Falling for the Fugitive

by Delia_Maguire

Summary

The irksome outlaw known as The Kid has evaded the long arm of the law for years; but as Sheriff Hank Anderson finally closes in on his prey, the grizzled lawman learns that things may not be quite as they seem... And it sure doesn't help that he just might be falling for the fugitive.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“It’s him!”

The screen door of the sheriff’s station slammed open with a bang. Hank snorted upright, yanked from the light doze he’d slipped into like a fish on a line.

“Whose him?” The man slurred. The last tendrils of sleep still dragging at his eyelids seemed to slow the world around him to a crawl.

“The Kid! It’s The fucking Kid!” The man who had burst through the door shouted and every ounce of sleep slugging through Hank’s veins evaporated in an instant.

“Ah, shit!” The sheriff cursed more to himself than the man. He snatched his cowhide hat off the cluttered table he’d been lounging behind and slammed a large hand down on the splintering surface as he pushed by. Hank grabbed his rifle from where it had been leaning by the door before shoving into the screen and bursting forth to the outdoors.

The sun raged across the land like a rabid beast. The street was engulfed in the evening’s ruby flames. The glass windows of every wooden storefront gleamed crimson and the very dust underfoot seemed to shimmer in the twilight heat.

Save for straight down the middle of the wide dirt road where the ground was kicked up in a massive cloud a mile high.

Hank whipped his head to follow the trail up the street. The man just caught a flash of darkness across the fire expanse of sunset before the gray cloud of grime swallowed up the sight.

The sheriff snapped his gaze back around to the guy who’d come screaming into his office. The man- well, no, the boy really - couldn’t have been more than fourteen. A black kid with curling hair kept cropped close to his skull and dirt smudged across his light blue shirt. Poor sap looked like he’d seen a ghost prancing up.

“Get the deputy, tell ‘em to ride around the saloon.” Hank instructed the boy. “Maybe we can still cut this bastard off!” The man jogged across the short porch and grabbed the reins hitching his horse off the pole there. The dark brown leather was warmed in the sun and seared against his hand where he clasped it but the man pulled it free nevertheless.

The creature was a stout thing, a Morgan with many a rough ride under her weathered pelt. Well worked muscles bulged under chestnut fur and tensed for action when the sheriff arrived. The horse’s head dipped slightly and her tawny main ruffled with the action.

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The sheriff flung an arm across the old saddle and hauled his weight atop the animal. The tanned leather groaned under his weight but the man had no fear it nor his trusty steed would fail him yet. “Aye, Nellie! After that son’ bitch!” Hank shouted in a growl and snapped the reins.

Nellie spurred into a swift gallop at her rider’s command. Heavy hooves pounded against the dirt road in a thunderous roar. A new wave of dust surged up in the sheriff’s wake and stung at his eyes, pointed needles that he squinted against to see. It clogged his throat and threatened to leave him coughing up his own lungs but he didn’t slow.

Buildings blurred as Hank snapped the reigns down again. The startled gasps of worried onlookers and the boisterous call of men calling their brothers to arms melded with the din of hooves rolling
over the land until it was all one great storm of noise. A woman in a white dress pulled her child to her breast. A man in a vest pushed open a door to see what all the fuss was about.

Soon, however, the scenery changed. Wooden shop fronts and clustered houses fell away to open sky. A determined scowl hardened Hank’s features as he broke town limits and met the empty plane. The man leaned forward with a sharp “Yah!” There was no way he was letting that weasel faced rat worm his way out of his hands this time.

Dust billowed up before the lawman and he drove harder. A streak of black smudged the dirt wall in the distance but took shape as Hank gained on the fleeing shadow. Indeterminable darkness took shape and formed the outline of a rider. Black smudges melded into the lean hindquarters of a mount and gray clouds became the figure of a man.

Just a silhouette against the flamelicked sunset - But enough for Hank to know without doubt…

Him.

The Phantom.

The Night Rider.

The Shadow Thief.

*The Kid.*

As lean and lithe as his horse, The Kid was as quick as him too. A wisp on the wind, some had rumored the outlaw. Others claim he simply wasn’t of this earth; a tormented soul roaming the barren frontier in the dead of night. Unable to be touched by sun or skin. Ethereal.

Hank was not a superstitious man. The Kid was bound to the same earthly laws as everyone else - And he’d broken a hell of a lot of them.

“Stop in the name of the law!” Hank bellowed as he gained on the outlaw. Unsurprisingly, The Kid did no such thing.

A train whistle screamed up ahead. The noise was nearly deafening in its shrill cry, like a woman who’d walked into a nest of rats snoozing in her girdle. Hank glanced to the side and saw the tracks leading out of town nearly under his hooves. They were following its course.

“Ah, shit!” The man growled and dug a sharp spur into his horse’s hide. The train they were pursuing soon came into sight, it’s metal cars blazing like fire in the setting sun. “Ah, double shit!” Hank huffed and snapped his reigns down. The steel cars glowed in the ruby twilight as the tail end cart took shape on the horizon. Unmanned and adorned with a empty platform, things couldn't have screamed *triple shit* any louder.

The Kid was nearly upon the train by the time Hank even got close. The iron horse must have just been pulling out of town but it certainly seemed to be gaining speed now. The thing’s metal tires screamed with action as it blasted forward, threatening to draw out of reach before the sheriff ever had a chance. The heavy sound of metal chugging like lightning across the desert deafened the man, leaving nothing but a dull ring in his ears. He could barely hear his own thoughts.

The Kid steered is horse to the side, banking a sharp right. The animal was black as night. Its raven fur gleamed brilliantly in the fire of the setting sun and its sleek mane shone like a gemstone shadow. Smooth muscles rippled under a glistening pelt as the animal raced alongside the train, flexing and tensing with each fluid motion.
Beautiful as it was, the horse still began to slip out of pace with its iron racer.

Hank felt a surge of hope course through him. There was no way in hell the outlaw could jump the train from where he sat. The Kid’s horse still wasn't quite close enough and was only dropping further behind by the second.

This time, Hank would bring the mongrel to justice.

Except, The fucking Kid suddenly started pulling his boots out of the holsters. The guy wiggled his left shoe free from its place and swung it around so he sat facing the train. He gripped the saddle horn with one hand and pulled his knee up to brace his foot under his butt. The man leaned back a bit to do the same with his right shoe. Then, low and behold, The stupid fucking Kid went and pushed himself upright.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Hank hollered, roaring to be heard over the horrible noise of the train.

The Kid didn’t so much as spare him a glance. The long end of his black duster coat whipped violently in the breeze and the sleeves of the thing flapped about his arms where he held them out for balance. Brown eyes narrowed over top of a triangular, black bandanna pulled over his nose and mouth.

“Don’t you fucking-” Hank began but was cut off when The Kid decidedly ignored him entirely. Big surprise there.

The outlaw bent his knees for a moment before pushing off. His heel spurred off the top edge of the saddle to send his body sideways toward the train. Long legs spanned the air between animal and machine and stretching fingers reached for the edge of the banister lining the platform.

Hank cursed colorfully. There was no way The Kid was making it. There was no fucking way-

The outlaw’s boots slammed into the metal platform with a noisy clatter nearly inaudible over the roar of the train. His hands caught the metal banister and clung on instantly, slender fingers wrapping securely around gold tinted steel to stabilize the man. He pulled himself in tight to the train cart and wasted no time beginning to scale the banister. Safe to say nobody on the train would be taking a little stroll out to the roof to catch some air, Hank supposed.

You had to be fucking kidding. “Stop the train!” Hank called angrily. “Goddammit, stop this damn train!” The man yelled but no one could possibly hear him over the noise of the machine. His horse was already beginning to fall behind. You had to be fucking kidding.

The Kid pulled his boot up to the top of the banister and threw an arm up to grab the edge of the steel panel roof. With a bit of scrambling, he hauled himself over the ledge and drew his upper body across the expanse of metal.

“Fuck!” Hank spat uselessly. He drove his horse on anyway, spurring forward fueled by nothing but spite. A red faced growl twisted his features. The bastard Kid had gotten away from him too many times before. He couldn’t let him get away this time too.

The Kid hauled his butt atop the train cart and turned around. Short, brown hair whipped out from under his black, pinch front hat and lashed sharply around his face. The wayward strands blew over brown eyes that squinted against the breeze but gleamed with the thrill of the chase nevertheless. Lightning danced through his wild eyes and mischief shone brightly in their caramel depths.
He tugged down his bandanna to reveal a lawless grin just as untamed and wild as he. Soft, rose
dusted cheeks stretched around the smile so hard that they dimpled lightly at the corner of his pink
lips.

The outlaw reached back to press a hand against his hat to keep it from blowing away in the
ravenous wind. The large, curled back folds of the thing whipped in the breeze as he tipped his
head back and gave a clear laugh. The white stampede string twined around the hat flew out behind
him and the raven bandanna hung slack around his throat where it stretched out with the action.

The Kid crossed the legs of his dark pants so that the heel of his right boot tapped merrily against
the toe of his left. A black leather bandolier hung from his right shoulder to his left hip and a thick
matching gun belt rested cockeyed on his waist. The dark handle of a revolver could just be seen
sticking out of the holster where it drug down a bit farther on his right. Complete with barely
visible white undershirt and back vest strapped over top of that, Hank could understand why the
outlaw had been rumored a shadow.

