

BLOODY PARADISE



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CHAPTER I



The farmhouse looked as frail and gray as the man hoeing the barren ground beside it.

Arthur sat his horse beneath an oak, elbows resting on the saddle fork as he watched from a distance. He wasn't a man who doubted himself, nor was he afraid to confront the weedy little bastard. It was just so damn hot and beating money out of people was tiresome. With a sigh, he took off his leather hat and hooked it over the saddle horn so he could wipe his brow.

"Well, girl," he said to his horse, settling the hat back on his head. "Let's get this over with."

Thomas Downes didn't appear to notice the clomp of hooves or thud of boots, but he looked up when the gate screeched.

"Downes," Arthur growled as he stomped over the carefully dug troughs.

At first, Thomas's eyes narrowed then fleeting, almost friendly, recognition touched his face as Arthur strode toward him.

“Where’s our money, Downes?”

Thomas dropped the hoe, his thin face growing paler than the sun-bleached fence he backed into. Contempt rose in Arthur as the man cowered. The way the man shrank away struck an even uglier cord within him, a familiar reflection that boiled his blood. The would-be farmer raised a boney hand as if that could fend off a powerful punch from the rugged outlaw. Arthur saw the feeble defense as an invite and sneered while his hands curled into fists.

“I’ll get it,” the weasel stammered. “I’ll get it! Soon. We just... I just—”

“You just *what*?” Arthur snapped, raising a fist.

Stinking sweat dripped from under the man’s straw hat and caught in his mustache. Arthur was about to grab Downes’s collar and shake the fear of Herr Strauss into him when the man gave a strangled cry and doubled over into a coughing fit. Startled, Arthur stepped back. He was further surprised when a woman burst out the front door, shrieking like a banshee.

“Get away from him!” Her voice was like a whip crack. “Leave us alone!”

Skirts hitched up in one hand, she ran to the garden gate but halted when Arthur pointed at her.

“Stay back, woman.”

He didn’t need to shout. His tone and eyes carried the hard-earned threat of brutal survival.

“What do you want?” she cried between sobs, clutching at the rusty gate.

Ignoring her, he turned back to Thomas who was gasping and wiping bloody spit across his stained sleeve. Arthur’s face twitched with pity, but only for a moment. Pity and sympathy didn’t get results.

“Either you give me the money, or I’m taking everything

ya got. Including your life.” Without turning his head, he pointed at the hysterical woman. “Or maybe hers.”

There was more pleading and crying from both of them, and it was giving him a headache. Satan’s balls it was scorching under the late afternoon sun. More than anything, he wanted a cold beer. When and why had he so readily agreed to be that German’s lap dog?

“Alright then.” He pulled out his revolver.

Just as he was about to aim at the fallen man, another shout made him freeze.

“Father!”

Arthur’s blue-green eyes locked onto the young man racing over to his mother. The tableau held for a minute or two as he stared at Thomas’s son. At least, the young man showed no fear. His eyes were flinty with rage. Arthur could respect that.

“Please,” Downes choked feebly from the ground. “I saved you from that fight in town. Pulled that brute off you. Remember? Please, sir.” His raised hand shook. “I promise we’ll get the money.” He coughed again, a weak, gurgling sound.

Suddenly, the hoed furrows looked like shallow graves. Arthur stepped away and holstered his gun. What was he doing? He cleared his throat and tried to sound intimidating, but the fire had gone out.

“You better.”

With that, he left, throwing the gate wide as the wife and son hastily backed away before sprinting past him to help Thomas. As if strings commanded his limbs, Arthur mounted Soteria, his blue-roan Palouse mare, reined her around and tapped his spurs against her sides with a “Hah.” She tossed her black mane, danced a few steps, then broke into a lope. Whatever had just happened back there, he

wanted to get far away from it. Her rocking, rhythmic gait always soothed him and helped him think as they loped through rolling grasslands. The Heartlands was beautiful, open country that smelled of crushed sage, even if it was a little too civilized.

In his journal, Arthur had sketched bison, deer, and pronghorn, their trails stitched across the hills and prairies. He'd begun journaling after Dutch and Hosea had found him as a scrappy half-wild orphan on the streets. Once he'd ingratiated himself with the gang, Dutch had handed him a leather-bound journal and a pencil.

A man ought to know his own mind, son.

Dutch was smart, and had always been kind to him, so such a small act only further cemented his love for the man. At first, he tried writing in it but soon found that pictures came easier than words. Besides, he apparently had a knack for sketching. *A bonified Remington*, Hosea had told him once when young Arthur had given him a drawing of his horse. At the time, he didn't know who Fredrick Remington was, but he ducked his head, embarrassed at Hosea's compliment. He never gave anyone a drawing again. However, he'd discovered, even after all these decades, that Hosea still kept the yellowed parchment safely tucked inside a dime novel western.

"Whoa, girl," he said as he reined in Soteria.

The trail home had led him along a ridge, and the sun was beginning to set, gilding the grass and cottonwoods. Their camp was near, but he didn't quite feel like going back. Dismounting, he pulled out his journal and found a boulder to sit on while Soteria grazed. He meant to sketch the landscape, but his hands betrayed his intent as a skeletal figure, more corpse than man, took shape beneath the graphite. A woman stood in the background but the boy she held next to

her side was not Thomas's son. He'd drawn a child clutching her apron, but he couldn't get the face right. Grumbling, he smeared the features, yet he knew who he was truly drawing.

He snapped the journal closed. Why had he faltered like that? It wasn't like him, but it was happening more and more, moments of hesitation, which could get him killed. What was he now, thirty-five? Thirty-six? He'd lost count. What did it matter anyway? With each passing year the sound of his mother's skull hitting the table, the pain of his father's drunken fists never faded. Arthur wished those memories would fade with the sun, but no matter how far he ran his past poisoned the horizon.

Feeling no better, he climbed back into the saddle and headed to Horseshoe Overlook.

* * *

"WHO'S THERE?" Lenny shouted into the near dark.

"Arthur, dumbass."

He nodded at the silhouette of one of their gang holding a rifle while he steered Soteria toward the glow of campfires and lanterns. After unsaddling, brushing, then hobbling her, he strode into camp. It was lively tonight. Javier was playing guitar while Uncle and Karen drunkenly sang out of tune. Others sat around the main fire clapping and hollering along. He wasn't in the mood to join in, so he headed toward the chuck wagon hoping for that beer. Even the night was warm, which meant the beer would be too, but the stars were bright. However, as he pulled out empty bottles from the crate, it appeared that none were left unopened.

"Too late," a man said as he came over and took a swig from his own bottle. "I got the last one, Morgan."

"Shut up, Micah."

Arthur's tone was one of dismissal more than anger, which, ironically upset Micah. But the blonde-haired prick was always angry far as Arthur could tell.

"You know," Micah said, raising a finger from his beer while Arthur knelt to search the crates under the table, "you're an ornery asshole. That's why nobody likes you. And why I didn't save you a beer."

Arthur straightened up, empty-handed, and said, "Is that so?" as he walked around him to pour a cup of coffee instead.

"That's so." But Micah didn't come up with any other eloquent insults to fling.

Arthur grabbed the percolator off the stone near the fire and poured steaming liquid into his tin cup. He knew Micah was still standing there, so he kept his back to him. After a moment, he heard him snort and turn heel.

Micah bored him and he could give a rat's ass what the man thought, but he trusted a rattlesnake more than that greasy criminal. He gave a lopsided smirk as he stared at the flickering flames. As if he too wasn't a criminal according to many. But in his mind, there were outlaws and there were criminals. An outlaw lived beyond the law because a lot of the time the law was wrong, like oppressing people's freedom. Sure, he stole, fought, even killed, but there were lines a decent man didn't cross. You didn't prey on the weak, you didn't turn on your own, and you didn't kill for no good reason. A criminal held no code except the one that served him best and damn the rest.

A hand clapped down on his shoulder, making him jump, but it was only Dutch.

"Thinking hard there, Arthur?"

"Ah." He shrugged. "Not really."

Dutch and Hosea were about the only people around that Arthur let his guard down with. They'd been more father

figures than his own worthless father. There was a woman, once, Mary, but that kind of love was different, more complicated. And he didn't like complicated.

"Probably for the best," Dutch joked as he sat on one of the logs. "My thinking hasn't steered us wrong yet, but yours might steer us into Dante's ninth circle."

He chuckled and Arthur laughed with him, though his heart wasn't in it. "If you say so, Dutch."

"Speaking of," the older man continued, "We just caught wind of a stagecoach laden with all the riches of Monte Cristo, investment money from these so-called railroad barons. We got a plan to rob it tomorrow night. At least five grand. Enough to get us outta here."

Arthur raised his cup with a small nod. "Sounds better than those nine circles."

Dutch guffawed and slapped his knee before standing. "I can always count on you, son. Hosea will fill us in on the details tomorrow."

Before Arthur could make his escape, Mary-Beth caught him by the hand.

"Oh, no you don't."

"Ah, nah, Mary-Beth."

"Just one dance."

Javier had struck up a waltz, and she dragged Arthur toward the firelight. He gave a long-suffering sigh, though a smile betrayed him as she caught his other hand.

"Just follow," she said.

"Thought the man was supposed to lead?" He settled a hand at her waist and swept her into the turn.

She giggled as she whirled beneath his arm. "Why, Mister Morgan, who knew you were a man of refinement?"

"I'll try to remember that."

He indulged her a while longer, waltzing around the edge

of the group who were either seated or dancing, weaving along with the guitar. Then he gave her one last twirl, stepped away, and tipped his hat.

"Thank you, miss. But that's all the refinement I have left tonight."

