a twister."

"I would expect you to know nothing on the subject... speaking of which, how did Miss Sinclair favor your literary acumen?"

"She loved it! Had her laughin' so hard, thought she'd bust a gut. I owe you one for that, Purple."

Unbelievable... I led this man to believe *The Scarlet Letter* was one woman's infatuation with high-end stationary and *still* he prevails? The man is made of luck.

No matter, Judas is expected any moment and I am quite thrilled at the prospect of a sumptuous evening. Nothing, I daresay, can dampen my mood.

Traxton points towards my ruined hair. "That some blood on your head?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He moves closer to inspect my uncovered scalp. Yes it is true the Australian did nick my skin with his razor, and yes I did previously suffer from a slightly vicious open wound, but I addressed that abrasion and ought to be fit as a fiddle.

"You're bleedin', Purple. Here, let me see what I can do."

Traxton spits into his own open palm and smears the expectorant upon the cut. He is cleansing me as one would a toddler. This is insufferable! And here comes Judas' carriage... just perfect.

I push him away. "Unhand me, Traxton, unhand me."

He pulls me back. "You made me tear the scab, it's drippin' worse."

He places his sleeve against my head and begins wiping away the blood as one would wash a window. I can readily discern the look of confusion in Judas' eyes as he pulls to the fore of the saloon. I attempt to steal away from Traxton, but he insists on placing a sheen on my shorn scalp.

I struggle to remove him. "Let me go, let me go, let me go, I say."

He throws his hands up in resignation. "Fine, go out a bloody mess. Me and Quon don't care. C'mon, Quon, let's go find some trouble."

Father and son disappear into the saloon as the coachman opens the door to the carriage. I squint my eyes in apprehension of a fainting spell, but Judas seems to have decided upon an Osbaldeston knot in his cravat (as opposed to the austere trone d'Amour knot he wore yesterday) and is therefore just shy enough from perfection for me to remain conscious.

He removes his top hat in greetings while I bow without removing mine. The breach in decorum would be unthinkable in a more civilized land, but this is no civilized land. I step into the confines of his carriage and my God is it exquisite...

The first thing I notice are the ornate glass windows; virtually impossible to repair without a first-rate gaffer. I seat myself upon upholstery of the softest

leather and wool broadcloth and notice the ceiling is lavishly adorned in a marvelous tapestry depicting unicorns at frolic in an English garden.

Judas assumes his position beside me and knocks twice with his fox-laden walking stick upon the door. The coach whisks us away to whatever diversion the man has prepared. It would be downright unseemly to retain my top hat indoors, so I decide to face the music and reveal my shame.

He notices without fail. "Oh... Alistair... that is... that is... what happened?"

"An Australian barber happened. Can you ever forgive me?"

He fixes a loose strand of mine with tender care. "You, I can forgive anything, but tell me this barber's name and I shall have him shot for defacing such a work of art."

"Hee hee hee."

Did I... did I giggle? Oh Lord, Alistair get a hold of yourself. What sort of man giggles? Honestly? Giggles? Perhaps Judas didn't notice...

He motions out the rear window. "So... who was that man you were with?"

"Excuse me?"

Judas' eyebrow is raised with particular interest. "The man administrating to your wound..."

"Oh, that's just..."

Hold on a moment... is he... is he... jealous? Of me? Judas has been nothing but forthright in our conversations, it would be subversive to the extreme to insert deceit now. But... if used in a cautious and considerate way, jealousy can be quite a useful tool in a relationship.

"Oh him? He's my partner."

"Your partner?"

I deliver a perfectly aloof shrug. "Riding partner, among other things... we don't subscribe to classification..."

That stung him, I know. And needlessly so. Oh, Alistair why did you do that? What good is ever attained through prevarication? And yet... I will now enjoy an advantage in that Judas believes me entertaining multiple options. Well, as Traxton would say, what's done is done...

We ride towards the mountains, postilion ever at our side. When the incline ascends towards a precipitous gradient, the man lashes his cockhorse to the coach's own and we continue on our climb.

Along the way we discuss some of the more outrageous happenings in recent science such as the discovery of Cro-Magnon drawings in Spanish caves, a powerful enough telescope for the Italians to have identified canals on the planet Mars (which some speculate are actually irrigation ditches!), and the notion our fingerprints may each be unique across the whole of humanity. Good heavens, what an age!

The coach climbs and climbs into the mountains - at great difficulty to the horses - but to my unbridled excitement. In a sort of penance for my untruth earlier, I do divulge to Judas that his choice in cravat knot is only my third favorite after the aforementioned trone d'Amour and the rugged Irish knot.

That sets us on a conversation as to the origins of the cravat, and my knowledge is bested as Judas imparts to me the etymological roots of the word. It seems Croatian mercenaries hired by the French in the Thirty Years' War wore miniscule handkerchiefs about their neck. Their Parisian employers took notice and improvised. From the term for Croatian - *Croat* - evolved "cravat"... splendid!

We arrive at our destination with a heavy "whoa!" from the coachman. He and the postilion set to task retrieving a crate from above the coach and withdrawing its contents expeditiously. A picnic! How grand. And at this height we are able to witness the sun setting unobstructed.

His men set a heavy, tartan print blanket upon the ground and proceed to unpack place settings, cutlery, an assortment of charcuteries, a scented candle, and even a chilled champagne from Champagne! Where in the world did he procure chiseled ice?!

With nary a word, his men complete their chore and retire somewhere over the next hill. I do not spot them again, but do pick up on the most faint wisps of tobacco smoke, so understand them to be within earshot.

This is majestic. Divine. Perfect. The sun is at present igniting the horizon in a multitude of hues and textures. Clouds painted rose contrast with the deep orange of the limitless reach. If not for a thoughtlessly shed snakeskin a few feet away, this view would certainly be faint-rendering.

As we lazily enjoy his selection of delicacies, a discussion forms on both *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's work is far superior, naturally, and I indulge in a minor recital of the poet Longfellow's translation, a particularly fitting tercet from *Paradiso*:

With the same colour which, through sun
adverse,
Painteth the clouds at evening or at morn,
Beheld I then the whole of heaven suffused

After the champagne follows giddiness and a particular thrill of the unknown. Who is this man with stature to rival even these mountains? Why are we

together, now, in this moment? Was this preordained, or had the chances of fortune truly been at play? And why, why did...

And then he kissed me.

Oh, Heavenly Father he kissed me. Thank you, thank you for sending this man. It has been so long since I have touched another soul with affection. In fact, I would surmise that in this past year, nearly every single time my skin has come in contact with another person, hostility played a role. Fighting, being set upon, accosted, threatened... this land is nothing if...

He kisses me again.

Why won't my mind just stop? Allow myself to truly experience the moment... "Oh, Judas, but what of your men?"

"They are well compensated."

We embrace once more. "My sole reservation. Shall we?"

He is all I may have envisioned; all my imagination is capable of conjuring. Mentally, physically, financially - all I may have even dreamed of. He is perfect.

And that is why I am positively sure my body will refuse to urinate within fifty yards of this man. Oh, why did I imbibe so much champagne?! It has ever been my way sipping beverages to avoid confronting my "stage fright" before company.

I hate myself for interrupting the proceedings. "Judas... I... I must ask that you please excuse me. I shall only be a moment."

With the moon rising, and the candlelight reflecting against his champagne flute, I simply cannot fathom a more ethereal vision. Damn this pitiable condition of mine...

I make off some distance, careful to navigate loose stones and the treacherously nearby precipice. I

make ready to relieve myself and... nothing. Oh, lamentable curse! I wander off further and, looking back, our candle and Judas' immaculate silhouette are practically impossible to make out. Surely this is sufficient. I make ready to relieve myself and... nothing.

His voice in the distance. "Alistair, I'm waiting..."

Why, why, why?

I trudge on further still, so far, in fact, that I am in jeopardy of losing my way. I commit a number of landmarks to memory and make ready to relieve myself... ah... finally... sweet release...

My triumph is tragically short-lived, however, as midway through my stream a rumbling growl emanates from behind me. I risk a peek over my shoulder, hoping against hope it was my own stomach, but of course, it is not...

I turn to find a semi-circle of coyotes licking their lips and padding towards me without fear, forcing my decision to face either the jagged cliff behind me, or the jagged teeth before me.

What to do, what to do?

A voice in the distance. "Alistair, I'm waiting..."

Chapter 23

Cyndel

September 20th, 1881

Oh, these cowboys and their simple, predictable minds. There is not a day that goes by, not a single day, in which I remain unpropositioned. I am routinely asked to wed, habitually asked to bed, and forever sought after for courtship.

Most of the offers have been made by the lowest order of man: Talentless, drunk, shiftless layabouts with nothing to lose.

There have been a few proposals from decent men: Our minister, a rancher with over a thousand steer, my doctor. But they all suffered from the same sickness: They live in Wyoming.

Dullsville, Wyoming.

No kidding. It's named after John Dulls who first settled this land, but I always thought the name fit the town just right.

I don't want to live in Dullsville. I don't care to ever see this place again. Of course I love my parents, but how long can one endure identical mealtime conversations each and every night? And it was the exact same is Kansas...

We lived in Wichita for most of my childhood, immigrants from New Jersey looking to do honest business for a change. Wichita was safe, but incredibly boring. The only noteworthy detail of that town is Billy the Kid was born there who, if rumors are to be

believed, met his demise just last month in New Mexico.

I could probably describe with accuracy the local events of any day in Wichita... Mary Dupree lost her chicken, Bob Daniels stubbed his toe, Bill Williams drank too much, Sarah MacArthur is having another bastard child. All things stay the same; nothing ever changes.

I know the rumor has followed me to Wyoming that I once posed nude in a photograph for which the local clergy forced us cast from the state in shame. That story is only partially truthful.

What actually happened is I was caught taking photographs of *other* people, usually nude. My friend Allison Delaney's father had brought with him a small box camera called a Kinnear all the way from London. The bellows folded in so we could carry the box and set it up wherever we wanted.

Allison got the idea to spy on the boy she was going steady with at the time, David, just to make sure he was staying true. Turns out David was a tramp and we got the proof one night outside his bedroom window after he received a late-night visit from his second cousin, Sarah.

We didn't have the money to develop the evidence however, so the next place we set up was outside Wichita's only photograph developer. Timing it for a rainy night full of lightening so the flash wouldn't raise his suspicion, we caught the man in full undress performing his calisthenics and brought the slide in for him to develop. I can only imagine the man's surprise when he saw the picture come into focus and it was himself nude for the world to see.

I wonder if he leapt in shock...

We told him there were many more exposures and if he didn't develop our slides at no charge, we

would send these photographs to a certain paper in New York City that prints these sorts of things for mass consumption. We received free developing and equipment for life.

After that success, Allison and I would wait for lightning storms like children do Christmas. We took a great photograph of Old May Jennings in her bath, one of Sam Smyth urinating onto the floor of his own bedroom, but it was when we captured Sheriff Cartwright with a married woman that I knew we were onto something special.

For two years Allison and I shot, developed, and blackmailed the city of Wichita. We would send a photograph along with a letter indicating we had many and more scandalous exposures to send out if not for a tidy sum brought to a place of our choosing right away.

They paid. Every single one of them paid.

It was a great idea - visionary, really - photographing people this way. For when, in the history of man, has a person ever opened their mail only to be greeted with a picture of themselves nude?

We made a bundle of money, and Wichita was, finally, an interesting place to live. That is until we blackmailed Minister Adams and he caught us red-handed retrieving the ransom. The picture we had taken of him was through the moon-shaped hole on an outhouse door, so while it was repulsive, it wasn't so scandalous that he had much to fear.

He brought his whole assembly to our home and gave lengthy fabricated sermons on what Jesus had said on rights to privacy. My parents were mortified and tore up all the photographs I had hidden between my mattresses. I was named a "villainous traitor to the common weal" and approached on numerous occasions to repent my sins.

I was also approached by many journalists begging me to divulge my trade secrets...

In the end, the negative attention was bad for business so we left town.

I feel genuine remorse for the hardships my parents endured during those years. But I was a child, and what good is a childhood without some sort of delinquency? Those are the stories we still wish to tell when we're old...

We relocated to Dullsville when I was almost seventeen and worked the general store these last five years without incident. Without *any* incident. None. Which is the way it always is in Dullsville.

Until Wayland Wiggle walked into our store...

He was unattractive, but fashionably dressed. Reasonably mannered, and carried about him an air of confidence only money can create. He was, straight away, quite taken, and I only agreed to share dinner with him because my mother insisted.

My "dilemma" came up the night of his invitation. "You are far beyond the reasonable age for settling down, Cyndel."

"But I haven't met anyone even remotely interesting, mother. Don't you want me to be happy?"

"I do... *happily married*..."

So, I had dinner with Mister Wiggle and found him to be almost bearable despite his spilling gravy on his collar, his stepping on my foot, his lack of any interest beyond the railroad, and his being forward enough to think he would receive a kiss at the end of the night...

He stood there outside my home with his eyes closed and lips puckered like a fish... "Mister Wiggle, are you feeling ill?"

His eyes remained closed. "Oh, no, I was expecting perhaps a sign of your favor."

"But we only just met."

Still closed. "Please, oh please. Please may I have a kiss?"

"Mister Wiggle!"

And yet, eyes still closed. "Pleeeeeease? Just one. Just one, please?!"

This thrilling dialogue went on for twenty minutes longer, until my mother came to the rescue. *Mister Wiggle's* rescue that is... "Go on and kiss him, Cyndel. Like you said you wanted to earlier."

Good heavens, where do mothers come from! Her lie made an uncomfortable situation even more unsettling as Mister Wiggle was now under the false impression I desired him. The only reason I didn't say the truth was because I hate to upset my mother since the move. I gave in and put my lips to Mister Wiggle's cheek.

A week later he proposed in front of the entire church.

I'm sure my eyes went wide at the spectacle; a stranger offering to spend his life with me. I answered "maybe," which all sane folks know is the same as outright refusal, but what was I to do? The man is hardly suitable, presentable, lovable...

But...

He does command a certain amount of influence with a major American institution, is worth upwards of fifty thousand dollars (I asked), and has an established presence in Chicago - a city, he says, that suffers only the most upright business and political practices...

He never reads for leisure; my favorite pass-time. He hasn't ever shot a gun (who knew such a man existed?). But perhaps most bizarre of all, Mister Wiggle rides side-saddle... side-saddle! On the two occasions we rode together, men, women, and children all were bent over in laughter at his dainty practice.

He says he rides that way due to a condition with his bottom, but for heaven's sake... *side-saddle!*

Luckily there won't be much occasion to be seen riding horses with him in Chicago. Oh, Chicago... do I dare take this man up on his offer? It would be the something different I've been praying for all these years... but... with a man I know I do not care for.

At my mother's insistence, he and I have been spending time together in an effort to be better acquainted. He brought me to the end of the railroad his company is constructing and carried on at some length on the marvels of steel alloys. He also commissioned for me a miniature train-engine replica, and explained, over dinner, in exhaustive detail the workings of each component.

Upon presentation: "Oh, Cyndel, what a wonderful gift I have given you!"

I decided our next excursion would be to the saloon for a night of drinking and dancing. He bristled at the idea, but I told him it was non-negotiable. He made due and put forth a decent effort; waddled like a duck to most tunes, but I've never really seen a man who was truly *good* at dancing.

He put on a brave face though... I'll give him that. Maybe a marriage would be endurable. Perhaps, over time, I might be able to come to some sort of peace with the situation. Having money's not bad. Having a decent amount of it is even better... perhaps...

And then *he* interrupted us. This man with a spark in his smile, a few weeks' worth of beard, scars both old and new, a mess of tussled brown hair... A face like that's one in a million...

Mister Wiggle began to protest his intrusion but was quieted right away by the roughneck. "Whatever this bald guy's payin' you, I'll triple it."

Whore?! I slap the man hard across the face and send him on his way. I may be the only woman in the saloon not for sale, but how dare he presume?

Mister Wiggle was being far too accommodating in an attempt to make me forget his being thoroughly dismissed by that cowboy. Nothing reduces a man's standing in my book worse than timidity.

As Mister Wiggle droned on regarding - what else? - his railroad, I caught the man I slapped making conversation all about the room. He certainly was gregarious. My date excused himself to the outhouse and I used the moment's reprieve to put my neighbor Mary to the question... "Mary, who is that man over there?"

"Him? That's Floyd America. You know, got drunk and set his ma on fire that time..."

"Not Floyd America... *Him*..."

She warmed at the mere mention of the handsome man. "Oh, said his name was Traxton Rhodes. Paid me two pennies to tell him 'bout you."

Butterflies. "Did he? What did you say?"

"Told him you get your knickers from Paris, France."

"What? Why would you say a thing like that?"

"Whiskey."

I nodded. "Oh, whiskey made you do it..."

"No. Buy me a whiskey and I'll tell ya why I told him that."

Mister Wiggle returned and put an end to my conversation with Mary. He doesn't get along with any of my friends. Says everyone in this town is beneath us; him, because of his money, and me due to my looks. I can't rightly say I agree... I do enjoy Mary's company, whore or not.

When the night was finally at an end, Mister Wiggle excused himself again to the outhouse while this Mister Rhodes tried to show his feathers off shooting at a tin can. His aim was less than impressive, but I did favor how he locked my date in the toilet with a wheelbarrow...

Women ought to praise ingenuity in a man attempting to make time with them.

After my perhaps future husband freed himself, he took my arm as if I were his property and lead me away from the saloon. I repaid that indignity with a call over my shoulder: "See you around, Mister Rhodes."

That got him. That got that presumptuous Mister Wiggle... he sniffled once before addressing me: "That man took you to be a whore."

"And I slapped him for it."

"Do you fancy him?"

I rolled my eyes at his jealousy. "I barely know him. I barely *know you* for that matter. But just so you know, jealousy and despair are the two least appealing qualities in a man."

"Harrumph! There is no need for envy, how much could a man such as he possibly be worth? One dollar? Maybe, maybe two dollars?"

The stars were captivating that evening. "There is more to this world than money, Mister Wiggle."

"Don't I know it? There is also land. Did I mention I mean to keep an home in London? No, perhaps I didn't. I plan on making a tour of Europe once the rail is complete... London... Paris... Rome..."

Mister Wiggle once again held the upper hand. "Rome..."

And he knew it... "I suppose witnessing the Sistine Chapel does pale in comparison to a man shooting at tin cans in Dullsville, Wyoming..."

I'd nothing to say to that; he was absolutely correct. I had no good reason to continue speaking with this Traxton Rhodes. No reason whatsoever. Until I came back to the store the next day and found my father chasing him around the nuts and bolts display. It was a simple, but oddly endearing misunderstanding.

Of all the ne'er-do-well, ragamuffin, cowboys who have shown interest over the years, this one alone stands out... and I don't quite know why...

I put to him a test... show me something I have never seen before... something grand. And it must be memorable indeed to best the Sistine Chapel...

Honestly, I know in my heart this man has no chance, despite my innermost desire to see him succeed. Short of a miracle, there is nothing in dusty old Dullsville he'll find to widen my eyes. I suppose I ought get used to the sound of my new name...

Missus Wiggle... Missus Cyndel Wiggle...

Oh God, please send Mister Rhodes a miracle...

Chapter 24

Traxton

September 20, 1881

"C'mon, Quon, have another shot of tequila..."

Purple told me I gotta watch Quon this night, and I don't know no way I'd of rather spent an evenin' when I were his age than bendin' an elbow with the big boys. I know he's only a little guy, so I borrowed a sewin' thimble from one of the whores and that's what he's drinkin' from.

Could be the first time he had a taste of tequila. Matter of fact, this might be the first time he ever had spirits at all. Ain't that somethin'? First taste of alcohol is a damn big occasion for a man. Bested only by the first taste of a lady.

But I reckon little Quon's still a bit young for women bein' he's only six. Best to stick with tequila for now...

After Cyndel walked off leavin' me in that gazebo I got to thinkin'... ain't no way I'd be able to show her somethin' she ain't never seen by tomorrow. Not 'round here, at least. And to my mind, if somethin' ain't got a solution, the next best thing to do is start drinkin'...

Done some of my best work blackout drunk. God's honest truth. Was one time I were lost in New Mexico with nothin' but a bottle. Every which way was desert and more desert. Horse was dead for lack of water and I couldn't even go the way I came cause the sands had blown over my tracks.

So, I sat down on the other side of some large rocks - the sort that jut out from the ground lookin' like pillars and such - and got to drinkin'. Last thing I recall was wrestlin' with a cactus what stuck me, and after that, nothin'...

I woke up in Albuquerque, only Lord knows how, no worse for wear and fifty more dollars in my pocket than when I started drinkin'. Now what'dya call that but proof drinkin's the answer to unanswerable dilemmas? And that's what this situation with Cyndel is, an unanswerable dilemma.

I don't know what it is Chinamen be drinkin' back in China, but little Quon here seems to have a taste for the 'ol mezcals. Just a few thimbles and he's already actin' the fool. And I'll be damned, but that boy might actually be my son. He's already focusin' most of his attention on the ladies...

I sit the young'n on my knee as a poker game opens up. Someone 'long the way taught him to play cards which ain't really no surprise; if you can't join in a round of poker there's not much else to do most nights. 'Specially if you can't read or can't have no poke...

We're up against two ranchers and an old sailor wearin' an eye-patch. The cowboys are decent enough, but the seaman can play. Must've had long years on the water tradin' cards. No problem though, little Quon's a natural, and with his aid I've already taken ten dollars from these men.

A few more hands, a few more rounds of tequila, and I think I seen this pirate pull a card from up his sleeve. I can't be sure I saw it - and namin' a man a cheat is serious business - so I let the hand play out. The sailor wins with a pair of aces.

More hands, more tequila, and the one-eyed man makes for his sleeve again. I can't say for certain he pulled a card from up there but what's he messin'

with his arm for so much? He wins the pot again with two aces.

More cards, more tequila, and little Quon's out cold on my knee. I got a right good hand with a pair of kings and a pair of aces. The two ranchers fold but the pirate raises twenty whole dollars. It's a tricky thing gettin' the measure of a man wearin' an eye-patch, but my hand's a good hand - a hand worth puttin' some money on.

I call and the pirate lays down three aces. What in tarnation?! I stare at those cards and then at the man what played them. I got a choice to make now: Call him a cheat or pull my gun. Seein' as I got a kid on my lap, I decide for a calmer approach than I might normally use... "Say, friend, that's a crazy hand you got there. Made even more crazy by the two aces I'm holdin'."

He looks around the table then points right at me. "You're a cheat!"

Is he serious? "I'm a cheat?! I seen you go up your sleeve three times at least."

"Arr, mind your tongue now, lad, I've fed men to sharks for less."

"You're a long way from the ocean, partner. How's 'bout you hand over your winnin's and we call it square?"

The old salt means business. "How's about you set the child down before he catches some lead meant for you?"

Why can't a game of poker ever not turn sour? It weren't my fault this man was caught cheatin'. What's he think we're all gonna ignore a fifth ace on the table?

The man does look like his mettle's tested. My guess is he's a pirate placin' some distance 'tween himself and his past. Them iron-sided boats the government got these days all but put an end to piracy. Only ones left is some mangy river pirates on the

Mississippi, I've heard. Maybe this one's lookin' to start new in the West. Or maybe he's plyin' his trade same as he ever did on the high seas. Either way he's 'bout to learn the ground 'round here don't splash when ya hit it.

I stare him dead in his one eye. "Look here, captain. The way I sees it, you're caught. I'm willin' to let you outta here with your hide and that's an offer no other man for a thousand miles would be fool enough to make. Now what's it gonna be?"

The man's one good eye squints near closed while his upper lip snarls in a look of true menace. His hair's gone wild due to the dust and dirt and is shootin' off every which way. I can truly imagine this man swingin' onto a ship by the main mast and cuttin' sailors down for their loot.

I sure am glad I purchased more bullets earlier today...

The man puts both his hands down on the table like he's 'bout to jump me. These two ranchers make themselves ghosts leavin' me to settle this on my own. I set little Quon down and make ready to plant this man in the bone orchard.

Quick as a flash I go for my gun and have it near to the pirate's face when he gets to... *laughin'* of all things... "Fine, fine... I don't want a fight. You caught me. I yield."

"Wh... What?"

He smiles a pirate smile. "Spent a lifetime in other men's blood and I've had enough. Take the money."

"You're serious?"

"Aye. Not even sure why I played ya crooked. Habit, I guess."

The man is settlin' this clean? I've a tough time believin' that bein' he is a *pirate* and all, but what am I to do? Shoot a man what surrendered? He ain't no

injun; there's rules on doin' a normal man in cold blood... I holster my revolver. "Well alright then, partner... Traxton Rhodes is my name."

"And I'm Cornelius Nutt, scourge of the Caribbean. Well, the South Caribbean that is. Waters up north be too hot if you take my meanin'."

This Cornelius Nutt's lived quite a life. We trade tales over whiskey while Quon sleeps 'neath the table. Turns out the man's the son of a privateer who went rogue and took his boy to sea with him. Grew up on the water sinkin' other men's ships after clearin' out their hold for 'em.

"Aye, piratin' ain't what it used to be, that's for sure. America guards her waters rather close these days, and down south all them flea-bit nations declared independence from Spanish rule and so too from Spanish gold. Used to be up to our gills in doubloons from Spain, now it's nothin' but oranges and bananas from Ecuador! How's a man to make a livin' off of fruit, I ask ya? The dreaded pirate Cornelius Nutt, here for your pears and plums..."

I nod understandin'. "That do seem a damn shame there Cornelius, that why you're all the way up here then?"

"Aye... heard told a man can still be a man in the West. Live by the rules of nature; not the laws of some far away fat men in fancy suits."

Me and Cornelius waste the night away in whiskey, rum, and tequila, tradin' tale after tale of the trouble we caused. Turns out Mister Nutt was once worth over one million dollars, but the sum total of his treasures was sunk by accident when a French sailor he'd shanghaied snuffed out a cigar into a gunpowder barrel.

The Frenchman exploded Cornelius' ship, *The Errant Moll*, and half the crew with it. Those that

remained washed ashore some desert island marooned for nearly thirteen years. The Frenchman did make it ashore himself, but Cornelius had the man's feet set on fire each night to catch the eyes of passin' ships.

When they were finally rescued, in true pirate fashion, Cornelius commandeered the ship, and told the crew they could sail with him, or spend their days on the island he'd just left. After rechristening the vessel, *The Surly Whore*, he took to the waves in an attempt to reclaim his fortune. But by then the trade had all but died. Gone were the pirate's coves, the thieves' dens, the bawdy hymns. Law and order had consumed the ocean. The end of an era.

The pirate raised his glass. "Here's to the American West. May she ever be free of law's corruptin' influence!"

That toast was the last thing I do recall of the night's happenings. After then only God knows what we done. What I do know is I'm in a barn somewheres with Quon and Cornelius all dead-drunk in a pile of hay. Some damn rooster is crowin' outdoors and a little pig is curled up next to the boy.

My back hurts somethin' awful; sorta like a cross between a sunburn and poison ivy. Mighta been some bugs in the hay or maybe I came too close to a fire - maybe I was on fire. Whatever it was, my back sure is tender.

I shake little Quon 'til his eyes creak open. He takes one look at me, frowns, and gets to bawlin' like a babe. I reckon he ain't never had no hangover before and probly don't know what's happenin' to his head right now.

"It hurts, Papa..."

"Now, Quon, quit that fussin' y'hear? There's prices to pay for drinkin' and a wee headache's the least of 'em. You liked what the tequila did to you, right?"

He winces. "It's my arm that hurts, Papa..."

"Well, if you wanna drink like a man, then you gotta face the music like a man too. Now let's get outta this here barn before the owner finds us."

I shake Cornelius to wake him up, but as my hand draws near, he catches me by the wrist and fixes me in place. His one good eye opens, sizes me up, and lets go once it registers who I am. "Traxton Rhodes... har, har, har! How's your back feelin'?"

"It smarts, by God. What did we..."

But in comes a furious farmer all red 'bout the face: "Who the hell are you three and what'dya do with my chickens, dagnabbit?"

The man's got a rifle but don't seem the type to use it. I look just behind him and notice by a smolderin' fire: Plucked chickens fully cooked, plucked chickens only half-way cooked, chickens still feathered but fully cooked... seems we had ourselves a feast of sorts last night...