“Maybe next time, Sheriff!” The Kid called gaily, shouting to be heard over the roar of his getaway
and Hank’s return curse was drowned out by the shrill whistle of the untouchable train.
“Apparently they were just pulling in to town when a horse came tearing up the road. Said they thought it was hell on wheels.” Hank’s companion relayed flatly. The man had dark hair slicked back flat to his skull with enough pomade to smother a cow. The greasy slick shone like a mirror in the blazing light as the sun finally relinquished its grip on the sky and slipped below the desert horizon. It kinda hurt Hank’s eyes to look at him for too awful long.

“Next thing they knew, some guy’s hopping in their coach and sticking a barrel in the husband’s face.” The guy scrunched his nose up when he told the tale. It only made a nasty scar slashed across the bridge his nose all the more prominent, a jagged, rough thing that looked more like it’d been dealt by a whisky bottle or a high heel than any knife. A matching knick cut through the tip of his right eyebrow, leaving a patch missing from the thick, dark hair. The fact that his brows were as heavy as a damn shelf only made the tiny cut all the more obvious.

“Well, Deputy, was anyone hurt?” Hank asked as he followed the man through town. The scene of the crime was at the far end of the little cluster of shops and houses they called home, out near the bank. The sheriff could only be glad the bastard didn’t decide to stick up that instead.

“Not a scratch on ‘em. A little shaken up is all.” Deputy Reed answered with a shake of his head. A red bandana that hung loosely around his neck shifted with the action and fell messily over his plain blue button up. The man’s clothes were about as plain as they come. A pair of well worn jeans were tucked neatly into beige riding boots. The knee was torn out of the left pant leg and more than one well washed stain clung to the denim. A beige ridgetop hat sat straight atop his oiled hair.

Quite fitting, considering Gavin Reed was ‘bout the plainest man Hank had ever met.

They were just passing the general store when the crowds started to thicken. Hank duly noted that he should probably tell Lennie to fix his sign up sometime soon. The white paint streaked across the huge letters reading “Store” across the front of the building was beginning to chip.

An older man with a bit of pudge to him peaked out from the front door of the shop and the sheriff glanced away; but he could still feel the guy’s eyes trail the pair of lawmen as they passed.

They turned a final corner and finally came upon the scene. A small crowd was gathered around a rich looking stagecoach parked just at end of the lane. The thing was painted an affluent shade of ruby and shone like the morning sun in the dull tones of the advancing evening. Gold trimmings decorated the side of thing in elegant curls that twirled beautifully around the open door and stretched out to the riders seat. There was no question, the owners were wealthy.

“Guess it’s no wonder these poor folk got the worst kind of welcome.” Gavin commented pityingly and Hank nodded. Anyone riding around flaunting their riches like that was bound to get a gun in their face sooner or later.

The sheriff pushed his way slowly through the crowd. The entire town seemed to have poured out like the theater had come to the street. The lawman brushed by a woman but she turned her nose up and away with an indignant “hmph!” before he even had a chance to apologize. Not a minute later, he tripped over some kid trying to peak round his father’s leg and nearly ate dust.
“Watch it, mister!” The little brat barked but his father smacked the top of his oversized hat down with a sharp scold. The man cast the sheriff an apologetic smile as his child pulled the hat back up from over his eyes with a huffy pout and muttered sniff. Hank offered a polite nod in return before finally maneuvering around the last few townsfolk and breaking free of the throng of people.

A young woman in an elegant dress sat inside the coach, perched delicately atop a sleek, padded bench. Her bodice was tight and dipped low to display pale skin and pronounced collar bones. The shoulders were ruffled and a draped bustle swathed from the waist of the garment to hang over a long skirt. Long, blonde sausage curls were done high up on her head and fell over her exposed shoulders in rich bunches.

Despite her elegant attire, dark streaks smudged rudely under the girl's eyes and ran over her flushed cheeks in rivers.

“Ma’am.” Hank greeted with a dip of his hat. The girl snapped her gaze toward him with a scowl so ferocious one might have thought he'd slapped her across the face. Thin eyebrows came together and painted lips twisted into a snarl that reminded the man more of a coyote than a distressed woman.

However, the expression melted from her face the moment her eyes fell on the man. “Sorry, sir. I thought you were my husband.” The girl apologized hastily, her voice soft and pleasant in a way, like the chord of song just beginning to play. A bashful smile crept across her face that seemed a near impossibility after the ferocity Hank had just witnessed.

“Well, in that case, I’m certainly glad I ain’t.” Hank chuckled. A disgruntled huff drew his attention behind him and he glanced over his shoulder to see Gavin shoulder his way into the open. The man rolled his shoulder a few times once he was free of the crowd before joining the sheriff.

“Do you think you could tell us what happened ma’am?” The deputy asked, voice stoic and curt. Always to the point, that one. Made him a hell of a good deputy, but maybe not the best riding partner Hank had ever had.

“I sure can, mister.” The girl snapped sharply, taking Hank a bit by surprise. She drew herself up some and her face contorted into that same ferocious scowl once more. “I will tell you exactly what happened! My idiot husband—“ The woman began but made it no farther than that.

“Oh, so now it’s my fault we got robbed!” A man abruptly interjected. He appeared out of nowhere, ducking out from behind the carriage like a snake striking at its foe. He wore a dapper suit, complete with a tall top hat and fancy cravat. A dark mustache bristled out above his upper lip and twisted with his offensive frown.

“We weren't even robbed!” His wife spat back venomously. All soft sweetness that had honeyed her voice before was suddenly absent and her tones were rough and course. Hank couldn’t fathom how the same girl could make such a horrible noise.

“You weren't?” There sheriff interjected hastily. He had to get as much information as he could before these two spiraled off into a war.

The woman broke off her vicious scowl for a moment to turn back towards the lawman. “Unless you count the theft of my dignity, no.” She answered in a pout.

“Unfortunately, ma’am, dignity thievery is not a crime punishable by law.” Hank deadpanned. “Can someone please explain to me what actually happened here?” He pressed, throw an exasperated look with as much irritation as he could pack into it to one person then the other.
“That ruffian burst into my coach-” The man began. A sharp “Your coach?” cut through his explanation but he rolled his eyes and continued on. “Demanding the name of some saloon over in some place.” The guy gestured vaguely as he spoke. Despite his hopes, however, his hand gestures failed to clue Hank in to the name of said place.

“A saloon?” Hank repeated. What kind of idiot stuck up a stagecoach to ask the best place to get a drop?

“A saloon where?” Gavin insisted. Right to the point.

”Shady something or other? Or maybe dusty? No, shady. Shady someplace.” The man offered unhelpfully.

“Shady Belle, idiot!” The woman snapped with a sneer and shook her head with an annoyed roll of her bright blue eyes. “I’m sure if he’d asked you about the whore house there you’d remembered.” The girl added under her breath.

Gavin shifted a bit at Hank’s side. Just a twitch, a scuff of his boot against the ground. No one else would’ve noticed but Hank had been riding with the kid for a little under two years. He’d come to know the man’s tells and ticks well.

“Well, we know where he’s heading now.” The deputy affirmed. The man then shifted a bit and took a small step back, preparing to leave, but Hank found himself lingering.

“What in the hell did he wanna know about some saloon in Shady Belle for?” The sheriff asked the stranger and crossed his arms thoughtfully over his broad chest.

“Well, I’m not so sure, sir.” The man answered uncertainty. “But I think he might’ve-”

“He didn’t even wanna talk to you!” The girl who’d been sitting quiet for a few minutes butted in again. She crossed her legs and turned her nose away from her husband; but she had Hank’s attention now.

“He wanted to talk to you?” The sheriff asked. None of this made a lick of sense and these two arguing through whole damn thing sure as shit wasn’t helping.

“As a matter of fact, he did.” The girl informed indignantly. She offered nothing else though and instead merely sat with her nose turned away and her arms crossed defiantly over her chest.

“Well, what did he want?” Hank pressed. He was trying his damndest to keep the irritation from his voice but his frustration was only mounting by the minute and a guy could only do so much.

“Does it matter?” Gavin piped up at his side, a keen note of disinterest woven through his voice. There was no malice behind the kid’s words. And really, he wasn’t wrong. At the end of the day, it didn’t matter.

The woman paused for a moment and when she answered her voice was quieted, almost sad in a way. “He was askin’ ‘bout an old friend of mine.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the encouraging comments! I always love hearing from you guys :)
“Pack your bag, Deputy! We’re heading to Shady Belle!” Hank had declared almost cheerily, encouraged to, for once, have an actual chance of catching the outlaw he’d been after for years.

What a fool he’d been.

After three hours in the train station, two hours on a delayed train, and five hours of listening to Gavin miraculously snore through it all, Hank was less than thrilled.

The man currently sat atop a wooden bench digging straight into his ass, every muscle screaming with the torment of stillness. He was too old for this. His back sang the siren song of every grating 42 years of his life.

The train car swayed and jerked as it flew across the empty land. On a particularly harsh curve, a baby who’d been blessedly quiet the greater part of the trip burst into noisy tears as the cart gave a sharp jerk, loud, ugly sobs that seemed impossible for something so tiny. Hank pulled his hat down over his eyes with a dismal groan the moment the first shrill wail rose up from the brat’s mouth. So much for catching a quick nap through the last stretch.

Beside him, Gavin gave a rude snort and his body jolted, with the sudden awakening. This would’ve been fine and dandy had it not resulted in a sharp elbow driving straight into the sheriff’s side.