"Good night, Arthur," she said.

"Night, Mary-Beth."

When he ducked inside his canvas lean-to beside the wagon, a letter waited on his cot. Someone must've gone to town and grabbed the mail. It was like the cold jolt of spotting a cougar when he turned it over and saw the name *Mary Linton* in perfect script. For a few breaths he just stared at the envelope, then sat on the edge of the bed. Mary. He hadn't heard from her in nearly five years. All those years between them, and the mere sight of her handwriting still sent his heart kicking and dried his mouth to dust. Somehow facing the barrel of a gun was easier than opening her letter but he finally mustered the courage.

MY DEAR ARTHUR,

I KNOW this letter may come as a shock, but I saw you in Valentine yesterday.

ONLY FOR A MOMENT, and I do not think you saw me. I nearly called out to you, though perhaps it is just as well that I did not. Father was with me, and you can imagine how that would have gone. Still, seeing you again after so long has left me thinking of things I had believed settled.

As I am in town for a few more days, and if you are willing, I

would very much like to see you. It may be unwise, but then again, we have always done unwise things.

I WILL WAIT near the church tomorrow afternoon after the sheep stocks close.

*MISSING YOU,
Mary*

HE READ her words several times, then with a deep breath, carefully folded and stuffed the paper back into the envelope. Lying back on the cot, one arm behind his head, he stared at the canvas overhead. For a man of little thinking, he did a lot of it that night. Did he dare see her? What was left to say? They'd been young lovers once, young and dumb, but it had ended badly. Well, more sadly than badly, but it had begun so innocently. Just two people starved for the same thing, reaching out for each other in the hope that they'd finally be saved, finally be loved. To his surprise, his eyes hurt. He squeezed them shut and rubbed them until the sting passed.

Almost, what, fifteen years ago, he'd been drawing a rabbit as he leaned against a tree outside whatever town they were currently planning to rob.

"What are you drawing?"

He turned to the voice to find a lovely young woman standing there with her hands behind her back, smiling at him. Like the fool he was, he just stared as if she'd been addressing someone else in the empty field.

"Can I see?" she asked.

And she was so pretty, so proper that Arthur found himself handing over his precious journal.

“Oh my, that’s really good.”

Before he realized it, she was turning the pages. His mind seemed to kick back into motion, and he lunged for the book, snatching it out of her hands.

“Sorry,” he said at her startled look, which made him feel ashamed. “I just... the rest isn’t any good.”

He cast his eyes down. In truth, he didn’t want her to read about any of his misadventures, of who he really was.

“Oh, I doubt that.” She gave him the sweetest laugh and their eyes met. “I’m Mary. Mary Linton.”

“Arthur Morgan.”

“Are you an artist?”

A lump rose in his throat. “No. Just, uh...” He gestured vaguely. “A cow...”

“A cow?” she giggled.

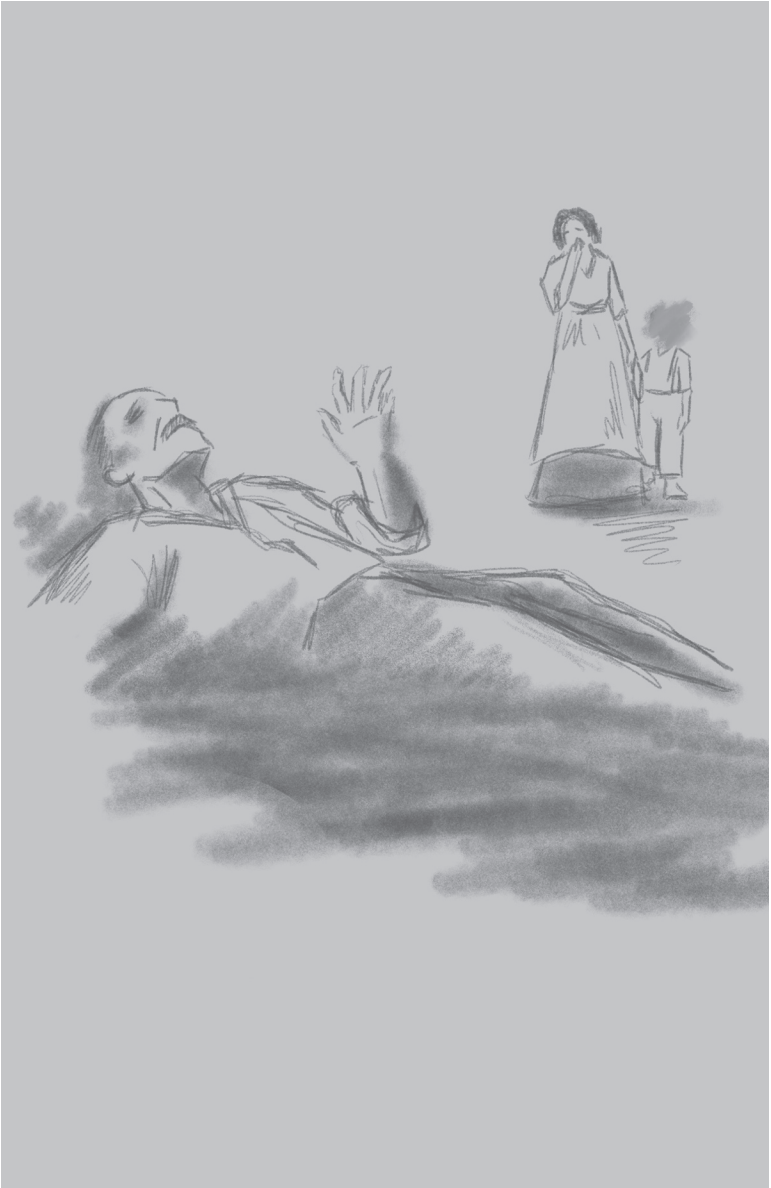
“A cowhand,” he said, heat rising up his neck.

It was sort of true, minus the whole stealing the cattle part.

She held out a hand. “Nice to meet you Arthur the cow.”

Somewhat bewildered but also enchanted by her, he took her hand, and after that...

Arthur threw his arm over his face, begging the night to let him sleep. He didn’t want to think about everything after that. Eventually, fitful dreams took him, but he dreamed of circling wolves.



CHAPTER II



The next morning Hosea explained that six of them would rob the stagecoach after dark between Valentine and Emerald Ranch. *Should be more than enough manpower*, he'd said. As the camp bustled with chores and preparations, Arthur slipped away. One pair of eyes noticed his silent retreat, but Mary-Beth only pursed her lips with a wistful look.

As he rode toward Valentine, Arthur nearly turned back twice.

"What am I doing?" he muttered to Soteria as they trotted on a back road to the church.

When the steeple came into view, his body went numb and buzzing all at once. He pulled Soteria into a rather abrupt halt, and the horse tossed her head, laying back her ears. Mary was nowhere in sight, so he hitched his mare, and began walking up the path. A part of him hoped she wasn't there, that she'd come to her senses or was too scared to follow through, but as he neared the cemetery behind the church, he saw her.

Her back was to him, wrapped in a lacey shawl he could've never given her, bundled black hair showing a few streaks of gray. Were they really that old now? Was he going gray? He took off his hat and ran a hand through his grimy hair, abruptly realizing he hadn't bathed in a long while. She still hadn't turned around; he could still leave.

"She was so young," Mary said.

When he didn't answer right away, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him.

"Who?" he asked as he walked over, stuffing his hat back on.

She pointed at the tombstone. "Sarah Deene. She was only nineteen when she died. So sad."

He nodded, not sure what to say.

Mary turned her face up to him, a little more lined and careworn, but he found her just as beautiful as when they'd first met.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

"Shoar." He shrugged. "I almost didn't."

She smiled. "I as well. But I suppose I just wanted to hear that you're okay. I've thought of you and often worried. When I saw you in town, I can't describe what a relief it was to see..." She bit her lip.

He nodded at the tombstone. "That I'm not dead."

"Yes."

"There's no fear of that," he said. "No cemetery would have me."

He grinned and she swatted his shoulder in admonishment. "Don't joke like that."

But he saw her purse her lips against a smile.

"Oh, Arthur. I didn't just want to see how you fared." She grabbed his hand and it was like being held by flame, warmth

touched with pain. "I've missed you more than you know, more than *I* knew. I thought I'd let you go long ago, but since yesterday, I realized that I'd only buried my feelings for you."

Her dark eyes held his light ones, and he was fully aware of the rise and fall of their shared breaths. Then she laughed at herself and dropped his hand and gaze. She raised her hands to her face. "I'm so sorry. What am I saying? I shouldn't be saying these things to you. It's not fair to either of us." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I should've never written to you. It was selfish."

Her tone shifted to what Arthur thought of as her distant, proper upbringing voice. "I merely wanted to see that you are well, as well as you could be, that is."

"You mean as well as an outlaw could be?" Arthur tucked his thumbs into his gun belt.

Her eyes flicked up to his, then away.

"I never," she began to say. "I always wished you might find peace, Mister Morgan. That is all."

"Mister Morgan now, is it?" He gave her a rakish grin.

Despite herself she grinned back.

"Ah, Mary." He waved a hand. "I guess I wanted to see that you're alright too. But I ain't here to rehash the past."

She nodded and the tension eased a little.

"So, tell me," he said as they started walking around the cemetery. "Married with a brood of brats?"

She gave a rather improper snort, which he found endearing. "You always knew how to make the ladies swoon with few words. I'm sure you'll be delighted to know I never married." Her flirtatious look spoke a challenge, and a jealous piece of him was glad to hear it, though he certainly wished her no ill.