I'm doin' all I can to set a decent example for little Quon here, but what're we 'sposed to do 'bout this mess? Ain't no bringin' these chickens back to life now is there? So I grab Quon by the wrist and we all make for the fields yonder. The farmer don't shoot - as I guessed - but we run all the faster anyhow, laughin' the whole way to the saloon.

When we get there, I see the carriage what Purple went away in last afternoon. Guess he made a night of it. Only... the coachman and his outrider are carryin' Purple in by his feet and arms. I can tell he's awake, but the man is head to toe cut and scraped... I run his way to check up but stop myself short...

Maybe this here's how two men get to sexin'... bein' all rough... looks like Purple lost... if that's what they do. I don't want to embarrass the man, so I walk on over to him and his fancy-pants gentleman caller to talk

up Purple's fightin' skills... "Howdy there, Purple. Looks like you boys had a good time."

Purple's voice is weak. "We had a coyote attack."

"That's the name for it? Sounds wild. Hope you got to show off how good with your hands you are. He's great with that fist, I know from experience."

He raises a tender arm. "Traxton..."

"Seen him finish off our pal Swinney in five seconds flat. And that was in front of Swinney's pa even."

He coughs. "Traxton..."

"Hell, he even got me down to my knees... on the first time we met too..."

His eyes go wild. "Traxton! Will you please..."

What's gotten into Purple? I was only tryin' to help. Don't matter no how, I got bigger problems than him. Cyndel's gonna be by in a bit and I reckon I don't have a thing what'll impress her. For the first time in my whole life drinkin' may have done me wrong...

Chapter 25

Alistair

September 20th, 1881

Coyotes. I shall meet my fate at the paws of a pack of bloodthirsty coyotes. I can make out my cenotaph now: "In memory of Alistair Evans Harris. Convicted in absentia of crimes against the land, justice was ultimately served by way of canine digestive tract." Oh, my mother would be so ashamed...

I stare at the twin incarnations of Cerberus, alternating amongst hazy, sanguine eyes. Terror has rendered me immobile. There is no hope; can be no hope. I surrender myself to the inescapable torture I shall soon endure, and shut my eyes to the world.

They pounce in unison.

After the initial inaugural claw scrapes its way through my forearm, I cease to feel anything at all. I would surmise this is due to the overabundance of pain my body is currently experiencing; this must be shock. The trauma is absolute... these, my final moments...

BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

My weary eyes open with just enough wherewithal to make out Judas and his men firing shot after shot into the body of this carnivorous maelstrom. Some run, others lie dead about me... to the final stubborn coyote, Judas delivers a resounding blow with his immaculate, soft-leather riding boot. I lose consciousness just after the animal sails over the side of the mountain.

I come to in Judas' carriage. We are slowly navigating the trail down the mountain. It is perfectly black outside, so his men must be driving by lantern - a perilous endeavor indeed. Judas is himself administering to my various wounds, cleansing here, binding there... is there nothing this man cannot do?

I lose consciousness once more.

I wake as the sun is rising ahead of the carriage. The path has leveled out, indicating the worst of the travels are complete. Judas is seated across from the chaise I am recumbent upon, smoking a long cigarette of some sort. He takes notice of my awakening. "Ah, good morning to you, Alistair. I pray you have your wits about you?"

"Yes... ahem... yes... oh, Judas... you... and the coyotes..."

He places a hand to my cheek. "Shh... what you require now is rest. I accept full responsibility for the attack. I should have known better than to let you wander unaccompanied in the wilderness and can offer only my most sincere apologies."

"It is I who should ask forgiveness... striking so far from the site was ill conceived."

"Alistair, there is very little I imagine you capable of which would ever require an apology."

He is so incredibly perfect. Why, oh why, must he depart so presently? Our one opportunity for solitude ruined by near death. Is that a sign of some manner? Oh, but I could easily make a future with a man such as he. Damn my "stage fright"... I swear an oath to conquer my affliction once and for all!

Judas becomes quite serious. "Alistair, I make today for Provo, a municipality I feel is destined for grandeur; the next great American metropolis. Should you ever happen to find yourself in the area... I do beg of you... call on me..."

I attempt a complimentary rejoinder, but the carriage halts its progression directly in front of the saloon. Judas' postilion and coachman open the door as the man himself shoulders my weight towards them. His men apprehend my person with care by the wrists and ankles aiding me into my room upstairs.

Judas visibly bristles. "Oh, here comes your... *riding partner*..."

Traxton! I had completely forgotten my untruth from the night prior. I must set the record straight with Judas as he has been nothing but forthright with me. "Judas, there is something you must know of Traxton... He and I are..."

Traxton arrives. "Howdy there, Purple. Looks like you boys had a good time."

"We had a coyote attack."

"That's the name for it? Sounds wild. Hope you got to show off how good with your hands you are. He's great with that fist, I know from experience."

How is Traxton so proficient at making the innocent appear vulgar? If Judas is offended, he is far too much the gentlemen to let it be known. As a matter of fact, he even withdraws from his coat a small object and presents it with delicate care.

No... it cannot be... a tin of Thurston Comstock's Mustache Wax!

"This is for you, Alistair. To replace the one you lost."

"Judas, I..."

He strokes my head. "Say nothing. Call on me in Provo..."

And like that, he is gone. His men deliver me to Traxton who, along with a coarse, eye-patched man, assumes my weight and provides escort within the darkened saloon. They set me down at an empty table after young Quon prepares a seat.

Traxton wastes no time procuring spirits, setting a foggy glass of brown liquid before me. Why is drinking ever this man's solution? I have lost out on what could have been the most memorable night of my life, I was set upon by a pack of murderous beasts, and now Judas is gone for good. Woe is me... oh, woe is me...

Very well... when in Rome...

I take up his offering and empty the glass. Traxton and his companion follow suit. I learn the cyclops is named Cornelius Nutt, that Quon did imbibe tequila the evening last, and that a farmer may be along seeking recompense at any minute. I take solace in my troupe of trusty vagabonds; a meager consolation, but a consolation nonetheless.

I think on what transpired between Judas and I, reliving the bliss that was every single moment prior the rude canine interruption. As Cornelius regales us with tales of piratical derring-do, I meditate on Judas' offer. Come to Provo... call on him in Provo. What should I do?

A detour of nearly three hundred miles merely to satisfy an unrequited tryst? Surely the notion is ludicrous. But what if there is a future in Provo? What if instead of San Francisco, Utah proves to be a bastion of acceptance and brotherly love? It just may happen...

While I ponder these conflicting thoughts, another, subtler, yet nagging notion surreptitiously arises to the fore: In each and every moment spent with Judas, he was irrefutably in charge. At the time, I was indeed swept up in the sentimentality of it all... the carriage, the view from the mountain, the champagne... and then in my ordeal with the beasts he was decidedly the principle player.

In my two previous liaisons, I was the prime mover. It had not occurred to me that I would ever be

anything but. Yet with Judas, I was the receiver of gifts, a fellow to be doted upon, a paramour to sway. And with the coyotes I was the one in need of rescuing. Just like any number of princesses locked away in their towers.

Was I... was I a damsel in distress? No... we are each of us equals - but - I cannot shake the foreboding sense that I was subordinate throughout our entire evening. Oh, how I long for a confidant to query on this matter. Traxton does seem infinitely more inclined to field such a question, but with his pirate brute of a friend here with us, I would not dare.

Perhaps if I deftly raise the issue in passing... "Traxton... would you venture to say a partnership may ever truly be an equitable affair?"

He sips his drink. "You talkin' 'bout you and your male lover?"

No! Oh, how could he be so uncouth? I had hoped he would maintain my secret in the strictest of confidence. His swarthy, one-eyed companion will surely force my having to beat a hasty retreat. How could he?

The pirate laughs heartily. "You've nothin' to fear from me, lad. I spent a lifetime on the waters. You show me a man who's spent a week at sea and I'll show you a man who's buggered and been buggered both... except for me of course. But ask again after a few more drinks and maybe there'll be a different answer. Har!"

"I thank you for your understanding."

Traxton waves over for another round. "But to answer your question there, Purple... hell no there ain't no such thing as equals in a partnership. Someone's always the boss. Even 'tween us there's a boss."

Always a boss; never truly equals... a more cynical opinion may not exist, yet I cannot envision a scenario to prove it false. Even England's most

cherished King Arthur sat at the figurative head of his ostensibly egalitarian round table.

Oh, I cannot endure the role of subaltern. The disparities between Judas and I must be dealt with if a future is even remotely possible. But how? What is the source of his superiority?

His appearance?

It is true the man could have posed for Michelangelo's *David*, but despite my admitted weakness for physical perfection, I am not so daunted by his looks. Provide me a proper bath and tailored suit and I have been known to turn my fair share of heads...

Is it his charm?

The man is positively stuffed to the brim with charisma. But so is Traxton - in a more roguish manner - charismatic, and I sense no clear distinction in his and my statuses...

His wherewithal?

His carriage. His fine apparel. His loyal coachman and postilion. His impossibly-procured ice for the champagne. Yes, it is his considerable means that so enables Judas to control a situation. I would never be fully able to exist on a level plane with a man as wealthy as he without similar means.

I cannot possibly rendezvous in Provo without first significantly altering my financial position.

But how? *But how?* All I could desire in a mate is that which comprises the man. What are the odds of such a discovery? And what is keeping such a find worth risking?

It is settled. A man such as he is no mere trifle to brush aside. No. He was placed in my life by providence, and I owe it to God to earn this immaculate boon. Unfortunately, the only reliable manner of raising my economical standing in the short term is to engage in some brand of illegal activity. That cannot be what

heaven has forecast, but as with the flurry of scandalous photographs which delivered us from Peggy Sue's mob, God does work in mysterious ways.

Very well, I shall abandon my journey to San Francisco for now, and take up with Traxton in an effort to elevate my standing. A smile crosses my face and a sort of contented delirium washes over me. Yes. This is the correct path. *Something* good will come from this moment in time.

I decide to inform the man of the good news: "Traxton, I've made a wondrous, life-altering decision. I intend to..."

His eyes widen. "Hush up a moment, Purple, the love of my life's just walked through the door."

Well, I suppose, for love, my proclamation may have to wait...

Chapter 26

Traxton

September 20th, 1881

I know I was 'sposed to come up with somethin' Cyndel ain't never seen before, but damned if my luck done run out this time. I was certain the answer woulda sprung up by now; drinkin' myself to kingdom come's worked each and every time I tried it... what went wrong last night?

It's my hope drinkin' this mornin' with the boys'll help to get the ideas a-bubblin'. My head's still ringin' and my back's achin' like I won twenty lashes, but Cyndel's worth every single tequila I'm raisin' in her name.

Quon tugs my sleeve. "Can you take a look at my arm, Papa?"

"I heard you ask the first time, Quon. Take your drinkin' like a man, remember?"

I find the wee thimble and give Quon a nip. I wanna talk to Purple on how to be romantic, but just as I'm set to ask him his thoughts, who walks in but Cyndel Sinclair herself lookin' beautiful as ever...

My lord, hair's done up in curls, she got on a red dress what almost matches her mop, ninnies is pushed together so tight I doubt I could even squeeze my finger 'tween 'em. And as proud as I am of those ninnies, there's somethin' 'bout her eyes what actually make you wanna stare at her face more than her chest...

Guess it don't matter none... my time's up. Gonna have to give her some of the 'ol smooth talkin'

Traxton flannel mouth... "Cyndel, pretty as a pig. *A peach. A peach-pig. Shit. You ain't no pig, you're a pig!* You know what I mean, dontcha?"

What the hell was that? Not the 'ol Traxton charm that's for sure. Why'd I call her a pig? The tequila's doin' me wrong again! That's twice now... I gotta get a hold of myself...

I notice her takin' sight of the almost empty bottle on the table... "Not but half past eight, Mister Rhodes, a bit early to be stumbling over your words, isn't it?"

"Never mind that and meet my friends. This here's, Purple, all the way from London, England. Cornelius Nutt, just in from the Caribbean. And that's sorta my son, Quon."

She smiles in welcome. "That's an... odd assortment... I wasn't aware you had children, Mister Rhodes."

"I don't. Well, 'cept this one. Sent his ma over a cliff so I'm stuck with him. But he's a good time and handles his drinks like a man, dontcha, boy?"

"Yes, Papa."

She pats his head. "Well, I will say he is as cute as a button, but I have seen children before, Mister Rhodes. I've also met Englishmen and men absent their eyes as well. Surely this is not the token I requested?"

"No. No, of course not..."

Damn the tequila and whiskey for lettin' me down. Why the hell were it even invented if not for to help folks in need? Seems I only got one place to turn now that my best old friends have left me with nothin'...

God... if you're up there... this is the finest woman I ever seen in my life. And if there's anythin' you can do to help me out I swear I'll never think of no other female ever again. Hell, I won't even poke another

female that's how serious I am. And that's a promise good as gold...

Captain Nutt raises his glass. "Well go on, lad, show her what I did to your back."

What's Cornelius talkin' 'bout, did to my back? I stare at him like he's lost his mind, and that 'ol sailor does open-palm slap me right between my shoulders. I jump in pain like he tore off my skin. What's he know what I don't?

"Go on, take off your shirt and show her what I done."

I ain't tell Cornelius 'bout how my back was painin' so I 'spose he probly did do somethin' last night, but for the life of me I can't recall what it might be. I shake my head as I undo the buttons and bite down as I peel my shirt from the skin raw.

As I inch it off I watch Purple's eyes go big and he covers his mouth with his hand as he gasps.

Cornelius nods his head smilin' at whatever he done. Cyndel can't see it and neither can I, but there ain't no stoppin' this now... I turn 'round and give her a good look at whatever it is Cornelius is so proud of.

She takes a step back in surprise. "Oh... Mister Rhodes... I... I don't know what to say..."

The pirate leans in his chair. "Aye, takes yer breath away, don't it, lassie? Some of my finest work if I do say so myself..."

Now I'm the only one what don't know what it is, so I walk on over to the mirror by the bar and take a look-see at what that pirate's done.

Oh hell... I ain't never seen nothin' like it... I ain't even know skin could be drawn on like that. I seen some injuns with lines and curves written on their face, but this is somethin' else completely...

This fool pirate done drawn on my back, hind to neck, the likeness of Cyndel playin' a harp, wearin' a

halo, and with two big 'ol feathered wings on her back. She also got two big 'ol naked ninnies as he drew her a topless angel. Then, right beneath the cloud she's sittin' on, he wrote: "Cyndel Rhodes, by God."

The pirate is pleased. "Didn't even make him pay for it, love, all he kept sayin' is he needed somethin' to impress you with..."

Cyndel steps towards her likeness. "I... I'm speechless..."

Well hallelujah! Tequila ain't fail me like I thought it did! Right there on my back is proof once again that drinkin's the solution to all life's problems. She's so struck her tongue's damn near nailed to the counter.

But... I also prayed to God to help me out... even promised to never poke no other female for as long as I lived. But the drawin' was already on my back. She woulda seen the picture whether I said what I said to God or no. But still... oh hell, this is makin' my head spin...

I'll think on this later. For now all I know is it worked. I showed this woman somethin' she ain't never seen. I would say callin' her by my family name is a might bit presumptuous, but females like a man what does things big.

I painfully put my bloody shirt back on. "Well then, you wanna tell Wiggle or want me to do it?"

"Mister Rhodes..."

"He ain't never done me no wrong, so I'll do it gentle. That's a promise."

"Mister Rhodes..."

"Course, losin' a girl like you'll probly make the man get hot in the collar... I may have to calm him down, but I swear I won't shoot him."

She touches my arm. "Mister Rhodes, this is a fine gesture. An incredible, reckless gesture."

"Thank you."

She turns away. "But I never agreed to terminate my arrangement with Mister Wiggle."

"Now wait just a cotton-pickin' minute..."

"I'm sorry, Mister Rhodes... I must think on this..."

Cyndel turns right 'round and scoots out this saloon. Now what the hell was that? She said to show her somethin' she ain't never seen, and I done it. I done it at great pain to myself. What does that woman want me to do? Light myself on fire?! Take off flyin' in the sky? God almighty I swear I'll never understand females...

I take my seat back down with the boys and finish off what's left of the bottle... "Bartender! More tequila!"

Purple is gentleman as always. "I am so very sorry, Traxton. Your effort was truly inspired."

Cornelius nods. "Aye, only one woman in a million would take a look at a beautiful piece of art like that and refuse to raise her skirt then and there..."

"Thank you kindly, fellas. I tried my hardest. Seems the bottle's the only thing what'll ever love 'ol Traxton..."

Quon sets down his thimble. "I love you, Papa."

"You say that now, Quon, but love's a hard thing to prove. And when you do prove it, it up and leaves ya for a squat bald man with a funny name..."

"I can prove it, Papa. Look..."

This wee lad has been complainin' 'bout his arm all mornin'. I 'spose I may have been a little tough since it was his first time tastin' the drink, but... oh my Lord... what has this kid gone and done?

The pirate laughs. "Well, shiver me timbers, I forgot I did the boy last night too..."

Purple's hand shoots straight back to cover his mouth as little Quon reveals a heart with an arrow through it drawn on his upper arm and the word "Papa" written in the middle. Oh hell, not but a minute ago I was set to knock back enough firewater to kill a buffalo, then a kid of all things demonstrates just what a namby-pamby I was bein'...

I pick little Quon up from his seat and raise him high in the air. I know this ain't my boy. But maybe lovin' a kid what ain't yours is an even stronger show of love since it don't come natural.

I hold little Quon close and the whole lot of us share a smile and a laugh. What's there to mourn 'bout? Cyndel ain't say no; there's time enough to win her over. I 'spose a life messin' with whores and bawdy women got me used to not tryin' too hard. The quality females make you work for what you want and this here massive and painful tattoo I got is only the first in what'll probly be a lifetime of earnin' her love. But for a smile and ninnies like those, I'd tattoo the words "cock 'n balls" on my own forehead if she asked...

So, I gotta figure... what's she still ponderin'?
What is it she stuck on Mister Wiggle for?

Is it the man's appearance?

Hahahaha hahaha...

Purple looks at me like I'm crazy. "What is so droll, Traxton?"

"Oh, sorry there, Purple, didn't realize I were laughin' out loud."

Could it be Wiggle's social airs?

Nah, he seems like the type of man what knows which fork 'sposed to go with greens, steak, and cakes. Knows when to bow or curtsy or whatever it is these people do at their fancy dinners. Hell, he's probly the type of man what'll leave a room to break wind. Ain't

no woman, proper or not, what can truly respect a man like that... no woman...

That then leaves one last thing: His money.

Women can't respect a man what's more woman than they are, but damned if they ain't able to ignore a hell of a lot if he's got some money...

I seen one girl, sixteen-years-old, marry a man *over a hundred* - and consummate it - just 'cause he had a two room home in Amarillo; seen another jump a man's bones in broad daylight 'cause he had a gold chain on 'round his neck.

Anyhow, that there must be what's got Cyndel unable to let loose of Wayland Wiggle.

A female like that's no mere trifle to brush aside. No siree. She were placed in my life by providence, and I owe it to God to earn her fair and square. Only thing is, to get my hands on the sort of money it'll take to win her over, I'll have to engage in some brand of illegal activity. That can't be what heaven wants, but as with this cockamamie tattoo of mine what saved my bacon, God does His work in mysterious ways...

We spend the rest of the day sittin' there at the table drinkin'. Cornelius Nutt excuses himself sometime 'round dinner and says he'll be in town a while, so if we lookin' to have ourselves any sort of fun to come callin'.

Little Quon does a slight better job pacin' himself with his thimbles of tequila, so is awake and laughin' 'stead of snorin' under the table like last night. Even Purple, cut up as he is, is havin' a grand 'ol time turnin' the bottle up and tellin' jokes no man would ever find funny: "If William Penn's aunts kept a pastry shop, what would be the price of their pies? The pie-rates of Penn's aunts!"

No one laughs.

"No? Who then is the greatest chicken-killer in Shakespeare? Macbeth, because he did murder most foul!"

No one laughs.

"No? Why should the number 288 never be mentioned in polite company? Because it is two gross!"

No one laughs.

"No? Why is a..."

I slam my hand down. "Alright, alright there, Purple. What're you doin', tellin' jokes, or readin' us our last rites?"

I was just 'bout to tell Purple how I'll need his help if I'm to make the sort of money it would take to really impress Cyndel when one of the whores I spoke with two nights past comes runnin' in the saloon lookin' half crazed: "Traxton Rhodes?! I need you right now!"

"Ain't interested, lady."

She's outta breath. "Not for that, you fool! Do you truly love Cyndel Sinclair like you say you do, or you only after her silky knickers?"

"Both."

"Then you'll want to know Wayland Wiggle just threw her over the back of his horse and took off ridin' side-saddle East!"

I jump from my seat. "What?! The man rides *side-saddle*?!"

The whore shakes her head. "I know, I know..."

"You hear that, Purple? Cyndel's been kidnapped! We gotta ride!"

He regards our half-full bottle. "But we are each of us nearly black-out drunk!"

"You're right... go on and bring the bottle... we'll finish the job on the way there..."

Chapter 27

Alistair

September 20th, 1881

Do Traxton and young Quon suffer from a deficiency in humor? What man may not guffaw at such classic fare as: "If all the seas were dried up, what would Neptune say? I really haven't a notion!"

No one laughs.

Harrumph...

I had never truly understood the barroom antics and bacchanal excess that so plague wharf-sides, factory districts, garrison towns, and the whole of Ireland, but in the time I've spent with Traxton, the comradery established over a glass of inexpensive swill does seem honestly garnered.

I am just set to divulge my intentions of accompanying Traxton on his next sordid caper, when an overweight strumpet interrupts and informs us of Cyndel's recent abduction. What am I to do? Traxton would surely come to my aid if Judas were at risk... I must to the rescue...

We stumblingly rise and make for the door, young Quon and another bottle of spirits in tow. Outside, Traxton demands the stable boy retrieve our steeds as he simultaneously urinates in plain view.

"What? I gotta go somewhere, don't I?"

The boy returns with our mounts and Traxton vaults himself up onto the saddle in an impressive show of physical prowess... what was not as impressive was

his subsequent tumble from the horse into the puddle beyond.

He massages his temple. "Damn, I think I must be drunker than I thought..."

The man remounts his brown and white stallion just as Quon and I take our places upon my own. We are assuredly in no condition to ride these beasts, let alone attempt rescue a hostage from a hostile and perhaps deranged individual. I foresee disaster...

Traxton wastes no time as he spurs his steed into motion with a formidable "HIYAA!" I follow suit with a less forceful "hiyaa" of my own. Does shouting truly coerce horses to greater speeds? I would very much enjoy reading a study on the effectiveness of encouragement rendered at heightened volume.

Oh... I must to task... I nearly directed my mare into a head-on collision with a cobbler's roughshod signage. The constant jostling is causing great pain to my near-open coyote wounds, and is also setting my stomach ill-at-ease as I am put upon by the most grievous attack of both hiccups and belches. A quarter mile or so and young Quon does retch his dinner upon my back... oh, what undignified rescuers we are...

Traxton leads the way, driving his steed at speeds both cavalier and stunning. Our mount's soft exteriors are developing a sheen of slick perspiration, lathering their coats in a layer of temperature-cooling froth. At such a pace, one misstep would send us hurtling through space as young Quon's mother did just a fortnight past...

Traxton is determined. "These tracks must be his. There's more weight on the left side of the horse. Goddamn, that man really is ridin' side-saddle. I ought to shoot him just for that. Looks like he ain't alone neither. Got three men with him by my count. He shoulda brung more... "HIYAA!"

I spur my horse on, young Quon's spidery little fingers digging into the fabric of my lilac cello-coat. The alternating hiccups and belches have not subsided, but are instead now accompanied by the random dry heave. Traxton witnesses one such near-regurgitation and offers this admonishment: "C'mon, Purple, keep it toge... UGHHH..."

He vomits on his horse's curry-combed fur a full gallon of thick fluid. I did not heretofore believe beasts capable of human sentiment, but Traxton's horse does tilt his head back in a look of utter disgust.

We ride for what seems an eternity, the sight of Dullsville long lost in the distance. Ahead, the rising moon looms large in a vast sea of twinkling distant stars. The air is cool and helps in calming my unsettled interior; eyes weighing heavy for an entire day of sophomoric inundation.

We slow to a halt, and as our vision is hindered by the lightlessness of eventide, it takes a moment to notice Traxton bent low, pressed against his horse staring at the passing earth. He must be straining his sight to maintain visual confirmation of our quarry's footmarks. His determination speaks to a resolve I would not have given him credit for even a few days ago...

Traxton remains bent low on his horse. Is he... is he slowing? Did he sense an irregularity in the hoof prints? My, what an incredible skill tracking is. One must consider each and every environmental nuance: A leaf bent the wrong direction, a subtle variation in tread depression, sight, smell, sound... I ought to give the man credit; he is vastly more in tune with the natural world than I could ever be.

I don't want to disturb his concentration, but we are now at a complete halt and he is braced directly against the back of his horse, head lolling towards the

earth. What does he see in the tracks? What faint clue has so struck his attention?

I wait a minute more... "Traxton? Traxton, what have you found? Traxton? Traxton?"

He jumps up with a start. "Huh? Oh shit, I fell asleep. Which way'd they go?"

Oh, for God's sake... why are we attempting a feat of heroics while we can none of us keep our dinners down or even remain awake?! This is preposterous!

"C'mon, Purple, they were here just an hour ago. I can smell the soap she uses in her hair. HIYAA!"

And off he goes again. Young Quon grips ever tight as we launch ourselves back into the fray, horses galloping by speculation more so than by sure footing. I clutch the reins and spur her onward; wary of the dust and debris Traxton is kicking up in his haste.

An hour more and the chill is near unbearable. My hands have grown numb and I must maintain my hold by sheer force. Traxton pulls beside me and requests the bottle of tequila. "It's the only way to keep from freezin'. Drink up, boys."

The man ingurgitates a full quarter of the fiery libation before passing it back to Quon and pressing his filly forward. My general reservations against providing children with hard liquor are stayed for the moment as the boy hefts the bottle up with both hands. I drink last and do immediately sense a distinct warmth course through my veins. Onward ho!

By the witching hour of midnight, the bottle is empty and we are as inebriated and muddled as when we first set out. Quon can barely sit straight and is laughing uproariously at Traxton's horse having defecated mid-gallop. Traxton himself is swaying in the saddle, one hand on the reins, the other on the horn.

I hiccup and taste the last sip of tequila I took return from deep within the depths of my being. A thin layer of sweat forms upon my brow as I stave off the urge to vomit. My skin feels pallid and ghostly; my hands are trembling from both nausea and persistent cold.

We finally catch sight of our marks. A half mile or so ahead of us the telltale glow of a lantern presents itself, casting light on four horses and four riders. I begin to feel sick.

Traxton slows. "Shh... there they are. We don't wanna give up the element of surprise..."

I place a hand over my mouth in an attempt to compel my body obey... but it is no use, my stomach wishes to void itself... I gag and emit an appalling guttural heaving sound: "Bleurgh!"

Traxton is frantic. "Shut up, Purple, noise carries for miles out here."

I can do nothing to end my dry heaving. The thought of the tepid liquid, and especially the worm, unsettles my stomach more and more; I am sure I have transformed a horrendous shade of malachite green. I heave again: "Bleurgh!"

"Dammit, I said shut up!"

No... I can no longer contain myself. I am addled, perspiring, quivering, cannot even swallow my own saliva... I do my very best to dampen the noise, but out propels a gruesome plume of brown sludge accompanied by a resounding "BLAHHAGH!"

Traxton swats his head in frustration. "Purple, you nincompoop, here they come..."

He is correct. The group splits with one set pressing forward, and another circling back on our position. Before we have time to come up with a plan, Traxton kicks his horse and runs directly towards the aggressors.

I speak in struggling whispers. "Quon, hold on tight and remain behind me. Do not look over my shoulder. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mister Alistair."

I command the horse onward and follow Traxton into danger. Soused as we are, the adrenaline does offer a slight reprieve and I feel somewhat confident despite our numerical inferiority. Yes, perhaps we shall have ourselves a parlay and quell this feud with a few simple...

BANG!

They're shooting! Good heavens we have not yet even conversed! This is much worse than I thought. Craning my neck for vantage, another bullet screams over my head and sears a bolt into the material of my top hat. The nerve!