Hank gave a low grunt and tried not to outwardly wince as he glared over to see his companion blink blearily awake. The deputy rubbed the butt of his palm into his eye before stretching back in a slow yawn, pausing to scratch roughly at the patch of prickly stubble coming in under his jaw - Somehow, the whole display just irked the exhausted sheriff. He had tried for hours to catch some sleep. Needless to say, he hadn’t found any.

“There’s a fella...” Hank scoffed ruefully, a cruel smile playing on his lips.

All the sheriff received for his efforts was a groggy groan. Gavin let his head fall back against the wooden bench and allowed his tired eyes to slip closed again, drawing one leg up to rest his foot against his knee and crooking an arm behind his head.

Hank kicked him in the leg.

Gavin jolted forward, apparently already beginning to dose again but the man quickly caught himself and straightened back up with a huff. He snapped his gaze back toward his companion with an irritated scowl twisting his features into an ugly snarl but his sleep hazed eyes blinked dumbly at the rude awakening. Frankly, he looked ridiculous.

“Sleep well I hope.” Hank jibed lightheartedly and let his gaze shift to the window as he spoke, knowing his disinterest would only rile the deputy. A decrepit house swept by on the the desert plain, old and falling apart at the seams. Gray wood fell to rot and sagged in on itself with weary age, drooping like a plant that had been left to the tormentous hands of the blazing sun for too long.

But it was something. If there were houses, they had to be nearing the town.
“Was.” Gavin huffed with an irritated roll of his dark brown eyes. The man didn’t stay mad for too awful long though and soon shifted to follow Hank’s gaze. “Must be getting close.” He commented and the sheriff offered a hum of agreement.

“Hey, Gavin, ‘been meaning to ask.” Hank began, turning his eyes back towards the man. “When that missy brought up this here place,” the sheriff began, pausing to give Gavin a moment to speak for himself but no sign of the deputy’s earlier twitch could be found. “Do you know it?” The man asked casually.

He meant nothing by it. Just thought knowing the town might help out a bit but Gavin jerked his shoulders up loosely. “I used to when I was young. Can’t say I much know it now.” The guy dismissed easily. Nothing worthwhile then. Damn.

“Well, guess we’ll just have to find someone who does when we get there.” Hank remarked and leaned back in his seat.

“Yes.” Gavin agreed. Truly, a stunning conversationalist if the world had ever seen one.

Luckily, it was at that moment the train finally began to slow. The world outside whisked by a little less nauseatingly and the sound of metal squeaking against metal shrieked through the cart. Unfortunately, the lurch of the car slowing to a stuttering halt made up for the nausea inducing streak of color outside swirling past.

Hank couldn’t say he’d ever quite gotten onboard with the stunning discoveries of tomorrow. Trusting his life to metal and machinery just didn’t agree with his gut. Give him a living, breathing beast any day. A horse was alive. You could control it. Trust it. A train was a big box of steel and prayer on the wind.

“Looks like we’re here.” Gavin pointed out. The man pulled himself off the bench only to be thrown stumbling forward as the train jerked. He snapped a hand out and caught the edge of the seat just before his feet could fly out from under him before turning to cast a sharp glare over his shoulder as Hank gave an amused chuckle.

“Where would I ever be without you, Deputy?” Hank jested with little malice behind his words. The sheriff gripped the edge of the seat himself and hauled his body up off the torture chamber disguised as a bench. Every aged muscle in his poor body groaned in protest at the sudden motion. Stupid muscles had just been whining about sitting still, now they wanted to fuss about moving. Insatiable.

“Probably exactly where you are right now, Hank.” Gavin countered with a distasteful sneer aimed at Hank’s sack. With all that shit, the boy had to be prepared for Christ himself to come prancing up on a fucking pony.

It was probably all pomade anyway.

With a shake of his head, Hank took a look around but if he had to choose one word to describe the sight that met his waiting eyes as he stepped off that train it would be: Unimpressive.
The train stop as Shady Belle proved to be one wooden shack with a guy behind a barred window passing out tickets. Hank tipped his hat at the man and shot him a friendly half smile while the aging boards of the platform creaked under his feet and moaned with the effort of holding him up. A few people bustled about the platform but no one paid him much mind. A young girl with long, tangling hair cried for candy and her mother shushed her with a sharp scold. An older boy with long hair tussled with a toddler as their dad bought tickets.

It wasn’t until the trail pulled away with a sharp whistle that Hank realized he and Gavin were the only ones left standing on the platform. No one wanted to get off at the dingy little town in the middle of nowhere.

The pair left the platform and walked into the town beyond. Well, if you could even be so kind as to call it that. It was more of a street, really. Just a few small buildings scattered across a lane spoke for the city they’d come to see and not a one had so much as a sign in front of it’s shabby walls. Shady Belle looked like it’d been lost to the world years ago.

Evening was just starting to fall over the quiet town. The dark of dusk crept in at every corner and stained the streets with the dull purple of twilight. The glass windows speckling the sparse buildings were dark even at that early hour and not a soul crowded the lonesome streets.

“Early to bed, as they say.” Gavin commented with a shrug.

Hank offered an uncommentable hum of acknowledgement and slung a thumb through a loose belt loop as he glanced down the empty road. Down the street aways, the windows of one wooden building glowed a sepia orange in the lavender twilight and the tinny sounds of an untuned piano floated on the air.

“Place looks lively.” Hank commented, nodding towards the building. “Could be a saloon,” he pointed out and began in heading that direction.

“ ‘Sidering the size of this place, it’s probably the only saloon.” Gavin snorted dryly as he turned to follow the sheriff.

“That’ll make our search a lot easier then.” Hank chuckled. The man slowed up just in front of the building and let his eyes trail over the scene. He dipped his hat slightly and kept moving at a leisurely pace past the saloon, not wanting to draw attention to himself. If they could keep the element of surprise on their side, maybe they could make this quick and clean.

The Kid was feral - and feral animals didn’t react well to being cornered.

A few horses were hitched just out front of the building. A painted mare shook her mighty head and tossed her pale mane. A stout, grizzled old thing snorted at the young filly’s antics and pawed at the ground.

It was neither of these proud creatures that caught Hank’s attention but rather the black splotch of midnight standing just to the right. Too prideful to be near the others, with long neck extended high and elegant head held with undaunted nobility; the horse bore no saddle nor held any bridle between its teeth. It lifted a poised hoof as Hank turned then lowered it gracefully back to the ground with a offended huff.

“Well, aren’t you just a show pony.” The sheriff chuckled as he drew to a halt before the creature. The man tried to extend a hand out to pet the animal but she jerked her mighty head away from his touch with a disgusted shake of her shimmering mane.
“This is his horse alright.” Hank tossed over his shoulder as he let his unwanted hand fall back to his side. “You stay out here ‘case he tries to make a run for it. I’ll go in and nab him.” The sheriff commanded, turning back to his deputy.

Gavin gave a curt nod, face serious. The man’s thick eyebrows dipped with a heavy scowl and his lips twisted into a straight line as thin as paper.

Hank braced a hand on the top of his revolver where it stuck out just above the silver metal of his belt buckle and began up the steps. The swinging doors were carved into elegant slopes and stained a merry red. Gold trimming ran over the smooth curves of its choppy design and glimmered in the dying light. When the man pushed them open, the sounds of the bar inside exploded out into the night like a wave sweeping over the darkness.

The sounds of people chattering noisily and making a racus flooded the lawman’s ears. The clinking of glasses was accentuated by the merry tune of men guffawing heartily at their own jokes and ladies giggling along politely. The piano man set up in the corner of the saloon played a jaunty little ditty, the crystal clear notes crying out from the old thing like a cat screaming under the cruel grip of a rocking chair. All of it came together in one great symphony of chaos but it was a familiar sort of chaos, almost inviting in a way.

Hank pushed the rest of the way inside and let the doors swing closed behind him with a noisy clatter. The saloon was wide and sprawling, with wooden floorboards creaking under the sheriff’s boots and a long bar sprawling along the empty walls. In the murky shadows of the high roof, the gray silhouette of a wagon wheel hung from the ceiling and from its spokes dangled a few flickering kerosene lamps. The wavering light cast the whole room in a deep, warm orange but couldn’t hold up, letting the life around fade into dark nothingness every few moments as the weak flames spat against an unseen wind.

Most paid the man no mind. The only person that even glanced up as he made his way through the saloon was the bartender. The guy swiveled a scrap of a rag over the same spot of counter as he had been but his eyes trailed the sheriff, boring into him like the curved point of a skinning knife.

The man was an ugly sort of bloke, with a thick face and a scraggly handlebar mustache patching over his heavy jaws. Greasy, black hair hung limply over sharp brows and arched cheekbones like seaweed washed over an ashen shore. A ghost walking couldn’t have held a candle to the feller.

Hank might’ve commented on the guy’s frankly rude staring had he not been taken completely off guard by a voice behind him.

“Howdy, Sheriff.” The Kid’s honey tones whispered just inches away from his ear.

Chapter End Notes

Me: "Hey, baby, gimme a good opening line for my outlaw"

My Boyfriend: "You've yeed your last haw."
Victory?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hank had never gotten a hand on his gun so quickly before in his too long life. The man snapped the revolver from its holster and spun around to face the outlaw before anyone could so much as bat an eye, the cold metal pressing into his palm like the skeleton fingers of death reaching out to take his hand.