He kept the topic on her and away from himself while they talked and wandered. As the sun set, they had eased

back into their old familiarity, and he'd half forgotten that they were no longer twenty or their courtship forbidden until a shout echoed across the road.

"Mary!"

She gasped and whirled around as her father stormed up the road in a dust cloud.

"Shit," Arthur drawled under his breath, instinctively stepping back from her.

"Mary! What in God's name are you doing with that man?!"

Mr. Gillis reminded Arthur of a bristling old warthog in a straw boater and linen suit.

"Nothing, Father, we were just talking."

"Get away from him." He grabbed her upper arm and yanked her to him.

The act stirred something protective in Arthur, and he uncrossed his arms, taking a step forward.

"Not a step closer!" Gillis commanded, raising an admonishing finger. "I forbid you to come near my daughter. I thought we'd gotten rid of you long ago and now I find you sniffing around like some mangy mutt."

Arthur's shoulders tensed, and he must've made a frightening face for Gillis backed away, dragging Mary with him and stammering, "I know the Sherrif. I'll have you hanged. Not a step closer!"

Mary gave Arthur a look of utmost sorrow and pity. He looked down and didn't watch as Mr. Gillis dragged his grown daughter away as if she were an errant child playing with a dangerous wild animal. Well, this mangy mutt desired to rip the old bastard apart, but for Mary's sake, he grit his teeth as he listened to "Criminals, outlaws, and I forbid you," while she protested.

Arthur had stood still as a statue next to the road, thumbs

tucked into his belt, until their voices disappeared. Why had he come? Shaking his head, he made his way back to Soteria—who was dozing with one hind leg cocked—and patted her awake.

“That’s my girl,” he said gently.

He found himself exhausted by the whole exchange. Thing was, he’d been so happy to see her again, for he too hadn’t realized how much he truly missed her. But her father, beast that he was, had the right end of it. She couldn’t love or marry a petty outlaw like him. There had always been a purity about her, a soul untouched by the kind of life that clung to Arthur like guts and gun smoke. She was all the things that he never had, that he’d never be, and perhaps that was why he loved her so fiercely. *Not fierce enough*, she would’ve said.

“Hah!” he called to Soteria, spurring her into a gallop.

Not fierce enough.

* * *

THE STAGECOACH RATTLED past exactly when they expected.

At Dutch’s signal six horses with masked riders bolted out of the woods and ran it down. Javier shot the driver and Arthur got the hired gun, but no one saw the third man until a shot rang out, and John fell off his horse. Dutch killed that man, but John was left behind in the darkness. Then Arthur and Lenny leapt to the racing stagecoach and finally managed to pull the panicked horses to a stop. Arthur threw the brake and leapt down to grab his horses’ reins from Bill.

“What’re you doin’?” Dutch demanded as Arthur mounted.

“Goin’ to get John,” he said, taken aback.

“No, you’re not. Get this lock opened first.”

There was that hesitation again. Dutch noticed it as well and even in the scant moonlight Arthur could see his eyes narrow over his bandana.

"Then send Lenny," Arthur said as he dismounted.

"Go see if that idiot's still alive," Dutch barked at Lenny. "Of which I'm sure he is," he amended at Arthur's glance.

Micah chuckled as he lounged on his horse, and Arthur held back the impulse to shoot him. By the time he got the safe open and the stacks of cash stuffed into sacks, Lenny returned with John and his horse.

"Shot in the arm," Lenny informed everyone.

Slumping forward over his horse's neck, John groaned.

"Get this off the road," Dutch ordered Arthur and Javier.

As the others galloped away, they steered the horses into the woods, then cut the four Clydesdales free.

"You take one and I'll take this one," Javier said as he looped a makeshift halter around one of the horses. "We can sell 'em in Emerald Ranch."

Arthur grunted in agreement and Javier cantered off with the big horse in tow. He was sizing up which one to take for himself when he heard a cough from inside the stagecoach. As quick as a cobra his gun was in his hand, and he cautiously approached the door. He flung it open and aimed. The second hired gun that Dutch had shot was lying on the floor, gasping for breath. Arthur grabbed the shotgun and was about to close the door again when the man gurgled something.

Arthur paused, waiting, and the man found enough breath to say, "You bastards—gasp—you stole their pay."

"Sorry, mister, we might be poor men without morals, but we don't care much for rich men without morals."

He was about to turn away from the dying man again, when he heard, "You idiot. The workers."

“The what?”

“The railroad—gasp—workers.”

Arthur’s eyes narrowed as he pulled down his bandana. “What do you mean? Are you saying this was company payroll?”

The man coughed and gargled, and a chill trickled down Arthur’s spine.

He grabbed the man by the collar and shook him. “Hey! Is this payroll for the railroad workers?”

The man’s eyes fluttered open then closed, but he gave a slight nod, enough for Arthur to question what they’d just done.

Leaving corpses in his wake, he galloped away from the scene with a handsome white stallion that would, no doubt, fetch a decent price at the fence, but he couldn’t shake the twisting feeling in his guts. Had Dutch and Hosea been given false information? That was probably it. They never stole from poor, innocent folks in need; they had *some* morals.

When he reached the camp well after midnight and hitched the horses, the men were still awake discussing and celebrating their success around the fire.

Without preamble, Arthur walked up behind Dutch and said, “You shoar that was some rich folks’ money?”

The conversation died immediately and every eye turned on him. Swanson, a clergyman with the most tortured soul Arthur had ever known, attempted to sneak away but he was too drunk and drugged to do so and ended up falling over a log then into a bush before wobbling off into the night. Though it’d been quite comical, the only one who’d snorted had been Micah. Dutch took a sip of whiskey before twisting around to peer up at Arthur. Then he gave a small, incredulous laugh.

“Arthur, it was *company* money.”

"You shoar it wasn't payroll then?"

"It was payroll belonging to a company worth millions."

"So, it was meant for the workers."

Dutch waved his hand. "And they will be paid. Do you honestly believe a railroad simply stops paying its men because one coach was robbed?"

Arthur's jaw tightened. "I thought we was robbin' rich folk."

The air seemed to thicken as Dutch stood. "So that's what this is. You think I lied to you."

It was like staring down a wolf, but Arthur didn't look away.

"After all these years," Dutch said. "After everything we've been through together, you come traipsing back after a successful venture to accuse me of deceiving you on the word of some dying hired gun."

"Ain't accusing you of nothing."

"Have I ever let you starve?"

Arthur frowned. "I'm only askin—"

"Have I ever abandoned you? Who gave you a home when you had none?"

"That ain't what this was about."

"It is *exactly* what it's about." Dutch stepped over the log and Arthur backed away. "Trust. Loyalty. Faith in the people who have stood beside you your entire *life*, Morgan."

Dutch's eyes hardened. "You know, lately I find myself wondering what has happened to you."

"What's happened to *me*?"

"This doubt. This constant questioning. Every decision I make, there you are, looking at me as though I have somehow failed *you*."

"I never said—"

"Perhaps you've grown soft. Perhaps you've forgotten what it takes to keep all these people fed and safe."

Arthur glanced around the fire. Nobody would meet his eye.

Dutch lowered his voice. "Or perhaps you simply don't trust me anymore. If that's the case, then your free to leave. This camp, this *family*, doesn't need your disloyalty."

Arthur was struck dumb. Somehow a box full of workmen's wages had become a measure of his loyalty.

He raised his hands. "Sorry, Dutch, I just... I guess I don't know what I'm talkin' 'bout."

"We're all under a great deal of pressure," Dutch said, his voice warm and fatherly again, forgiving, as though Arthur was the one in the wrong. "Get some rest, son."

It wasn't an invite to join around the campfire. The subtle shunning and shaming hurt more than a beating. Arthur turned away and sought out John who was fast asleep in Abigail's tent with their little boy, Jack.

"How's he faring?" he asked her as she rinsed bloody rags outside by lantern light.

"How do you think?" she said in a tight voice, wringing out the stained cloth like she was imagining John's neck. "Damn useless fool nearly got himself killed."

"Hey, Arthur."

He turned to see Lenny's form beyond the light.

"Wanted a word with you."

Arthur wished Abigail a good night, then followed Lenny. When they'd walked a ways outside camp into the trees, Lenny stopped.

"It's about John," he said. "And Dutch. I saw the whole thing. After John got shot and fell off his horse, Dutch was right there. I heard John call out for help, but... but he just left him there, and told me to keep after the stagecoach." He

shrugged. "Maybe Dutch was right and the stagecoach was more important. But I don't know, it just felt wrong leaving him there like that. I know he would've been there for any of us."

The hollow feeling Arthur had taken with him after talking with Dutch now filled with a sickening weight. He placed a hand on Lenny's shoulder.

"Nah, you're right. John would've helped us."

"You think Dutch lied to us?"

Arthur squeezed Lenny's shoulder. "I think... he's got a lot on his mind."