Traxton answers their cannonade with a volley of his own. He presses repeatedly the flat of his palm against the hammer, unleashing a hailstorm of bullets that all seem to hit their target as the villain closest us is lifted from his saddle and lands in a heap of discombobulated flesh.

Traxton is not impressed with his success. "Goddammit, I ain't got time for this. Hey, Purple, I'mma do this man injun-style then you finish him off. Catch up after, ya hear?"

Injun-style? What does he mean by... oh... Traxton only took the time to reload his empty revolver with one bullet. He takes aim at the rider and shoots his horse directly in the head. The man is launched into the air, but somehow manages to land and roll back to his feet none the worse for wear.

I circle my own horse and charge as the tilting knights of yore. The man aims down his sights and sends a bullet whizzing past my hand; I do a mental check to ensure young Quon has maintained purchase

upon my coat. Once verified, I lower myself forward to decrease my profile and charge my steed directly at him.

As we bear down on his position, the man makes the desperate decision to shoot directly into our horse's broad chest, effectively propelling us skyward, Quon even higher than myself. I land with a thud on my side and skid to a halt. Our opponent casually walks over with a rogue's swagger. Propping myself upon my elbows, ignoring my new (and yesterday's) injuries, I attempt to placate this man's thirst for violence: "Good evening. Fine weather we're having, don't you think?"

The man is surly with a fresh gash from mouth to ear. "Shut up. Mister Wiggle said to stop anyone tryin' to keep him from his revenge. Paid us real good too. I'm gonna enjoy this..."

The brute flashes a sinister grin as he slowly cocks back on the hammer. He squints with one eye and levels the weapon directly at my person. I take a breath and raise my chin in the face of despair, as any true Englishman would.

A small, but loud voice behind the rogue. "Stay away from Mister Alistair!"

Young Quon erupts from the shadows and grabs hold of our assailant by the leg - biting deeply into his meaty calf.

The man cannot believe it. "Goddamn! It's one of them rabid Chinese!"

I prevail upon the distraction and deliver an emphatic stroke to the man's nose followed by a solid strike to his jaw. I could be wrong, but I believe he was unconscious before his head hit the ground.

I tussle the hair on young Quon's head and offer my thanks. Retrieving the clod's revolver, we both of us dash into a canter and race to Traxton's aid, entreating fate to make of us a swift delivery...

Chapter 28

Cyndel

September 21st, 1881

Honestly, I don't know what I was expecting when I bid that man to show me something I'd never seen... I suppose keeping one's head in the books year after year implants false expectations towards romance and grand gestures. It was unfair of me to do and I decide to apologize when I meet him at the saloon this morning.

I do pick out my most fetching ensemble: Reasonable bustle and corset accentuating those parts men adore accentuated, white petticoat and vermilion riding habit, soft leather boots, white gloves, and a charming silver brooch.

As my mother was lacing my corset, foot planted against my back for leverage, she put me to the inquisition: "So, you'll cut quite the figure in this. Finally decided to show off for Mister Wiggle have you?"

"No, Mother, I'm to visit with Mister Rhodes."

An intake of air. "Mister Rhodes?! You'd waste this look on a guttersnipe?!"

"What sort of guttersnipe reads Shakespeare?"

"The *lying* kind, I say. Men'll do anything to lure us into bed, Cyndel. Oh, why don't you go and call on Mister Wiggle? He'd be tickled..."

"I will, mother, I will. I've just got to be certain of one thing."

She shook her head, resigning. "Alright... but don't you go and offer up your chastity to this dolt. 'Cause once it's gone, it's gone, and then it's spinsterhood for sure."

"OK, Mother."

If only she knew my chastity had long since flown the coop. Gave it to a boy in Wichita whose name I don't even remember. He was strong, and dumb, and was covered in freckles. We did it in a field while truant from the schoolhouse. I daresay I learned more in those five minutes than anything our teacher had planned for the whole year...

The next time didn't happen until a long time after. Not that there weren't opportunities, but most of those opportunities came in the form of my father's visiting business associates or from the lechers who go to church only to meet girls a quarter their age. No thank you...

I seduced an injun boy once, and a farmer on his way to Nebraska who turned up dead the day after, and when I was sixteen, a boy not but twelve-years-old caught my eye on the day I first tried wine.

As a penance to my parents, I swore not to let any of the boys in Dullsville know me until I was married. I'd mortified them quite enough with the pictures I took back in Kansas, couldn't rightfully risk a scandal of such proportions as giving birth out of wedlock. My mother would have probably died of the shame...

So, I'm more or less good as new; four men's not such a large number. I know girls that were in the hundreds even before their twentieth birthday. Not that I judge them; they had to do what they had to do. It's just hard to walk the aisle wearing white when over half the town knows from experience what your backside looks like.

Folks in cities can afford to test their virtue; endless anonymity is taken for granted. It's much more difficult to remain discreet when each and every person for twenty miles goes to the same church as you do. Makes things complicated...

Anyhow, I do sense a bit of giddiness for what the man Traxton Rhodes has in store. Had I asked Mister Wiggle for such a display he would have assuredly pontificated on how he was himself something I'd never seen because of the railroad coming to town. The railroad. Always and forever the railroad with that man.

If I do go to Chicago the first rule of the house is no more talk of the railroad. He never wants to discuss my books, why should I entertain his mindless prattle on shunting trucks and hauling freight?

Here we are, the saloon. Now we shall find out if God has truly borne me for misery or if some manner of hope exists...

The first oddity is his choice in riding partners. A British dandy, a washed-up pirate, and a little Oriental boy he claims is his son due to some woman going over a cliff. A far cry from the usual cattle men, sod tillers, and witless blockheads I generally meet.

The second oddity, however, is much more profound. This lunatic of a man has had my likeness, depicted as a scantily clad angel, and with his own family name substituted for my mine in description, tattooed on his back!

I... I don't know what to make of it. The pain must have been excruciating. The artistry, while scandalous, is magnificent. And it is all so unimaginably permanent.

What have I done? I knew the man was ungoverned by common sense. Why did I challenge him so? Show me something I've never seen. What's he

supposed to have done? Burst into flames? Take to the air like a bird in flight? What possible alternative outcome did I expect?

I vacate the premises and partake deeply of the early morning air. Confound this corset, I cannot breathe! What manner of test is this? What manner of man is he who would do such a thing?

I must weigh my options as father has always instructed. In business, he would judge it best to set competing interests at odds and allow the most favorable outcome arise while maintaining neutrality.

But no... this is no mere business transaction. This is my life. This is love. And no person's hands may remain clean in matters of the heart...

I need a sign of some sort. A word from a knowledgeable source, wise beyond all reason. I need a...

A familiar voice. "Oh, hi, Cyndel..."

"Floyd America? What are you doing back in the stocks?"

He manages a shrug. "Was caught fighting a scarecrow."

"Oh, Floyd..."

"He provoked me. But now why do you seem so downcast?"

I look away. "I... well... it's a long story..."

He raises his eyebrows. "My sentence runs 'til tomorrow. I'm all ears."

"There's a problem... I've one too many suitors."

Floyd raises a hand as best he can manage. "Say no more. We've all been there. Before I got married I had all sorts of women vying for my dance card. Mom had to keep 'em away with a broom, she likes to say. There was good in all the girls I made time with: Sarah Meadows baked the best pie, Lynette Simpson had the

prettiest face, Clara Duncan was a mute... but in the end it all came down to one thing..."

"Yea. And what was that?"

He considers. "Uh, oh... I shouldn't have begun this story. My wife would kill me if I told you. Let's just say if the law knew why I chose her, we'd both be in these stocks quite a bit..."

"Alright... Thanks, Floyd..."

"You just gotta find that one thing you want more than anything else. For me it was fellatio. Oh shoot... I told you. Please don't go tellin' my wife, Cyndel. She's just so good at it though! Fellatio... ohhh..."

I walk away from Floyd America as he seems to have forgotten I was even there. *Honestly...*

But perhaps there is something in his disgusting advice. "Find that one thing you want more than anything else."

One man leads down a long, healthy, affectionless, yet stable existence. The other may lead anywhere, but surely not towards stability. One has promised Rome and Paris, but what purpose does Paris serve absent love? I may as well walk those ancient roads alone.

Mister Rhodes, however, offers nothing but devotion. And with a man such as he, even devotion may be collateral he has no business bargaining with. What would a future with such a man come to resemble? Travelling from town to town, possibly wanted in parts of the country. Possibly wanted in *this* part of the country. What do I truly know of him aside a cavalier recklessness bordering on insanity?

No. There is no choice to be made. What am I doing? I do not love Mister Wiggle, that I know. And Mister Rhodes is much too much an uncertainty upon which to base a future. The choice is simple: Neither.

Neither. Why am I even entertaining such permanent appointments? I am under duress from mother, that is true. But I am only twenty-three. Yes, each and every woman I know was married long before they reached my age, but I am young yet. In a manner of speaking...

No. My decision is final. I shall inform both my suitors I require more time to consider their offers. Floyd America's advice remains sound: "You just gotta find that one thing you want more than anything else." Well, I am unsure as to what that one thing is; adventure, sanctuary, affluence, intrigue... none, or all combined?

I suppose I should be thankful I even have a say in the matter. Alice Coleman was married off at fifteen to a manure-man; Sally Myers was kidnapped with her father's permission, Mary Russell has been a prostitute since twelve...

And yet their lives are theirs and mine is my own. I will inform Mister Rhodes of my decision this afternoon, and Mister Wiggle straight away. At this hour, I am sure to discover him poring over his time charts and geological surveys in the room he keeps above the town wainwright.

I knock on his door, summoning the determination to ruin his future.

He is shorter than I am even wearing a top hat. "Cyndel. How wonderful. I was just regarding the engineer's droughts for the Somerset Pass. Did you know that a turn of even one degree requires the most precise calculations? Otherwise all would be doomed. Some would say I am saving lives with my efforts. Wow... to think... me, a savior..."

"Oh, Mister Wiggle."

He frowns. "How many times must I bid you call me Wayland?"

"As many times as I must inform you given names are far too familiar."

He wags his finger, tutting like an old lady. "The people of Chicago will offer a quizzical eye for your provincialism..."

"And let us see how well the repudiation of propriety serves your city..."

Mister Wiggle ushers me inside. "Don't let's row, Cyndel, you did not come here to argue. Besides, there is nothing you could do to upset me. Unless you are here to decline my proposal. In which case I may become instantly irate. Now, to what do I owe this honor?"

"Uh..."

He flushes. "Oh, how your brow furrows, you are so lovely. I cannot wait to consummate our union and claim your maidenhead. I'll have you know I can be a most generous lover."

"Uh..."

"And when my seed does spring fruit from your loins I have come up with a most glorious name. What do you think of: 'Otho?' For a boy, I find it quite striking - or for a girl - if you get it wrong the first time..."

That's enough! "Ah! I won't marry you."

His jaw drops. "WHAT?!"

"I cannot, I will not, ever, marry you!"

He stomps his little foot. "It's the dusty fool from the saloon, am I correct? AM I CORRECT?! AM I CORRECT?! AM I CORRECT?!"

This is a side of my would-be suitor I'd not yet experienced. Father always said of life out West compared to city living: Out here there is no substitute for hard work as that's all there is, but in cities, with their clutter and noise, one must cultivate a healthy dose of petulance to stand out. As Mister Wiggle stamps left

to right, I see how he rose so high in the Chicago business world.

"Mister Wiggle, show some composure..."

He stomps both his little feet. "Composure? I just finished informing you that many, many people think me a savior! I have more money than anyone in this insignificant town, than in this insignificant state, probably. I would show you the world... what more do women want?!"

"You will someday make a very lucky lady exceedingly happy. I just know that if you..."

He suddenly retrieves and aims a tiny pistol from his roll top desk. I freeze mid-sentence as he brandishes the Derringer with a steady hand, a different man entirely.

"Oh, shut up, you floozy. Renounce me for some dirty cattle-herd, will you? You think just because he can straddle a horse he's a better man than I? I am building a railroad, Cyndel; altering the system of the world in a more profound manner than even that moron, Thomas Edison, and his idiotic light bulb. How many tons of Maine lobster will a light bulb convey to San Francisco, Cyndel? *How many tons, Cyndel?*"

His face has changed... he is a monster, crazed.

"The answer is zero tons of Maine lobster, Cyndel. ZERO!"

I attempt levity. "Mister Wiggle, but I thought you had an aversion to firearms?"

He inspects his tiny pistol with pride. "Oh, there's a first time for everything, Cyndel. Back home I pay brutes to do my dirty work, but out here... well... out here I must resort to doing my own dirty work. Turn down my generous offer of marriage, would you? Come now, and let me show you just how dirty I can be."

Chapter 29

Traxton

September 21st, 1881

Golly... I've been drunk in the saddle before, but this here's ridiculous. Little Quon got sick, I got sick and fell asleep, then Purple got sick within earshot of Wiggle and his henchmen. That noise sent his scouts on over, who then had to get dealt with. One man I sent to hell emptyin' a whole round in his chest, the other I had to do dirty, shootin' his horse and leavin' Purple behind to finish him off.

Now it's just me and Wiggle and one other man.

Their mounts ain't as tired as mine, what for us havin' to make up ground on the head-start they had. But Wiggle's horse has the extra weight of Cyndel and the fact the man rides side-saddle's gotta limit how fast he can go besides.

I know I'm keepin' pace with the two of them 'cause I can see the lantern Wiggle's man's holdin'. I ain't never been out to these parts and have no idea as to where he's takin' her. I reckon once she wakes up she'll name him a kidnapper. 'Less he thinks his money'll get him outta hot water.

Don't matter no way - I'll catch him 'fore he makes any town 'round here and get Cyndel back by hook or by crook. I figured him for a man what wouldn't take kindly to gettin' licked the way he did, but what's he think he's gonna do? Keep Cyndel locked up for the rest of her life? The man must of lost his mind.

I'd guess it's 'bout one or two in the mornin' by the looks of it. I'm keepin' my horse at a trot for fear of her droppin' dead of exhaustion, but I'm within sight of Wiggle and his man so their horses must be tired too.

This time of night there ain't no noise at all. The clompin' of our footsteps is all there is for miles and miles and miles. That's why it comes as a bit of a surprise that there's a train whistle from outta nowhere. With no hills or trees to speak of, that whistle could be damn near ten miles away. But it's out here. And it's my guess that's where Wiggle is headed.

Damn, if he hops a train there ain't no way I could catch him. Not with this raggedy-ass tired horse of mine. I need to make my move now. I kick the mare in the belly and push her harder than a good animal deserves to be pushed. But there's love on the line and this nag's fate is sealed.

"HIYAA!"

Wiggle and his accomplice must've seen me comin' faster 'cause one of the two horses circles back to stop me. Lucky I had bought all this ammo earlier - seems I'll have need for it...

It's a peculiar series of thoughts that runs through a man's head as he's chargin' straight for one set to kill him. The half mile 'tween us affords a few minutes to reflect on things I've seen in my life... Cyndel pops into my head first, the red dress she had on this mornin', then I think on her curly red hair, then on her ninnies, then on all ninnies, then on the nekkid pictures I lost in Casper, then on Piggy Sue...

Get out my head, Piggy Sue! I got a real woman to think 'bout!

Anyhow, this man's near a quarter mile from me now; horse at a full gallop. I've been in these types of situations before and truly there ain't many options that

are too good. I can shoot first and hope to hit him. I can let him shoot first and hope he misses. I can...

Oh shit, my bein' drunk made the choice for me. While I was wonderin' which way to confront this man, this damn nag jumps over a bush and I fall rollin' backwards over her butt-end to the ground. I do a quick check and find I lost my gun... Well, hell...

I run up to my horse and stand behind her just as Wiggle's man rides within shootin' range.

He bellows out. "Traxton Rhodes, get out from 'hind that horse so I can shoot ya."

"Now why would I go and do a thing like that for?"

I can see his breath in the moonlight. "'Cause it's colder than all hell and I gotta job to do."

"Whatever Wiggle's payin' ya I'll double it."

"He said you'd say that in which case he'll triple it."

I think on all my cash. "I'll double that number then."

"Said you'd say that too."

"Ain't there nothin' I can do what'll get you to go?"

He aims but can't get at me for the horse. "You could die."

The man walks his mount 'round in a wide circle so I turn mine by the bridle to keep him from gettin' the drop on me. The more he goes 'round, the more I turn 'round until we're damn near dancin' out here by the moonlight.

"Goddammit, Traxton, take it like a man, will ya?"

The rider kicks his horse to run in circles faster, so I spin mine in place faster still. I ain't ever wonder if horses could get dizzy but lookin' at my animal I reckon she's 'bout to fall over...

'Round and 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round...

After near a hundred damn spins my horse whinnies then loses her lunch right in the field. That there's another first; I ain't never seen no horse puke. It's a green mess what erupts from her jaw, sprayin' left to right as she shakes her head. Then the ol' girl gets to buckin' somethin' fierce. Guess she's done with goin' in circles...

As she's kickin' up, one of her horseshoes get stuck in the mud. I make a quick grab for the metal just as I hear Wiggle's man arrive behind me.

The old killer chuckles to hisself. "Seems your horse don't like bein' spun 'round. Matter of fact, neither do I. For that, I'mma shoot you in the belly *then* your head. Say your prayers, Traxton Rhodes..."

I spin myself and judge the distance by his voice. As I come near to seein' him, I let the horseshoe fly. The man watches me do it and raises his arm to aim down his sights. But the horseshoe's too fast - it smacks that fool upside the head and he drops off his mount like the sack of shit he is.

I grab his gun and mount, leavin' my pukin' horse free rein to go 'bout her business. She's earned it...

I kick her and make off after Mister Wiggle. I can hear the train a-comin' 'bout seven miles yonder ways. Ain't no town nearby as far as I can tell. Maybe he's fixin' to jump aboard. No. Not that man. He rides side-saddle for God's sake. He ain't jumpin' on no train...

What the hell's he up to?

I boot my horse all the harder to catch up, wasted damn near half an hour messin' 'round with mister horseshoe-head, so that's even further I gotta go. I'm feelin' a bit nervous that there won't be 'nuff time to catch up, but a search of this man's saddle-bags does

just the trick: Ain't nothin' what can lift a man's spirits better than spirits. A whole bottle of whiskey not even opened. Hallelujah!

The drink warms me up in a flash and the nag gets pressed all the faster for it. I can't see no lantern no more and it would be damn near impossible to pick up Wiggle's lopsided tracks in the dark. So I just keep on keepin' on. She's ahead somewheres and if I'm real quiet, maybe he'll give up his position...

I take turns runnin' and trottin', lookin' and listenin', strainin' my ears and eyes as far as I can. All I can make out is that damn train whistle getting closer and closer. But by the time I'm halfway through this bottle I finally get the answer I was lookin' for: A mumbled cry for help...

I turn a ways to the north and follow that mumble. Wiggle must've shoved a cloth in her mouth 'cause all I can make out is "muh, muh, muh, muh, muh." It's a sound I've heard plenty of times before; I ain't no greenhorn when it comes to hostage takin'...

I move slow as can be to make sure I don't lose the direction of the noise. In fact, the only sound I do hear besides her mumblin' is my throat gulpin' down this whiskey. Ten steps forward, mumble, ten steps more, mumble, ten steps, train whistle, ten steps, whiskey... and there she is!

Goddamn! Wiggle ain't nowhere in sight, but there's Cyndel hog-tied to the train tracks! My God what sorta maniac would put a girl like this out to be runned over? Piggy Sue on the tracks I'd understand, but *her*? Look at that face, *her*?

I jump down and stumble when I land. The look of relief in her eyes changes to bein' annoyed when she sees how much I've had to drink. But I straighten myself up then set to untyin' her as fast as I can.

A thin voice behind me. "Stop. Right. There."

It's Wiggle. He's got a wee pistol aimed in my direction. The little man's got on a black cape and top hat, and he's twirlin' his mustache with his free hand. A train whistle blows. Three miles...

He dares a step closer. "I've got you exactly where I want you, Mister Rhodes. First you will watch as my glorious train speeds past this location and then you will die."

"What're you doin' this for, Wiggle? You ain't no killer."

He stomps his foot. "You two would make a laughingstock of me. Well, I am here to inform you that no one will ever laugh at the name Wayland Winston Wiggle ever again."

"C'mon now. You know damn well that name sounds silly as hell..."

He stomps both his feet. "Enough! This train is running at precisely fifty miles per hour and is exactly two miles away, that gives you one hundred and sixty seconds... fifty-nine, fifty-eight..."

I look down and see Cyndel - fear in her eyes - and make a decision. I ain't never said this 'bout no other soul on earth, but I'd rather not be here than to be here if she were dead. With that in my mind, I walk directly towards that man ignorin' the gun in his hand.

He steps away. "What are you doing? Stay back. Stay back I say. I'll shoot you. I'll do it..."

I snatch the weapon straight out that man's little hand, turn it 'round and gunbutt him, breakin' his nose sideways. I grab his collar and lead him to where Cyndel is tied up. Headin' our way, right on time, is the train - headlight shinin' like a star. I take out my knife, cut through her ropes, then turn Wiggle 'round and tie him up while he whines.

I boot that man onto the tracks and aim his own gun at him. Cyndel throws her hands 'round me, and,

more importantly, presses her heaven-sent ninnies 'gainst my arm.

Mister Wiggle's got the fear of God in his eyes.

"No! No, have mercy, please, have mercy."

"I don't think so, Wiggle."

"Please, oh please, show mercy..."

"I done said no already. Quit askin'."

The train is rushin' up louder and louder with each passin' moment. Cyndel has her head on my shoulder and arms 'round my chest. Wiggle is lookin' frantic as a school girl lost her dolly. I notice movement off to my side. Purple and Quon ridin' the green horse I left back there! Well, I'll be... drunk as we are, this rescue done wound up alright...

"Hiya there, Quon, Purple. Whiskey's in my saddle-bags if you want a swig."

Purple's out of breath. "Traxton... Miss Sinclair... what is that man doing tied up upon the track?"

"He had Cyndel tied up first. This here's his just desserts..."

Purple nods and don't even try to talk me out of it. "I see... Quon... you might do well to avert your gaze..."

Wiggle's doin' as his name suggests and is wigglin' back and forth strugglin' 'gainst his bonds. But it's no use, I can tie one mean knot if I do say so myself. The rumble of the train is shakin' the ground now; whistle's bearin' down on us noisy as you please.

I find myself wonderin' if that poor son-of-a-bitch is gonna get sucked under the train, chopped in half by the cattle-guard, or if the damn locomotive is gonna knock that man 'cross the sky to kingdom come. Either way it's gonna be quite a show.

Wiggle begs again. "Please, Mister Rhodes... Cyndel... please... I have so much to live for."

"Forget it, Wiggle. Ask again and I'll piss on ya 'til the train gets here."

He's damn near cryin'. "Please... take pity... I'm a virgin... you would not have me depart this earth without partaking of the most sumptuous of nectars, would you?"

I bust out laughin' at such a lame admission.

Cyndel raises her perfect lips to my ear. "Let's show mercy, Traxton."

"What?! He tried to run you over. Fuck this fuckin' Wiggle."

She regards young Quon. "For your son's sake, then. Mercy, Traxton, I vote for mercy."

Oh, hell... as if I'd ever tell her no. She's the boss of me and it'll be a lifetime tryin' to keep her convinced otherwise. It burns my biscuits, but I gotta let this man free... "I do this and you're in my debt, you hear me, Wiggle?"

"Yes, yes, I am in your debt."

"Swear to God."

He earnestly declares. "On God and on the graves of the entire family Wiggle - past, present, and future - I am in your debt."

I hate to remove myself from the arms of Cyndel, but I do so only to roll that man Wiggle off the track with my foot right before the train rushes by faster and louder than any I'd ever heard.

Little Quon takes a wee sip of whiskey before I knock it back and hand it to Purple. We exchange a look only two men what have been fired at together are able to share - I nod my thanks and know he knows I'm in his debt again.

The four of us pass the bottle back and forth under the moon, watchin' the train speed by loud as thunder. Wiggle lays on the ground tied up and cryin' the whole time...

Chapter 30

Alistair

October 5th, 1881

A fortnight is passed since our impromptu turn at heroics. An early season snowfall has rendered the mountain trails all but unassailable. That, however, is of scant importance given my decision for Utah; the path to California closed not a moment after the path to my affections opened...

I apologize for the treacly sentimentality, but given the overwhelming probability we shall endure the winter here in Dullsville, my mind has had ample time to wander. Will Judas wait? Will he be greatly pleased? Will he even recall my name? Surely a man such as he is surrounded by temptation...

However, in a fledgling locale such as Provo, perhaps there are no others yet available to tempt. Oh, of course it is my most fervent wish this whole land will someday be populated by characters of all creeds and proclivities, but perhaps a more immediate wish would be to see this land thusly diversified only after I secure Judas' affections. Is that selfish?

No matter. It is what I desire and I shall work diligently towards realizing my vision. To that end, I did breach the subject with Traxton the night following Cyndel's rescue:

Traxton was, as usual, in his cups. "So, you're taken with a fella named Judas. You don't think that a bad omen?"

"It is but a name. He is not *the actual* Judas..."

"You sure he ain't bunko? Lots of them characters runnin' 'round out here."

"I am as sure of him as you are Miss Sinclair."

He nods, understanding. "Well that there's sayin' a lot, Purple. Alright, Jacob Mortimer and Juris Leland did both clue me in on a train what should be runnin' all the way from New York City filled with more riches than a man can spend in a lifetime. Me and you partner up to take that train and I bet we could retire as kings, what says you?"

A train robbery. If caught, we would assuredly face the gallows or perhaps even firing squad. Our names would be synonymous with lawlessness; our legacy one of treachery and scandal.

But if we were to succeed...

If we succeed our future as men of distinction is guaranteed. Traxton may prove to Cyndel's parents that he is no mere sloth and I would find myself on equal footing with Judas. Perhaps, if the score is large enough, I may even claim the upper hand in our relationship.

"Very well, Traxton, when the time comes, I am your man."

We shook hands that day and have since settled into a routine for the winter that nearly resembles normalcy. Young Quon and I have adopted a regimen of morning calisthenics followed by afternoon scholastics. The mind and body must be tended to, and how better to engage the faculties than in the role of professor?

Dostoyevsky is far too advanced for one only six, so we read instead from Charles Dickens - the same such tales I read at his age. Miss Sinclair does indeed possess an impressive library for being so removed from civilization. We had our choice of *David Copperfield*, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, and *Little*

Dorrit. Young Quon chose, perhaps fitfully, to read the exploits of the Artful Dodger...

At midday Traxton rides with the boy and imparts the skills no school may divulge. They shoot at targets, lasso cattle, cure meat, and skin small game for their hides...

Young Quon even tried his hand at breaking colts, but is far too slight, and was jettisoned thirty feet in the air. He returned home to the saloon absent his left front tooth; his eye a deep cobalt. It is fortunate there remains an entire set of teeth to replace any he might lose at this age.

The night of the rescue, we bid Mister Wiggle walk the entire distance to town. The entire way we inveighed him a deplorable reprobate, not only for attempting to see Miss Sinclair burst to smithereens, but also due to his riding side-saddle. Not even young Quon wished to share a horse with the man...

He has remained in sequester since our return, though Miss Sinclair has divulged that his final task - convincing the McCradden family to sell their lands to the railroad - is in the final stages of contractual negotiations.

I am sure Miss Sinclair would love nothing more than to be rid of the meddlesome man for good. Yet he is quite beholden to Traxton and has a more intimate knowledge of railroads than any other man for a thousand miles. I would have assumed the logical conclusion self-evident...

I gave voice to my thoughts just the other evening: "So it would seem Mister Wiggle is soon set to depart. How do you intend to reclaim his debt?"

Traxton snuffed out his cigarette. "Yea, but what's a man like him able to give me besides a pain in my neck?"

"He is plenipotentiary for the railroad is he not?"

He looked at me cockeyed. "You know goddamn well I don't know what that word means."

"Ambassador. For the railroad. He represents their interests."

"Yea, so?"

I rolled my eyes. "*So?* We are, in a few months' time, attempting the grandest heist in this nation's history. Do you not think it prudent to utilize this man's unique knowledge on the matter?"

"Well I... hell, Purple, you may be onto somethin'..."

Traxton and I devised a plan to pay Mister Wiggle a midnight visit on the eve prior his departure. Tonight. The man's effects are packed into crates and loaded onto a carriage outside his residence. There had been a ceremony to commemorate the successful completion of his task and to well-wish his voyage back to Illinois, but I heard Floyd America was the sole Dullsvillian in attendance - and he was present only due to the festivities being held adjacent the town stocks.