The moment he turned, the sheriff found his entire field of vision taken up by outlaw. Wild strands of wayward brown hair crowded his face and tickled at his nose while caramel eyes bore into him from all of about two inches away. A slight speckling of freckles danced across his vision here and there where it was taken up by pale skin, something he’d never noticed from horseback paces behind. The Kid’s slightly upturned nose nearly jabbed him in the cheek.

Personal space seemed to not be be part The Kid’s dictionary and one hot breath of air later Hank found out why - The smell of whisky swamped his nose and mouth like a layer of fog settled over a lake in the early hours of the dawn.

Nevertheless, Hank thrust the muzzle of his weapon forward sharply, digging it into soft flesh like a swift punch to the gut. Drunk or not, The Kid was a cunning bastard and the sheriff wasn’t too awful keen on taking any risks.

The outlaw gave a breathy huff at the impact, sending another stomach churning wave of whisky breath straight into the sheriff’s face. The man tried his best not to gag but even he couldn’t hold back the disgusted cringe that twisted his features as the onslaught of hot, sick air smothered the life from his lungs. Really, he could probably claim a weapon had been pulled on him at this point, that breath was that lethal.

“Is that a gun in my side or are you just happy to see me, Sheriff?” The Kid wheezed, apparently too drunk to remember how exactly to fill his lungs with air.

Before Hank could even think to respond, the outlaw fell into a fit of giggles at his own joke, honey eyes crinkling as a little snort escaped him and he tripped forward, tiny snickers sending him off balance and stumbling straight into the lawman.

Hank caught the boy before he could go face first into the floor, grabbing him by an arm and hauling him back upright but his hand felt bulky and clunky around The Kid’s slender limb, too large and unrefined for his liking. Hank did his best to stabilize the outlaw nevertheless but any attempt to straighten the fugitive absolutely refused to work out. Everytime the man leaned The Kid back up on his own feet, the outlaw teetered forward until his body went falling straight back into the sheriff once more, driving is nose straight into the lawman’s chest with a fitful grunt.

“Jesus, how much did you have?” Hank groaned irritably, grabbing the outlaw by the shoulders and pulling him off of himself for what had to be the twelfth time in the past ten minutes.

The Kid seemed to consider the question for a minute, nose scrunching up and lips twisting into a befuddled frown. The boy’s face was flushed with intoxication, a rose dusted blush dancing across his soft cheeks and fluttering over his nose as a soft “umm” escaped his parted lips on a quiet breath. For a foolish moment, Hank thought he might actually get an answer but, low and behold, all he got for his trouble was a stiff shouldered shrug and an absent giggle.
“Just start walking.” Hank huffed dryly, prodding the outlaw in the side with the muzzle of his gun to remind him it was still there.

“Try’na take me home already, Sheriff?” The Kid purred with an overdone draw of excitement threaded into his lilting voice. “You ain’t even bought me a drink yet.” The outlaw scolded with a belittling tut, shaking his head and nearly sending his poor hat flying as he miscalculated the action and about broke his own neck.

Despite his antics the outlaw did, in fact, start moving; so at least Hank had that small mercy. Unfortunately, the poor guy made it all of about two steps when he miscalculated the location of his own legs and tripped on a particularly nasty piece of thin air, flailing wildly before he managed to catch Hank’s arm and cling on for dear life.

The sheriff sighed heavily, wishing he’d done what his momma wanted and become a nice cowhand, or a banker. Cowhands and bankers never had to deal with drunk, clingy outlaws.

“Well, you’ve caught me, Sheriff,” The Kid slurred as Hank hauled them both through the crowded bar, the swinging doors nearly in sight, though they might as well have been Heaven’s gate at the moment. “Whatcha gonna do, hogtie me?” The boy snickered in a pleased purr, snorting as he slumped against the man and let himself be drug along. He danced his long fingers over the sheriff’s arm as he spoke, clawing them teasingly along the sensitive hairs there until he pressed them over the man’s bulky shoulder and tried to drag them down towards his chest.

“If you can’t keep your hands to yourself, I just might.” Hank huffed sharply, grabbing the Kid by the wrist and tossing his cunning fingers away. Unsurprisingly, they were clawing their way right back up his bicep not two seconds later.

Finally, Hank broke free of the crowd and found his way to the front door. He sent the poor thing flying open with a sloppy kick and shoved the outlaw unceremoniously through after his foot. The Kid flailed through the entryway and promptly went straight to the ground just outside, catching himself on all fours and dipping his head nearly to the ground.

The sheriff wished he could say he’d been surprised when the outlaw gave a low groan and suddenly released a horrid gag. The Kid’s angular shoulders arched and his lithe body heaved, a strangled groan fought its way past a wet choke before the poor little shit lost everything in his stomach. Bile splattered to the dusty street and dripped from the outlaw’s lips is a long trail as he drew his head slowly back up and moaned weakly at the sight.

“That’s the legendary outlaw?” Gavin’s voice drew Hank’s pitying gaze away from the mess of a boy on the ground and up to where the deputy was grimacing disgustedly at the sight before them.

“Just,” Hank began but found himself at a loss. This wasn’t quite how he’d expected the wild chase to come to an end. “Just make a cup of coffee. Let’s see if we can sober him up some.” The sheriff finally decided with a slow shake of his head before he drew his gaze back to where the Kid was currently spitting into the dirt.

The outlaw moaned and flopped onto the ground, sprawling across the street before rolling over to face the stars. “They always say yeehaw.” The boy sniffed to nobody, drawing an arm up behind his head. “But they never ask haw yee,” The fugitive moaned to the ruthless sky and Hank did his very best not to groan.

Oh yes, this was gonna be just peachy.
Hey guys, this is actually coming together much faster than I expected. Because I’m ignoring all my other responsibilities, I should be able to start updating a bit more often :)
Sopping wet locks of hair pulled taut under Hank’s iron grip as he yanked the Kid up by the soaked strands, hauling him out of the rushing water and into the merciless air of the cold desert night.

The outlaw spat and sputtered, coughing up a mouthful of river water and drawing in a strained grasp. “Christ! I’m sober! I’m sober!” The fugitive hacked, voice rough and wet as he twisted in Hank’s grip to glare at the man whose fingers still fist ed in his hair.

“I told you to shut your mouth.” Hank tsked, letting his fingers uncurl from the outlaw’s hair to let the boy slump to the riverbank in a gasping heap.

“Oh, gee, how considerate,” The Kid huffed after dragging in one last strained wheeze. “Here I thought you said that ‘cause you were getting tired of hearing my voice.” The outlaw groaned, lifting his head from where it had been dipped to the ground to glare daggers into the lawman. Thick water droplets gathered on the limp tips of his hair and splattered onto the ground below in spreading pools that crept ever outwards to stain the forest floor a dark, muddy brown.

They’d decided setting up camp away from town would be a wise choice and had set up in a small wooded area not too awful far away from the train station. The trees were sparse but offered cover enough and they’d even found a small river near the middle of the small woods, the babbling little brook just perfect for sobering up drunk little pests who couldn't seem to keep their delicate little hands to themselves.

“I am tired of hearing your voice.” Hank assured with a humourless snort. Nevertheless, he waved Gavin over from where the man had taken up post leaned against a tree a few paces away and held out a hand expectantly.

The deputy wordlessly pushed a small, steel cup into the sheriff’s hands before retreating back to his place, watching the scene like a hawk yet never saying a word from his silent post.

The metal cup felt warm and welcoming against Hank’s fingertips and steam billowed up from the rim in rich plumes that swirled through the sky before finally being claimed by the breeze. The cool metal gleamed in the flickering glow of the small fire they’d set up earlier and reflected the orange blaze back in a distorted reflection of warm light that cast the Kid’s face a soft sepia when the Sheriff pushed the thing into his hands.

“Drink this. It’ll sober you up.” The sheriff directed after a moment, feeling the need to after the outlaw did nothing more than stare into the cup like a filly stranded on the train tracks.

“I think my little dip in the river did a fine job of that.” The Kid snorted tastelessly, still blinking down into the cup like the stars themselves had been plucked down and drowned under the dark liquid. Steam swept up in thick curls to brush a gentle caress over his soft cheeks, still twinged a slight pink with the aftereffects of his drinking, and swirl it’s pale fingers around his damp hair.

“Look, Kid, it ain’t poisoned.” Hank huffed dryly, running an exasperated hand back through his graying hair. “If we’d wanted you dead, we woulda shot you in the street.” The sheriff explained tiredly, a touch irritated by the boy’s unwarranted hesitance.

“Doesn’t mean he didn’t spit in it.” The Kid muttered spitefully but, after a long moment, he finally
brought the brim to his lips and tipped the cup back. Despite his earlier hesitation, the outlaw craned his neck back to dump the caffeinated godsend back in one swift swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing with the motion. A pleased sound hummed softly from between his lips to echo off the metal walls of the cup as he finally pulled the empty thing back and Hank couldn’t help but wonder when the last time the guy had sat down and had a cup of coffee was.

“I say we tie him to a tree so we can get some sleep.” Gavin piped up, the first time he’d opened his mouth since they’d left town.

“Sounds like a good idea as any.” Hank agreed with a shrug though, honestly, he wasn’t quite sure how well he’d be sleeping with a notorious murderer roped to a tree naught but a few feet away.