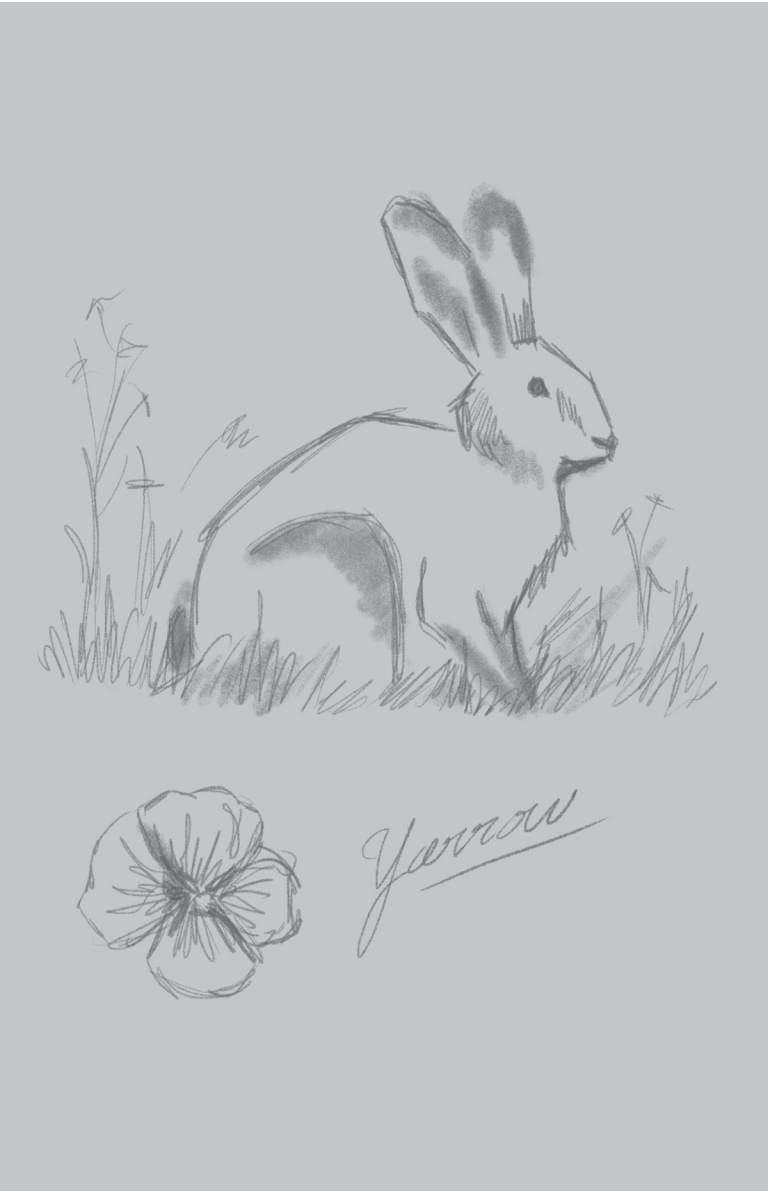
"Seems like he's been slipping up more, though," Lenny said quietly. "Been robbing the wrong folk or getting caught lately. How'd everything go so wrong in Blackwater?"

Arthur didn't have anything to say to that, because he silently agreed, but it felt like betrayal saying it aloud.

Instead, he said, "Don't worry about it. Things will sort themselves out."

But sort themselves out, they did not.

Strauss was angry with Arthur for not collecting on certain debts; Dutch and Molly were always arguing, and even he and Hosea were at odds. The overall morale of the camp was diminishing. And then things went from bad to worse. A few months and a botched bank job later, the gang licked its wounds and hastily retreated to the thick, murky swamps of Shady Belle. This time, two young men of their group, Sean and Kieran had been sacrificed for the "dream," a dream growing ever more soaked in blood.



CHAPTER III



Saint Denis was a bustling, sooty, noisy, crowded city crawling with corruption.

Arthur felt like a hare-in-a-snare in this place as he leaned against a wall, hip cocked, waiting for the signal. Dutch had assured everyone that the incoming train would be filled with bonds and not payroll for some “poor bastards being ground under the heel of industry,” as he put it.

However, when the train squealed to a halt, bellowing steam, Arthur expected the signal to never come. Guards leapt out of every car and began patrolling the platform, Winchesters slung across their chests. There were twice as many as there should’ve been. Arthur straightened from the wall. Surely even Dutch could see this was a bad idea. There was no way they’d be able to sneak on now. Across the street, Lenny caught his eye, gave the slightest shake of his head, and Arthur nodded.

But then came Dutch’s signal.

“Dammit,” Arthur growled.

Miach, Dutch, and Bill rushed the cars while Arthur and

Lenny covered the platform. Rifles and revolvers cracked like thunder, people screamed, and the whole station erupted at once, guards pouring from the train as police whistles pierced the air.

"Dutch!" Arthur shouted. "What're we doin'?!"

"Hold them! We got this!"

"Like hell," he muttered, ducking behind a stack of freight as bullets splintered the crates above him.

He fired, forcing two guards back behind the train, then glanced toward Lenny. The kid was pinned behind a baggage cart at the far end of the platform.

"Lenny!"

Blood darkened one sleeve, and every time he tried to move toward Arthur, another volley drove him back.

Dutch, Bill, and Micah emerged from the baggage car with sacks slung over their backs.

Arthur called out to them. "Lenny's stuck!"

"Cover us!" Dutch yelled back as he kept firing, before disappearing behind the train.

Arthur stared after him.

"Arthur!" Lenny shouted. "Just go!"

"No! Stay there." He was furious that Lenny was willing to die so easily for the others, and that Dutch seemed willing to let him.

Shooting as he went, he bolted and threw himself behind the cart that was shielding Lenny. The wound wasn't as bad as he feared, but Lenny couldn't shoot properly. Arthur hauled him up.

"Come on. You ain't dyin' here today."

He'd promised the kid that things would get better, or perhaps he'd just been trying to convince himself. Through some miracle, even managing to snatch up his fallen hat, Arthur fought their way through the freight yard, slipping

between boxcars while the law flooded the station behind them. By the time they reached the horses, the others were already mounted.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Dutch snarled. "I gave you an order."

Arthur's expression hardened. "Since when was leaving our own behind an order?"

"Since it jeopardizes our future. We can discuss your faltering attitude later. Right now, we need to *ride*."

Arthur helped Lenny into the saddle, then galloped after them, the word *future* rattling in his skull like a stone.

* * *

BY THE TIME Arthur got Lenny patched up and returned to the fire, Dutch was already telling the story as if it'd been some grand adventure instead of a near massacre.

"...and there we were, half the law in Saint Denis bearing down upon us!" Dutch declared, fine brandy in hand. "But here we are. Alive, considerably richer, and with another story to tell."

A few laughs and congratulations went around the fire. Arthur, standing just outside the ring of light, noticed that Molly, Tilly, Mary-Beth, and Sadie remained subdued.

However, their matron of the group, Miss Grimshaw, toasted with Dutch and appeared ready to give one of her tiresome speeches about family when he called out, "Javier! Strike up that guitar."

As the music and singing began, Arthur approached Dutch near the wagon, wondering if he should say anything at all, but it was like a part of him was begging to hear Dutch's agreement.

"Whole damn station was crawling with guards," Arthur

said in a low voice. "Should've called it off. Now we can't show our faces."

Dutch, however, spoke in a carrying, pleasant tone. "And thrown away a perfectly good opportunity? They don't know who we were."

"Christ, Dutch, we damn near got slaughtered."

"But we didn't." He spread his arms wide. "We prevailed. We came home with the money, and every man who rode out this morning rode back tonight."

A few people glanced at them, then away, except Hosea.

"How much?" Arthur asked.

"This isn't about one haul, Arthur. It's about our *future*. Every dollar brings us closer to freedom."

Arthur braced his forearm against the wagon above his head and leaned into it. "Shoar, Dutch. Remind me again. What exactly does this future look like?"

"Freedom, Arthur. A place where we don't have to live with a boot pressed against our necks."

"And how much more we need for that?"

Dutch gave him a wounded look. "What's gotten into you?"

Hosea stood from the log he'd been seated at around the fire and walked over to them.

"I'm starting to wonder the same thing myself, Dutch."

"I don't recall asking for your opinion."

Hosea gave a tired smile. "Maybe you oughta."

For an instant, Dutch seemed genuinely stung.

Arthur pushed away from the wagon. "Lenny damn near died tonight. John before that. Sean and Kieran *did* die. So, if there's some number we're trying to reach, I'd sure like to know what it is before we're all dead."

Behind them, the singing rolled into another verse and Uncle whooped as he fell backwards off his seat. Karen

clapped and shrieked with drunken laughter. She was always drunk these days, along with Swanson. His eyes roved over the people gathered around the fire, these unwanted lost souls, their smiles shining through despite shared hardship.

The fight draining out of him, Arthur spoke before Hosea could. "Look, Dutch, I know you're trying. I'm just tired is all. Maybe when we find some halfway decent land, we take it. We don't need something perfect."

"You know what it would take to make sure all these people are fed and cared for?"

"I know. I know. Just sayin' maybe paradise don't need no mangoes and pretty gals in grass skirts."

Hosea gave a small laugh behind him.

Dutch put a hand on Arthur's shoulder. "Speak for yourself, son." He laughed, but his grip tightened, and for a brief, ugly instant, Arthur was a boy again, his father's hand locked around his arm. He pulled free.

"Shoar. Whatever you say, Dutch."

He walked away.

As he passed by one of the tents in the dark, a sharp whisper called out to him.

"Arthur."

He paused. "Mary-Beth?"

She materialized out of the shadows, coming so close to him that he could feel her warmth and smell the floral scent she always used.

"She told me to give this to you."

He looked down to see a letter in her hand, no envelope this time. Without a word, he took it and read by moonlight Mary's short note.

MY DEAR ARTHUR,

. . .

PLEASE MEET me tomorrow at midnight near the main bridge into St. Denis. It's urgent.

YOUR LOVING,
Mary

URGENT? His heart had stopped at that word. Was she alright?

When he tucked it away, Mary-Beth lay a hand on his arm. "Before you decide, there's something I need to show you."

Perplexed but curious, he allowed her to lead him away from camp.

"How'd you two—" he started to say, but she shushed him.

He decided to let the mysterious ways of women lie. She led him out of camp into the swamp, and he was about to protest—there were snakes and gators after all—but then she halted near a large cypress and began looking around, pushing aside leafy plants.