Poor Mister Wiggle. Had he not attempted to obliterate my closest friend's true love beneath a train, I might well have pitied him...

Anyhow, Traxton and I arrive at Mister Wiggle's abode and find our way to the front door. I suggest we knock; Traxton acts otherwise and bursts in without announcement.

Unlucky for Mister Wiggle, as we catch him utterly nude, surrounded by the most scandalous of pictures, and mason jar after mason jar of assorted and colorful jams and jellies...

Traxton removes his hat. "Howdy there, Wiggle. Not disturbin' ya, are we?"

The wee man covers his manhood. "This is not what it looks like!"

"What the hell is it then?"

Mister Wiggle reluctantly nods. "Very well... it is precisely what it looks like."

The man, with paroxysmal floundering, covers his shame using a ghastly, repugnant photograph of a woman with a... with a... oh, I will not lower myself to describe it... suffice to say his tastes are rather... exotic...

Traxton and I assume flanking positions; stern as the stone colossi of Memnon. Mister Wiggle tries desperately to retrieve his clothes, but is barred in each attempt. He resigns himself to his nudity and dissipates an audible breath of defeat. "Fine, gentlemen, how may I be of assistance?"

"You remember you're in debt to me don't you?"

"Yes, yes, yes... get on with it."

Traxton raises his boot to Mister Wiggle's table. "We wanna know everythin' there is 'bout this train of riches headed for Grand Junction at the start of Spring."

That certainly garners his attention. Mister Wiggle nibbles the edges of a previously well-manicured fingernail and develops a noticeable tick in his left eye. "Uh... there is no train bound for Grand Junction laden with treasure. Whatever gave you that idea?"

Traxton snorts. "Now, Wiggle, you can either tell us all you know 'bout this train, or you can tell the sheriff why you got photographs of a woman fuckin' a fish... your choice."

Oh... Traxton raised the issue of the verboten photographs... I daresay I am as proud of my native Europe as a man may be. Yet there is no doubt in my mind that the contraband this man possesses emanated from none other than the continent of my origin.

It may perhaps be attributed to both French permissiveness and Germanic repression, but obscenities such as these are certainly no by-product of a sound mind. A backlash against ecclesiastical conservatism, a refutation of Victorian propriety, or simply a manifestation of human decrepitude; bestiality is some sort of a mental aberration fit for only the most deviant of minds...

Traxton confiscates the photographs. "And by the way there, Wiggle, I'll be holdin' onto these here pictures as part of your debt as well. Now tell us 'bout the train."

Mister Wiggle moves to the next finger and whittles down another nail. His tick is even more discernable as his unease grows. Clearly, this man is well aware of what we seek.

"I swear you are mistaken. There is no..."

Traxton is growing irritated. "One last time, Wiggle. Tell us what we need to know and make good on your debt or I'll see ya tarred and feathered through town for bein' a pervert."

Mister Wiggle throws his hands up, uncovering himself. "Fine! Fine. I will divulge all I can. But you must promise this will mark the cessation of our affairs."

"My word'll have to do - I ain't shakin' hands with ya, and I'm sure you know why."

He covers himself anew. "Yes... yes... and in return for my tractability, may I request to keep half of my photographs? You cannot possibly comprehend how difficult it was to procure such fare..."

Traxton pats his pocket. "No way, Wiggle. These is mine. Now speak..."

True to his word, Mister Wiggle does spend the rest of the evening betraying his employer the railroad. There is indeed a shipment of gold scheduled to

traverse this nation in the middle of April. The specie itself is part of an estate divestment, and, given its unsecured status while in transit, will be escorted by a contingent of mercenaries.

The shipment is, by design, completely inconspicuous. There will be the usual passenger and cargo cars, leaving the gold unmarked and unidentifiable within various holds. The mercenaries themselves will be plain-clothes passengers indistinguishable from real, paying passengers.

The route to Grand Junction will consist of a veritable gauntlet of checkpoints at which guards will be substituted and payload confirmed. Mister Wiggle does not himself know the precise worth of the gold to be transported, but does attest to the sum being so fantastic that the head of the railroad himself had to sign the shipping order in the presence of clergy from all denominations vowing his best efforts or risk forfeiting his ever-living soul.

Finally, and perhaps most concerning, the train itself is a prototype allegedly capable of speeds previously unthinkable. A new brand of coal, with properties nearly resembling those of dynamite, is able to propel the locomotive at twice the standard velocity. No horse has a prayer of catching up to this train...

After we squeeze the final details from Mister Wiggle (including even the engineer's name), we finally allow him to dress himself. The sun is rising as we vacate his home and the man's carriage is set to depart. He waddles down the stairs and enters the ornate conveyance with these parting words:

"Though you surely think me a reprehensible fiend, know that I return the sentiment. You act as your upbringing dictates; untamed and given to chaos. I am for Chicago, where tradition prevails and the lower orders know their place. Ta-ta."

The words may have had more of an effect if Mister Wiggle's carriage had not abruptly departed with a jolt sending the little man bouncing about like dice in a tumbler.

Well... we've now a tremendous amount of work and only five months in which to make ready. However, we are that much more certain of success armed with Mister Wiggle's invaluable intelligence. I withdraw a tablet and make note of what various and sundry provisions we shall require...

Traxton is undaunted. "First things first, Purple... there's as much gold as they say there is, we're gonna need us a first-class get-away coach; one that can move fast and take a beatin'. Just so happens I know exactly where to find one too..."

Chapter 31

Traxton

October 6th, 1881

These last few weeks ain't exactly what I thought they'd be. Don't get me wrong now, spendin' time with Cyndel is like spendin' time as a kid again. All them feelin's of excitement what used to crop up as a young'n when talkin' to girls... that's how it is with us. When I gets to see her, that is.

I 'spose it ain't her fault havin' a job and all. I been 'round lots of females what had a profession. Just happens the profession was layin' on their back. Cyndel got a real job; one what has her up at cock's crow and runnin' 'round 'til long after I'm too drunk to be good company.

I did offer to help early on, but her folks is still sore over the whole Wiggle thing and her pa chased me out with a broom. Came back the next day to prove I were serious 'bout learnin' the family trade, but Cyndel's ma up and pegged me with a tin of tuna.

When me and Cyndel do find time it's been a barrel of monkeys. This female can ride a horse like nobody's business and likes to prove it every chance she gets. As a matter of fact, two nights past we rode together to the outskirts of town and Cyndel said we should race to Totton Creek.

I ain't wanna make a fool of her, so I declined. Then she said if I beat her she'll give me a kiss 'fore the night is done. I ain't never been with a woman what was waitin' for marriage to get sticky, but let me tell you

what... when you are with a female what wants to wait... a kiss is worth ridin' a horse dead in the ground for...

I spurred my mount and moved like the wind. Could hear her cloppin' right behind me; hooves strikin' down earth and stone. I kept in front the whole time dreamin' of what that kiss would be like, but just as soon as the creek were in sight, Cyndel flew past me as if it weren't no thing.

She beat me to the creek and hopped off her mare so to let her have a drink; lookin' up at me with a grin only a perty woman could get away with makin' 'cause if a man rubbed it in my face like that, it'd be a fight for sure...

"Mister Rhodes, I thought you said you could ride."

I pointed to the sky. "Weren't fair, sun was in my eyes."

"Same as mine... we could race back then. Sun won't pose such a problem. Double or nothing."

I pressed my luck. "What's double on a kiss? I get to touch your tit?"

She pretended to be offended. "*Mister Rhodes!* No... you win and I shall kiss you twice, but if I win, you must do all my deliveries tomorrow so I can read *Little Women*."

I took off for a good head start. "That there's a bet. HIYAA!"

I did all her deliveries the next day then had to get Purple to fill me in on *Little Women* 'cause I told her I'd read it years back...

I've been havin' a right good time with little Quon too. That boy seems able to pick anythin' up in only a try or three. 'Cept breakin' a colt... That damn horse sent him so high I thought he'd fly all the way

back to China. But he's a crack shot, quick on his feet, and best of all, ain't scared to get his hands dirty.

He downed a black-tailed prairie dog all on his own and when I told him to skin it, he grabbed a fistful of fur and hacked away like he'd done it his whole life. Yea, that boy is somethin' special.

When the kid's not with me he's with Purple learnin' books and doin' some silly stretches. After Quon's down for the night, Purple and me stay up drinkin' and plannin' the train robbery. We brought on the pirate Cornelius Nutt who knows a little somethin' 'bout takin' things what weren't his. I also plan on involvin' Bluto from the town with no name and Juris Leland too if he ain't dead.

I was thinking on gettin' Jacob Mortimer and his boys in on the action, but he'd just try and run things hisself, takin' a cut for his wife in the process. No siree, I want this here job to be the last job I ever do. Now that I found Cyndel, it's a risk livin' as I have - and I wanna be 'round to enjoy her. 'Specially if I gotta wait to enjoy her...

She don't know 'bout the robbery just like Purple ain't tellin' that Judas character neither. I figure it's best to keep our traps shut doin' a job this big. She don't need to know how I'm gonna make us rich; all she needs to worry 'bout is how to spend it all.

Purple comes up with the bright idea to pump Wiggle for information on the train in question. Truth be told, I was happy just lettin' him go on 'bout his business, but boy am I glad we did pay that man a visit. And not only 'cause he was plumb full of details on the train... he also had the most wild supply of nekkid pictures I ever seen...

Animal fuckers be all 'round these parts. Sheep, pigs, owls... nothin' ain't safe from a farmhand who drank up his whore money. Most folks who resort to

animals do so when they're down on their luck. But Wiggle... this man's got all sorts of money and a whole stack of animal pictures so you know he got problems. But pictures as rare as these really are more valuable than gold, so I go on and keep 'em just in case...

Anyhow, it'll be hard work takin' that train, that there's a guarantee, but it ain't impossible. Nothin's impossible. And the good news is, I know exactly where to find a stagecoach good enough to be the getaway vehicle.

I'd seen it at Cyndel's shop the other day. A stagecoach full of fancy knickknacks came through town to fill an order her pa made three months ago. They dropped off clocks, and banjos, and rims for spectacles; maps printed in New York, somethin' called a gramophone, and guns. Lots and lots of guns.

The stagecoach what made the delivery had another two stops before they was headed back to Ohio. I had a good look at how it was built too: Wheels on springs what'll take a beatin' and sides made to withstand damn near anythin' short a cannon.

A stagecoach like that'd be perfect to fill full of gold and escape through the brush. I figure by now it's probly only a day or two away. 'Tween me, Quon, Purple, and Cornelius Nutt I bet we could take the thing without breakin' a sweat. And if we don't - well - if we can't get our hands on a simple stagecoach I don't rightly believe we deserve a crack at a proper train now do we?

The only thing is I gotta lie to Cyndel. I don't wanna lie to her. 'Cept I've been lyin' 'bout readin' books now for a bit. But that's a little white lie, this here's a big black lie...

But I gotta do it. "Listen up, Cyndel. Me and the boys got some business outside town a ways. I should be back by Wednesday."

"What kind of business could you possibly have, Mister Rhodes?"

"I got business."

She ain't buyin' it. "What sort of business?"

"Business, woman, and that's the end of it."

"Mister Rhodes, you better tell me what you're up to or we're done with and that's a promise."

I'm gettin' used to answerin' her on my actions. "We're goin' over to the next town to find a whore for Cornelius."

"What's wrong with the whores in Dullsville?"

Time to lie. "Well... if you want the truth of it... a shark bit off half his pecker - sideways, not front to back - and the girls here don't want nothin' to do with him. He needs a whore what don't know yet..."

Cyndel is shocked. "A shark?! Oh my... that is quite the travesty... and you won't be purchasing any ladies for yourself now will you?"

"Hell no. What I need a whore for when I got you?"

She shakes her head. "Lovely..."

We set out at daybreak headin' south after the stagecoach. Cyndel came by to see us off and even placed her hand on Cornelius' shoulder and told that man she was sorry for his loss.

Cornelius ain't have no idea what she was talkin' 'bout, but that there's a man's man and knows the number one rule regardin' females: If another man's woman up and says somethin' crazy, you just run with it, 'cause you don't ever know what lie her man said to her.

Truth be told it feels good to be in the saddle again; too long in one place just ain't my way. It's the four of us ridin' side by side: Purple in his purple coat, Cornelius Nutt who seems to know his way 'round a

horse for bein' a seaman, and little Quon with a saddle I had made for his size.

Cornelius and me got two pistols each, Purple ain't want one for some reason. Don't make no sense to me, not wantin' a gun, but the man's made it this far without one... maybe he'll be alright.

We head south all mornin' with the sun a welcome sight. It's been rainin' for almost a week now which don't help too much with trackin', but the coach we're after is a heavy one, so it'll take more than a bitta water to wash away it's trail.

At 'round two in the afternoon, we pass through another town. It's smaller than Dullsville; only one saloon, cartwright, stables, morgue, sheriff, two churches, and a small library even. A library? These folks must think themselves mighty fancy.

The town's named Ronson, population fifty, and we heard told the stagecoach was parked there two whole days and can't be that far ahead at all. So, despite the calls of some piggily whores, we pass on by ourselves.

The rest of the day we don't see shit. We're in the part of Wyoming where you pray every minute for a tree, a bush, or even a rock to look at. It's just grass, and grass, and grass, and more grass. Cornelius Nutt is a man used to long stretches with nothin' to do - what with havin' been on a boat half his life and stranded on an island the other half. He sets to tellin' Quon some tall tales of the sea...

"Master Quon, have I ever told ya of the giant squid named Baroo?"

Quon's all smiles. "No, Captain Nutt. What's a squid?"

"A squid be a fishy creature with a funny wormy face. And old Baroo was the king of them all. Baroo didn't quite enjoy ships casting long shadows

deep down in his kingdom, so took to breaching the waves and squirting his ink at any who made him angry. Now normal squid ink ain't nothing to worry 'bout; ruin your shirt is all... but Old Baroo... when he rose out the water and sent his ink your way, it was like gettin' pissed on by the devil hisself..."

Quon's eatin' it up. "Hahaha! Did Baroo ever spray your ship, Captain Nutt?"

"Aye, laddie, he did. We made the mistake of walkin' some Greek sailors off the plank right above Old Baroo. Usually, sea-creatures love it when we send people off the plank, but the Greek food turned Old Baroo's stomach. In revenge, he rose from the waves, lifted his big, puckered arsehole our way and blasted my whole ship with sticky, oozy black ink."

"Hahaha! That's gross, Captain Nutt!"

"Aye, it was gross. Took three years to scrub Baroo from me beard. Made nighttime raids a cinch for me ship bein' all black though..."

Purple's over there with a little grin, smilin' at the pirate's tall tales... I reckon he's taken to the boy same as I have. Funny how hearin' a kid laugh can make a man laugh along with him. Cornelius Nutt gets to tellin' more of his stories as we ride, more stories as we set up camp, and more still as we cook our supper on the fire.

It's good to have a laugh now and again. 'Specially since the tracks we've been followin' for this stagecoach is gettin' newer and newer. Yea, I bet we'll be on 'em in a day's time or so. And once we do catch up to 'em... well, there won't be no time for laughin' then.

Chapter 32

Alistair

October 7th, 1881

There is no end to the outrageous nautical balderdash the pirate Cornelius Nutt can recite. Young Quon enjoys his exaggerations, however, so I allow the nonsense to proceed... despite the virtual certainty it will fall upon my shoulders to correct the boy, as his knowledge of oceanography is now horribly retarded.

For instance, Captain Nutt has led young Quon to believe King Triton's trident discharges white lightning, dolphins sometimes engage in choreographed dance, and that he once impregnated a mermaid! What a tangled web of deceit I shall have to undo...

No matter, we bed down a few hours after passing the miniscule Township of Ronson. Traxton affirms the stagecoach is not but a day's ride due south, two days ride at most. As much as consistently sleeping in a bed these last weeks has been a welcome respite, I must admit there is something quite satisfying in sleeping beneath the stars. Yes... I missed this.

We wake and go through our own personal routines. Surprisingly enough, Captain Nutt does less to prepare himself upon rising than even Traxton - which does equate to doing precisely nothing. I ensure young Quon performs his stretches, jumping jacks, and knee-lifts, followed by gargling voraciously, scraping the white film from his teeth, and combing his hair.

Traxton busies himself distributing biscuits and preparing the coffee as both he and the pirate enjoy their morning cigarettes. After the boy and I are prepared, we join them by the fire... "So, Traxton, perhaps this may be a good time to discuss tactics?"

"Tactics? Like how we're gonna take this coach without gettin' our asses handed to us? Easy. The 'ol 'woman in distress' ploy."

I raise an eyebrow. "Woman in distress?"

"Yea, same as Constance Pritchett got you with just last month. Dry gulch 'em with a prize they can't rightly turn down."

Oh yes... The 'woman in distress' ploy... Stranded, innocent princesses in need... the perfect premise. But we are noticeably absent the prerequisite female. Unless... no, he would not dare! I am no androgyne capable of altering my outward appearance on a whim. How dare he presume I would casually accept the role of damsel? I will certainly make known my reservations toward...

"Hey, Purple, lend me your straight-razor will ya? I gotta get rid of my scruff."

What? "*You* are shaving?"

"Yea. Someone's gotta play the lady in distress. What, you think I'd let you do it? You wouldn't have the first idea on how to pull a trick like this off..."

How dare he? I was reared on theater and the delicate art of authentic performance. Has he witnessed Desdemona desperately attempt to remain on this mortal coil? Ophelia succumb to madness at the loss of her beloved father? Juliet ache as Romeo tragically proclaims: "Thus, with a kiss, I die?"

No, of course not. I would be much better suited for this role than he. If there is one thing I know, it is the appetite of man. One must at once conceal, enhance,

exaggerate, blur, and bring into focus... Traxton is in no way prepared to make use of the...

"What you think, Purple? Too big or too small?"

The man has withdrawn two voluminous bags of sand and is holding them against his chest in mimicry of women's breasts. They are positively enormous! No man would fall for such false proportions.

Captain Nutt adjusts himself. "Aye there, matey, those are the type of milkers that'll have a man run his ship aground."

Never mind... I suppose Traxton is better suited at knowing what manner of enticement would best capture an ape's attention. And, truth be told, with his face freshly shorn and his hair sufficiently tamed, Traxton Rhodes is quite striking. In a lumpen, churlish sort of manner...

Visage, locks, and breasts at the ready, we strike out due South once more. Young Quon is receiving quality instruction on the precision of tracking and how best to distinguish among identical parallel grooves in the soil.

By nightfall our quarry is found off in the distance. They've set up camp for the evening so we must do the same. Using a telescope Captain Nutt swears has seen all four corners of the Earth, we do spy three men lazily turning a hare over an open flame.

Very useful reconnaissance knowing their numbers. We decline to build a fire of our own, opting instead to maintain visual contact throughout the evening. Our vigilance proves highly uneventful, but even the absence of movement can be a telling statement on their behavior: They are no drunks, they are orderly, and they are loathe to stray from their stagecoach.

At first light, Traxton slips into a rag of a dress and departs for a mile-wide circumvention. When a safe distance ahead, he will unburden his steed, and lay in wait within shouting distance of the road. Then, when he lures them from the confines of their stagecoach, his pistols will hold them in place as we, the cavalry, charge in.

It's as fine a plan as I may have concocted. When I inquired as to our victim's fate, Traxton replied: "If they don't shoot, they live. If they shoot, they don't."

We follow at a safe distance, telescope fixed on their position. The anticipation is immense. With the burglary there was a fair amount of apprehension, but the goal in that caper was to avoid hostilities. With this jaunt, hostilities are all but certain.

Young Quon hands over the telescope after his turn. "Mister Alistair, what are we doing again?"

"Well, Quon, we are appropriating these men's conveyance."

"Why?"

Why? Why? The real question is why did we bring the child along? Surely there was some sort of governess we might have hired to mind the boy, but Traxton believed this to be an invaluable lesson in how the world truly functions. I protested, but young Quon is Traxton's ward and woe be upon the man who counsels against a parent's better judgment.

I once witnessed a footman pummeled within an inch of his life for suggesting a lord ought consider a hat for his young daughter on a frigid day. Children are the ultimate possession, and it seems to me an appropriate reaction to defend that natural arrangement with profound vigor.

If Traxton wishes to raise young Quon in the same manner as he was himself reared, then so be it. But, as usual, it falls on me to provide some level of

moral context... "Quon, we are commandeering their stagecoach in service of the greater good."

"What is the greater good, Mister Alistair?"

"Well... you see... the greater good is..."

Captain Nutt jumps in. "Laddie, the greater good is gold. Gold!"

I rush to correct him. "No, Quon, the greater good is love."

The captain tugs on his wayward beard. "Aye, I love gold!"

The boy will remember that. These formative years construct the plinth that will one day bear the man young Quon will become. And he has just now learned the acquisition of precious metals by devious means supersedes a man's right to private property; the cornerstone of any republic.

Well, seeing as I am in no position to refute this nefarious piece of anti-wisdom, I may at least attempt to cultivate a healthy outlook of "do as I say, not as I do" philosophy in the boy. Yes, we may be absconding with these men's possession, but overall, one should counsel against such behavior, for if every person acted as we are, the entire world would be in disarray.

Ethical justifications for theft are opaque at best. Surely, I am no Jean Valjean making away with a loaf of bread to feed a starving nephew. No... I am presently engaged in as piratical an endeavor as may be conceived.

What is my excuse? I require this money to be content? This gold must have originally been accumulated by devious means, so is fair game? This money was destined to be stolen, so better by myself than by some hooligan?

Whatever my ostensible extenuation, the only truthful answer is we are thieves. What's worse is we are thieves who ought to know better. Cornelius Nutt,

with his father's privateering background is surly aware, as only a mercantile man may, that commerce is dependent upon seeing laws upheld. Traxton, while suffering from a capricious upbringing, does himself possess the highly unique gifts of charm and gregariousness, skills philosophers of all stripes rank more desirable than even physical ability or mental acumen. And then there's me... schooled at the most prestigious academies and institutions; provided access to the world's finest examples of cultural refinement... I am an aesthete for goodness sake. I ought to abhor such tasks as are generally reserved for brigands...

But no. None of these considerations helped stay our turn towards knavery. We ourselves in part comprise the leviathan Hobbes believed society would one day slay...

And now, even considering this, my sober reflection, I am still dedicated to the cause... Why?

Captain Nutt interrupts my reverie. "Alistair, they're goin' fer the bait..."

I shall have to ponder this later, for our quarry has fallen for the first stage of our subterfuge. "All three of them?"

"Aye. Was just the one at first, but he summoned his pals when he seen the size of Traxton's tits."

"How very... Quon, now is the time to don your mask and bandana."

Young Quon acts as I bid and raises his bandana to just below his nose, tying off the corners behind his head. He then lowers the felt mask over his upper half utterly concealing him from prying eyes... I follow suit and tie-off a particularly fetching ice-blue kerchief.

The cyclops, Cornelius Nutt, raises his bandana and lowers his telescope. The man checks his weapon then nods in my direction before spurring his horse

towards Traxton. Young Quon and I share a glance then simultaneously command our steeds onward.

I cannot say if I have ever experienced such a primal thrill as is washing over me now in abundance. We are stealing a stagecoach! Oh how life is rife with surprises. Not that long ago my most pressing concern was if I should attend the opening of Planquette's *The Chimes of Normandy* or Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* - and what to wear when I did decide.

But right now, at this exact moment, I could not care less about theater, art, propriety, or even love. I am alive! I am more alive than perhaps I have ever been. As alive as Caesar standing athwart the Rubicon, daring Pompey to rise; alive as ancient ancestors engaged against woolly mammoths and sabre-tooth tigers...

Yes, I am more alive in this moment than...

"There's trouble on the seas m'hearties..."

Cornelius slows our assault and presses his telescope to his one functioning eye.

"Aye, by the looks of it, Traxton got a jam in his pistols. I think he's wavin' at us to hold."

"Are you quite sure? Here, allow me..."

I retrieve the brass cylinder in an attempt to confirm this unfortunate turn of events. Traxton's weapons must have indeed jammed as he is presently being led by our targets towards their carriage. All we can do now is await his signal...

Chapter 33

Traxton

October 8th, 1881

Ten times outta ten a man sees a set of ninnies what need savin' and he saves 'em. It's his natural instinct.

To that end, for only fifty-two cents I got hold of some sorta red cheek powder, half a bottle of some nice smellin' water, and a dress what ain't completely gone to the moths.

I got my guns, by God, but don't have 'em in the holster. That I leave in my horse's bag as I make my way up ahead of the coach. When I get a mile or so in front of 'em, I give my horse free rein and walk the rest of the ways to the wagon trail. Then I hide my guns down in the dirt and just wait on them to pass by.

Ain't gotta wait that long seein' as I just passed 'em a little while ago. Yup... there they are, big ol' carriage bumpin' 'long the open road. Don't have a care in the world by the looks of it. Well, they soon will, I reckon. Here goes...

"Yoo hoo, hey boys, I lost my horse and am out here all on my own. Will somebody save me?"

They stop. Like I said, can't no man turn down a lady in distress. Not if they want to continue callin' themselves a man that is...

The driver shields the sun from his eyes. "This ain't no 'woman in distress' bullshit, is it?"

"What? No. I'm just a lost female with nothin' in the world but these big breasts of mine."

He hops on down. "Well then... this is yer lucky day, ma'am. Webster, Southworth, c'mon outta there. We got ourselves a lady what needs our help."

Perfect. This is going directly to plan. Soon as these fools get close 'nuff I'll just pull it out and give 'em all a big surprise. My guns that is - not the other thing. Although that'd probly give 'em quite a shock as well...

The latch moves from inside the stagecoach and the door swings open heavy as a jail cell. Two men climb on out coverin' their eyes from the sun as well. These gents be bigger than they looked in Cornelius' telescope. Don't matter none, a bullet'll take down a large man same as small...

The one named Southworth whistles at the sight of me. "Them's some big tits you got there, ma'am."

"You sure know how to talk to a lady."

You see, the "woman in distress" ploy is doubly cold. For one, you get robbed... that there's reason enough to be down in the dumps. But, maybe even worse is, almost never do you get to be rewarded by the woman in distress. And the truth of the matter is, the unspoken of reward is sexual in nature and the only reason a man steps in to help in the first place.

And that's every man. Even in situations where there really is a woman in distress, men be wantin' somethin' for their good deeds. Even if it's only a big hug so you can feel ninnies through the shirt... *somethin'...*

They're almost on me. All three of 'em got guns on they belt, but once I pull the two I got in the dirt there won't be no time for them to make the air smoky...

"Alright boys. I've got two big rewards for ya. Wanna see 'em?"

Webster all but hoots. "You're an answer to prayer, woman! Pull them flappin' mams out for the world to see!"

All three of 'em got eyes wide like the moon fell out the sky. I reach down 'neath my dress and wrap my hands 'round my trusty pistols. Here goes nothin'... "Arms to heaven, boys, this here's a robbery."

Southworth kicks a rock. "Goddammit, Oren! It's always the 'woman is distress' trick. Ain't no female ever lost for real."

Their leader points right at me. "Lady, you the third 'woman in distress' we done seen on this trip. And I do swear we're tired of it. You're just gonna have to shoot."

Uh oh... these men are walkin' towards me not even carin' 'bout the guns in my hands... I didn't want to have to kill no man today, but this here's their choice... I cock the hammers both and...

Nothin'.

I cock the hammers back again and...

Nothin'.

Tarnation! The guns is jammed. Must've had somethin' to do with how I hid 'em in the dirt while I waited on these men. This ain't good. Ain't good at all...

Open smiles in the sun. "Lookey here. The party lady's guns is jammed. Ain't that somethin'?"

What?! No... *no*! I cock the hammers one last time and hear nothin' but a click as I pull the triggers. I'm too party. I'm too party dammit! They really do think me a female. Or maybe they don't but don't care none. This ain't good, this ain't good, this ain't good...

I gotta think fast. "Say, fellas. I do admit I tried to do ya dirty. That weren't very nice of me. How 'bout we cook ourselves some lunch and have a laugh about it over some whiskey?"

The men halt their approach and consider my proposal. Webster nudges Oren. "She do got some mighty big honkers, be a shame to shoot her."