“I say we don’t but I guess it’s two to one.” The Kid sighed and pushed himself up off the bank with the butts of his hands, pausing to drag his palms against his dark pants before he reached down and snagged his hat from where it lay just beside the river. The outlaw plopped the thing back on top of his head and stalked over to the nearest tree before flopping back to the ground, landing heavily on his ass with a soft “oomph.”

Hank was gonna go out on a limb here and guess The Kid’s coordination probably hadn't all returned quite yet.

Gavin heaved himself up off the forest floor and reached for his overstuffed bag where it lay just beside him. The man rummaged about the bulging thing that was about beginning to tear at the seams and pulled out a long rope from within. The cord was beginning to fray with age but was thick enough to hold a horse still and long enough for it too, dragging the ground even as Gavin began walking across the makeshift camp.

Why the hell the deputy thought to bring what almost looked like rope from the gallows, Hank would never know, nor did he think he wanted too.

The man kept a sideways glare dead set on the outlaw, a vicious sneer twisting his features as he approached. Yet the expression lost some of its ferocity when set against the absolutely flat look of deadpanned boredom the fugitive returned it with.

Gavin seemed undeterred, however, and quickly set to work looping the massive rope around the thick trunk of the tree. The fraying cord stretched over the Kid’s slender frame in thick strands and pulled taught over the graying bark of the pine. The outlaw’s arms were pressed close to his sides and the unyielding rope held them there with merciless strength while the massive cords wrapped over his lean chest to keep him bound.

“So this is what pure evil looks like.” The deputy sneered as he finally pulled back to sit in front of the outlaw, one leg bent under himself and an arm rested against his knee where it was propped up.

The man received no response, just dead silence from the Kid who refused to even bring his gaze up from the ground, head dipped so his hat guarded his eyes.

Gavin reached back and Hank stiffened as he caught the metallic gleam of the lawman’s pistol shine under his hand in the low light of the dying fire. The deputy pulled the weapon from it’s holster and drew it forward, causing the sheriff to shift forward an inch as an uneasy pit grew in his stomach.

“You disgust me, mongrel.” Gavin hissed in a dangerous whisper, leaning in to breathe the words into the fugitive's face. “What kinda sick bastard stabs his own mother in cold blood?” The deputy sneered as he brought his weapon up to pushed the brim of the outlaw’s hat up from his face.
The Kid brought his eyes up from the floor to glare coldly into Gavin’s own brown orbs. “Keep talking and you’ll be next, farmhand.” The outlaw whispered slowly, voice as cold as the ice and dark as the black, starless sky above them.

“Lay off it, Gav.” Hank interjected just as Gavin opened his mouth to reply.

The deputy turned to give Hank a questioning look but the sheriff waved him off with a shake of his head. There was no cause to torment a man they already had tied to a tree.

Gavin hesitated a moment but reluctantly drew back with a final scowl, sneering at the outlaw as he slowly drew back to his previous post and settled against the tree he’d been leaned against earlier.

Silence settled over the camp soon after. Gavin eventually grew tired of his one sided glare-fest and rolled over onto his side, grasping tiredly for a blanket that wasn’t there and absenty throwing a few leaves over his shoulder in the process. The dying fire finally succumbed to the cruel wind stealing its life away and died with a last crackle and a pathetic hiss, leaving nothing but silently, smoldering ashes glowing a dull red where there had once been roaring life. Quiet swept through the world like an unseen rider, bringing the late hours of the night in on its silent hooves.

“Shame the stars aren’t out.” The Kid’s voice broke the spell, his honey words startling Hank out of a light doze. “If this was my last night of freedom, I woulda liked to seen ‘em.” The outlaw mused, gaze turned toward the uncaring blackness of the sky to stare at the heavens that couldn’t care less if the people below them lived or died.

“Shame.” Hank agreed gruffly but his voice sounded deafening in the silence between them, loud and rude in the quiet of the night. Quiet soon settled in once more but now that the outlaw had stirred the lawman he couldn’t seem to find sleep again, his eyelids heavy but his mind whirling behind tired eyes. After a moment, he finally caved and pulled himself up to a sitting position with an irritated grumble.

“I have to ask,” The sheriff began, watching through suspicious eyes as the outlaw squirmed against his bonds to shift towards him a bit. “How’d you get the horse back?” Hank finally asked incredulously. The question had been prodding the back of his mind since he’d found the creature outside the saloon in a town miles away from where the Kid had leapt from its back and pressed into his mouth before he could reign it back.

“Silver always comes back to me.” The Kid replied simply, smiling softly as he angled this head to where the creature was currently tethered to a tree not far from where Hank sat.

The sheriff cast a long glance at Silver, the phantom shadow of a horse nearly invisible in the black of night before bringing his deadpanned gaze back to the Kid. All he got was a shoulder jerk that probably would’ve been a shrug had the guy not been tied to a tree.

“Hey, Sheriff,” The outlaw piped up again after a few minutes, shifting about as if he were nervous, though the thick ropes pulled taut against his lean body restricted the movement.

“If you’re gonna ask me to loosen the ropes, the answer is no.” Hank deadpanned flatly but the dry comment won a light chuckle from the captive and a warm smile still lingered on the outlaw’s lips after the noise subsided.

“I wouldn’t be here if you were that stupid.” The Kid dismissed with an amused smirk but then seemed to sober up some. “Look, Sheriff, I know I ain’t in no kinda position to be asking favors of you,” The outlaw began slowly, bringing his lower lip gently between his teeth. “But if they string me up, will you make sure they don’t do nothin’ to my horse? Watch after him?” The boy asked.
urgently, worry flickering clearly in his mahogany eyes as clear as day.

“Um,” Hank began un-eloquently, taken back by the sudden request. “Uh, yeah, sure, I guess.” The man got out haltingly before he recollected himself with a curt cough. “Sure. He’s a fine animal.” The sheriff finally managed, reaching out a hand toward the horse to give the creature an assuring pat.

Silver reared up on hind legs the moment Hank reached for him, giving a loud whiny before slamming his front hooves back into the earth to back up a pace. The horse gave a restless snort and pawed anxiously at the forest floor, prancing in place and eyeing the sheriff with haughty rage. The animal only settled when the Kid gave an urgent click of his tongue and made a soft shushing sound, straining against the ropes to make eye contact with the horse from where he was bound.

“I don’t think he likes me very much though.” Hank admitted with an awkward chuckle, letting his hand fall back to his thigh where it had rested earlier as he returned his attention to the outlaw.

The Kid gave a small laugh, a warm, sweet sound that reminded Hank of the wind; wild, and lawless, and crystal clear in the cold night. “He’s used to you chasing us.” The outlaw pointed out. “He’s a wild thing but give him some time, he’ll warm up you.” The fugitive promised, his voice softening some as he gazed fondly at the proud creature who only blinked mistrustfully at Hank as if intent on proving his rider wrong.

“If you say so.” The Sheriff snorted as he stretched out and shifted to lay on his back, gazing tiredly up into the starless sky. He could worry about wild horses and their wilder masters in the morning. Right now, all he was worried about was getting some fucking sleep. “Get some sleep, you bastard.” The man groaned in the direction of the outlaw, the distinct feeling of eyes boring into the back of his skull keeping him in the cruel claws of wakefulness even as he turned over.

“Well, you ain’t wrong about that one.” He barely heard the Kid chuckle before he was claimed by the imposing darkness clouding his exhausted mind.

Chapter End Notes

I've really missed reading everyone's encouraging comments - You guys are the greatest :'}
Honestly, Hank wasn’t even surprised when he woke up the next morning tied to a tree.

Still half within the realm of dreams, the man shrugged himself into motion and willed his arms to move only to find them bound tight to his sides. The coarse fabric of the fraying rope dug into his flesh and pulled cruelly against his straining form when he pressed his muscles against its unrelenting hold, doing naught but leaving harsh red lines in his own skin and failing to budge the twisting strands in the slightest.

“Fucking bastard.” The sheriff sighed as he begrudgingly went limp, letting his head fall back only to have it thunk heavily into the thick trunk of a tree with a dull noise, leaving a heavy throb pounding behind his eyes.

“Wassat?” Gavin’s familiar voice slurred from nearby, rough and unrefined with sleep.

Some painful shifting later, Hank caught a glimpse of the pale brim of the deputy’s crooked hat just in the corner of his vision… So they were both tied to a tree. Peachy.

“He tied us to a goddamn tree.” Hank informed curtly, a growl rumbling through his voice as he twisted a bit only to fall still again with a heavy groan a moment later, chest heaving with the effort and nothing to show for it but angry red lines ribbing across his shoulder. The camp was empty, no sign of the outlaw nor his prissy horse left in the scratched up dirt to suggest there had ever been anyone but Gavin and himself there last night. The cool river babbled merrily on through the thin grass and a small bird with brilliant black feathers hopped about, giving a shrill chirp every few seconds before a spat curse from Gavin sent it fluttering to the sky with a startled song; but no other sound existed in the silent woods.

“I’ll fucking kill him” Gavin mumbled in a snarl, apparently having woken up right quick after learning of their predicament. The man squirmed a bit, straining fruitlessly against the cords and only succeeding in pulling them tighter against Hank in the process, dragging the ropes into the sheriff with every twitch.

“If you don’t stop fucking moving I’ll kill you before you get the chance!” Hank barked sharply, his words thankfully stilling the deputy who laid back with a crude grumble about “pig fucker.” Hank really wasn’t sure if the guy was talking about him or the Kid.