"Alright, Mary Beth," he said, crossing his arms. "What in blazes are you doin' other than trying to get yourself bit?"

She looked up and raised her hands. "Okay. Now, Arthur, don't be mad, but I figured you should know."

He raised an eyebrow. "Know what?"

"About Dutch. I seen the way you two been conversin' lately, and I think... I think you'll want to hear this." She took a deep breath and straightened up. "You're right. He's reckless and been endangering all our lives for nothing."

“For nothin’?”

She began her search again. “I followed him and Micah out here. Ah!”

Like a cat pouncing, she crouched and pulled a large rock off to the side. It was too dark to see much more than moving shadows limned in moonlight, but Arthur saw her stick her arms into a hole and then pull out a lock box. It seemed heavy.

“Here,” she said, pulling hair away from her face and leaving muddy tracks. “You know how to break locks, right? See what’s in there.”

“I don’t know. This—”

“Is your ticket out,” she hissed. “You and Mary.”

The tone of her harsh whisper, even more than her words, shook his resolve.

“Quit jawing,” she said, “and open this goddamn thing.”

“Why, Mary-Beth,” he said as he crouched next to her. “I do believe our bad habits have rubbed off on you.”

She pushed her shoulder against his. “Too late for that.”

Within a few minutes he’d opened the steel box, and the world fell out from under him. For a breath he just stared, then he reached down and pulled out a large stack of cash, then another, and another, alongside gold and jewelry.

His mouth had gone dry, and he barely managed to ask, “How much is in here?”

“I reckon twenty thousand,” she said.

“Twenty?” His voice cracked. “Twenty thousand?”

He tossed the money back in and wiped a hand over his face. Mary-Beth laid a hand on his arm and said the one thing he desperately needed not to be true.

“It was never about getting out,” she said.

Abruptly, he stood and paced away, shaking his head.

"We coulda bought land this whole damn time," he said, his voice rising. "We coulda bought a whole damn *island*."

Mary-Beth came to his side, her hands on his arm a tentative touch as if afraid he might rage at her. Instead, he looked down at her upturned face, suddenly seeing something there he'd never realized. She was pretty, but he'd never seen her as anything more than a little slip of a fawn in need of protection. But the way her doe eyes looked at him now, she clearly felt more for him, and he couldn't fathom why. Just like he'd never understood why Mary had loved him so, for he was not a man worth loving like that.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked. "Why not take the money and escape yourself?"

She dropped her hands and looked away. "Because, even though Dutch might have other ideas as to what it means, we're family. And, out of us all, you know a love true and rare. Go to her, Arthur. Take the money and live your life."

He snorted. "You read too many of those silly romance books."

"And you too little," she teased. "Go. You don't have to promise her anything. Just see what she wants."

Know your own mind, son.

The words came back to him with a bitter irony. What had once sounded like fatherly advice suddenly echoed like a warning.

"You are a meddlesome woman."

"Rightly so," she said as she gathered up the box and held it out to him. He shook his head.

"I ain't taken all that." With a deep breath he walked away, the mud squelching beneath his boots, then circled back to her again. Even the insects and frogs had gone quiet around them. "You know he'll come after us?"

"I know."

They stood like that in silence, both weighing the consequences of what they were about to do. This was not merely an act of theft; it was turning his back on his past, on all of it. Dutch had found him when he was fourteen years old and given him a home, taught him to read, to shoot and survive, but, more than anything, had given him something to believe in. He'd measured right and wrong against that belief. They were outlaws, he didn't deny that, but they weren't common criminals. Whatever blood Arthur had spilled, or laws he'd broken, there had always been that distinction. Never did they prey on common folk, only the corrupt who were hell bent on destroying some vague, mythical land of freedom. But it'd all been a lie. Dutch was never going to save them.

He motioned for her to put the box down, then he pulled out a few bundles of cash, a few thousand worth, and shut the lid.

"Divvy up the rest among yourself and the others," he said. "The ones that need out. Abigail and Jack, Lenny, Tilly. You know."

"I know," she said again, softly, and this time he heard all the unsaid things she wished to tell him but never would.

His heart began to race as he stood and handed her the box.

"You'll have to leave quick," he said, second guessing what they were about to do. He was putting everyone at great risk. But hadn't that been what Dutch was doing this whole time?

As if reading his mind, she answered, "You're not the only one making decisions, Arthur. Give us the chance to choose our own futures."

To his pleasant surprise, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his scruffy cheek, then turned and started back toward camp. His heart breaking in a hundred different ways, he followed. She was right. Without the cash, their futures would be

shackled to Dutch's bloody paradise. Though, Dutch being Dutch, their futures might be doomed regardless.

Most everyone was either passed out drunk or gone to bed, all but Dutch whose silhouette sat smoking a cigar while overlooking the water. Arthur slipped upstairs and hid the cash in his satchel, more terrified and conflicted than he'd ever been in his life.

CHAPTER IV



The following midnight came too quickly and not fast enough.

All day, Arthur was on edge while trying to appear calm. What if Dutch or Micah went to check on the stash before he left? Many times, he debated returning the money and forgetting the whole thing. But he watched the members of his gang, his family, and thought of John and Lenny wounded and left behind, Sean and Kieran dead. Then his determination solidified when his gaze fell on the women and young Jack. They deserved better. Even drunk, cussing Karen. All his years of horse thieving served him well as he led Soteria through the night before galloping away from the only life he'd ever known. Mary was waiting for him on a horse under a tree next to the bridge. When he rode up, she quietly called out his name.

"It's me," he answered, reining in so their horses were nose to nose.

Neither spoke for a moment, then he broke the silence.

"Are you alright?"

She gave a small, nervous laugh. "Oh, more alright than I've ever been."

It was then that he noticed her riding attire and fine horse. He gestured at the black thoroughbred.

"Ain't that horse your father's?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes. Yes, it is. I also stole his gold watch, about five hundred dollars, and my mother's brooch. Well, the brooch was always mine to begin with. I've decided to run away, Arthur. And I hope you'll come with me. Either way, I will no longer be under that man's tyranny. I realized that we were both prisoners of men who thought they knew best. It was unfair of me to ask you to leave your prison when I wouldn't leave mine. Isn't that what you always advocated? The great open skies of freedom?"

Arthur sat absolutely dumbfounded.

"Arthur?"

"You stole his *horse*?"

She giggled. "Is that all you have to say?"

"I ain't quite shoar what to say."

"Then say you'll run away with me. Did Mary-Beth show you the stash?"

"You know about that?" He made an exasperated scoff. "Do all womenfolk conspire in secret?"

She shrugged and answered mysteriously, "Perhaps."

"Yeah, she showed me..." He hung his head and exhaled. "We'd be damned fools to go through with this."

"Then let's do unwise things together, Mister Morgan."

A grin broke across his face. "If you say so, ma'am."

She kicked her taller horse forward and looked down at him, their legs nearly touching. "Don't you go ma'aming me."

"Sorry, ma'am."

With a laugh she leaned down, cupped his jaw in her hands, and kissed him long and hard. He wrapped his hands

around her back, and for those few seconds there was no Dutch, no gang, no money hidden in his satchel. There was only Mary and the staggering fact that after all these years she was still here, still in love with him—for some goddamn reason—and her kiss left him dazed. When they parted, he kept his forehead against hers.

“Christ, Mary.”

“Come with me,” she breathed.

He nodded. “Let’s ride.”

His heart hammered harder than it had in any gunfight. Every instinct he’d learned since boyhood seemed to be pulling him backward. He watched Mary as she clicked her tongue at her horse and moved out onto the road. That there was love. Why had it taken him so long to see it? She’d never judged him, not the way her father had. She’d never rejected *who* he was, just his dangerous lifestyle, and he couldn’t blame her for that. He was finally rejecting it himself. He imagined Dutch discovering the money gone, the fury and accusations, and the others caught in the middle of it. He ought to go back and protect them, but then he recalled Mary-Beth’s words: *Let us choose our own futures.*

“Arthur? Are you coming?”

He wheeled his horse around and rode after her, leaving a loyalty born of debt for one freely given.

* * *

ALL NIGHT they rode as Mary led them to one of the farther outlying towns. There they rented a room and bought supplies, but afterwards Arthur insisted they sleep under the stars, for fear of discovery. When she didn’t complain and helped where she could, he fell even more in love with her. While watching her char some meat over the fire one night,

he suddenly saw her as the woman she was now, not the sheltered young lady he'd kept preserved in memory. Somewhere in his mind, Mary had remained the girl he'd known, the one in fine dresses, with hands soft and smelling of rose-soap; whose father decided what sort of life was proper for her. This Mary had steel in her, and a will as fierce as his own.

He'd always thought of himself as the dangerous, irredeemable one, while she belonged somewhere safe and orderly. Deciding that she couldn't live in his world and he couldn't live in hers had made parting inevitable. Yet here she was in muddy riding skirts, burning a rabbit he'd shot, and glancing up at him with more devotion than he knew what to do with. Every night, with her in his arms, new fears arose. If anything happened to her, he would never be able to live with himself. Gambling with his own life was one thing, but it was a heavy weight to accept that she gambled her life by simply being with him. Dutch would come. Arthur tried to push that dread aside, to hope, but it followed in the shadows like all the other ghosts.

They never stayed anywhere long. Despite his wariness of boarding houses or hotels, Mary put her foot down when it came to bathing and eating a decent meal occasionally. Not all her lady-like upbringing would be left behind, and he didn't wish it to be. However, they used fake names, and every dark haired, mustached stranger made him look twice, while every distant gunshot turned his stomach to ice. Whenever he woke suddenly in the night and reached for his gun beneath his bedroll, Mary would stir and wrap her arm around him. It was strange, letting her stand between him and his demons, but he'd relax against her and eventually fall back asleep.