Oren nods. "Alright, fuck it. But I wanna see 'em later. Yer life for a peep."

I smile. "That's an offer I can't refuse. What're we eatin'?"

I follow the men back to their carriage, makin' sure to wave over to my men not to charge in just yet. If there's one thing I can do is hold my drink. I'll get these fools good and drunk then have Purple and them make quick work of these boys.

Southworth turns some rabbit over a fire while Oren sips from a fancy-lookin' green bottle. He passes it my way. "This here's a new kinda drink was part of our delivery. Store owner ain't cough up the money so now it's ours. Have a swig."

I turn it up and can't rightly believe my tongue ain't actually on fire. What the hell is this? I nearly choke. Webster laughs at me. "Strong, ain't it? Russians drink it to survive the winter. Have another."

I do oblige the man and turn the green bottle back up. Goes down easier the second time, but still tastes like the devil's own piss. Five sips in and I'm already wobbly. Oren's tellin' a story 'bout some vulture they seen pick a man clean while still alive. Not sure why, but the idea of a man bein' half skeleton before even dyin' yet has got me gigglin' somethin' stupid. I turn the bottle up again.

The rabbit's almost done, but I find I don't have the stomach for food. This Russian drink is doin' me just fine. Another few swallows and my eyes seem heavier than they've ever been. Maybe I'll just rest my head.

Last thing I see is Oren standing over me. "That's right, lassie... have yourself a good little nap..."

Everythin's quiet. The world's gone silent. I watch as the clouds pass by and a jackrabbit hops along... there's nothin' but silence... grass waves left to right in a slight breeze...

My cheek's pressed down flat in the dirt. I smell the smolderin' fire. My eyes focus on somethin' nearby. Webster and Southworth, both layin' in piles on the ground. Someone's shakin' my shoulder; speakin' words I can't hear...

Purple sits me up, holdin' my head in his hands, I can see his mouth movin' but still can't hear no sounds.

Oren lies in a pile just beside me, dirt soakin' up blood leakin' from his back in a number of places. Quon comes from nowhere and wraps his arms around me. I can smell his hair. Smells sorta like berries... must be somethin' Purple put in there...

I'm startin' the hear stuff again. Cornelius Nutt. "Avast, matey, if only t'were a way to kill this bunch again... What they did's low, even for a pirate."

I got my voice back. "What... what happened?"

Purple and the captain share a look. Neither wantin' to speak.

"C'mon, dammit, what the hell happened?"

Cornelius spits on Oren's corpse. "They did ya foul, boy. Tamed a rough patch of sea, they did."

"What?"

"Attacked the poop deck, if you take my meanin'"

My eyes damn near pop out my head as I scramble to stand. *They did what?* I gander about at the scene of the crime. No... there's nothin' to do or say 'bout this one. This one's a story no one'll ever hear. I

reach down to find my gun not there. Lucky thing too, 'cause my instinct right now's to end my ridin' partner's lives so there'll be no witnesses.

I catch my breath... calm down, Traxton... calm down...

I speak slowly. "I thank y'all for comin' to my rescue... if word of this ever gets out, I swear to God I'll kill ya."

Purple and Nutt nod solemn agreement and I hold little Quon a moment more. Alright. Nothin' much to do now but change out this damn dress, burn these sons of bitches, and ride this stagecoach on home to Dullsville.

I gotta move past this... I gotta move past this... I gotta move past this...

We open up the coach and find all manner of prizes: More guns, a machine what does math, a painted rockin' horse, gold time pieces, fancy boots, spectacles, a camera, wine in bottles not written in English... all sorts of prizes...

We toss out any loot we figure we won't ever use or sell, keepin' the rest packed up in the back. Then I heap these three sacks of shit on top of the pile and burn it all up in a blaze that stinks to high-heaven. I don't even make the sign of the cross for those bastards but spit in the fire instead. Purple and the captain haven't said a word in over an hour.

The inside of the carriage is built like a jail. Iron bars, metal floorin', no windows... yup, this here stagecoach is made to be a tough nut to crack. I cracked it though... Cracked it by usin' my crack... no! I ain't never gonna think on this... never again... what happened happened and no good can come from thinkin' on it.

I choose to drive the carriage, lashin' my horse to the back of Cornelius Nutt's for him to take home.

Little Quon and Purple decide to ride with me, but I tell 'em I feel like bein' alone for a bit. We add their horses to the four pullin' the coach and they hop on inside the big wagon.

Even though my head's ringin' from passin' out earlier, there no way I ain't havin' somethin' to drink to keep my mind from reelin'. So I take a box of these fancy wines and two rifles from the coach and climb on up to the driver's seat. Captain Nutt rides on ahead a ways while I drive the coach due north in silence.

I don't have no idea on how to open these here bottles of wine. Always a bartender opened wine for me all my life. Got some sorta plug stuck in the hole it's too tight for...

No! Don't think on it!

I hold the bottle by the back and break the top off 'gainst the footrest. It's a red wine. Tastes like fruit gone bad. It smarts drinkin' from the jagged edge of a broken bottle, but how the hell am I 'sposed to drink this shit? By the second bottle I don't feel the broken glass or taste how nasty it is no more. Boy, this wine'll get you drunk as tequila will, by God...

By noon I'm three sheets to the wind and takin' pot shots at critters with the rifle as I drive. Purple opens up a little slidin' peephole and asks if everythin' is alright.

I wave him off. "Just shootin' at critters is all, go back in and rest up, Purple."

By sundown I'm as drunk as I've ever been, pissin' over the side of the wagon, dancin' 'round on top of the carriage while no one is steerin' her, punchin' myself in the chest to see how hard I hit... damn, I'm a strong son-of-a-bitch...

I'm up here singin' a song I ain't heard in years. I don't even know how the hell I remember the words. I think they'd sing it at the camps I stayed in with my ma

and pa... rebels headin' west after the war. Figured comin' out here were better than livin' under Yankee rule. Haven't heard it sung since I was a boy...

"Oh, I'm a good old rebel, that's what I am;
And for this land of freedom, I don't give a
damn,
I'm glad I fought against her, I only wish we'd
won,
And I don't ask any pardon for anything that I've
done.

I hate the Constitution, and this great Republic
too;
I hate that mouthy eagle, and the uniform so
blue..."

By God, I've been drinkin'...

At nightfall, I can see the town of Ronson 'bout a half mile ahead of us. I break open my fourth... fifth... no, *sixth*, bottle of wine. My pants and shirt and hands is each stained purple from the wine gettin' all over the place. That don't matter now... nothin' does...

I got bugged today...

The wine goes down faster and faster. I smash open another bottle and most of it spills; I drink what remains and break another. I feel like we're goin' really fast. Too fast. No... not fast enough...

"HIYAA! HIYAA! HIYAA!"

The peephole opens again. "Traxton, what in the world are you..."

I can't hear Purple, I can't hear nothin'. Faster and faster. I break off another bottle and drink it top to finish in ten seconds flat. I break another bottle and pour the whole lot of it over my head, catchin' as much as I can as it rains down on me.

Goddamn. Goddamn everything...

None of this shit matters. None of it. I break the final bottle in the crate and drink it down. After that I don't remember nothin'. Nothin' at all...

Chapter 34

Cyndel

October 9th, 1881

Traxton Rhodes... Mister Traxton Rhodes... I know he was lying through his teeth when he told me Captain Nutt had suffered from a shark attack. If any of the working women in this village had seen a wound like that, it would have been the talk of the town straight away.

Men don't know that of women; that their minds are just as craven as men's. Or they do know, but don't want to acknowledge the fact. I am fully aware Mister Rhodes is about some sort of illegal business out there with his chums. And what that fool doesn't understand is the only reason I'm even interested in him is due to his carefree existence.

After the affair with Mister Wiggle, I couldn't keep my hands off that man. All I wanted to do is hold and be held in those arms that saved me. He saved me... picked me right up off those tracks and saved my life. Drunk as he was I'm not sure he even remembers that whole affair, but he saved me nonetheless.

I permitted him, much to my parent's dismay, a courtship. The notion of courting is beyond a man like Mister Rhodes, so there is a fair amount of guidance on my part. For instance, he once tried to hold my hand while on a stroll. I'm no prude, but in public? My mother would never permit it.

No. To help satisfy his urges, I convinced my mother to allow a bundling. Mister Rhodes did come to

our home, take his place in the guest room bed, and my mother and I did sew him up to his neck in a linen sack. This way, we could spend the evening enjoying each other's company minus the temptations incumbent.

The night we bundled, I read to him from Mark Twain's newly published *The Prince and the Pauper*. After the recital, we did discuss our views on the world, life on the ranch and out West. For being so well read, he does yet retain a stubbornly abbreviated vocabulary...

Anyhow, I made for my own bed, but first leaned over and placed a kiss on his tough, weather-worn lips. I permitted the moment hold, then excused myself from the room. Mister Rhodes did beg I stay and kiss him more, but I knew for certain my mother was in the next room with a glass against the wall.

He is vexed by my having to keep regular store hours. Seasonal workers and desperados know nothing of catering to a cantankerous clientele. As my father says, in retail, keeping your store open means keeping your store open.

How I hate to depart his comfortable company, but as I routinely remind: "We must obey the time." Peculiar he has not picked up on the reference. Perhaps *Othello* is one of the few pieces of Shakespeare he has not had occasion to read...

I am perfectly aware he exists outside the confines of accepted behavior. I am flattered by his utterly transparent efforts to keep me from this aspect of his life. But it is there. Peeking through in his behavior and attitude. Staying too long in a town such as Dullsville will drive him mad, and that is why I sanctioned his illicit jaunt: A man must have a task, or he is no man at all.

It therefore did not surprise me, although it certainly caused much distress, when the pirate,

Cornelius Nutt, did bang upon our front door, waking all the neighbors in the process, until I donned my robe and answered the man. "What in heaven's name is going on?"

He removed his large captain's hat. "Ma'am. I thought you'd want to know, Traxton, Alistair, and Quon have all been sent to the brig up in Ronson."

"Mister Rhodes is in prison?"

He couldn't meet my gaze. "Aye, but not for anything you'd think he were in prison for. It's rather silly actually. But he does require a respectable person come fetch him."

"What did he do?"

"There isn't a name for it, lassie..."

So, I changed into an outfit suitable for a midnight ride to our sister-city, Ronson. I feel it only right given his immediate response to my having been kidnapped. We are officially courting and I must take the negative along with the positive.

And it is in that spirit of heartfelt resonance that I gaze upon my Mister Rhodes at this very moment: Curled up in a fetal position upon the Ronson City sheriff's station cell room floor. Mister Harris is asleep on the one provided mattress, with young Quon nestled beside him. Is now a good time to mourn my chance at Chicago?

I turn to the bespectacled lawman. "Sheriff, I do speak for this man. What crime has he committed?"

"Well, y'see, that's a tough one. Weren't no crime he broke really. I don't rightly know what to call it."

"What did he do?"

He almost laughs at the memory. "He came barrelin' through town drivin' a fancy stagecoach, drunker than any man I'd ever seen, shootin' his guns in the air, and rode straight through old man Cotter's livin'

room. Old man Cotter's been dead these past three months, so ain't nobody worried 'bout the damage, but there's gotta be somethin' illegal 'bout runnin' a coach blackout drunk through a city. Saddled while inebriated? Drivin' muddled? Drunk ridin'? There must be a law on it somewheres, I reckon."

"I whole-heartedly agree with you, sheriff. And his companions, what about them?"

He shrugs. "They ain't done nothin' illegal neither. Found 'em knocked unconscious inside that fancy stagecoach. Figured we'd let 'em sleep it off in here."

"I see. Well, in the absence of a crime having been committed, I request you turn them over to my care."

He's already on his way out the door. "That's fine by me. Was hopin' to get some fishin' in later anyways. Keys are on the hook. See ya."

And now Mister Rhodes and his troupe are within a cell, and myself their solitary custodian. What to do? What to do with this power?

I chose Mister Rhodes against my parent's wishes. I chose him. *or...* I chose to see where this path may lead. It has led thus far to some humorous dialogues, flirtatious horse races, and a cage in Ronson, Wyoming. And it hasn't even been a month. What to make of him?

If I am to be with this man, I must know this man. Intimately. I must know what resides within his deepest thoughts... or perhaps even his surface-level thoughts... something. But I must know it now; I will not come to his aid at midnight again should he decline.

I retrieve a metal soup ladle from the sheriff's breakfast and rattle it back and forth between the prison bars, waking all contained within.

My consort reaches for his temples. "My head! My head! Cyndel? Are you... what... where am I?"
Quon dashes over to his father. "Papa, Papa..."
"Quon? You're in jail too? What the hell's goin' on?"

I clear my throat. "Good morning, gentlemen. Quon, it breaks my heart to see a child in prison. Especially for what will surely be a prolonged sentence."

Mister Harris is startled. "*A prolonged sentence?* What have we done?"

"According to the sheriff, you were recklessly drunk driving a stagecoach while shooting your guns and demolishing property."

Mister Rhodes stands. "Bullshit! That ain't no crime! Where's this sheriff, I wanna have words with him."

"I spoke with the sheriff, and have prevailed upon him, using my family's standing to set you free."

Mister Harris cheers. "Hallelujah!"

"*However...* before I unlock this cell, I would have the truth - the real truth - on who you are, Traxton, and what plans you have for the future. What was this so-called business trip all about?"

I can tell both Mister Rhodes and Mister Harris are uncomfortable. Men detest divulging their affairs to women and I know not why. What activity would not be made all the better for a woman's insight and natural preparedness? The silence is quite telling...

Young Quon steps forward. "Excuse me, Miss Sinclair? We stole a stagecoach for the greater good, and the greater good is gold!"

His father seethes. "Hobble your lip, Quon!"

I touch the boy's hand. "Thank you, Quon. You are right to speak the truth among friends, and those you purportedly love... now... let's have it..."

Mister Rhodes and Mister Harris do exchange glances once more. The latter seemingly encouraging Mister Rhodes to speak without speaking. It is an unusually affable relationship between these two. I wonder if he is capable of being so trusting before a woman... I suppose he shall soon have the opportunity to find out...

The cowboy nods. "Alright Cyndel, you want the truth if it? Here it is..."

Oh... he speaks. And he speaks. And he speaks without reservation. He tells me of his youth. Watching his own mother shoot Comanche as he reloaded her weapon. He speaks of the solitude of being orphaned at thirteen - old enough to care for oneself, but not so strong he might find honest employment. He speaks of cutting purses, picking pockets, breaking into locked homes, swindling dowresses...

Oh...

Making off with herds of steer, robbing safety deposits, hijacking, kidnapping, hostage-taking, cheating at cards...

Oh my...

Blackmail, perjury, arson, impersonating a doctor, impersonating a reverend, counterfeiting coins and paper money, burglarizing mansions and shanties both, ordering meals and running off without paying...

Adventure... the sage advice to discover the one thing I want more than anything else. *It is* adventure...

Oh, my God... I... I love this man!

He has lived a life of pure adventure. Yes, turmoil preceded his actions, but the result is a life unencumbered by propriety or guilt. The thrill of excitement Allison Delaney and I felt while extorting the folks of Wichita with naked photographs of themselves is an excitement this man replicates on a perpetual basis...

Mister Rhodes is pressed up against the prison cell as he speaks. The man looks tired, worn, bumped and bruised... but I love him. I love this man, Traxton Rhodes!

I reach past the iron and run my fingers through his hair; bringing his face to mine, we kiss between the steel bars.

"I love you, Traxton Rhodes. I swear it. And if I may join in your next adventure, I'll love you forever."

We kiss once more then I retrieve the keyring from its place on the hook. Opening the door, little Quon emerges first and wraps his arms around my waist. His hands clasped behind me and resting against my bottom. Is that intentional or coincidental? Perhaps he and his father *are* related...

Mister Harris exits next and bows in deference with courtly refinement; protocols distinctly foreign to a small-town prison. Mister Rhodes... no, *Traxton*... follows suit then lifts me in his arms high above the ground. He smiles, then winces and buckles under the weight, lowering me in the process, hunched over as if in great pain...

I hold him. "All is well? Did you suffer an injury?"

"Worst injury in the history of the world... but that don't matter now, all that matters is you and the gold we're gonna steal this spring. C'mon, let me show you what we got."

The four of us depart and find a massive stagecoach, that, despite numerous cosmetic blemishes, is none the worse for wear. I feel like I've seen this coach some place before... haven't I? No matter, a coach is a coach.

The horses seem none the worse for wear either. What sturdy creatures... barge through a solid structure

by night, healthy enough to pull a heavy wagon the next day...

Young Quon and Mister Harris do mount their own horses and meet up with Cornelius Nutt, who had been watching via telescope as he is naturally disinclined to venture inside a sheriff's office. Traxton and I sit side by side driving his stagecoach back towards Dullsville.

Along the way, he fills me in on the pending heist, the gold, Mister Wiggle's involvement (and the photographs he was in possession of - *my God!*) and of his plans to retire after this crime. I warn him that retirement had better not put an end to his melodrama, and he offers this retort: "Cyndel, bein' a millionaire don't mean you can't be no trouble-maker... it just means you make trouble on a whole 'nother level..."

That's what I wanted to hear... I hold his hand and sidle up against him, resting my head on his shoulder. Somehow, Wyoming doesn't seem half as bad riding next to this man, Traxton Rhodes...

Chapter 35

Alistair

December 25th, 1881

Merry, Merry Christmas! Oh, what an occasion; the absolute pinnacle of holidays. And, as is ever the case, children escalate the merriment by factors exponential. Young Quon had no clue what surprises laid in wait this morning; the boy received no less than thirty gifts ranging from candied apples to carved wooden horses to an ornate carousel.

The proprietor of the saloon permitted our decking the halls and raising a seven-foot Colorado Blue Spruce adjacent the upright piano. Carolers made their way about the town, prayers were said, well-wishes wished, and last night there even descended upon Dullsville the season's first snowfall.

Traxton and I decided to spoil the boy beyond belief; every child deserves at least one Christmas morning that defies all expectation. And, given the tumultuous year Young Quon has endured (witnessing his mother hurtle down a cliff, watching me shoot a man for defiling his father...) the lad deserves a moment of unadulterated joy.

We did attend mass, along with Miss Sinclair and her parents; the choir was in glorious harmony. A Christmas Eve dinner of turkey, gravy, boiled legumes, sweet meats, fresh-baked breads, candied yams, venison, goose, and even bear.

Mister Sinclair did, surprisingly enough, bid Traxton say the mealtime blessing. Perhaps the man is

finally warming towards his daughter's choice in consort. Well... *was* warming to him prior his grossly inappropriate prayer: "Dear Lord, bless this food what mama Sinclair slaved over. And also bless Cyndel here, may them ninnies stay upright long 'nuff for me to finally set my eyes on' em. Amen."

Mister Sinclair did naught but shake his head and solemnly carve the turkey.

Back home at the saloon, we both saw young Quon off to bed, reminding him of Saint Nicholas' imminent arrival. The boy literally drifted off to sleep wearing a grin from ear to ear. Traxton and I retired downstairs, the sole occupants on this most hallowed of eves...

We ordered a drink and reclined in our chairs before the glittering Christmas tree. What a year this had been...

Traxton then raised his glass. "Purple, I don't say stuff like this all too often, but... yer my best friend."

And I fainted.

What can I say? The crackling fire in the hearth, the tree adorned with candles and silver tinsel, the poinsettia arrangements Miss Sinclair had delivered... the sincerity of my companion Traxton Rhodes' heartfelt announcement... it was a perfectly beautiful moment...

I awoke seconds later as the man shook me alive... "There, there, Purple. Alright now..."

"Oh, yes, quite right... I apologize. Well... in return for your candid sentiment, I too have a boon to bestow."

I removed from beneath the tree a package I paid dearly to have expedited all the way from Providence, Rhode Island. Traxton smiled and took no

time tearing apart the ribbon and tribune packaging I so painstakingly crafted.

Within, he discovered a collection of no less than twenty volumes of classic tales - *The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, *Beowulf* - all summarized in plain English and, more importantly, colorfully illustrated. Yes, they are indeed children's editions of the most cherished works of literature. The one untruth Traxton has yet to divulge to Miss Sinclair is regarding his knowledge, or lack thereof, of novels. I guessed his ruse would persist, and hoped the texts may abet his predicament.

"Well golly, Purple, this here's a fine gift. What's this book? *The Iliad*? Hot damn, who's this? Helen of Troy... Helen of Troy? I may have to rip this drawin' out for later..."

I stayed his hand. "No... no... please... *The Iliad* predates Christianity by nearly half a millennium. Please enjoy it as it was meant to be, in its entirety."

"Alright then, but this artist's good at drawin' ninnies I'll tell you that much."

We did awake this morning bright and early, boiled water for our coffee, and relished Young Quon opening his gifts one at a time; assiduously arranged in an effort to heighten the yuletide cheer with each unveiling. A marionette in his stocking, a miniature train replica from Miss Sinclair, some fetching new clothes, and then there was Traxton's gift...

After the final present had been shorn of its packaging, Traxton did interrupt the boy at play with his new toys, and revealed there was one more gift just outside the saloon. Young Quon's eyes sparkled as his father led him outdoors. And there he found the gift all children most fervently dream of: His very own horse!

The young appaloosa is brown and white and with the most genteel disposition. Traxton hoisted

Master Quon and set him upon the saddle. The boy embraced the horse by the mane and held him close.

"This here's your horse, Quon. That means you gotta look after him and make sure he's always well kept."

He hugged us both in turn. "Thank you, Papa! Thank you, Mister Alistair. Can I name him?"

"Darn tootin'. He's all yours."

"I want to name him *Papa!*"

So the boy rode Papa all morning and then came back in to play with his toys and is now quite asleep in bed surrounded by those gifts he refused to be without. Yes, I daresay this was a Christmas young Quon will never forget.

Later in the day we all get dressed in our finest outfits. Myself in an indigo and alabaster suit, young Quon in the charcoal number I had commissioned, and Traxton in a becoming black vest Miss Sinclair did choose for the occasion.

We stroll together to a newly-constructed meeting hall and are greeted by nearly the entire town equally spiffed in their finest raiment's. A man strikes up a lively tune on his fiddle, joined by a scintillating accompaniment struck upon a large tin pail. It is no philharmonic, but the tunes are buoyant and gay and succeed in setting happy couples spinning about in dance.

The Sinclair family is in attendance, and Traxton wastes no time engaging Miss Sinclair in a spirited cotillion. Young Quon is very quickly absorbed into the children's circle as the exuberant energy whisks the youngsters into games of chase and risk.

I content myself on a particularly robust glass of eggnog, and watch the spectacle unfold before me. All are dancing, some are singing, men who work their

hands raw every day of the year are cavorting for once without a care in the world.

At one point in the evening, that astoundingly absentminded denizen, Floyd America, does unsteadily take the stage and call for silence... "Quiet, quiet, everyone be quiet. I got something I'd like to say. On this good Christmas night, I want to tell my wife, Missus America, mother of my seven wonderful kids, that I think she's the... that's she's the - uh oh - BLAHHAGH! BLAHHAGH! BLAHHAGH!"

Oh God! That man vomits a cask's worth of eggnog upon the stage and upon the innocent fiddle player. Being in a forgiving mood, however, the town erects a set of stocks in the hall and allows Floyd America to remain with his family, held within his familiar confines.

While I harbor no thoughts of estrangement, it is a welcome show of friendship that Miss Sinclair does disentangle from her constant companion and bid me accompany her to the dance floor. She and I twirl about for no less than three successive songs, before we all retire to a large table headed by the pirate Cornelius Nutt, toasts a-ready.

"Raise your glasses, you landlubbers. Here's to Jesus!"

All at the table. "To Jesus!"

"And here's to booty!"

All at the table. "To booty!"

"And here's to America!"

All at the table. "To America!"

Floyd from the stocks. "Gee, thanks guys."

"Arr, not you, Floyd, to the real America!"

All at the table. "To the real America!"

What a day, and what a night. Who might have guessed that I would ever feel so at home in a backwoods village surrounded by the meekest of the

meek? But I do. I do feel at home amongst this group. As welcome and cared for as I ever felt back in England. Yes, I cannot think of anything that might make this Christmas any better...

A voice by the door calling out. "Alistair Evans Harris? Is there an Alistair Evans Harris in attendance?"

What is this? A man, just arrived layered for travel, dusted in fresh snow, is calling my name. What could possibly be the meaning of this? "I am Alistair Evans Harris. What, pray tell, is our business?"

"No business, sir. I've been dispatched with a correspondence all the way from Utah. Provo, Utah."

I nearly shove my way to him. "Provo? Provo, you say? Where is this correspondence? Ah, thank you. Thank you and Happy Christmas! Please, stay and be merry."

"Thank you kindly, sir."

The courier withdraws his snowy portmanteau and makes directly for the eggnog. I stare with wonderment at the envelope bearing my name in a delicately striking cursive. Such penmanship. This is assuredly inked by Judas' own hand. My heart skips a beat...

Traxton is all smiles. "Well, whatcha gonna do, Purple, stare at it all day?"

After the long weeks since I last saw Judas, this envelope does radiate an aura; is imbued with his essence. I gingerly pry apart the adhesive and am nearly overwhelmed by the faint traces of sawdust and campfire - the manliest of scents. Inside, I retrieve a letter and a recently-developed photograph of the man himself.

He is in an outdoor setting, one arm gallantly holding his sly-fox walking stick, the other, his top hat. His mustache has grown fuller, his hair is parted in a new manner as well. Oh how much he has changed! His

suit is of the finest quality and, although sepia-toned, I can tell his cravat is a deep lapis lazuli.

He is standing before a home, partially constructed. I can only speculate the manor is his own. There are eight Grecian columns, wide windows at generous intervals, and it seems the roof is nearly complete in capping the third story.

I open the letter, handsomely penned in his own longhand. Oh, how I ache for this man...

"Dearest Alistair, I am unsure if you remain in Dullsville, but given the early season snowfall reported along the mountain passes, I would venture you may be. I sincerely pray you are well and have come to a complete recovery after the unfortunate incident with the coyotes. As you may see for yourself, my home here in Provo is nearly actualized. I use the word 'actualized' with purpose, for one may never deem a home complete without someone with whom to share said home. I genuinely desire to someday pronounce my home complete... I wish you the happiest of Christmases and good fortune in the New Year. Profoundly Yours, Judas Buchanan."

Oh, how I was wrong... this Christmas was just made infinitely better! I am in his thoughts, he dispatched a courier just for me, and did insinuate his home is mine to share. My goodness this is a gift beyond measure. I must return to the saloon and set to task answering this man's glorious communiqué...

But... ought I answer him straight away? I do not wish to seem too eager. And without the funds I will soon acquire, what may I offer in return that is as grandiose as a veritable mansion? No... his position is too strong. Wait for me, Judas, in but a few months' time, I will be a man deserving of your affections; a man truly your equal.

I refold the letter and place his picture in my left breast pocket. Judas has given me much to ponder, and I lay in bed this night unable to rest for all the perfectly pleasing dreams I dream while yet awake; happy to be alive in a world containing a man such as Judas Buchanan...

Chapter 36

Traxton

February 4th, 1882

We got 'bout ten weeks 'fore that train of gold comes rumblin' through these parts. 'Tween me and Purple and Cornelius, and Cyndel too (even though I swore never to work with no female again), I think we're almost set on a plan. It'll take a few more men, so it's a good thing Juris Leland and Bluto, who I got into a shootout with, just got to town.

Juris is missin' more teeth by the looks of it. "Howdy, Traxton. These here folks the ones I'm the boss of?"

"Juris, you must be outta your goddamn mind. You blown up the last train you tried to take and the gold with it. Me and this man, Purple, is the bosses. We clear?"

He tongues a tooth-hole. "Long as there's gold at the end... we clear..."

Tomorrow's an important day for our plans. There's a train comin' on the track Wayland Wiggle tied Cyndel up to what's got a cargo we'll be in need of. So I guess you could say we gotta rob a train so that we can rob a train.

We don't need the whole train though, just a prize what's on its way from Philadelphia. This were part of the plan Purple came up with. To hear him tell it, there's an invention called sulfur mustards some cockamamie scientists is messin' with. 'Spoused to set

your eyes to burnin' and skin to boilin' somethin' awful...

Purple's always readin' newspapers and periodicals as they make their way out to Dullsville. Seems the Sioux what took down General Custer five years ago is raisin' a ruckus again up in Montana. The government figured they'd try out this mustard poison 'stead of sendin' in the infantry.