“Ya’ boys seem’ be in a might bit of a bind.” A new voice interjected, drawing Hank’s gaze to the far side of camp where a skimpy twig of a tree was being pushed aside and a small herd of guys approached. Flannels and jeans as far as the eye could see, the group were simple townsfolk by the look of it, probably come from Shady Belle.

“Howdy.” Hank greeted in an awkward chuckle, dipping his hat politely as best he could with his hands roped. First impression for the record books.

The group had been quick working boys and Hank soon found himself standing back in the middle of the small, rundown town with absolutely no leads to speak for. He’d asked every one of the men who’d rescued them if they’d seen someone matching the Kid’s description and had received the same answer every time - No, sir. Ain’t never seen the fella in my life.
“I’m gonna keep asking around town. He can’t have just disappeared.” The sheriff sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut against an oncoming headache, the thing rolling toward him like a freight train gone off rails and over a damn cliff.

“You wanna talk to every lad and lass in this shithole, that’s fine with me.” Gavin snorted tastelessly, already popping open a new can of pomade and beginning to comb the shit through his hair where it miraculously stuck up against gravity’s hold. Tree bark was apparently no better a pillow for the hair than it was the back - Hank’s ruined muscles shrieked in testimony to that.

“But I’m gonna be findin’ us an actual room to lay our heads down in tonight. I ain’t sleeping in another woods if it kills me.” The Deputy spat, already stalking away before Hank could even respond and mumbling muttered curses all the way.

“Prissy as that fucking crazy horse.” Hank chuckled to himself and set to work. The man spent hours asking every person on the street if they’d ever seen a brown eyed man with freckle stained skin but he had little luck. It was already dusk by the time he started going in shops asking around and night had claimed the sky when he finally closed the last door and heaved a tired sigh. The purple gray of the evening crept through the town on a quiet breeze and the dark of dusk left him as answerless as the bright dawn.

The phantom of the wind seemed to have simply swept away with the mist. No one had seen the Kid.

There was only one place left in the whole goddamn city Hank hadn’t gone into. The building set just a little out of town so that you could still see it from the street but far enough away that it didn’t press in close to the others. Almost as if it were uninvited to the rest of the town - Shunned away and disgraced yet lingering nevertheless.

The sheriff made his away across the modest stretch of desert and came to stand just in front of the two story building where he let his eyes flick across the wide sign nailed to its staggered rooftop. “The Wild Stallion Brothel” was scrawled in huge, curled letters spanning the length of wood, gleaming a haughty red in the burning candles hung around the building to light the whole place in a welcoming glow, like a fiery beacon of life in the dark night.

“And stay out you no good rotter!” A woman’s harsh voice bellowed through the night and the front doors of the place swung open to throw a man out of their bowels. The guy went face first to the ground, his hat falling over his face and his ass left up in the air as the woman who’d tossed him out stood out on the small porch to glare down out him.

The girl was heavy set, voluptuous and full. A decorated corset stretched tight over her filled out chest and a bustling skirt fell over her wide hips in lushious folds that shimmered a rich satin in the lamp light. She snarled as fierce as any coyote, pushing a feather from her elaborate updo out of her eyes as her gaze drew up off the fallen man to fall on Hank, who had failed to do much more than gawk at the scene from where he stood.

“Well, are you just gonna stand there like a horse’s ass all night?” The lady called, turning on a heel and stalking back into the brothel, the heels of her boods clacking angrily against the wood as she went.

Hank blinked himself out of his stupor and made after the woman, carefully stepping around the man who groaned into the dirt and failed to do so much as pull himself off the ground. The sheriff stepped up onto the small wooden porch and pushed open the scarlet painted doors, chasing away the dark of night to be brought into the warm glow of candlelight basking the building in its warm touch of life.
Ladies milled around the open area just inside, leaning over men who had more money than Hank and sitting pretty around a small bar that was set up by the wall. Scarlet lipstick and high laced up boots seemed to be a popular choice and luscious dresses of every color danced around the room, flowing in the warm light and shining with the rich desires of the lonely world.

Behind the bar, a man stood rubbing the inside of a tall glass with a pale rag, his handlebar mustache twisted as his face set in a perpetual frown. Ashen skin stretched over heavy jaws and greasy hair hung limply down into haunted eyes that rose to bore into Hank as the sheriff let the doors swing closed behind him.

“You can call me Ruby Grace and this here is my place.” The woman Hank had followed inside began speaking, drawing the lawman’s attention away from the bartender. “Behave yourself and don’t do nothing my girls tell you not to or you’ll end up on your ass like bozo out there.” Ruby warned, emerald eyes flashing and painted lips twisting into a snarl that meant business.

“I’m actually just hear to ask you something ma’am.” Hank corrected hastily, shaking his head as if to shoo away any other suggestions as to why he might be here.

“Sorry, hun. I ain’t as young as I used to be, I just run the place now.” Ruby dismissed, a light blush coming up to dust her full cheeks rose red as a bashful smile crept over his face.

“What? No! I just-” Hank sputtered then gave up with a groan. “I'm looking for a man,” The sheriff tried to start over but got cut off with by an amused chuckle.

“Sorry, sugar, I don't employ any men here.” The woman apologized earnestly, painted lips curling into a sorry smile, and Hank swore he went into cardiac arrest on the spot.

“No! I’m looking for a different kind of man!” Hank corrected hastily, eager to erase any notion that he looking for what Ruby seemed to believe he was, then instantly wished he hadn’t.

“Aren’t we all, Hun.” Ruby agreed with a wide grin and knowing eyes gleaming mischievously, as if they could see past Hank’s eyes to read every secret like a book.

“I,” The sheriff tried then realized how fruitless trying to correct the woman would be and gave up with a tired sigh, migraine brewing behind his temple. “Have you seen a man with brown hair, kinda soft face, pale skin, little on the smaller side. Delicate like?” Hank asked exhaustedly, tired of giving this same speech and receiving the same answer time and again. He had already steeled himself for the same, abysmal answer when the woman opened her mouth.

“Pretty little thing? Sweet eyes?” Ruby asked, nearly sending Hank into shock.

“That’d be him.” The sheriff agreed instantly. Then tried to pretend he had to think about it for a minute for his own sake.

“Well, sure!” The woman cried and Hank nearly sobbed with joy. “He came in here earlier saying he saw a couple sorry idiots tied to a tree so I sent a few boys out.” Ruby explained pleasantly, smiling broadly at said sorry idiot.

“Of course he did.” Hank groaned, dragging a hand down his face to pull at the aging skin there and tug at his beard. “I need a drink.” The man sighed, turning towards the bar and ignoring the absolutely confused look the brothel owner cast his way.

Hank stalked across the room and slumped onto a bar stool, waving the bartender over with a tired hand. His eyes wandered behind the bar as he waited, drifting over fancy bottles gleaming in the low light until it fell on a framed oil painting hung in the very center of the wall. Nothing about it
seemed all that noteworthy, just a painted picture of Ruby Grace and her girls from a few years ago from what Hank could tell, considering the woman that headed the herd looked at least twenty years younger than the one the sheriff had just spoken too.

However, something about it kept his gaze even as the bartender slid him a glass and he brought the thing to his lips, the amber liquid tasting warm and thick on his lips. There was something almost familiar about one of the girls near the end whose long brown hair fell over her shoulder in luscious waves and whose caramel eyes gleamed with flirty mischief; but for the life of him, Hank just couldn’t put a finger on it.

“I ain’t never seen you around here before, mister.” A soft voice whispered in his ear, honey sweet like a song on the wind. Delicate fingers brushed against his shoulder, pressing into the tense muscles there and wiping Hank’s mind clean, leaving a dull, warm haze in wake of where he’d once had coherent thoughts.

“Well, I ain’t from around here.” Hank managed to reply after an embarrassingly long moment, doing his best not to let a shiver roll over his body as the newcomer leaned in close.

A breathy giggle blew into the sheriff’s ear, summer warm and feather soft, making his mission not to shiver an impossibility. Careful fingers danced over his shoulder blades and down along his tormented back, trailing ever lower until they were dangerously close to his back pocket, where he kept all his cash.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Hank chuckled, whipping around before the newcomer could retreat. “You ain’t the first to try that.” The sheriff chided, snapping a trailing hand by the wrist to halt the cunning fingertips as he spun to catch the culprit in the act.

Surprised doe-eyes, wide and startled, stared at the man over the black laced edge of a pink fan that hid the culprit’s face.

But Hank didn’t need to see the rest of the person's face - He knew those eyes all too well.

Chapter End Notes

Me: I should really be studying for my finals, working on that chem paper, finishing my Christmas Reverse Au short, that Hankcon Big Bang is due today...

Also me: Let's write cross dressing cowboys :)
A gloved hand struck like lightning into his cheek before Hank could do so much as blink, the open palm screaming through the air to leave a stinging, harsh, red mark against his skin.

The outlaw twisted like a snake in the lawman’s grip and ripped free of his hold before Hank’s cheek had even stopped burning. A thick, layered skirt dragging nearly down to the fugitive’s ankles bounced with the motion, a fluffy white petticoat kicking up to reveal shining, heeled boots as he tore off through the crowd.

Hank was after him in an instant, recovering from the initial shock of being slapped in a startled blink and lunging quickly into action.