Arthur was surprised to notice the aspen leaves turning

gold as they rode through Colorado. Had it truly been four months since his break from the gang? The fact that Dutch hadn't caught up to them yet was a little peace of mind. Maybe he wouldn't seek revenge after all, or maybe they'd sufficiently covered their trail. Either way, something about this land pulled at him. It was beautiful country, for one, with golden aspen and rusty Gambel oaks set against distant snowy peaks. He could see them disappearing into one of those lavender aster valleys, raising sheep... Christ, anything but sheep. Raising horses and building a real life together.

"What're you looking at?" Mary asked as she pulled her horse to a stop and followed his gaze to a valley with a sparkling river below.

He looked at her. Months ago, she'd changed out her fancy skirts for a plain, practical split-skirt, blouse, and vest. She'd also become more adept at riding the feisty black stallion, Erebus. As she became more beautiful in his eyes, he feared he became rougher and grubbier to her. He ran a hand over his beard self-consciously, vowing to shave and cut his hair first chance he had.

"Just thinking this might be a good place to settle."

Her eyes widened. "You really think so?"

"We can check around in town. See what's for sale."

He wheeled Soteria around, carrying with him the fragile beginnings of a future he thought would've never been possible.

* * *

THEY BOUGHT EIGHTY ACRES, burning through almost the rest of their two grand. After all the years of running and fighting, Arthur had finally found his own paradise. Mary had grand ideas about the cabin until he reminded her that

winter was closing in, he only had two hands, and less than three hundred dollars. It was barely enough for timber and supplies that would hopefully get them through the harsh Colorado snows.

Arthur worked from sunup and sometimes beyond sundown, while Mary helped with keeping them fed—she'd taken quickly to the bow for hunting small game—mending tears in his clothing, chinking gaps, and turning the tiny cabin into a home. Arthur finished the makeshift stable just as the first flakes began to fall one cloudy afternoon. With Soteria and Erebus snug and fed, he stomped the gathering snow off his boots and looked forward to getting warm as well.

"Arthur," Mary said brightly as if he were some fairytale prince and not a two-bit outlaw.

"There she is," he replied as he hung up his coat.

It was cozy inside with the crackling fireplace where Mary crouched tending a simmering pot of stew and burbling coffee kettle. She'd sealed the walls and roof well. No cold draft would dare enter without her permission. She handed him a cup of coffee, and he collapsed into one of their mismatched chairs. How had he been so lucky to have met such a woman, and luckier still that she wanted to be with him, here and now, in some rustic shack hiding from the world?

"I figured," he said, leaning forward, "if you haven't sold it for that mirror"—he pointed at the small mirror on the wall she'd purchased in town—"I suppose we're still engaged?"

She looked at the mirror then back at him. Replacing the lid on the pot, she stood and went to her chest of clothing and other items. After a few minutes of rummaging around she came back holding the gold band he'd given her more than a decade ago.

"I thought about a new dress, but..." She shrugged a shoulder.

He took it from her, held her hand, and gently slid the ring onto her finger.

That night, when tenderness began to turn into something more, Arthur hesitated, "We ain't married yet."

Mary pulled him down. "What's one more sin with the man I love?"

For the first time, they made love as though their passion might reclaim the years they'd lost, until the ghosts faded with the misty morning.

However, like most dreams, it didn't last.

CHAPTER V



When one particularly nasty mid-winter snowstorm finally broke Arthur announced he was going into town to sell hides and restock on a few essentials. Soteria seemed as glad as he to get out of cramped quarters with an extra pep in her step as they trudged through deep snow.

Arthur loved Mary, and the newfound peace was a nice change, but a part of him was restless. He didn't miss robbing trains or running from the law, and sure as hell didn't miss moving from one place to the next. Yet, he found it difficult to go from a lifetime of vigilance to mundane routine. And then just as quickly he cursed himself for taking their hard-earned peace for granted.

As he was leaving the store he nearly dropped the bag of dried and canned goods when he overheard a conversation.

"...seen a woman named Mary Linton?" a well-attired man was asking someone in the mud-slushed street. "With a man named Arthur Morgan?"

"Nah." The trapper shook his head. "Can't say I have."

"He's wanted for kidnapping and theft. Stole a lot of property and abducted a woman."

Arthur didn't hear the rest as he hurried out of town, nor did he see the man turn and look in his direction.

"Everything alright?" Mary asked when he arrived home.

"Shoar," he said as he set the groceries down.

But then he leaned on the table and shook his head. "No. Your father's sent men after us."

Mary gasped, her eyes widening, and the fear in them stung his heart.

"Don't worry," he told her, going over to pull her close. "I'll deal with them. It'll be okay."

She pushed away. "No, Arthur. Don't kill them."

Looking into her pleading eyes he nodded. "Alright. I won't kill 'em. But I might need to scare 'em. A lot."

That night they were awoken by pounding on the door. Arthur had already been half-awake, expecting trouble, and it seemed Mary had been as well for she didn't cry out in alarm. They sat up from their cot and Arthur reached for his holster.

"Don't," she said, laying a hand on his as he grabbed the gun.

"I won't shoot 'im," he assured her. "But there ain't no guarantee he won't shoot me."

The bed was only a few strides from the front door, and she went to crouch behind the table and chairs as they'd agreed upon earlier.

"Arthur Morgan!" the man shouted from outside. "We know you're there. Come out peacefully and you won't be harmed."

"Like hell," he muttered as he positioned himself on the wall next to the door.

The windows held no glass and were tightly shuttered against the cold. He listened.

"Come out, Morgan!" another man shouted a little farther away.

"Two," Arthur noted to himself. "Three against one," he shouted back. "What're you so scared of?"

"Oh, I think the two of us can handle common trash like you," the second man yelled.

Arthur chuckled as the first one reprimanded his partner for giving them away.

"I'd leave if I were you," Arthur said. "Whatever Gillis is payin' you ain't gonna be enough."

"Mr. Gillis is willing to pay a high price for his property," the bounty hunter said, "especially for abducting and raping his daughter, you sick son-of-a-bitch."

Arthur was about to slowly open one of the shutters when a click made him look toward Mary's hiding place. With blazing fury on her face, she strode around the table, shotgun in hand, and before he could stop her, unlatched and flung the door wide.

"Get off my damn property!" she shrieked at the men.

Arthur wasn't sure who was more stunned, he or the man with a barrel an inch from his whiskered face. No one moved. The younger man standing a few yards back held his hand over his holstered gun. The one in the path of Mary's wrath raised his hands.

"I was not abducted, nor raped," she said in a deadly voice, the gun braced solidly against her shoulder. "Whatever lies he told you, my father well knew that I left on my own accord and *I* stole his horse and money. But if you try to take me or my fiancée while trespassing on our land, my finger might just slip in self-defense. Arthur," she said, while still

staring down the barrel. "Go into my chest and get that gold watch and the last of our money."

Without a word he did as she asked and returned to her side with the watch and two-hundred dollars.

"Give these nice men my daddy's things."

He tossed the pocket watch and bundle of cash into the snow at the man's feet, who quickly glanced down then back up.

"There," she said. "That should pay for the horse. But I am not his property."

Arthur smirked at the shock on the men's faces, his chest swelling with pride and repressed laughter at the ferocity he never knew Mary had.

Warily, the man bent down, picked up the items, then backed away.

He gave her a nod and said, "Our mistake, ma'am," then they mounted their horses and took off into the sparkling white night.

"Oh my," Mary said as she shut the door and dropped the gun. "I'm shaking."

She laughed nervously and sank to the ground. Arthur wrapped his arms around her, and then they burst into laughter which turned to kisses and a sleepless night of release.

* * *

THE ONLY OTHER incident that winter was a pack of hungry wolves, drawn to the horses, but Mary and Arthur managed to fend them off, and it was the moment both realized they truly made a good team, come hell or high snows.

As spring thawed ice into lupine and lilies, and the

chickens Mary had purchased with her mother's brooch squabbled and scratched, Arthur prepared to harvest logs for a bigger home. He was felling a tree a good distance from their temporary one when he heard Mary scream. Instinct threw him into immediate motion. Dropping the ax, he leapt onto Erebus, drew his gun, and launched into an earth-churning gallop. With pure dread he recognized the read paisley vest as Erebus crested the low rise, and then he saw Mary.

Dutch had her pinned against him in front of the cabin, one arm hooked across her chest and the other hand gripping her arm. Never in his life had Arthur felt such intense fear followed by an overwhelming, mind-numbing rage. He drove Erebus down the slope, crushing the little purple flowers Mary had been so pleased to discover only yesterday. He was suddenly hyper aware of every little thing: a chicken running under the coop, someone near the sawhorses and stacks of lumber, her checkered dress snapping on the washing line.

"Arthur!" Mary shouted.

He pulled Erebus up so hard the stallion slid and half-reared, but Arthur leapt off with his revolver already leveled at Dutch.

"Let her go."

Dutch looked upon him as though Arthur was being the unreasonable, reactive one. Micah sat smirking on the corral fence, while Bill stood near the woodpile. Arthur was genuinely surprised, and hurt, to see Javier and Charles. Two other hard men he didn't recognize had straightened up, ready to aim their rifles. He was at least glad to see many faces were absent. His eyes flicked back to Dutch.

"I said, let her go."

"Easy, son..."

"Don't call me that."