And that poison's what we mean to steal tomorrow...

This train won't be runnin' half as fast as the train with the gold, so the first step is to ride up 'long side it, and me, Cyndel, and Bluto is gonna jump on and make for safety. Once we're aboard, the four of us is gonna go car by car 'til we find the one with the mess in it.

Should be simple enough; it ain't somethin' folks would think worth stealin' so there won't be no guards... then after we do find it, Purple, Quon, and Juris'll be waitin' thirty miles up a ways with fresh mounts. We'll have to shove the crate out the hatch then jump ourselves. Ain't too much fun jumpin' from a movin' train onto land, so we plan on doin' so when we're up on a bridge over water.

Cornelius Nutt is gonna be waitin' down below, captain of a little row boat or somethin' to rescue us in. If all goes accordin' to plan, we'll be in and out and on our way home in one hour flat. To that end, Purple bought me a pocket watch to keep track of when we'll be over the water. 'Cause if we miss it, we either jumpin' onto hard dirt or ridin' all the way to Montana...

I introduced Bluto to the rest of the gang just yesterday. He's still got that ring of metal I put 'round his head... still racist as hell too, but once a man's over a certain age the only thing that'll cure him of that is death.

"Hey, Bluto, you alright ridin' with Quon and Purple given they're not 'Merican?"

"No, I ain't. I hate 'em more than dirt. But gold is gold."

"That's a rotten thing to say there, Bluto, you best not get to whoppin' on 'em, or it'll be yer hide."

The train we found out by pure luck. Was a trader what came through town sayin' how excited he was to see his daughter. Had a letter by her sayin' she'd be in from Philadelphia on February 6th, and that her tickets was sold cheaper than normal 'cause of some military secret on board what could be dangerous. Purple put two and two together and figured that had to be the train with the poison meant for them injuns.

It'll be strange ridin' with Cyndel by my side. We had a lot of time since she said she loved me to speak on what adventurin' does to a man, but Cyndel only sees the good in it - never the consequences. I 'spose that's my fault for never really gettin' caught... I make illegal things seem easy and fun. Of course, I ain't never told her the whole story 'bout how we took the stagecoach. If she heard what that cost me, she might up and walk away from me forever.

It still smarts to think on that day... probly always will...

Anyhow, we leave at night under cover of darkness, all seven of us on our own horses makin' for the tracks. 'Long the way we actually find the body of the man I shot while rescuin' Cyndel last October. It's been picked clean by the coyotes, but most of his face is still on him. I do the sign of the cross and ride right on by.

After a number of hours, we get to where we plan on catchin' the train. We sit 'round a middle-sized fire listenin' to one of Cornelius Nutt's tall tales... "Aye, this be the one where me mate, Long Benjamin Brown,

made the dire mistake of capturing a ship bound from Italy."

Quon loves it. "Why was it a mistake, Captain Nutt?"

"I'll tell ya, laddie, it's due to that ship carryin' a whole circus family from Naples. Once Long Ben did raise the Jolly Roger, all manner of briny hell broke loose. The Flyin' Cappelli Brothers did a trapeze act overhead and tore Long Ben's sails in the process. Francesca Cappelli ambushed the first mate by walking the mizzen mast like a tightrope. The wee Cappelli Cousins even entered the damn cannons and fired themselves at Long Ben and his marauders. But then they let the dancin' bear free and it was a massacre the likes of which the sea had never seen..."

Bluto spits in the fire. "May God damn all spaghetti eatin' 'Tilians."

"Alright, calm down there, Bluto, it's just a story is all..."

We each of us wake up after a restful night in the cold. The fire did a good job of keepin' us warm, and Cyndel even let me sleep beside her. I ain't get to poke, but I did get a good sense of what her bottom feels like through the blanket. 'Cause of that though, I got a case of the mornin' wood what won't go down...

After camp's tidied up, Purple and me shake hands and nod understandin'. When they're gone there's not much left to do but wait on this train...

Cyndel's in her saddle readin' some book called *Through the Lookin' Glass*. Bluto's got his finger in his nose damn near to the third knuckle. I'm not doin' shit but watchin' these tracks... waitin' to hear the train whistle.

Four hours later, I hear the noise I've been hopin' for: Here comes the train! We walk our horses over behind a slight hill so the train's engineer won't

catch sight of us. The big metal monster's runnin' at full speed; black smoke seen for miles and miles... well, here goes nothin'...

After the caboose passes by the hill we all kick our horses forward at the same time. Bluto's on the left side of the tracks, me and Cyndel on the right. We're spurrin' our mounts and hollerin' as we go... smokes gettin' in our eyes and that fool Bluto's horse keeps sendin' little rocks back in our direction as she runs.

It's him who catches the caboose first, reachin' one big paw and grabbin' hold of the railin'. With the metal funnel from my blunderbuss still wrapped 'round his head it's a bit of a surprise he can see so good. Bluto stands in his stirrups, swings one big leg over his horse's head, and simply steps right on over to the train easy as pie.

I shout over the noise. "Alright, Cyndel, you seen what he done? Now you do it."

Cyndel's better at ridin' than I am, so gallops on up to the caboose no problem. Her arms and legs ain't nearly as long as Bluto's, which normally's a good thing keepin' her from bein' a giant and all, but they would be rather useful in this case. She's flailin' over and over tryin' to grab hold of that rail. Finally, leanin' almost sideways, she grabs hold of the caboose, and sorta lets the train pull her off.

Bluto reaches down and snatches her by the wrists, pullin' her on up and over the railin'. That son of a bitch presses his own body hard 'gainst hers as he sets her down, makin' sure to get a good feel of those ninnies with his face while he's at it.

Bluto looks me wild in the eyes and shouts loud. "They're good, Traxton... real good..."

Dammit, that sets my blood to boilin' while I got a job to do. It's my fault for bringin' a female to work with me... but this here's the cost for her affections, so I

guess I gotta do it. But I'll remember that for later, Bluto... I'll remember.

When she's settled, I gallop my horse on up to the caboose and grab the rail on my first try. After missin' those tin cans and bein' thrown in jail in Ronson, it's good to finally show Cyndel I know what I'm doin'. I snake my right foot out the stirrup, swing it over my horse's head, and hop on easy as you please.

I take her hand as I arrive. "Well, alright. That weren't so bad now was it? Let's go."

The door to the caboose is open, so we just let ourselves in. There we find the usual crew's quarters, coal stove, stacked beds, little eatin' area with a deck of cards sittin' on it... ain't nobody here now (which is good for them) as they're all probly up there shovelin' coal or mannin' the chow car.

This here's a mixed train so there's passenger cars and boxcars both. The passenger cars is at the back so we're gonna have to walk through them all to get to the freight. The first car, or last car dependin' on how you see it, is the sleeper car for the rich folks. It's only three or four cabins in here so we don't see anyone as we pass through.

The next car is for people with money but who ain't as rich as the others. Rooms are smaller, but least they get to lie down a bit. No sign of movement, crew and passenger both. Sights of Wyoming blurry outside as we move along. The next car is the chow car. There's tables by the windows on both sides. A few folks is havin' lunch, readin' papers, mindin' their own business. We keep movin'...

The next car is for regular people makin' their way 'cross the country. The seats are all they got for the hours or days they'll be on this train. It's way more loud in this car as there's children playin' and carryin' on. A

crewman with a face full of soot walks past us, but don't seem to take no notice.

The next car is where the real poor folks go. Somethin' like sixty seats in a room made for forty. These poor sons of bitches is crammed in so tight it may as well be a freight car. Oh well, beats walkin' I 'spose.

I look back and find that Cyndel's exchangin' a few words with a fella so fat I took him as two fellas... ain't that always the way? Women love nothin' more than startin' things at that exact time when they shouldn't... aww, hell...

She grabs my attention. "Traxton, this man could do with a lesson in courtesy."

My name! She said my name. Goddammit... I knew she weren't ready... and why can't females pick fights with other females? Why's it always with a man? Well, we ain't got time for this shit, so I grab her by the wrist and pull her through the door ignorin' whatever the fat man said to insult her.

Outside she gives me a look like she wants to have words, but that was the last of the passenger cars and we've got a job to do. I go on and climb up top of this here boxcar. Ain't nothin' special 'bout none of these far as I can tell. I will say the view from up here is somethin' - even if I'm freezin' both my balls off.

We make our way to the center of the car and I have big Bluto hold my ankles as I lay on my belly over the side and undo the door latch. I then pull it open and shake my leg so he knows to pull me back up. I lower myself down through the open door. One little swing and I'm in...

And I ain't alone... "Well, well, well, Traxton Rhodes. What in the sam hell is you doin' here?"

Chapter 37

Cyndel

February 5th, 1882

I successfully boarded a moving train! This is exhilarating!

Traxton joins us aboard and we make for the train's caboose. How cute! I had no idea these types of cars were so warmly appointed... A fine sitting area, stove, mounted pictures of crew members' family and friends.

We continue through the sleeping, dining, and general fare cars. In the final passenger car, folks are seated so close they'd need a shoehorn to fit anyone else in. The seats are built for two, but on one particular bench a grossly obese man has taken up the whole seat while a lanky man stands in the aisle beside him.

Now that just isn't right. I engage with the standing man. "Excuse me? Do you have a seat?"

He shrugs. "Ain't no seats left. Been standin' since Cleveland."

"*Since Cleveland*?! What's that, two days?"

"Yes ma'am, I reckon."

I address the large man. "And you, aren't these seats made for more than one person?"

He continues to read his paper, devouring a turkey leg. "Ain't my fault."

"He purchased a ticket, same as you, why not give him a chance to rest?"

Still, regarding his paper. "Can't. My feet hurt when I stand."

"Feet hurt when you stand? What sort of man are you?"

He ruffles his paper closed and finally looks my way. "Quit barkin' like a bitch or I'll mount ya like one."

The nerve! I will not dare suffer such an insult! "Traxton, this man could do with a lesson in courtesy."

Traxton looks at me as if I'm the one at fault for this man's behavior. Without a word in defense, he takes my wrist and pulls me from the room like a child. Unbelievable. I was only trying to right a tragic wrong. I bet he wouldn't sit silently if some heifer of a man was stealing the seat he'd paid for...

I'm about to say something to him about how rude he was back there when he drops to the roof of the train and Bluto holds him by the ankles as he slithers over the side. I don't know how fast we're going, but if the brute loses his grip, Traxton is almost surely dead. That's a lot of trust to place in a man like Bluto...

Traxton then lowers himself down and into the boxcar. A minute passes... it is really cold up here. As fast as we're going, and it being early February, I should have thought to bring a warmer coat. As it stands, I'm shivering and my teeth have begun to chatter...

Bluto looks me up and down. "You sweet on him or somethin'?"

"Excuse me?"

"Rhodes. You sweet on him?"

I warm just a little bit. "We are courting, yes."

"That's too bad. I'da paid good money to bone... still will if you wanna go... he'll be down there a while..."

Good Lord... what sort of men does Traxton keep company with? And why did he leave me up here to suffer Bluto's abuse? Well, I asked for an adventure

and will absolutely not stand here atop this speeding train while Traxton has all the fun below. I crouch down and lower myself into the open freight car door.

Bluto huffs. "You sure you wanna do that? Yer just a female."

I pay Bluto no mind and slide both legs over the side of the ledge. Oh, this is dangerous; I may have made a mistake. There is nothing to steady myself with... but I cannot climb back up, not after having begun. What will Bluto say? He would echo this incident at each and every occasion. No. I must continue.

I lower my hands and grip the edge of the car as hard as I may. The landscape is speeding by mere feet from my feet; colors blurry as any Impressionist painting. Steadying my legs, I drop down in a controlled (well, partially controlled) descent and experience a genuine burst of glee when my hold persists and am hanging mere inches away from the floor. I didn't fall! Yes, perhaps I am made out for this adventure business...

A voice from within the boxcar. "...and then, remember the time in Texas you broke Thomas Linden's record and plowed ten whores in one day?!"

What? Traxton and some grizzled old hobo are in the midst of a conversation. *This* is what has been keeping him?!

Traxton doesn't know I'm here. "*Ten?* You're rememberin' it wrong. It were twelve!"

I clear my throat. "*Ahem...*"

"Huh? Oh, shit... uh, Cyndel, when'd you get here? This is Zebulon Pilgreen. Zebulon, this here's my special lady, Miss Cyndel Sinclair."

The hobo brushes off a year's worth of dust from his hat. "Oh, uh, let me stand up. Don't get too many ladies fine as yourself in the boxcar. Had to kick

the last one out for screamin' too much. 'Course she was in the middle of havin' a baby, but some of us gotta sleep, you know what I mean?"

Oh, my God! Why does each associate of Traxton's appear more primitive than the last? This must be some miserable jest...

Traxton tries to recover. "Well, uh, Zebulon. We're after a crate of poison. You don't know nothin' 'bout that, do ya?"

Zebulon scratches his chin by way of scraggly beard. How old is he? Honestly, the man's skin looks far more like lizard-skin than human-skin. Is that the effect of long-term exposure to the elements? I wonder what their past truly is...

"Poison... poison... hell, Traxton, I don't know. Only thing of interest far as I can tell is this box with a skull and crossbones on it. Made a bed of it two days past, but got some awful itches on my skin so put it in the back of the car. Think that's it?"

Traxton's million-dollar grin crosses his face and he asks Zebulon to show him the box. Only when we start moving and shuffling crates around do I realize just how many people are on this freight car. My goodness, it is positively infested with hobos.

Hobos behind boxes, hobos on top of boxes, hobos *in* boxes... I even spot the remnants of a campfire made from burning up some of the real passenger's stowed luggage. Surely the railroad has some clue their shipping efforts have been compromised...

Near the back of the car, as promised, is a large crate with a skull and crossbones on the side in bold black paint. Zebulon assists in carrying it towards the open doorway and then both men pry it open with one of the crew's own crowbars.

Inside, packed in straw, are numerous mason jar-sized canisters similarly marked with skulls and

crossbones. This must be the prize we're after. Traxton checks the pocket-watch Mister Harris provided him.

"Ten minutes left. Not bad if I do say so myself."

The men raise the crate up to Bluto, then I go on up with the brute's help. As I'm being pulled back onto the roof of the train, I hear old Zebulon below: "From here I can see up your special lady's dress. You sure is a lucky man, Traxton Rhodes. She as good in the sack as I imagine she is?"

"Better. Woke up the whole town once..."

Zebulon laughs. "Weren't the first time you made a lady scream like that, by God."

The nerve! Why must this adventure be plagued by the lowest creatures and sentiments imaginable? I am constantly tossed back and forth between exhilaration and fury: Board a speeding train, be threatened with rape by a fat man; successfully climb down into a boxcar, hear about Traxton's past conquests; locate our mission's goal, listen to Traxton's bragging about events that have not ever happened... I watch as the man climbs up onto the roof of the train... I am furious... "Woke up the whole town, did I?"

He chuckles. "Oh, that weren't nothin'. Just a bit of man-talk, Cyndel..."

"Yes, I overheard some of your 'man-talk'... Twelve whores in one evening?"

He spits off the train. "Goddammit. I knew bringin' you along would mean trouble."

"I have done nothing but do my best."

He motions to the passenger car. "You picked a fight with a stranger!"

"You refused to defend my honor when he threatened me!"

His eyes go wild. "'Cause you said my name. *My name*, Cyndel. We could hang for this!"

"Well... you told Zebulon my name."

"Zebulon's an old crook. He'd rather die than talk."

"And you didn't even say anything when he looked up my dress!"

He points to my skirts. "Put on some damn pants if you don't want men lookin'."

"Fine, maybe I will."

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

He can't stay mad at me. "I love you, Cyndel." Nor I him. "I love you, Traxton! I'm having the best time!"

We stand there on the roof of the train kissing as the world rushes by a vivid mix of cold and wonder. All we need to do is talk about what upsets us. My parents never discuss their feelings and so are constantly at odds. This can work. This *will* work... I shall ensure it...

Bluto blurts behind us. "This is what we came for? Tastes like shit."

What? Oh... Bluto is standing with a half-full bottle of poison open in his palm. Did... did no one fill him in on what mustard poison was? Did he just drink half a bottle? OH! The veins in the his neck bulge as thick as fingers... this isn't good...

His tongue barely fits in his mouth. "What's happenin' to me?!"

Bluto's stomach grows instantly the size of a woman full-term. His boots burst, exposing bloated, near-spherical feet. He belches loud as thunder a green-yellow cloud of putrid fumes. Oh my... I never cared for the man, but... but this is horrendous...

Traxton moves us slowly away. "No offense there, Bluto, but I think you're 'bout to 'splode..."

Traxton wraps his arm around me and turns us both away from the man just before we hear a noise nearly as loud as a cannon report. We slowly turn to see

the aftermath... Bluto's massive duster flapping in the wind glued to the surface of the train by his sticky remains.

Traxton crosses himself. "Well... one less person we gotta pay out when all's said and done..."

Shocked by the incredible scene of carnage Bluto caused, I almost missed seeing Mistert Harris and Leland, along with young Quon, down below. We passed them. Honestly, now that we've seen this chemical in action, I doubt hurling a whole case of the stuff at them was the wisest idea in the first place.

How are we going to unload our cargo?

Traxton scratches his chin. "Well, hell... Purple never said this mess would 'splode people... How we gonna get this stuff off the train?"

"I was literally just thinking the exact same thing!"

We kiss again despite the gore, only resurfacing for air due to the train whistle blowing. How are we going to do this... hmm... oh, I have an idea... "Traxton, you remember Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, don't you?"

"That's the one where they go 'round the world in eighty days right?"

"Don't make me laugh, this is serious. Remember how they planned on landing?"

I make for Bluto's remains and pry apart the duster from the roof. The shreds of material that were his pants and shirt I hand to Traxton to slice into long fragments with his knife. I then tie off the duster to each of the four corners of the crate, being careful to make sure there are no knots or catches in the former clothing. And I couldn't have finished any sooner... here comes the lake!

We can see in the distance Cornelius Nutt aboard a row boat in the center of the lake. The train is

quickly approaching the bridge. Here we go... as we pass high above the water, I signal Traxton and he gives the crate a great big kick sending it over the side. It falls... it falls... and... YES! The duster catches the wind and opens up like a parachute slowing the crate's descent. Perfect! It glides down and touches lightly upon the water's surface.

My rogue smiles. "Yer a genius!"

Traxton hugs me like a proud father and loving husband all at once. I'm good at this adventuring business... great, even...

We hold hands and jump into the frigid waters below. As cold as this lake is, the excitement is pumping blood and keeping my body as warm as if it were July... I like this, my decision towards adventure.

Chapter 38

Alistair

March 27th, 1882

I am stupefied! Positively stupefied! Yong Quon and I departed for our daily constitutional, and what did we find plastered all about town? Wanted posters with Traxton's name and likeness depicted. Sought after in connection with a train robbery a few weeks past. How did they place him?

To hear him tell it, nothing went awry. Yes, Bluto combusted by self-inflicted sulfur ingestion, but besides that, nothing was amiss. We immediately return to the saloon, ripping down each and every poster we find, and pound upon Traxton's door, waking him in the process. "Who's out there knockin'?"

"Wake up, Traxton, this is an emergency!"

I hold the poster to eye-level so when the man opens his door, he is staring at none other than himself. "Oh shit. Where'd you find that?"

"All over town. You are infamous."

"Well, hell..."

I fold the poster. "Now see here, Traxton, how could this possibly have come to pass?"

"Some passengers may have heard my name..."

"*Your name*? I am astounded! How?!"

He scratches his chin, looking away. "Yea, uh, Bluto blurted it out while we was passin' through the poor people's cars."

Bluto! I knew involving an unrepentant churl was an ill-conceived notion. Why, oh why, did we ever

send that dispatch to the town without a name?
Unbelievable.

Traxton shrugs lightly. "Don't worry there, Purple, our geese ain't cooked yet. The law don't know nothin' for sure..."

A voice downstairs. "Traxton Rhodes! This here's the sheriff of Dullsville. C'mon down with your hands up."

Traxton rolls his eyes in seeming exasperation, then clears his throat and expectorates upon the landing. Oh bother, I hope he has more to confront this dilemma with than the notorious Traxton charm...

Young Quon and I both observe from above as the man walks casually down the stairs, arms raised, clad only in his undergarments. The sheriff has known Traxton for months now, and must surely feel somewhat peculiar aiming his rifle at a man he drank an entire bottle of tequila with just last week.

Traxton tips his hat. "Howdy, Carlisle. You don't mind if I have a drink, do ya?"

"That's *sheriff* Carlisle today, Traxton. And I don't mind at all... matter of fact, I'll have one with ya."

The two men seat themselves and order matching cups of warm mezcal. Traxton lights a loosely rolled cigarette and offers one to Sheriff Carlisle. The man thinks twice about it, then lowers his weapon and accepts the gift.

The sheriff knocks back his drink. "Alright now, what's this I hear 'bout you bein' on a train to Montana a few weeks back?"

"Train to Montana? Where'd you get that idea, Carlisle?"

The lawman frowns. "*Sheriff* Carlisle. Word came in that a man big as a house heard your name mentioned just before a crate of gifts the army was

sendin' some injuns went missin'. You sayin' you don't know nothin' 'bout that?"

His winning grin. "Sheriff Carlisle. I haven't been on a train in years. Upsets my stomach, all that jostlin' round."

"Uh huh... you got an alibi who'll swear to it?"

"I do. None other than Miss Cyndel Sinclair. Been with her every night since before Christmas. You'd believe her wouldn't you, sheriff?"

Now it's the sheriff's turn to grin. "Miss Sinclair? Hell yea I'd believe her. She's the pertiest girl in Dullsville, I'd believe anything she said."

"Great. Sorry you had to get up early for this, Sheriff Carlisle."

The lawman visibly eases up. "Case is closed, you can go back to callin' me Carlisle again. Well, I'll just go back and tap away on that newfangled telegraph thingamabob that it were all a big misunderstanding. Thanks for the drink, Traxton, see ya tomorrow for poker."

And with that, the sheriff snuffs his cigarette on the sole of his boot and walks out the swinging saloon doors. Traxton ascends the staircase wearing the smuggest of grins and pats my shoulder as he returns to his room. "And that's how it's done, buddy. That's how it's done. If you find any more of them wanted posters keep 'em for me, will ya? I got a collection goin'."

His door closes before I can answer him. I swear the man reinforces my notion that charisma is the pinnacle of all traits God may bestow. The man is virtually impervious to bad luck... well, aside the woman-in-distress incident...

Anyhow, that ordeal behind us, young Quon and I resume our scheduled constitutional on this brisk late-March morning. Ah, the air does wonders for one's essence.

As we stretch our legs, my mind wanders between the two most pressing issues of the day: The upcoming heist, and my impending reunion with Judas. One must precede the other, but both send my stomach reeling in anticipation. I simply cannot wait!

The heist is planned now in its entirety. It will be a daring action to say the least, requiring all of our combined talents and resolve. It will take place at dusk, and to that end, we took our cues from Cornelius Nutt's absurd tale of Old Baroo the ink-squirting squid - painted our stagecoach an imposing obsidian. Yes, our getaway will need to be swift, and a perfectly black vehicle will serve the occasion perfectly.

Then there is the matter of the sulfur mustards. It came as a bit of a shock that ingesting only half a bottle led to a complete combustion; the tribunes and quarterlies I read on the matter neglected to mention that aspect. I was under the impression fits of coughing and grossly irritated skin were the sole effects. Therefore, I have been hard at work testing the chemical first upon swine, then cows, then Traxton, and believe I have come up with the precise amount to generate maximum discomfort without inducing self-detonation.

How to board the train proved a perplexing conundrum, but, again, I rose to the task and have come up with an ingenious idea that - while decidedly mad - does see us all upon the faster-than-normal locomotive intact. It does require some particular grit on the part of young Quon, but his mettle has been tested time and again and the boy always rises to task.

The idea came as I was airily perusing the illuminated Homer I gave Traxton for Christmas. What may no person ever refuse? A gift. And what was the most notorious gift ever given? The Trojan Horse. To that end, we will be dispatching a crate addressed to

none other than the train's engineer whose name Mister Wiggle so fortuitously divulged.

We shall deposit this unscheduled gift at the station closest our position reserved for the end of the train's inaugural run. Inside the box, young Quon will lay in wait, supplied with ample ventilation, sufficient food stores, candles, reading materials, and the equipment needed for after his emergence. Once the crate is stored, the boy will escape his confines, casually approach the rear of the train, and affix two large metal meat-hooks to either side of the train's posterior.

Those hooks will be the apparatus of our delivery.

Using a post-hole digger, ten-foot twin beams will be placed precisely erect aside the tracks holding up a chain each, securely fastened to barrels, and within those barrels will be us, the invading party. The train will speed by, the hooks shall catch the chains, and we shall be whisked off upon a bumpy ride behind the locomotive. Then, if we haven't died, we scale the chains just as rats board moored ships.

Once aboard, we will judiciously deploy the sulfur mustards, car by car, protecting ourselves with heavy bolts of cloth through which we shall safely breathe. Once incapacitated, we bind each and every person on board before moving on with our poisonings.

Then, at a predetermined location, Cornelius Nutt will divert us all onto an unfinished section of track. We shall halt the train's progress and casually identify and unload the gold into the stagecoach, leaving the bound and gagged crewmen and mercenaries without their precious cargo.

And then... and then...

And then onto the great unknown. Will he, or won't he? Will I, or won't I? There is no need to pull at

petals to divine Judas' intentions, his letter conveyed his true feelings. But after all this time, will the flame of his desire burn as brightly? Will a union remain mutually reciprocated? Who can ever say?

Another scenario that has played itself out in my mind is that of Odysseus stuck on Ogygia; perpetually enamored by the nymph, Calypso. What man has not secretly harbored a desire to be so sinisterly captured?

Would that Judas and I could escape the world in such a manner... oh, what an existence... but known to me are the ways outside influences may interject. Am I crafting my own utopia? Utopia derives from the Greek: "no place"; Sir Thomas More invented the word with deliberate intent.

If there is no true perfection, how do we know when good is good enough? What true future may Judas and I achieve together? An existence defined by clandestine trysts and perpetual skullduggery? What, oh what, may we ever hope to achieve?

I steel my resolve; after the successful completion of our heist, I will away to Provo, comfortable in my decision for love. No matter where that road may lead. I choose myself. And by choosing myself, I am choosing Judas. The one is inseparable from the other...

Young Quon interjects upon my ruminations. "Mister Alistair, what sort of animal is that?"

Our charge and I are at that part of our constitutional where we generally return from whence we came: The outskirts of Dullsville. Towering mountains in the distance loom large in the vertical, green plains before command all horizontal. Yes... I suspect I will someday soon come to miss this part of the world.

I follow young Quon's gaze and spot a blur of white and black fur... rare, yes, but he ought to know

this creature's name and genus... "I believe we have learned of this creature."

"I don't remember what it's called."

I am his tutor, not his dictionary. "Yes you do, Quon. Consult the bestiary."

He cups his palm thoughtfully. "I don't have the bestiary."

"If you have seen it once, is it forever imprinted in your brain. It is all a matter of commanding the discipline to recall. What is the name, Quon? What is this creature called?"

He ponders thoughtfully. "It's a Canadian Lynx! Family: Felidae, genus: Lynx."

"Absolutely correct! Superb!"

It really is quite a majestic creature; pointed tufts and flared facial fur, the Canadian Lynx is an uncommon animal to sight in Wyoming. Young Quon grasps my hand as we silently observe the fuzzy feline's crouched movements.

A slight breeze blows past and I pull the child's coat tighter about his neck...

Yes, there is much I will miss once our journey together comes to an end. I wonder what will come of Young Quon. Surely Miss Sinclair's influence will prove providential; for the boy and for Traxton as well.

If only there was a way to convince them all towards Provo. But that seems a highly unlikely eventuality. Maybe I will adopt a child one day. Perhaps Judas and I might find a young child in need of a loving home. Yes, perhaps that is the cause of my recent melancholy... I have grown quite close to the lad and despair of foregoing him.

It is settled then. I shall make for Provo with my fortune, embrace Judas as only a conquering hero might, and immediately set to task locating a child we may raise as our own.

The perfect life; the perfect dream.

Now, the only obstacle that remains is taking and subduing a row of mercenaries aboard the world's fastest locomotive... facing death countless times in the process...