No more than a streak of silken pink, the fugitive swept through the crowd, weaving around men and woman like a river tearing over rocks and under roots, hindered by nothing and slowing for no one.

“Stop him!” Hank shouted fruitlessly, pushing roughly through the crowd and shoving people aside in his rush. The long, dragging skirt of a blonde girl caught under his feet and nearly sent him careening through the front doors as the outlaw took to the street paces in front of him.

The chill wind of the desert night lashed against Hank’s sore cheek as he stumbled out of the warm embrace of the lamplight and into the shadows of the street beyond. The man whipped his head around and it didn’t take long for his gaze to fix on the ghost silhouette of a poofy skirt sweeping over the land, layers upon layers of the thing all moving with a mind of their own - It was a wonder the Kid hadn’t tripped himself up in the thing already.

Hank dashed from the porch, leaving the pool of light and letting the darkness of the night swallow him as he tore after the boy. The heavy sound of his own boots slamming into the ground underfoot fought to be heard over the noise of his blood rushing through his ears and the ragged breaths he struggled to draw as he ran after the outlaw. Yet he never slowed, his muscles blazed with energy and the thrill of the chase surged through him to push him on through the darkness. He felt like he could run for hours. He felt young.

For a moment there, Hank even forgot his back was supposed to ache.

Soon, they’d crossed the empty section of desert keeping the brothel separate from the good town and were back within the confines of houses crowding in from every side. The Kid swerved, racing down an alley and Hank was quick to take to his course.

A long, rickety fence blocked the path up ahead but the Kid didn’t slow. Rather the outlaw kept up his breakneck pace and when he met the obstacle he planted his hands atop the top beam and leapt over the thing like a bird in flight. The layers of his elaborate dress twirled over the barrier, heeled boots kicking up as he swung his legs sideways over the wood and planted his feet on the other side.

Hank came barreling after him a few moments later and mimicked the maneuver. His boots nicked the top of the wood to send him flailing forward, his face plowing straight into the ground underfoot and his legs still windmilling behind him. How the ever loving fuck had anyone done
that in a *dress*??

Hank pulled his mouth out of the dirt and heaved his body off the ground, hands pushing into the dust to drag himself onto his knees before he scrambled back up and spurred himself after the outlaw. The lawman sidestepped into another alley in the fugitive’s wake and skidded into another still before he finally started to gain on the man.

Gleaming black boots shone in bright flashes against the pure white of a full petticoat as light from nearby windows swept by in momentary bursts. Pink, silken fabric swept noisily with each step as the small heels of the shining boots beat into the abused road in long, graceful strides.

Hank pushed himself just that much harder, to be *just* that much faster. The lawman got so close he could almost smell the cheap scent of flowers and whatever else they’d hung around the brothel to smother the stench of men and whisky still clinging to the boy’s hair. Finally, he snapped out a hand and caught the outlaw by the upper arm, twisting his thick fingers firmly around the slender limb and refusing to let go for God his-fucking-self.

The Kid yanked backwards, the momentum of his mad dash sending him stumbling to the ground and dragging Hank down with him. The outlaw twisted and kicked, a heeled boot catching the lawman in one of the ribs as the fugitive scrambled to loosen the sheriff’s iron grip to no avail.

Hank grunted with effort as he fought to stay on top of the squirming tangle of boy beneath him, snapping his free hand over the outlaw’s other wrist to stop his mad swinging. Despite he Kid’s best efforts, the sheriff was still twice his size and strong enough to snap him in half. It didn’t take long to have both hands pinned above the outlaw’s head and his wiry body pressed to the ground under the man’s unrelenting force.

The Kid’s breath came out in panting spurs that escaped scarlet painted lips in quick, breathless gasps. His pale cheeks flushed a rose pink and dirt smudged across the painted dusting in rude streaks as his eyelashes fluttered closed with the strain of the chase. Slim wrists twisted fruitlessly against Hank’s iron hold where he held them above the boy’s head but when the outlaw let his caramel orbs slip open again lightning still lashed through their warm depths in electric streaks and a small smile played across his parted lips.

Before Hank could so much as wonder what the Kid had up his sleeve, the outlaw arched under his hold and everything after that was lost to the feeling of warm lips pressing against the lawman’s own. Warm and supple, everything about the fugitive’s lips felt feather soft and honey sweet even as his cunning teeth gently scraped at the sheriff’s lower lip. The outlaw nipped gently at the chapped flesh there, the sharp bite an impossible contrast to the gentle caress of the Kid’s painted lips and Hank forgot how to think.

A heeled boot to the face reminded him rather quickly, however, and Hank very distinctly remembered how to think when the man he’d had pinned just moments ago was suddenly squirming free of his hold and racing away.

Hank hauled himself up off the ground and stumbled to his feet. He forced his legs into motion despite the fact that his mind stayed back in the dirt where it lingered on what had transpired there, refusing to draw away from the scene still playing behind his eyes.

A few paces in front of him the Kid turned another corner; and by the time Hank had skidded to a haphazard halt and turned to follow, the boy had already leapt himself up on a nearby stagecoach.

“Hey, missy, what do you think-” The poor bloke holding the reigns tried but made it no father as he suddenly had an armful of outlaw to worry about.
“Please, sir! That man’s after me!” The Kid sobbed, voice shifted to something honey smooth and pretty - Twisted by the fake sob he’d threaded through the words and the fact that he’d buried his head in the rider’s chest to muffle his words, even Hank couldn’t blame the guy for being fooled.

“Uh-” The driver stuttered out unintelligibly but snapped the reigns down nevertheless, spurring the two horses tied to the thing into motion with a sharp “yah!”

It wasn’t two minutes later, however, when the guy suddenly went flailing forth from the ride, landing on the dirt road in a messy heap with a startled “oof.”

“Ask a girl before you go grabbing!” The Kid snapped angrily, feminine voice dropped and lashing venom in is place as he leaned over the edge of the coach to glare at the man he’d booted. The outlaw pulled the front of his dress up with a disgusted snort, full, true offence written across his features in a blazing fury as he leaned back around and spurred the stolen horses on with a sharp click of his tongue.

“God, I think I’m in love.” The poor stagecoach driver moaned into the dirt as Hank walked over to offer a hand down to the guy.

“Aren’t we all, buddy.” Hank sighed in resigned agreement as he heaved the man back to his feet and dusted his back off.

Chapter End Notes

2 in the morning

Body: Please... SLEEP

Mind: No. We write now.

Me: Can't we write, you know, later..?

Mind: No. We write. Now.
The House at the End of Memory Lane

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hank pushed into the doorway and slammed the thing shut behind him with a heavy sigh. Asking around for Gavin had been a lot easier than asking around for the Kid but it was about the only part of Hank’s evening that had been anything less than hellacious. At least the deputy had gotten them a decent room - Then again, any place with two separate beds was considered nice in Hank’s book.

“Well, don’t you look like you had fun.” Gavin jeered, looking up from the portable, stand up mirror he was crouched in front of at the far side of the room. The man had shaving cream smeared sloppily across half of his face and patchy, untrimmed stubble littering his jaw where he hadn’t quite gotten yet, the foamy bubbles twisting with his sneering half smirk.

Hank stalked across the room and shoved the man out of the way, ignoring the sharp “Hey!” spat from the deputy under his hand as he peered into the mirror. Gleaming, scarlet lipstick smeared across his lip and over his jaw like a rival flag flying high over a conquered fort to let all who saw it know the land was lost to the enemy.

The sheriff merely groaned and ran a tired hand over his eyes, pulling back to let Gavin reclaim his mirror with a muttered insult and a splat of shaving cream flicked in his direction. “You wouldn’t believe.” The man muttered in response to the deputy’s jest, walking across the room to flop into the bed whose sheets had been all but smothered by Gavin’s entire beauty routine, pomade, shaving cream, and more combs than anyone could have use for spread out across the other mattress.

“Hey, I might have something that’ll cheer you up.” Gavin offered, face twisting oddly to get a good angle as he went back to dragging the edge of the razor along his jaw.

“Gavin, I don’t think there’s a single thing in the world you could say right now that would make me feel the least bit better.” Hank huffed dryly. He’d just been kissed by an outlaw in a fucking dress - And worse than that, he couldn’t seem to stop thinking about being kissed by an outlaw in a fucking dress.

And, well… They weren't awful thoughts.

Which was, in short, awful.

“What if I told you I might know where the Kid’s hiding out?” Gavin asked with a knowing edge to his voice, turning slightly to smirk at the sheriff through the mirror, his features distorted and stretched in the curved glass.

“Then you will have proved me wrong, good sir.” Hank conceded instantly, pulling himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, already feeling eternities more energetic than he had a moment ago.

“Now quit screwing around with your face and spit it out. Ain’t nothing you can do to fix that ugly mug anyways.” The sheriff insisted impatiently, drumming his fingers against his leg in eager anticipation.

“Remember how I said I used to know this place when I was young.” Gavin began slowly, waving his straight edge through the air in a vague gesture so that the cold metal gleamed in the flickering lamplight. “Well I spent a few summers growing up here.” The man explained, turning his face to
inspect a clean shaven cheek in the mirror before shifting about to move on to the other side.

“As very interesting as your life story may be, deputy, save it for the papers.” Hank snorted jovially, chuckling at the annoyed eye roll he received for his efforts.

“Well, it just so happens that your fugitive grew up here too, sheriff. Does that interest you more?” Gavin sniped sharply, huffing as he got to work on the other cheek.