The words escaped him without hesitation, and shock, possibly even hurt, moved across Dutch's face. That was the damned thing about Dutch. Arthur had spent half a year trying to reconcile how much of it had been lies, but a man could think he cared for you and yet hurt you; could save your life and ruin it later; could say words you so desperately needed to hear, but each one added up to coils of rope around your neck. And then, when you were tamed with calculated kindness and you'd served your purpose, *yank* you to your knees.

Mary shifted in Dutch's grasp and his arm tightened. Arthur's finger pressed against the trigger. Dutch's gaze wandered over the property.

"So," Dutch said. "This is it. This is what you threw our family away for."

Arthur didn't rise to the bait, but the accusation was still painful. For an instant he saw Horseshoe Overlook instead of the mountains: Hosea bent over a game of checkers, Pearson swearing at his stew, Jack poking sticks at bugs. He heard Javier's guitar and Sean's obnoxious Irish banter and practically felt the warmth of a campfire surrounded by people he'd once believed would be there until the end.

Then he looked at Mary, and her gaze said one thing: *kill the bastard.*

"Whatever you say, Dutch."

Dutch scoffed. "Whatever I say?" He dragged Mary with him as he paced a few feet. "I say you *stole* from us, Arthur, and then turned half the camp against me. You took our *future* and made one all for yourself. For what? This harlot and a patch of half-frozen dirt?" He was becoming more animated as he spoke, emphasizing each word like a hammer striking nails. "Look at you. For twenty years, I fed you, clothed you, taught you. You were nothing when I found

you. *Nothing*. No family, no education, no future. I gave you *everything*, Arthur. And this is how you repay me?"

"It was always gonna be another score," Arthur said, his gun still following Dutch. "California, Tahiti, Australia. What was next, Dutch, goddamn El Dorado?"

Like always, Dutch changed tact quicker than a hawk. "And this is your idea of paradise? This woman comes back into your life and suddenly we're beneath you. She couldn't accept the man you were, so she poisons your mind and feeds you this"—he made a mocking gesture and expression as if the land were foul—"this horseshit vision of freedom. What's next for *you*, Arthur? Paying taxes, tipping your hat to the sheriff, bowing and scraping and begging the government for scraps like a hound brought to heel? That's not the world we were fighting for."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "And what were we fightin' for? Because all I saw was a whole lotta fightin' and not much else."

Dutch shook his head like Arthur was still a naïve little boy. "Look, we can stand here all day debating the philosophical nature of freedom and the obligations of man, but I'm afraid we've reached a rather more practical matter." In a flash he had the muzzle of his revolver jammed into Mary's side, and the stifled cry she gave nearly brought tears to Arthur's eyes. "You are faced with the freedom of choice, son. You can make right what you've done, or you can face the consequences of your actions."

Micah's chuckle sent white-hot fury through Arthur's veins.

"Dutch," Arthur drawled into a snarl. "Let her go. This is between you and me."

"And *she* is between you and me. Give me a better offer, Arthur."

"Go to hell," Mary spat at him like a wildcat.

"Soon enough, Darlin'," Dutch said. "Soon e-nough."

"I thought revenge was a fool's game?" Arthur said.

"You mistake revenge for consequence. A petty man seeks revenge because his pride is wounded. A principled man acts because some offenses cannot be permitted to stand."

It was like catching eels when trying to talk to Dutch, his logic twisting out of Arthur's grasp before he could make head or tail of it. He didn't answer as Dutch continued. "An eye for an eye, Morgan. Crime and punishment grow out of one stem, and you must pay at last your own debt."

As much as he hated being cornered, Arthur couldn't see a way out. Just as he was on the verge of lowering his gun, Charles stepped forward with Javier at his side.

"This wasn't what I came here for," Charles said to Dutch. "You said we was just gonna to talk, smooth things over."

"Yeah," Javier said. "I don't wanna hurt nobody. Forget about the money, Dutch. Let Arthur and his woman be."

Dutch stared at them, and for once, words seemed to fail him.

"I don't want this blood on my hands," Charles said. "It ain't worth it,"

Dutch gave a short, incredulous laugh. "Twenty *grand* of *our* hard-earned cash ain't worth it?" His gaze moved between them, his expression growing ever more wounded and savage. "So that's it, then. Arthur steals us blind, leaves us paupers, and somehow, *I'm* the crazy one for expecting him to answer for it."

"That ain't what I said," Charles replied.

Dutch looked at Javier. "And you?"

Javier shifted his weight. "I been with you a long time. But I didn't come all this way to gun down my friend and his woman."

"His woman?" Dutch's arm tightened around Mary. "This *woman* helped tear apart everything we built and profited quite handsomely from it, I might add." He exhaled hard through his nose. When he spoke again, his voice was dangerously quiet. "I have spent my entire life surrounded by men who profess loyalty right up until they have to prove it. So, I suggest the two of you decide, right now, whether your word means anything at all."

Charles's expression didn't change as he calmly gave his answer. "My word don't mean followin' yours when it's wrong."

Charles had always seen so clearly what had taken Arthur half his life to understand, and it made him feel like a blind fool. Javier nodded at the declaration, taking a few steps closer to Arthur, and to cover.

Dutch's gaze slid toward Micah and the other two strangers. Bill remained very still near the log pile but kept his eyes downcast.

"Well," Dutch said, "at least now I know where everybody stands."

In that instant, Arthur knew what was about to happen, but not in the way it went down.

Micah moved first. His hand dropped for the revolver as his eyes went straight to Charles.

"Charles!" But Arthur's warning was lost beneath the crack of gunshot.

Then Mary moved when Dutch yelled at Micah to *stand down!* She drove her bootheel into his shin, making him curse and loosen his grip just enough for her to wrench out of his grasp. His revolver went off beside her like a thunder-clap, but luckily the errant bullet tore harmlessly into the dirt. Arthur's rage, however, reached another height upon seeing Dutch's shot at Mary as she raced into the cabin.

The peaceful valley exploded into an avalanche of violence.

Arthur ran and flung himself behind the wagon then fired at Micah, but one of the other men cut across his line of sight. A bullet struck the wagon, spitting splinters into his cheek. Across the way, Charles had reached the woodpile and Bill had seemingly vanished. Arthur frantically searched for him and then saw Bill on his horse, disappearing into the distance. One of the new men popped out from behind the cabin and fired wildly. Charles fired back and the man crumpled. The last stranger tried to run for the chicken coop but Javier suddenly appeared from behind the woodshed and shot him down. Now only Micah and Dutch remained.

A bullet chipped the wheel beside Arthur's hand.

"Was that whore really worth it, Morgan?" Micah shouted.

Arthur leaned around the wagon and fired, but Micah ducked behind a leaking water barrel near the house with an ugly laugh. From behind a large boulder near the fence, Dutch fired at Charles and Javier, but his shots went wide.

Arthur reloaded his gun with quick, steady fingers, but just as he twisted around to aim for Micah once more, something punched him in the stomach. The blunt blow didn't hurt at first, nor knock him backward. He looked down and saw blood blossom on his shirt. For a moment, he just stared, then his revolver slipped from his hand, and he tried to catch himself as he collapsed onto his back. The spring sky swung into view overhead, painfully bright. Sound pierced his ears as his senses suddenly grew sharp and clear.

Gunfire. A horse screaming. Chickens squawking. Mary shouting his name.

Arthur put a hand to his belly. The pain was beginning to rise and he moaned.

“Havin’ a lie down, cowpoke?”

Micah swam into view. Arthur reached for his gun but found only grass.

With a mocking grin, Micah aimed his revolver.

Arthur's hand swept through the grass again and struck iron. Right before the gunshot, Arthur rolled to the side, crying out in agony as he fired back. The bullet caught Micah in the chest and knocked him back. He staggered but somehow stayed upright. His gun came up again, and then three shots hit him all at once from Arthur, Charles, and Javier. Still, Micah remained upright for a moment in dazed disbelief, then his eyes glazed over and he fell to the grass.

Gun smoke drifted lazily through the air, and Arthur heard the creek rushing with snowmelt. After all the mayhem, everything had suddenly gone quiet and still. All strength fled and he dropped back again, his body too heavy to move. All he could manage was one agonizing shallow breath after another as life bled away from him. The warm day grew cold.

“I’m sorry, son.”

Arthur’s eyes fluttered open to see Dutch’s form blocking the sun. Then he noticed the barrel of a revolver pointed at his head.

“Don’t do it, Dutch!” he heard Charles yell.

Arthur’s focus slid past the gun to the man.

For more than half his life, he’d watched those eyes shine across campfires while Dutch talked about freedom and civilization and all the things wrong with the world. He’d seen them furious, laughing, frightened, proud. He’d looked into them as a starving, lost boy, believing he’d finally found the father he’d never had.

Arthur managed to raise his arm, a feeble shield, and

remembered the poor, broken man lying on his back in the barren ground.

“Dutch,” Charles said more urgently, pleadingly.

It was only lasted a second, but something passed between the men and Arthur knew Dutch couldn’t do it. Then, to his horror, another shot rang out. Dutch staggered sideways, clutching at his shoulder, and nearly went to his knees. Arthur tried to shout but all that escaped him was a groan. Rasing his head, he watched as the man turned away and lurched toward his horse tied to the far side of the fence.

“Let him go,” Charles said, and Arthur realized the shot had come from Javier.

Dutch climbed into the saddle then plunged into to the forest, hoofbeats echoing then fading away through the valley.

Arthur let his head sink back into the grass.

He turned his gaze to see the mountains capped with snow and the emerald valley splashed with purple, yellow-white flowers. He'd spent his life expecting to die in the dirt during a robbery, or hanged in some miserable town, or stabbed in a saloon brawl. He'd made his peace with it so many times that dying had become an ordinary fact of life. But now, he found he didn't want to die. He tried to curl his fingers, but they were growing numb with cold.