But... what's a little risk when the reward is as near a personal utopia as this world may offer?

Chapter 39

Traxton

April 19th, 1882

One day. One more day 'til the train we're gonna rob comes blastin' by like a bullet. All the preparations we could think of, we done. The coach is painted black, that mustard poison we put in containers what ain't so easy to break, got new guns and new horses, the barrel and chains contraption Purple made is all set to go, and the box what Quon'll be hidin' in all day is made up with water and food...

It's the whole bunch of us out here in the middle of nowhere. We got the black stagecoach near full of our supplies, plus the box for Quon up top. We're gonna put him in there tomorrow mornin' and leave it at the station to be picked up many hours later when the train passes by.

After that we gotta drive up a ways and set our barrels out beside the tracks. The barrels is connected to chains, the chains is connected high up to posts, which are close enough to the tracks that the meat-hooks will catch the chains lifting the barrels behind it like tin-cans tied to the back of the weddin' carriage. And we're the dummies who'll be in them tin-cans... It's a wild idea, but with all the guards at the station protectin' the train, there's no way we coulda snuck on board while they was stopped. No way in hell...

After we get the barrels ready, Cornelius Nutt is gonna ride the stagecoach up near seventy miles to an unfinished bit of track and pull the lever when he sees

us comin'. After that we take the gold and ride through the night easy as you please.

It's all of us out here 'bout an hour from the station where we'll box up little Quon. Cyndel (wearin' pants this time), Purple with his mustache done up extra fine, Juris Leland still smellin' of shit, Cornelius Nutt and his one good eye, and little Quon with his fine appaloosa.

We're all by the camp fire havin' a grand ol' time. Little Quon's on my lap thinkin' he can win at thumb-wrestling. Purple's got a book he's readin' by some guy with more letters in his last name than makes sense to have. Juris is chewin' on his 'baccer and spittin' in the fire. Cyndel's combin' out her hair. And that pirate Cornelius Nutt is doin' what he does best: "So, laddie, did I ever tell ya of the time we saw a moon-rock come crashing down from the sky?"

The boy loves these tales. "A moon-rock, Captain Nutt?"

"Aye, a moon-rock the size of ten of me ships landed in a big ball of fire right there in the ocean. It sent a massive wave straight for us. I had my men batten down the hatches as quick as they could, but that wave crashed sendin' Tattoo'd Timmy overboard. After the ship leveled out, we all gathered 'round the main mast to look at the oddest critter we'd ever seen."

Quon's practically bouncin'. "What was it, Captain Nutt? A fish?"

"Weren't no fish, laddie. No. This were an honest to goodness alien from another planet. Green face, no nose, and two eyeballs high above the fella's head on stems. Was Big Paul what tried to catch him first, but that alien shocked him so bad we saw Paul's bones right through his skin. After that none of us wanted nothin' to do with the fella. He just stayed on his own at the bow of the ship, watchin' the skies and

dreamin' of home. We made port and the alien up and took off runnin' for shore. Last I heard, the wee green man was crowned King of Trinidad, zappin' all who stood in his way. Now what do you say to that?"

Juris waves the pirate away. "I say that's horseshit. Ain't no aliens could whoop us humans..."

"Arr, the story was for the lad, Juris."

One by one, the lot of us falls asleep 'neath the stars; April bein' a warm welcome after the colds of winter. Juris is snorin' a few feet away from me, so I boot him one good one to shut him up. Cornelius Nutt gets some shut-eye - which is probly the only time that term's ever been used correctly, as he's only got one eye to shut. Cyndel's breathin' her normal sleepin' type of breathin' so I know she's down. And little Quon's been out for a while now... that just leaves me and Purple, side by side... "You reckon yer ready for this, Purple?"

"Yes... yes, I daresay I am."

I regard the stars. "It's a might bit different than you expected, ain't it? Comin' out west and all..."

"My family would not believe even one word of my doings..."

And there goes a comet. "That's what life's all 'bout now ain't it? Makin' stories to tell 'round the campfire... you reckon you'll go down to Provo after tomorrow?"

Purple nods, positive. "Yes. I've had Judas wait long enough."

Another comet! "Well good on you then. He's a lucky man to have ya and that's the truth of it."

"And you are a noble soul, Traxton. Despite our impending heist."

After that what's left to say? Both of us stare into the fire for a little while longer then bunker on down for the night. I'm just layin' here with my hands behind my head, listenin' to the sounds of nothin' when

I feel a tug on my sleeve. My eyes open and find Cyndel's crawled over real quiet like. She points with her eyes that she wants to walk away from the fire... now what's this all 'bout?

I get up, careful not to wake the camp, and both of us mosey on over to a long rock outcroppin'. "What's the matter, Cyndel? Can't sleep?"

She ain't her usual self. "I... tomorrow will be dangerous, won't it?"

"*Hell yea* it'll be dangerous! Dangerous as fuck!"

She takes my hand. "Well... I just wanted to say... whatever happens..."

"Hey, hey, hey. You don't ever walk into a situation like this with doubts. There's only one way this'll end, and that's with you and me bein' rich and happy forever."

She smiles devious-like. "Right... well, if you're so sure we'll come out of this alive, then I guess there's no reason for the good-luck gift I had for you."

"What sorta good-luck gift?"

She raises her eyebrows in answer, squeezin' my hand.

I pull down my trousers faster than I can pull a gun. Cyndel smiles in the moonlight at how anxious I am to get to sexin'. But this here's what I'm best at in the whole world, and it's a tough thing not to get to show off to your woman what you're best at.

Now she's just teasin'. "I thought you didn't need good-luck?"

"I was wrong. We're all dead as door-nails tomorrow..."

Yee haw! It's been months and months since I got to do this, and for a man like me, that's like goin' months and months without eatin'. Or a few days without drinkin'.

Anyhow, I pull off her pants (somethin' no man's ever had to do before, I reckon), then her shirt - and there - moonbeams shinin' on the face of God - Cyndel Sinclair's ninnies.

Hand on the Bible, they're the best things I ever laid my eyes on. Better than the royal flush I got one time without cheatin', better than the Grand Canyon, better even than the sunlight after gettin' free from that coffin months ago... these here ninnies are the best and most fine things that are able to be in this world.

We shoulda walked further from the camp... I'm gonna make her wake them fools up more than once...

These rocks ain't the softest place for a woman to be made love to, but if Cyndel's uncomfortable, she ain't said nothin'. Matter of fact, she ain't said shit the past half hour 'cept "Oh God, oh Traxton, oh God, oh Traxton, oh God, oh Traxton!" Yessir. This female finally knows what I'm all 'bout...

After we're finished we go again.

After that we go again, again.

The rocks themselves look like a wave hit 'em as wet as they are, so Cyndel and me lay on the ground instead. Her head's pressed up to my heart; the most beautifullest thing in the world... so beautiful even the stars somehow seem less impressive.

When we do make our way back to the campsite, Cyndel's walkin' like she's been on a horse at full gallop for a week. Yes sir, I do know my trade. At the fire, we sneak back under our blankets, and just as we're layin' down to sleep, each and every one of these scoundrels - even little Quon! - starts clappin' for us.

I wave them off. "Alright, alright, it ain't what y'all think..."

The captain winks his one good eye. "Arr, matey, that's what seamen call crackin' the tea cup."

Purple brushes his blanket off. "Shakespeare referred to it as 'making the beast with two backs.'"

Juris flashes a missin'-tooth grin. "Mother called it makin' cunny-money..."

I throw some dirt on the lot of 'em. "This here's my woman y'all are talkin' 'bout..."

Cyndel stands her ground and smiles. "It's fine, Traxton. I know this group of malcontents by now and can say, without reservation, that each and every one of you had intercourse this evening... with yourselves..."

Juris scoffs. "Well, that ain't no secret!"

Cyndel smirks. "We know, Juris, next time do it *under* your horse-blanket."

Yessir... the perfect woman... she's into raisin' a ruckus, and she'll get on my friends 'bout scrubbin' their carrots... I done hit the motherload. And come tomorrow, I'll be hittin' another motherload... yessir... it's a fine, fine life I've got...

We all wake up just before sunrise. Young Quon and Purple doin' their stretches, Cornelius Nutt boilin' the coffee, Juris Leland got a case of the mud-butt over yonder ways, and Cyndel is doin' her hair up in pins so it don't get caught while she's climbin' the chain later today.

Yup. I'm proud of this little gang we've put together. Damn proud. It'll be a pity to not see them after tonight, 'specially Purple. That man's the closest thing to a brother I ever had. Hate to lose him, but losin' him to love's a worthy reason I 'spose...

Anyhow, I'll have Cyndel and I'll have little Quon...

Speakin' of little Quon. I got him somethin' special for the occasion. Nothin' too crazy, but he's got maybe the most important part of the plan, so I figure it's only right to send him off with a prize all boys'll be jealous of. "Quon, this here's your very own gun."

His eyes are bigger than the moon was last night. "My very own gun!"

"Six maybe is a bit too young for somethin' like this. But since you don't even know when your birthday is, I say today's your birthday. Now you're seven!"

"I'm *seven!*?"

I hand the boy his weapon. "Yes you are, little man. And there's the gun to prove it."

It's a solid revolver, probly too heavy for him, but he's gettin' stronger every day it seems like. And with all the practicin' we've been doin', it's time he learned to take care of one proper...

After we pack up camp in the pitch-black stagecoach, we make for the town where we're droppin' off little Quon. Almost there, we put the boy in the box and light a candle for him inside. It'll be a comfy enough ride for him... 'long as they don't turn the box on its head that is...

Just before we close the top, I take that boy and put him in a big hug. I do love this boy and I don't care who knows it... "I'm mighty proud of you, son. You know that, right?"

I feel his smile pressed to my neck. "I do know, Papa... but I like when you say it."

"After today, it's gonna be me, you, and Miss Sinclair for good, ya hear me? And we can go wherever you want."

"I like that plan, Papa."

"Good. Now go on and read your books, and remember, when the pocket watch says it's eleven at night, you go on and come out the way we show'd you."

After that we close up the box and me and Purple carry him over to where the other freight is waitin' by the side of the tracks.

Oh Lord, if you're up there, watch out for this boy. And, matter of fact, watch out for all of us, will

ya? 'Cause you damn well know we know not what we do...

Chapter 40

Alistair

April 20th, 1882

What in heaven's name was I thinking? Meat-hooks placed by a six-year-old... well... *seven-year-old* boy that will catch the chains connected to the very same barrels we are standing in at this very moment? Insanity. Insanity I say!

"Purple, you're lookin' a bit green, you alright over there?"

"Yes, yes, I am perfectly fine, thank you for asking."

I am not fine. This is an untested theory at best. Yes, the chains are solidly constructed, the barrels fashioned by a master cooper, and the poles we erected are at precisely the distance for the hooks to catch the chains... all is hypothetically sound... but surely, this is insanity...

After we dropped off the boy, we rode for five hours following the railroad into the wilderness. At this distance, young Quon will have approximately thirty minutes in which to exit his confines, work his way to the rear of the train, and affix the two hooks upon the guardrail.

The pirate, Cornelius Nutt, after we unloaded the barrels and chains at this remote location, did withdraw post-haste to our point of rendezvous seventy miles away. That will give us only a little more than an hour to climb aboard, subdue the passengers, and apply

the brakes after the train is diverted. We'll never make it...

The barrels are lined-up directly adjacent the tracks. On the southern side, Traxton and Miss Sinclair occupy one together, and on the northern side, Juris Leland and I are unpleasantly sandwiched in our own.

It is eerily quiet this far from civilization, but soon that will be precisely the opposite. A train hurtling down the tracks will catch the chains and we will bounce and bob behind the locomotive as we shimmy our way up to salvation. Absurd... absurd...

It has been eleven hours and twenty-seven minutes since Cornelius Nutt's departure, meaning the train ought to be along in only five more ticks of the long hand. Curious I have not heard the whistle; I pray nothing has gone awry.

There are so many thoughts that run through... Oh no! Here comes the train... here comes the train... Alistair, this is it... the moment of truth... the whistle... the whistle is growing louder... the light on the train is growing closer, closer, closer still - like the light at the end of the tunnel those who have experienced near-death attest to witnessing...

Louder and louder still, the black train contrasts against the black night; black smoke seen only by the light of the moon. Oh God, what have we done? I must get out of this barrel!

Traxton shouts. "Here we go! Don't y'all get scared now!"

The train rushes past our position with a gust of wind nearly toppling us over. It is so completely loud that I cannot even hear Juris Leland's screaming, despite his mouth being inches from my ear. The cars pass in the blink of an eye, and now we shall see if young Quon was successful in his mission... one... two...

THREE!

The hooks catch our chains and with a jarring, neck-breaking velocity, we are launched after the train at an incredible speed. Juris' eyes are as wide as saucers, both of us gripping the rim of our barrel for dear life. The barrel is bucking, rebounding, vaulting, and ricocheting in every direction. I can barely summon the wherewithal to make an appraisal, but do force myself to confirm young Quon's presence aboard and Traxton's barrel having been snagged and dragged behind the train same as ours.

Good, we are all of us still together. Now to climb... I tap on Juris' shoulder and point towards the chain, indicating my intention to attempt the climb. He nods his understanding and, if my eyes are not deceiving me, wipes tears from off his face. Yes, I suppose this is an appropriate time to cry.

I reach forward and begin the arduous process of scaling this chain. A momentary glance confirms Miss Sinclair has begun her gauntlet as well. I pull myself free from my confines, back nearly touching the ground with each bumpy recoil, and press my feet hard against the rim of the barrel.

I then wrap my legs around the chain and begin the death-defying ascent. At least I am looking towards the sky. From this angle I can make an honest effort at ignoring my surroundings; concentrating on the heavens and forgetting about the earthly hell just below. Inch by devastating inch I draw closer; propelling myself with a will I was not even aware I possessed. So excruciatingly close to death, I feel supremely alive...

My muscles strain; sparks ignite as the metal rings around the barrel clang against the track. Loose gravel pelts incessantly, I climb. A blast from the train's whistle touches my soul. Man and machine, we are one.

I touch upon the guardrail above me! Grab it, hold it, take it with my other hand and pull myself to safety. I unwind my leg and reach and... I am aboard! I am aboard! Quon! I take young Quon into my arms. "Quon! You are victorious!"

The boy is wearing a smile from ear to ear. "Mister Alistair, I did just like you and papa said."

"Yes, you did, yes you did, my boy! Capital! Capital! Capital!"

I return the boy to the platform and inspect Miss Sinclair's progress. She is nearly arrived. Her wearing men's pants seemed an egregious breach of propriety, but I must concede, in the context of an aerial train boarding it was a wise decision.

She reaches the guardrail and places her hand aboard, contorting and reaching her leg for the platform, at which point I take hold of her wrist and assist her to safety. She climbs over the rail and hugs me. "Oh, good God, I pissed myself, but I made it! I made it!"

Yes, the pants she is wearing do now possess an off-color stain in the expected area. But, given the extreme nature of what she just now accomplished, one can understand her undignified evacuation. We turn back to observe Traxton and Juris' attempts.

The barrels, with significantly less weight, are now bouncing behind the train uncontrollably hither and yon. In fact, one particularly spirited bounce by Traxton's barrel sends him above our height crashing down on the other side of the tracks erupting the barrel into a million splintered shards, leaving the chain loose like a ribbon flapping in the wind...

Luckily, Traxton had already reached that point in his climb where the chain is higher than the ground, so is not presently being dragged in the dirt (which

would surely spell doom). He climbs, hand over hand, until... YES! He has arrived!

The man summits the rail, kisses Cyndel and even myself upon the cheek, and lifts young Quon in the air squeezing the breath out of him. "Hell yea, d'you see that?! Your crazy-ass plan worked, Purple! It worked!"

All that remains is for Juris Leland to make the train. He is discernably nervous; shaking far beyond what even this situation calls for. Traxton grabs hold of the chain and makes an attempt to reel him in, but the barrel is too heavy; no man is strong enough for such a feat.

Juris has barely made a foot's worth of progress in the last minute. Surely he understands time is of the essence? I suppose he has more pressing concerns... such as his being launched in the air even higher than Traxton was! His barrel lands exploding to oblivion - completely erasing evidence that there once was a barrel at all.

The fear in Juris' eyes is absolute; there is no room in his being for any other emotion as he is currently dragged behind the speeding locomotive. His pants instantly become tatters, wounds freshly scraped appear in their multitudes, and the man screams... boy, does he scream.

With the barrel eliminated, Traxton attempts once again to reel Juris in, this time with success. I join in the effort, pulling with all the strength I can muster... closer, closer, closer... and yes! Miss Sinclair reaches out, takes Juris by the wrists, and helps him on board.

The man is shaking. "I shit myself, I shit myself, I shit myself... oh Lord, I shit myself..."

Traxton inspects what's left of Juris' trousers. "You sure did, Juris, goddamn..."

We made it... we actually made it on board! I withdraw the meat-hooks from the guardrail and toss them as litter behind the train. We each do a personal inventory. Sulfur mustards are miraculously intact, guns holstered, bolts of cloth in good order. Yes. I feel confident enough to declare this first stage a complete success!

Now for the difficult part...

Young Quon informs us he had to walk through two sleeping cars, a club car, and three passenger cars after departing his crate in a freight area. He was addressed only once, by one of the train's patrons, and had the wherewithal to inform the man he was a waiter from the club car. The man ordered a salami sandwich on rye, hold the mustard. Ironically enough, the only item he may hope to have delivered is mustard. *Sulfur mustards*, that is.

We each of us cover our faces with the thick bolts of cloth we brought; Miss Sinclair thoughtfully assisting the boy with his own.

Traxton takes point. "Alright now, easy does it. I'm gonna throw this bottle into the middle of the car, and after it breaks, people will be chokin' somethin' awful. We tie 'em up and move on to the next car. Anyone gives you trouble, knock 'em in the head. These are innocent people, so no shootin' 'less you have to..."

Instructions conveyed, we maneuver through the finely appointed caboose, and brace ourself for bedlam. Traxton opens the door to the passenger car, uncorks his bottle of sulfur mustards, and lobs it between the passengers overhead.

Such a powerful concoction; men begin hacking and coughing almost immediately, radiating from the point of landing to the front- and rear-ends of the car with resounding speed. Each and every person in the car is doubled over in fits and convulsions. Traxton bids

us move forward with our thin strips of leather. First we bind their wrists, then we bind directly to the metal couplings fastening the benches to the floor.

"This here's a robbery, don't nobody move!"

One man, presumably a nondescript mercenary, attempts to resist, but in his weakened state is easy enough to subdue with a swift blow to the solar plexus. Another upstart makes for the door, but Juris extends his leg and causes the fellow to render himself unconscious as his head hits the ground.

We work diligently binding and lashing, binding and lashing. People are not thrilled with being tied up, but are in no position to resist as the need to breathe is a more natural instinct than self-defense. After the final passenger is bound, we begin at either end and double-check our efforts for all we need is some hero surprising us...

Every person suitably strung, we meet by the door to the following car. "Alright. That was perfect. Two more and we're golden. Let's go."

Traxton lobs in another opened bottle of the poison and we repeat the process all over again. This time one man attempts to ignore his need for oxygen and nearly levels a pistol in my direction, but Traxton swiftly dispatches him with a nose-crushing blow from his pistol's grip.

Another man Miss Sinclair quells with an unexpected open-palmed swipe to the jugular... impressive...

We bind this group in exactly the same manner as the last and finish off by ensuring our work was thorough. Young Quon discovers two men Juris tied who were nearly escaped... I rush over and secure their bonds...

Two down, one to go.

We exit this car and move on to the next. So far, so good. Traxton hurls yet another vile potion into the car and again, passengers fall in paroxysmal fits and spasms. This is all too easy...

"Alright, this here's a robbery. Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt."

A stranger's voice above the chaos... "Hey, I know you... You're..."

Traxton slams the barrel of his gun into the man's head before he has a chance to complete his sentence...

Chapter 41

Traxton

April 20th, 1882

Dammit. All was goin' accordin' to plan when who do I spot 'bout to say my name, but none other than Swinney Mortimer. I gun-butt that fool then his brother Ryland looks me in the eyes and sure as shit knows who I am. What the hell are they doin' on board?

"Keep your mouth shut if you wanna live."

We go through the cabin tyin' everybody down same as in the other two cars. One tough bastard grabs Juris by the shoulder, but crazy Leland puts him in a headlock and falls with him. After that no one else makes the slightest move to stop us. We tie the whole room to the metal posts under their seats then I grab Ryland and Swinney and bring 'em outside the car to have a little chat. "What the hell is you two doin' here?"

Ryland's red in the face for the mustards. "Same as you. We're gonna rob this train."

"How'd you two even get aboard?"

Swinney shrugs. "Bought tickets back in New York City. You ever been there? The whores in that town... how'd you get on board?"

"Long story. Well, seein' as you boys are here, you may as well make yourselves useful. Guard this door and make sure nobody moves."

"Alright, but what about our pa's cut?"

I ain't got time for this. "He ain't here, is he? You two'll get paid and that's all. Take it or leave it."

The two brothers look at each other and shrug their shoulders. Some money's always better than no money and they know it. Those two post up to guard the door and we move on to the club car. There's only three folks in that one so we make quick work and move on to the sleepers.

Here we go room by room, guns drawn, and tie up the rich folks. In one of the sleepers we find a couple doin' exactly what Cyndel and me did last night so they get tied up nekkid as can be for their troubles. I betcha the fella don't mind it one bit. In another sleeper we find a man passed out drunk, so we don't even bother to wake him, just tie him up to his bed...

We finish up the second sleeper car even faster than the first. I check my pocket-watch and find we got a good twenty minutes to reach the conductor. No problem. All we got left is some freight cars, a coal car, and we're done. I swear I thought it would be harder than this... but when you make good plans things just have a way of workin' out...

A voice behind us. "Alright, don't none of you move!"

Shit. Spoke too soon. All five of us turn 'round and find a big 'ol man with a serious weapon pointed in our direction. Juris! I know Juris was the man what tied this one up. Goddammit!

The mercenary ain't too happy neither. "You thought you could rob this train, did ya? Well it'll be the gallows for the lot of ya. Even this female in pants and the wee Chinese'll hang. Now hands to the sky!"

What to do 'bout this one? I 'spose I could charge him and hope I only get shot in an arm or shoulder, but that don't seem like a good idea at all. But if I don't do somethin' soon, we'll all be bound for the gallows.

I speak up. "What happened to the two men we left back there?"

"Shot 'em and shoved' em off the train. Now raise your arms or you're next!"

Poor Swinney and Ryland. Their pa won't take that news too kindly, I'm sure. But what is there I could've done? They knew how dangerous this would be before they set out. 'Least they got some quality whores back in New York 'fore they died. That's as good a partin' gift as anyone could hope for.

No time to think on that now. How are we gonna deal with this man. I look 'round and see fear in Cyndel's eyes. This ain't right. This can't be how this ride ends. I make the decision to charge this man; if I die then at least she'll go on to live a good, long life.

Well... I guess this is it...

But then Juris moves on him! Juris, the worst and most cowardly man I ever knew, runs straight for him...

BANG!

Juris gets shot in the stomach but still falls on top of the mercenary. We rush on over and Purple boots that man in the head. I take hold of Juris as Cyndel and Purple tie that mercenary up.

Juris is banged up somethin' awful. "Oh Traxton, Traxton... I'm a goner for sure. The whole kit and caboodle. You think they got whores in heaven?"

"I don't rightly know, but I pray there is each and every day."

He checks his new gut-hole. "Won't be long now. Oh, he got me... the bastard got me good..."

"Was a brave thing you did, Juris. There anythin' I can do to make things right?"

He can't barely speak no more. "Yea... there is... use my portion of the gold to build me one of those mausoleums, will ya? Somethin' big to honor the

Leland family name. Maybe a statue... ten feet... no, twenty feet high. You'll do that for me, won't ya?"

"I sure will, Juris. It'll be bigger than that cockamamie Statue of Liberty everyone's talkin' 'bout."

"Good... good... I do deserve it... oh God... oh..."

And like that, the man's gone. Juris I've known for almost ten years. He made it longer than most men what choose this way of life. And for that he earned my respect... even if he did die with his pants torn and full of his own shit.

Cyndel places her hand on my shoulder and Purple looks like he's sayin' a prayer. "That is a kind and noble gesture, Traxton... erecting a statue in his name."

"What? I ain't doin' no such thing. Biggest waste of money ever is spendin' money on the dead."

"But you said you would; it was his dying wish!"

I stand to keep goin'. "You wanna build one so bad, you do it."

Purple begins to say somethin' but closes his mouth. He knows damn well he ain't spendin' one damn dime on no damn mausoleum. Juris was a decent man, but who in their right mind would build a statue for a fellow like that?

"C'mon, time's runnin' out."

We head out the second sleepin' car and climb on up top of the freight car. From up here I can't rightly see shit. It's the middle of the night and the moon's gone off behind the clouds. We move as fast as we can over this car, the next car, the coal car, then jump down in the engineer's room, guns drawn.

The engineer's havin' a smoke. "Alright, partner. We're takin' this here train. Only thing you gotta decide is if you wanna be dead or alive when we do it."

The man raises his hands. "Alive."

"That's what I thought. We're gonna be switchin' tracks in a minute then I want you to hit the brakes hard, you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The train speeds on fast as ever. Right on time, we veer left onto another set of tracks and I can make out the black stagecoach ridin' 'side us for a minute. The conductor pulls on some switches and just when I thought the train couldn't get any louder, it gets louder than the devil takin' a shit too big for his unholy hole.

We screech to a halt in the middle of nowhere and all of a sudden it's silent. So silent I can hear all our heartbeats beatin' in our chests. We did it... Goddamn, we did it! We took this train and soon we'll be richer than the most rich men in America. Holy shit...

I tie the engineer to his seat then we all jump down onto the ground. We did it... my God we did it! I scoop up Cyndel and we kiss right there in the night. Purple's got little Quon picked up and they're both dancin' in a circle like crazy people.

We stop kissin' then we all get to huggin' like we just survived an injun attack.

Purple's got my face in his hands. "By Jove, we've done it."

I hug him close. "Yes, Purple, yes we did."

The black stagecoach pulls up behind us and Cornelius Nutt hops on down and joins in our fun. Oh Lord, I wish I could put into words how good this feels. We stopped the fastest train in the world and are now goin' to take all her gold...

Gold...

"Alright, we ain't through yet. We gotta find this gold we're here for."

The next hour or so we're in the boxcars tearin' open crate after crate and ain't found shit. We find all

sorts of other things like personal effects, fancy goods, and knickknacks. But no gold.

It's turnin' into a landfill here beside the train as we open a crate, toss out the contents, and move on to the next crate. We find some paintin's Purple's awful fond of, some things what would fetch a good amount if we fenced it, even a wild animal little Quon tells me is called a platypus.

I kick the platypus box. "That's all fine and dandy there, Quon, but we ain't here for no gull-darned platypus. Where's the gold?!"

We open crate after crate of this bullshit, and now there's only two boxes left. That's gotta be the gold.

I open the first one and find nothin' but some fancy weddin' dress both Cyndel and Purple tell me is from Paris. But I don't care if this dress came all the way from China like little Quon did, I don't want no weddin' dress. It's gotta be this last one. I look 'round the room as all of us can't wait to see what's in there. Since its gotta be the gold, I take this moment to say a few words: "Well, it's a lot less than we thought it was, but even if this crate's only half filled with gold, we'll all live out the rest of our days rich as can be. I wanna thank all of y'all for your hard work - I know this weren't easy. Now... let's all take a look at this here gold!"

I shove the crowbar 'tween the box and the lid and pop it off no problem. All of us look down into the box and find... some goddamned porcelain dolls! Dolls! "NOOOO!"

There's no gold! No gold on this train! There's no gold! Where the hell could it have gone? Wiggle! That man Wiggle must've gone back on his word and switched trains. Oh, I'm gonna ride to Chicago right now and shoot that man in his wormy face! No gold!

I kick the crate. "It ain't fair! It ain't fair, it ain't fair, it ain't fair! Where's the gold? We earned it! Where the hell's our gold!?"

Nobody's got an answer for me. We're all standin' 'round the box of dolls like a bunch of fools. Juris died for these dolls. Dolls! How am I 'sposed to retire with dolls? They don't give mansions to folks what pay in dolls... oh God, why'd you do this to me?