“Arthur!”

He turned his head toward Mary's call, but the world was dim. The last thing he saw was her beautiful face, her flying hair and billowing skirts, as she rushed to his side. His eyes closed. There were a few worth loving and dying for.



CHAPTER VI



*I*t wasn't long until the grass grew green again, blanketing the bloodshed. The chickens and their brood scratched placidly for bugs, the two horses grazed, and a garden grew plentiful with corn, beans, carrots, and onions. Even a small apple orchard was planted that spring with the help of Charles and Javier. Somehow, Uncle got wind of the operation and rolled in like a tumbleweed only to get caught, most days, in Mary's rocking chair griping about lumbago.

For nearly a week after Micah had shot him, Arthur hovered under the cloak of death. Charles and Javier had dragged him into the cabin while Mary rode for a doctor, and what followed survived in Arthur's memory as scraps of voices and pain. The bullet missed his spine, and the doctor did his best, but Arthur writhed in feverish dreams for over a week.

Everyone expected him to die, and Mary stayed by his side as if she could protect him from Satan's fiery grip. She changed his dressings, cooled his brow with ice-cold cloths

from the stream, and spooned broth and medicine into him. Once, half-delirious, Arthur shouted then pleaded with her to end it all, end the pain, and she knew he meant more than just the bullet wound. In his sleep he cried out and moaned for his mother and father, for Dutch to spare his life or that of another, for all his tormentors, real or imagined, to leave him be. The other men learned to let Mary cry in peace, for she'd shoo them off, but Uncle always brought her a cup of tea or shawl for her shaking shoulders.

Lead had weakened his body, but Arthur's will was forged of stronger metal. By late summer he could cross the yard without help, and by mid-autumn he was back on a horse, though Mary watched him with apprehension. Even now the wound pulled when he twisted too quickly, and sometimes a deep ache would make him pause and take breath, but the scar changed him in other ways. He'd flung himself into danger for Dutch's ideals, a noble cause he believed worth dying for, but a man couldn't fear losing a future he never expected to see. Mary and their patch of paradise was more vision and reason to live than Arthur could've ever imagined, and it shook him to his core.

Charles had stayed through that summer, Javier until after the first snow, and Arthur accepted the fact that Uncle was a permanent fixture like a potbellied stove, or sticky pine pitch. By then the little cabin had become a tack room beside a large log cabin with several rooms, a porch, and proper windows. Mary made it a home, and every passing day Arthur slowly learned how to accept her love, and she his scars and ghosts.

The three of them scraped by that winter and when the following spring rolled around, Arthur had a new vision.

"Erebus and Soteria?" Mary echoed, crossing her arms

and staring from the porch at the mare in one paddock and the stallion in the other.

"Shoar." Arthur shrugged. "Why not?"

She pursed her lips, thinking on his proposal, and then smiled.

"I think it's a wonderful idea."

"Well, mercy for that," he said, dodging her playful swipe and gently swatting her back.

It was a battle after that until Arthur called a truce on account of his gut aching from laughter.

With her blessing, he paired the two horses, and when Soteria caught with foal, searched for more horses to add to his venture. He sought out unwanted or problematic ones, rehabilitating them with kind patience. Over time, the herd grew, and within a year townsfolk were coming to Arthur for new stock or help with unruly horses.

Through Charles they crossed paths with Rains Fall and Eagle Flies, and their business dealings grew into deep friendship.

"A frightened horse is often called a bad horse by a man too impatient to understand what frightened it in the first place," Rains Fall told him one rainy day while Arthur worked with a spotted chestnut mare.

He'd bought and traded with the tribe for several Palouse horses over the past year, interbreeding them with thoroughbreds, morgans, and draft horses.

"You allow them to choose," Rains Fall said from the fence. "That is why they trust you."

"That so?" Arthur replied as he cautiously approached the skittish mare, halter in hand.

"You do not force her to your will. You let her decide when and where she feels safe."

The little mare's ears were flat against her skull as she

skipped sideways away from him. He stopped, speaking low to her, "That's a good girl." When she snorted and lowered her head, her ears swiveling back and forth, then working her upper lip, he took a few steps closer. They danced like that through the misty rain until eventually he placed the rope over her withers then led her out of the corral by the halter.

"Good," Rains Fall said with an approving nod. "It is nice to see two creatures learning to trust one another."

Arthur just gave a little smirk and ducked his head, a stream of water falling off his old hat.

On some days, he rode and hunted with Eagle Flies, and many nights were merry around the fire with his newfound family. They added three milk cows that autumn, then more chickens, and as Arthur's herd grew to twenty head, he contemplated purchasing more acreage. As he leaned his shoulder against a post sipping coffee, he surveyed his land, *their* land, and was struck by the overwhelming reality of it all.

They'd finally married in April, quietly and simply with a small group of close friends, and he was still getting used to hearing himself be called "husband." Twenty horses now grazed in the pastures; chimney smoke curled above the house, and, inside, the love of his life was singing a little out of tune as she prepared a stew. He'd spent so long believing a life like this belonged to other more deserving men that he half expected to wake up from it. Even the coffee tasted nothing like the bitter grit he'd drunk most his life at camp. Mary would spoil him rotten if he didn't take care.

"Arthur," she called.

"Yeah?"

"Come eat, my dear." Then he heard her bark at Uncle, "If

you take one more piece of cornbread, you'll be eatin' horse turds instead!"

He chuckled, tossed back the last swig of coffee, and permitted himself to be spoiled.

* * *

THREE YEARS after their homestead had grown into a hundred-and-fifty-acre ranch which Arthur named Isaac's Rest, a most surprising letter arrived for him.

"Mary-Beth?" he muttered while seated at the kitchen table.

DEAR ARTHUR,

I WAS SO happy to hear that you and Mary are married at last. I suppose some happy endings simply take longer to reach. Please send her my love and I expect an invitation to Isaac's Rest one of these days.

I WANTED TO INFORM YOU, now that I fully know for myself, what happened to everyone after that night in the swamp. After you left, I did as you asked and saw that the money found its way into the right hands. Dutch was so certain you'd taken everything. One by one people began to slip away. He was ready to declare martial law by the time Tilly and I escaped a few days later. I do believe we got out just in time, for his suspicions had reached dangerous heights. Only Hosea had the guts to stand up to him.

He tried to stop Dutch from going after you, and when he refused to follow him down that dark road, they had a terrible

argument which nearly ended in bloodshed. Both Miss Grimshaw and Hosea left the next morning, and Dutch merely remained holed up in his tent listening to that gramophone, or so I was told. No one has heard anything of his whereabouts since the event at your ranch, and I'd say no news is good news.

You'll be pleased to hear that John, Abigail, and Jack also have a farm outside Blackwater. Tilly is happily married in Saint Denis. Sadie has become a bounty hunter, and I admire her all the more for it. She has become quite an inspiration for my... well, I'll tell you that news in minute. Reverend Swanson returned to the cloth and seems finally at peace.

Pearson went respectable as a shop owner, of all things. Molly returned to Ireland, but I have heard nothing of Karen. I wish I could tell you otherwise. Though Karen was my friend, I didn't trust her with the money and even less so with secrets. May she find peace as well.

AND NOW I have something wonderful to tell you. I am a published novelist! Of none other than romance, as you most rightly have already guessed. Those years with the gang, watching all of you, helped enormously with my stories. One thing I learned was that people rarely change because somebody tells them to. You must give them the right piece of the story at the right moment and let them believe they reached the conclusion themselves. It is remarkable what people will do once they think an idea belongs to them.

COME TO THINK OF IT, perhaps I should thank Dutch for that bit of insight.

WITH LOVING REGARD,

Mary-Beth

ARTHUR LOWERED the letter and ran a hand down his chin, then read the last paragraph again. Everything had unraveled so quickly after Mary-Beth had opened that box. Although he'd known how nimble her thieving little fingers could be, apparently, she hadn't spent all those hours with her nose in a book merely daydreaming. Now those same innocent-looking fingers were putting words to paper and leading readers wherever she pleased, just as she had led him and Mary, and everyone else.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered in awe. "She played us all like a fiddle."

And Dutch would never understand how it had all come crashing down.

He glanced out the window. Dark clouds broke over the mountains, scattering sunshine. Cattle and horses grazed beyond the fenced apple orchard, and Mary was out gathering eggs, or perhaps throwing them at Uncle. As he stood, he reached for the gun belt and his father's old leather hat hanging over the back of the chair. His fingers brushed the battered brim and then paused.

Leaving them where they were, he picked up his journal and pencil, opening it to one last, empty page.

THE END



Mary's Apple-Beef Stew

A HEARTY, slightly sweet stew for cold winter nights.

Serves 4–6 (unless Uncle is around)

INGREDIENTS

1-2 lb chuck roast or stew beef

2 apples, chopped

1 large onion, chopped

3 carrots, chopped

2 celery stalks, chopped

3 cups broth or water

1–2 tbsp maple syrup

1 tbsp apple cider vinegar or Worcestershire

1 tsp thyme

1 bay leaf

2 tsp cinnamon

1 tsp ground cloves

Salt and black pepper

Optional: 2 tbsp flour

Optional: Bacon bits

Optional: Butter or bacon fat for browning

Optional: switch out maple syrup for chilis or hot sauce for a spicy stew.

Instant Pot: Cook on High Pressure for 30 minutes; natural release for 10 minutes.

Slow Cooker: Cook on Low for 5-6 hours or High for 3-4 hours.

Dutch Oven: Simmer gently, covered, for 2–2½ hours.