I can't take it; I gotta hit somethin'. I take this crowbar and smash a hole in the wall. "Dammit!"

I smash another hole in the wall and kick the box of dolls, nearly breakin' my foot. "Dammit all to hell!"

I take one of these damn dolls and knock it with my crowbar from here to kingdom come. "This is bullshit!"

I smash the floor with the crowbar one time, two times, three times breakin' the wood. "I *did not* get fucked in the ass just for this shit!"

Cyndel raises an eyebrow. "Uh, what was that, honey?"

I smash the floor with the crowbar again, lettin' out all the frustration I got in me.

"AHHHHHH!"

Purple. "Traxton!"

I smash it again.

Purple, louder. "Traxton!"

I smash it again and again.

Quon this time. "Papa! Look!"

I stop, crowbar over my head. "WHAT, QUON, WHAT?!"

The boy points to the floor. "It's gold."

I take a breath and look where everyone else is lookin'. The hole I beat in the floor is shinin' yellow. It's gold. It's gold! IT'S GOLD!

Well, that just proves... sometimes drinkin's the answer to unanswerable dilemmas, and I guess sometimes the answer's to lose your temper...

Chapter 42

Cyndel

April 21st, 1882

Gold, gold, and more gold. Traxton's pitiable loss of composure actually proved useful - a fact he has reminded us of at least three times already. And as far as his other admission... well... perhaps I'll leave that mystery unsolved.

We all chip in to help pry the boards free, uncovering in the process gold enough to satisfy even King Midas' greedy heart. As Captain Nutt and Mister Harris continue rescuing the precious metal from their hiding place beneath the train, Traxton, Quon, and I stack the bars in orderly piles within the stagecoach.

I am unsure as to whether anyone had anticipated this much gold, for the stagecoach, after we're done, is so full we're obliged to ride home on the roof. A small price to pay for such an incredible amount of money.

We set out at four in the morning - early enough for the stagecoach's blackness to be of some use, but certainly later than we had planned for. We cannot simply ride into Dullsville with a mountain of gold - no - that would be preposterous. Instead, Captain Nutt's previous occupation proves immensely valuable as we drive to a location approximately two hours north of our town and get to work burying the gold.

The old seaman then draws three maps, each identical to the next. You begin at the distinguishable triple-rock formation, walk fifty paces east to the bull

skull, one hundred paces south to a slight mound, then one hundred more paces to where the great big "X" on the map dictates, and dig.

Honestly, I haven't the slightest idea how one could even spend this amount of money. Multiple palatial mansions? A perpetual world tour? Hire any army? Thinking on it, I would guess the only real way to spend this amount of money would be to either give it away or destroy it. There simply does not exist enough things in this world to buy...

After the gold is buried, we unfasten the horses and burn the stagecoach to the ground; each of us standing before the blaze in silent contemplation. I think of poor Mister Leland and the Brothers Mortimer. I think of the climb up the chain. I think of yesterday evening and how insatiable Traxton is... my, he really does know his trade... I think I may be more excited at the prospect of unlimited access to his... *to him*... than I am at unlimited gold.

By the time our stagecoach has been reduced to ash and miscellaneous metal bits, it is practically nightfall again. Having done a meticulous job losing our own tracks, there is no fear of being discovered, so we pass a solemnly reflective night together once more. But this time, even Captain Nutt remains disproportionately silent - each of us content to revel in the moonlight contemplating our success.

In the morning, we head back to Dullsville. As we ride into town it is quite obvious the entire population knows about the train robbery. (Gosh, how these telegraphs have altered how the world communicates...).

Floyd calls from the stocks. "Hey Cyndel, you hear about the robbery?"

"Oh hi, Floyd. No, we were out inspecting the mountain passes for Mister Harris' trip to San Francisco. What happened?"

"A whole train-load of gold was stolen! They say the United States Army is investigating. I heard they're going to draw and quarter whoever did it."

"Wow. You're lucky you have these stocks as your alibi."

He smiles. "That's what I told my wife! Guess it was a good thing I drank too much and branded Old Man Aaron, ain't it?"

"It seems that way... take care, Floyd."

We all head back to the saloon and Traxton orders a round of tequila. It's a confusing series of emotions coursing through me right now. The exhilaration of our adventure contrasts against the inevitable departure of my fellow conspirators. Captain Cornelius Nutt is the first to take his leave.

"Well then, maties... a sailing man always knows when he's been too long in one port. And when to hunker down before a storm. I want to tell ya I've got three gold bricks in me bag and that's all I need. The rest of my take you can give to the boy. I'm just glad for the adventure. Here laddie, go on and take my copy of the map. It's been a fine pleasure knowing all of ya..."

The pirate nods in each of our directions, tussles Quon's hair, then turns and walks through the saloon's swinging doors; his long morning shadow the last sign of the man we ever see again.

Mister Harris excuses himself as Traxton, Quon, and I partake of an unusually thick morning stew. When he returns, he is a new man: Bathed, groomed, wearing a finely tailored white and tan suit, and the ends of his mustache are worked into points pricklier than any cactus-needle. He is the very concept of dashing.

Behind him, two of the saloon's employees are carrying down a hefty travelling valise - there must be much more in there than clothes...

The man declines our invitation to join and instead stands before us a pillar. He has somehow transformed; is far more the landed British aristocrat than ever I have seen him.

He addresses us stiffly: "In his Californian quarterly *The Wasp*, Ambrose Bierce recently defined the act of praying as: 'To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.' Though penned in satire, how else may we truly regard prayer? So, when in the throes of despondency, upon having forsaken all that I had ever known, I silently pleaded towards the heavens that some manner of companion be provided, I did neither believe it possible, nor myself worthy, for an answer. But the laws of the universe were annulled for one unworthy, and did offer up yourselves in answer. You three are an answer to prayer, and I am eternally grateful for your presence in my life."

With that honest confession, Traxton rises from his seat and holds Mister Harris much longer than I have ever witnessed two men embrace. Pulling away, I do notice the telltale traces of tears having rolled down both of their cheeks. Mister Harris then lifts Quon and the boy rests his head against the man's shoulder for the better part of a minute. He fondly embraces me as well, Mister Harris places his top hat upon his head and bids us all adieu.

Then... all nearly goes back to normal. With the army involved in the search for the gold, it would be sure folly to spend even a dime until they've gone to investigate elsewhere, so I return to my normal routine at the general store, being courted by Traxton, and confounding my mother.

Traxton and Quon continue their residence at the saloon, hunting and shooting and trapping for their daily bread. I read to Quon and have him read from a new book each week, continuing the education Mister Harris had assiduously encouraged. Why Traxton, with his love for novels does not read to the boy I'll never know...

Then... two weeks after the robbery, a fact-finding envoy from Washington comes into town with full federal authority (which all the town laughs at), but also carrying very large weapons (at which the town does not laugh). They are conducting thorough interviews, focusing undue attention on Floyd America for his long list of past offenses, and, of course, Traxton is of particular interest...

He and I are just returned from a warm stroll along Totton Creek only to find his room turned upside-down by the federal agents.

Traxton becomes hot. "Now what the hell's goin' on here?"

The black-suited man withdraws his credentials. "Traxton Rhodes? We are with the United States Government."

"You are? Then *get out!*"

"I'm afraid we cannot. Tell us, where were you the night of April Ninth?"

Traxton relaxes. "Me? I was with my son, my sweetheart, and my best friend searchin' to see if the mountain passes were open so he could go to California."

"Leaving the state? Why such a hurry?"

My man scoffs. "He'd been stuck in a town called *Dullsville* since the fall. There's your hurry."

"Yes, well, do you have an alibi who will corroborate this story?"

Traxton pats my bottom. "I sure do. This here's my sweetheart, Miss Cyndel Sinclair."

The man in black does a double-take. "Oh. Look at that face, and those... ahem... OK, Mister Rhodes, we believe you."

"Good, now *get out.*"

The government agent stops just short of the door. "One last thing, Mister Rhodes. We came across some very disturbing photographs while searching your room: A woman copulating with a salmon, another mid-coitus with a pelican, a lady in carnal embrace with a bear... would you care to explain how these horrible, atrocious pictures came to be in your possession?"

Traxton pauses for a moment. "His name is Wayland Wiggle, lives in Chicago, Illinois. You find him, you'll find lots more where these came from."

"Thank you, Mister Rhodes, Miss Sinclair."

Sufficiently convinced of our town's innocence, the federal agents leave for good, off to follow other leads, and now things may truly return to normal...

Every once in a while, Traxton and I sneak up to the buried treasure, file off a sliver of gold, and spend a romantic weekend in Ronson. But, truth be told, the most fun I have with Traxton is when we just ride out together to the middle of nowhere, light a fire, and make love a half dozen times beneath the stars.

It took another two months until something worth sharing occurred in Dullsville...

So... there was a petty crook named Lorinden Smuthers who made off with an ox from the newly built McCradden family farm. Sheriff Carlisle caught her and handed down the death-sentence right there on the spot. The town got to work constructing an impressive set of gallows upon which Lorinden Smuthers was to be read her last rites.

All of Dullsville was there for the hanging, folks came in from Ronson even, and beyond. My father actually thought to donate the noose-rope in exchange for being allowed to hang a banner from the gallows-scaffolding advertising our store... his mind is ever at enterprise...

When the minister asked if any present had a few words they'd like to say, Traxton surprisingly raised his hand and climbed the freshly hammered wooden steps up to where Lorinden was standing with the rope around her neck and black sack over her head.

Traxton cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen. Y'all know me, I'm Traxton Rhodes."

There was an extended round of applause.

"Thank you, thank you. Now, this lady, Lorinden Smuthers, did somethin' awful. She stole an ox what weren't hers. Yes, yes, that's just plain wrong. But someone else here today is guilty of stealin' somethin' too. Cyndel Sinclair was involved in a horrible robbery y'all may have heard of... it's true, it's true... just a few months ago she stole my heart. So, I guess there's only one thing to do... Miss Cyndel Sinclair... will you marry me?"

Unbelievable! I sprinted up the platform, tears in my eyes, provided Traxton with my left hand, and permitted him to slip a gorgeous diamond ring on my finger. Then, as he was bent down on one knee, I leaned over to kiss him, and... my bottom accidentally knocked the lever opening the trapdoor. The crowd cheered uproariously for us - and for Lorinden Smuthers - in what may have been the most romantically macabre moment of anyone's life, ever...

Afterwards, we took a walk with Quon; Traxton and I holding hands as the boy threw rocks into the nearby creek. I couldn't stop rubbing my thumb over the ring finally placed on my finger. It is an exquisite

ring too... I actually had to lie twice already to folks who asked how much it cost because the true value could buy all the land in the state of Wyoming... twice over...

And that's perhaps why I wanted to speak with Traxton. What the ring symbolizes is amazing, it's perfect... but the ring itself... well, when you're a millionaire (even a secret millionaire) many, many times over... money seems less and less able to impress. I want adventure. The feeling I had climbing up from that barrel *must* be replicated. Damn the gold, I want the danger!

I made my feelings known to Traxton... and my future husband just smiled... "Y'know... that ain't such a bad idea. How's about, let's get married here in Dullsville, and after that, you pick a place on the map... anywhere in the world... and we'll go there and find all sorts of trouble to get into. That sound good to you?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have to. I kissed him instead. My perfect man.

Chapter 43

Alistair

April 29th, 1882

The perfect man... the perfect man... the perfect man...

I am high atop my steed, masterfully coiffed, in possession of a valise half-full of gold, riding into the town limits of Provo, Utah. It is much less grand than I have envisioned it in my mind's eye all these months. Far more... quaint...

I have been nearly ten days in the saddle, deciding on a more composed approach instead of a mad-dash into Judas' arms. I ought not be over-eager, nor too aloof... comfortably welcoming, but austere. The man must be made to know we are equal partners in our relationship. I will not accept the role of subaltern.

Oh, but why am I anticipating hostility? The man has never been anything but gracious. Alistair please calm yourself. Speak your fears out loud and be open with this new man, Judas. He will understand. Plus, with my newfound wealth, I daresay he will be in no position to dote on me exclusively... now, I may dote on him...

I inquire of a sunken-eyed farmhand where the Buchanan manor may be found, a single time-worn finger points the way.

"Thank you ever so kindly. Come on, Traxton, let's go."

Oh yes... I have named my mount: Traxton. I figured it at once honored the friend I have come to care for so deeply, while likewise enjoy something therapeutic about saying the name again from time to time.

I make my way along a roughshod path towards the manor from my Christmas picture. Odd... I would have surmised the work would be complete by now, but there yet remains portions of unfinished roofing left bare... scaffolding erected... and there are no laborers at task. It is Saturday, why are they not hard at work completing Judas' home? Odd.

The grounds are astounding. A man-made lake has been dug, tall rows of manicured bushes are rooted, deciduous spruces and everlasting conifers are generously dashed about... all is an idyllic, arcadian wonderland.

But where are the lawn keepers?

No matter. I ride my horse directly to Judas' courtyard and dismount. No stable boy? This is becoming absurd... I lash the bridle to an ornately carved rail-post and dust off my riding coat. A black and canary yellow Western Meadowlark chirps its warbled call from a low-lying branch nearby.

The grand entrance is lorded over by an ornate gargoyle clenching a knocker securely in his mouth. I rap three times in succession. No movement from within... so peculiar... I rap three times more... nothing. Something quite bizarre is at work here...

I turn the knob and allow myself in. "Judas? Hello? Judas?"

No response... but, my God is this home lavish! Where did he get this wood from? This is no mere garden variety, but foyer floors of Brazilian Rosewood, circular staircase handrail of Middle Eastern Olivewood. Unbelievable...

"Judas? Judas? Is anyone home?"

I walk down the eerily vacant hall towards a sitting room of the most sumptuously upholstered chaise longues, sofas, and settees. A monstrous hearth, apparently used recently, has the Abduction of Proserpine depicted in bas-relief. A series of Roman busts line the far wall. Impeccable...

"Judas! Judas? *Judas*..."

I continue down an outdoor corridor braced by marble pillars adorned in vine and leaf filigree etchings. The hall opens up to a partially-enclosed swimming pool. And there, trousers rolled to his knees, absent his shirt, dangling his legs in the water, is Judas.

The man is as striking as ever - despite having allowed a few days' worth of scraggly beard to grow in. He is staring blankly towards the west; sun bowing to its setting phase. Judas... *my* Judas... at last..

I move towards him, stepping on clouds. "Judas, it is I, Alistair..."

His gaze moves from the distant to the immediate, but does not lose the dull incomprehension. What has happened to this man? Was there a death? Is he grieving? What can entrance a sane man so? How to awake him from his stupor...

Perhaps I ought to clarify. "Alistair Evans Harris... I've traveled from Wyoming. We... we took your carriage to the mountains and had a picnic... then some coyotes attacked, but prior the coyotes it was the most magical evening I have had in a very long time... Judas... Judas, what has happened? Do you remember me at all?"

He regards me, vacant. "Gone. It's all gone..."

"What? What is gone?"

"Everything..."

What is he talking about? Does he even know with whom he is conversing? What on earth has vexed him so? "Judas... what is gone?"

"My family's fortune... I had it liquefied and shipped out west. It was on a train bound for Grand Junction."

Oh no...

"From there it was to be securely transported to Provo where I was to be the principle investor in this city's future."

What have I done...

"I was going to build libraries and museums... had begun designing them even... I have the architectural sketches upstairs... a hall for the philharmonic... ballet, opera, musical theater... *musical theater*... Provo was to be the bucolic, shining city on the hill... an utopia in every sense of the word..."

I think I may be ill...

"And... my most grand vision... I had already laid the groundwork for a center... a mission, of sorts... a massive home, with free room and board, for men and women of... *our persuasion*... where they could live and learn and create and... be free..."

I have committed the most grievous of offenses...

"I was to use my fortune to dictate how laws were written. Encourage, from the onset of this new state, inclusive legislation prior fundamentalist influence..."

My eyes fill with tears...

"And now... and now I see the preachers at their fiery pulpits were right... have always been right... God did not desire my vision fulfilled... He sent his agents down and put an end to my vain conceit... I know now that I am a monster in His eyes..."

The room goes dark; my vision escapes me.
Faculties inherently mine to control have ceased to
comply. I am undone...

My mind reels...

Oh, how it reels...

The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: The
Colossus of Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon,
the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Statue of Zeus at
Olympia, the lighthouse at Alexandria, the mausoleum
at Halicarnassus, and the Temple of Artemis...

The original Temple of Artemis was built in
Ephesus sometime in the Bronze Age by the Amazons.
Around seven hundred years before Christ, the temple
was destroyed by a great flood. It was rebuilt in 550
BC, at great expense, by the Kingdom of Lydia.

This second incarnation was the first Greek
temple built entirely of marble. Commanding columns
forty feet in height, carved by the hands of the day's
most gifted artisans. The immensity of the structure,
along with the panoramic mountain setting, attracted
travelers and worshippers for hundreds of miles... all in
an effort to pay homage to Artemis.

Apollo's twin sister, Artemis, the Hellenic
goddess of the wilderness, childbirth, virginity, the
hunt... all qualities revered by ancient woman and man
and deified in the form of a most comely goddess. The
hunt and childbirth were everything to these people...
formed the essence of who they were... offering
allegiance to Artemis was an act of crucial self-interest.

And then along came Herostratus...

Herostratus was as great a betrayer as America's
Benedict Arnold... as was Caesar's Brutus... as was
Jesus' own Judas... a man so desiring of everlasting

fame, he turned against his countrymen, and his gods, and burned the temple down to the ground in a most selfish act of arson...

Herostratus admitted his motives to his Ephesian captors, that he wished his name known forever. They declared his actions stricken from any and all historical record - just before executing him. But his name was recorded in the annals nonetheless, and now he lives on... in infamy... but he does live on...

I am my people's Herostratus. Destroying a vision of hope - my people's first - all in the name of personal aggrandizement... Judas... I am a fool. Where may I possibly find refuge from my dastardly acts?

Judas stares off into the distance once again. The man is lost, broken, betrayed... Judas, *the betrayed*...

I regain what composure I may muster, resign myself to the loss, and return to my horse, Traxton.

What do I do? Remit upon this man his stolen fortune? How is such an act achieved? Or do I claim that I singlehandedly uncovered its location? How would I answer the government's questions? How do I explain myself to Traxton? To Miss Sinclair? To young Quon? That gold is now his birthright...

Oh, how life may humble a man. Pride was my undoing. If only I had accepted Judas as he was... and how I was... how can I proceed? Oh, how do I proceed?

I mount Traxton and spur him on and out of Provo, destination unknown.

I think little on my plans and current status, and even less on what surrounds; my horse leading me as I have remitted to him the reins. When I left London, at least I had my convictions I was the wronged party. But now... now I have no such safe refuge.

I lower towards Traxton's large, strong neck and drape my arms around him; cheek firmly pressed

against his soft curry-combed pelt. My major secret, divulged to Traxton (the man), was a disclosure I have shared with scant few trusted individuals. Aside them, however, the true nature of my being has been kept in the strictest of confidences...

But this... who may I ever impart this horrible news to? Who could even begin to understand what I have brought about?

No one... no one might possibly empathize with the plight of a man who betrayed his own people because betrayal is, as Dante has attested, the worst of all sins. I am destined for the ninth circle, encapsulated in the frozen Cocytus ice... joining the ranks of the worst malefactors humanity has created... Cassius, Cain, Judas Iscariot...

My soul is weak as I lumber on in solitude...

The sun is setting; browns, tans, reds, yellows. Through my narrow, weakened eyes I can barely make out if I am on a path or if we have wandered into the wilderness. No matter. What becomes of me now is of no consequence.

Furry animals scurry as we approach, birds streak by overhead, and still we trudge on and on and on and so beneath the timeless skies incarnadine...

Chapter 44

Traxton

August 21st, 1882

I'm gettin' married today! Who in their right mind woulda thunk this day would ever come? But here I am done up in my best bib and tucker. Got little Quon here as my ring bearer. Might not be the smartest thing in the world leavin' a seven-year-old with a three-million-dollar ring (a diamond worn by some old Queen named Eleanor of Aqua-somethin'-or-'nother...), but I trust Quon more than anyone in the world.

It's a damn shame I couldn't get a letter to Purple, 'cause now my best man is this fool, Floyd America. He was 'sposed to set up my stag party, but the ingrate got too drunk the night before, bit off his own pinkie finger to prove he could do it, and had to spend the next day in the stocks for causin' such a bloody scene in church.

After the weddin' we're gonna be packin' up and makin' for Europe. London first, then Paris, then Rome, then wherever the hell we want 'cause we're rich. Just *one* of these gold bars is enough to have Queen Victoria let me lower my drawers and drop a deuce on her face... so you can imagine what we'll be doin' with the *ten* gold bars we're takin' with us.

I never did count how many we got in all... a hundred... a thousand... no way of knowin' really. We dug a big 'ol hole and just threw 'em in there. More than I can spend in a lifetime, so that's enough for me...

The church is done up all perty with flowers, and streamers, and candles. We paid for a whole lotta doves to fly out a box when we're kissin' up on the stage - the altar, I mean. I paid to have a special bed made what's shaped like a heart; felt Cyndel deserved somethin' so romantic.

Her parents have finally come 'round to acceptin' me as their son-in-law. Not sure what did it, but I think it might've been the gold bar I snuck her dad one night. Ever since then they've both been all smiles and warm welcomes...

Yessir, life's just 'bout perfect. I ain't wanted no more, ain't in no man's debt, I got the finest girl in the West, and the most talented son the world's ever seen. Truth be told, the only thing missin' is Purple. I do miss that man, and I don't care who knows it.

But I 'spose he's in Utah happy as a clam with that Judas fella. Anyhow, half this gold's his so I imagine I'll see him again someday...

There's a knock on the door to this little dressin' room. "Yea, yea, just gimme a second will ya, Floyd?"

Floyd's head bobs in, huge. "You need help with anythin'?"

"Actually, I can't quite get this flower pinned right..."

"Here, let me try..."

This fool pricks me dead in the chest. "Ow! What the hell's the matter with you? You stuck the pin dead in my heart."

Why'd I trust a near cross-eyed man to stick me? "Sorry 'bout that, Traxton, sufferin' from the delirium tremens since Missus America said I can't drink no more."

I run some sticky gunk in my hair what makes me look like a damn clown. Then I take a bit of the mess and use it on my mustache for the first time in my

life... how the hell... no... dammit, I can't quite get it to be pointy like it should...

A voice behind me. "May I be of assistance?"

I look at myself in the mirror and there over my shoulder is none other than Purple. I get a goofy grin then turn 'round and hug my friend, askin' him to be my best man.

"But what of Floyd America?"

"Fuck Floyd America. Yer the one I want."

Purple helps me with the mustache 'til mine looks almost as pointy as his. Cyndel will sure be happy... there's not a day what goes by when she's not commentin' on how fancy Purple's mustache is.

I don't think to ask about Judas; figure he's out in one of the pews waitin' for the show to begin. There ain't no time to catch up right now, so we walk out to the church and up to the altar.

The music begins and here comes Cyndel Sinclair all in white. Her red hair's done up in little curls fallin' past her shoulders, her eyes have a smoky look to 'em, and her ninnies - God those ninnies - even if she accidentally got blown up by dynamite and lost her hands, feet, legs, arms, neck, and head, I'd still marry her for them ninnies alone...

She's got a smile ear to ear same as me and same as Purple. Walkin' slow holdin' them flowers as she comes, I swear she's the pertiest thing in the world. Her father nods my way 'fore he gives her up, then before you know it, Cyndel Sinclair is Cyndel Rhodes... same as it says on my tattoo...

The reception we have at the meetin' hall where the Christmas party was. There's a big 'ol cake, and food, and drinks... lots and lots of drinks. So many drinks, in fact, that Floyd America fell down and nearly had a heart attack when he seen it all.

"All this alcohol? And it's *free*?"

I pat his shoulder. "Sure is, Floyd, have at it..."
His wife blocked his path. "Now remember,
Floyd, you're a teetotaler now..."

He thought for only a moment. "Eh, divorce me,
why dontcha? Free booze!"

Cyndel and me dance and dance and dance.
Purple's over at a table quizzin' little Quon on his
learnin' and Quon is happy to be quizzed. I do know the
boy missed him somethin' awful.

Later on, Purple and me don't really have time
to catch up, but we do trade a few funny stories on
Piggy Sue flyin' into the canyon, the old lady he
chopped in two, the injuns he saved me from, our drunk
rescue and all the other adventures we had together... I
meant to ask him 'bout Judas, but there just ain't enough
time at a man's weddin' for conversatin'.

After the night's done and Floyd America's in
the stocks, we head on back to the honeymoon suite at
the saloon and Cyndel surprises me with a move she
learned from Floyd's wife... and... all I can say is, if
every wife did that move all the time, there'd be no such
thing as divorce and that's a fact.

After that I set to work and don't quit 'til the bed
breaks... Cyndel's cryin' tears of pleasure and the
neighbors is bangin' on the wall yellin' to keep quiet.
Yessir, I do know my trade, by God...

It's only in the mornin' when me and Purple is
sittin' by ourselves over a breakfast of ham, eggs, and
tequila that I get to ask how's he doin'. It takes a few
tries, him bein' a man's man, not wantin' to burden folks
by gettin' all sentimental... but I tell him he's my best
man and I want to know.

After that he spills the beans like I did to Cyndel
that time when I was in jail. He tells me of how the gold
we took was Judas', and how that man was gonna open

a big home in Utah just for men and women who like to sex their own kind.

Now I must be a different man than I used to be 'cause if anyone had come to me with a story like this a year ago, I'da laughed until I lost my lunch. But to hear Purple tell it, my heart starts hurtin' like I give a damn 'bout queer-folk I don't even know.

I make a decision without even havin' to ponder it. "You gotta envelope, Purple?"

"Yes... I always carry the requisite stationary for correspondence. Why?"

"Give one here, will ya?"

Then I do somethin' I never thought I'd do in a million years. I take one of the maps Cornelius Nutt drew for us, fold it up, and put it in the envelope. Then I tell Purple to write Judas' address on it and I walk with him straight to the post office and mail it myself.

As soon as it's away, Purple looks me in the eyes and nods his head. He knows there ain't no debt for this; it's just friends doin' what friends do.

Cause 'fore him I can't rightly say I ever had a real friend. Sure I knew lots of folks. But I won't say any of the men I've known were friends 'cause I couldn't trust a one of 'em. And I can't say none of the women I've known were friends' cause I was always pokin' 'em...

Anyway, we got more than enough for our trip to Europe and when we get home, I'm sure Cyndel will be happy as a pig in shit to go adventurin' again...

Me and Purple head on back and order more tequila like we did back when he lived here in the saloon too. After all these months it's a cryin' shame to only have one day together 'fore we up and head off for the motherland. Then it hits me... "Say, Purple, why not come with us?"

"To Europe?"

"Sure, who else better to show us 'round and tell Quon 'bout all the old bullshit we'll be seein'?"

He considers it. "Well, I... what of Judas?"

"Look, if he went as crazy as you said he did, it'll take a few months to come to his senses after he gets his gold back... then, by the time we're home, he'll be his old self again."

"That does sound like a plausible scenario... very well... let's to Europe!"

Well alright. This here's lookin' better and better by the minute. I know little Quon'll be happy for the news, and Purple can fill me in on more books since I was runnin' out of lies for the ones I said I read... yessir, I can't imagine how my life can be any better than this...

Purple gets serious for a moment. "You know, Traxton, after I found Judas nearly destroyed, I had no idea where to turn to. Who I might confide in. My trespass was so unbearably colossal that I... I contemplated even the most drastic of measures... I... I really must thank you for listening... for everything... but for listening most of all..."

"Aww hell, Purple... it ain't nothin'... matter of fact... you wanna know somethin' I've been wantin' to tell for the longest, but ain't had the mind to?"

"Yes, of course, anything, Traxton..."

I set my hand down on the table. "Well, you remember when we set out to nab the stagecoach and I pulled the 'lady in distress' trick, dontcha?"

"Yes..."

"And you remember what happened... with the... with the..."

"Yes, Traxton, I recall..."

"Well, what I've wanted to tell someone is... My memory don't always come back when I drink that hard. Most of the time it's gone forever... but for some

reason the memory of what happened in that field did come back to me and... and...

Purple finishes my sentence for me. "It was not so unpleasant as you thought it might be, was it?"

"You tell anyone I said so and I swear to God I'll kill ya."

THE END

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