“It certainly does.” Hank agreed easily, biting back the thousand and one questions that sprung to the tip of his tongue the moment the words left this companion’s mouth. He trusted Gavin, the man would tell him all he knew in time… though even Hank couldn’t help but wonder why this information hadn’t come up before.

“He was a weird kid, broke bastard with a whore of a mother, so me and a few other boys we used to,” Gavin began but then simply shrugged, offering nothing.

Hank offered an incredulous eyebrow and questioning silence, unsure of where exactly this conversation was heading and, somehow, not exactly sure he liked the route it had taken.

“Well, we used to, you know,” Gavin went on, waving his straight edge vaguely through the air with little in way of an actual explanation. “We used to follow him sometimes.” The deputy admitted awkwardly, shoulders jerking in a stiff shrug. “Just being little brats, like we were.” The man tried to chuckle but Hank couldn’t find it in himself to return the conversational laugh as he was expected to.

The sheriff shifted a bit where he sat, unsettled in a way he couldn’t quite put his finger on. As long as he’d known Gavin, he’d considered the deputy a decent man and this new bit of information just didn’t seem quite in line with the rest of the guy’s character. A discrepancy.

“Well, the point is, he used to go to this old abandoned house a little ways out of town.” Gavin moved on quickly. “He was smaller then ‘rest of us so he could fit through this crack under the porch. Hide out there until we got bored and left.” The guy reminisced, squinting at nothing as if trying to see the memory a little clearer. “Word is, the old shack ‘s still standin’.” Gavin explained, finally getting to the point of his uncomfortable story with a final shake of his straight edge that sent a small spray of shaving cream flying. “There’s a chance he’s gone to hide out there again.”

“Peachy.” Hank offered after a moment, still less than settled. He was probably overthinking it. Gavin was young then, all boys do dumb things when there young. “We’ll head out there in the morning.” The man decided, pushing away any lingering discomfort and pulling his legs up off the floor to lie flat on his back.

Hank pressed his toe into the heel of his riding boot the help kick it off and stared up at the ceiling as Gavin’s shuffling footsteps pattered around in the back of his mind and the sound of the man creaking open the small door of the oil lamp came after. Darkness swamped the room as the deputy blew the thing out and the sheriff watched the shadows swim above him as the unmistakable sounds of Gavin pushing his on the go beauty salon off the bed met his ears, a sharp metallic clattering of about a dozen different containers of pomade hitting the floor.

When he finally closed his eyes, all he saw was scarlet lips.

The walk out to the abandoned house were long and tedious - And most importantly, before coffee. Gavin seemed particularly antsy that morning and had pushed Hank to place the exploration before everything else. Breakfast. Coffee. A goddamn bath. Everything Hank had been deprived of since this hellish trip had begun.
The shack they’d spent two hours - Yes, you heard him right, *two fucking hours* - trekking out to was a miserable, decrypt thing sagging at every edge and weary with the weight of the world. Shambling, graying boards creaked dangerously as Hank stepped onto what was left of the porch and the windows had only a few jagged shards of fractured glass left to sit pathetically against thick boards barring the open holes.

All in all, the thing look like it had died years ago and only a husk of a house remained in its place.

Gavin gave a low, drawn out whistle as he gazed upon the hodgepodge pile of boards Hank wasn’t giving enough to call a building anymore. “And I thought this sorry son’ bitch looked bad twenty years ago.” The man scoffed disdainfully, sneering disgustedly at the mess as he placed his hands against his hips and leaned back.

“Well, I guess I’ll check out the inside. You go around back.” Hank directed shortly, eager to get this over with and get back to the cup of coffee he’d just started when Gavin demanded they walk two fucking hours to see a few dry rotted boards barely nailed together.

The deputy gave a curt nod and Hank pushed a hand against what might have once been a door but was now nothing more than a half of a broken piece of wood falling sideways off a pair of rusty hinges. The rotting wood crumbled at his touch; and when he pressed against it, the door refused to move more than a bending inch. A glance down revealed the bottom to have sunken into the degrading porch so that it only drove farther into the sickly wood when Hank gave it another experimental shove.

With a tired sigh, Hank stepped back from the door and readied himself. The sheriff drew up a leg and planted a single, solid kick in the center of the rotting wood that sent half of the thing splintering but hey, it moved the other half and the door was now open so Hank was gonna count it as a win.

The inside of the house was no better than the outside, dusty furniture sunk into the rotting floor and the walls bent in on themselves with age. Hank coughed as the dank sent of must and mold flooded his mouth and smothered his throat, clogging his nose and eyes alike as he blinked through the sting of unsettled dust to peer around the ruined building.

A stuffed bear with with half its limbs missing lay near where a hole opened up from under the floor, a thick layer of dust settled into its fur to coat dull tawny a smothered ash. Yet the face appeared to have been brushed clean, a single button eye gleaming with crystal clarity and the muzzle smudged free of grime. Maybe Gavin had been right. Maybe Gavin had been the one to rip the arms off the poor toy to begin with - But Hank was trying his best not the think about that.

No one seemed to be in the house now, that was for sure. Thick silence, as heavy and suffocating as the dust smothering the air hung in the house. Nothing seemed to have been touched for years.

Absently, Hank noticed a picture frame laying face down atop one of the dust coated tables and flipped it over out of sheer bored curiosity. However, as the sheriff took in the face poorly depicted in the photo he paused, familiarity undeniable in the man’s harsh features.

“Hey, Gavin!” Hank called experimentally, still eyeing the photo in his hands. “I think I found a picture of your dad - Guess he had their vote!” The sheriff shouted in the direction of the open door. Gavin’s father had been the mayor of their own little piece of frontier for more than one term so his face was easy to recognize, especially since the guy had one, distinct tooth knocked out front and center of his nearly perfect teeth, but damn… How political did you have be to to keep a
picture of the mayor in your own home?

However, no response came. A light uneasiness shivered its way down Hank’s spine as he placed the picture back where he’d found it and crept towards the door, a whisper of a feeling that breathed its way through his body at a slow creep until he could feel it in every fingertip.

A shot rang out from around back.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! On the bright side, Yesterday was the last Chem Lab of the semester! Whoohoo!
Catching the Next Train

Hank was through the front door like a shot, his foot nearly going straight through what remained of the unfortunate wood as he raced through it. The man all but bounded off the porch and dashed around the side of the house, skidding to a halt as he turned the corner and saw what had transpired.

Gavin stood just beside the house, stalking slowly forward with his shotgun held out in front of him, smoke still curling off the black tip of the barrel in a thin trail.

A few paces from him the midnight black splotch on the sky Hank had come to know as Silver tore up on hind legs with a whinnying cry, front hooves pawing at the air as he tossed his mighty head. A trail of ruby droplets dripped in the creature’s wake and smudged under his hooves, mixing with the dry dust to form a rusty mud when Silver slammed his paws back into the ground with another screaming cry.

The horse’s rider stood just before his steed, hauling on the thin cords of Silver’s reins in a fruitless attempt to drag the beast forward but the animal wouldn’t budge. The fugitive's muscles visibly strained, the taunt cords pulled tight in his hands but all proved futile. “We gotta go!” The Kid cried sharply as if that would somehow make his horse move. “We gotta go! Please, we really gotta go!” The outlaw insisted in a shrill whisper, giving up on the reigns to fist his delicate hands in Silver’s night colored mane, slender digits disappearing in the inky black of the creature's hair.

Gavin didn’t slow, stalking ever forward no matter how fast the Kid managed to scramble his reluctant beast back. The deputy brought a second hand up to pull back the bolt of the gun, yanking the thing back with the heavy metallic thunk of a new bullet sliding into place.

The Kid stared at the approaching deputy like Satan himself were riding up greet him, caramel eyes wide and desperation written into every twisted muscle of his pained face. “Please, Silver.” The boy whined dragging them back a pace but the moment the horse moved an inch it whinnied and stuttered to a halt, the dark fur of its shoulder sticky and matted with the dark stain of blood.

Gavin aimed the weapon at the outlaw, squinting his eye down the barrel of the thing as his lips twisted into a disgusted sneer.

The Kid dipped his head and pressed it into Silver’s pulling the horse forward by the mane and whispering something Hank couldn’t quite make out from where he stood. The moment Gavin fired the shot, however, the outlaw jerked to the side and dodged just moments before it would’ve been lodged in his skull. The fugitive spun on a heel and took off across the open yard like lightning, aiming for where dust gave way to woods a little past the house. His dark dust coat flying out behind him, the outlaw was swallowed by the cover of the trees in moments, disappearing into the woods like a shadow chased away by the early light of dawn.

Gavin growled in the back of his throat but stalked forward nevertheless, pulling the bolt of his gun back once more just as Hank jogged up to reach him. The deputy didn’t hesitate before aiming the barrel straight at the injured horse’s forehead, staring straight into the woods as he did with an uncaring snarl twisting his features into something ugly. The dark snout of the weapon pressed flesh against the injure’d animal’s skull, cold metal gleaming against black fur and life met metal.

Just as the deputy’s finger closed around the trigger, however, Hank grabbed the barrel of the weapon in one hand and turned it to the sky. “What the hell do you think you’re doing!” The sheriff demanded, screaming to be heard over the shot as it exploded into the open air, deafening in
its powerful scream of death. The man stared at his companion incredulously, disbelief and confusion etched into every ununderstanding fiber of his being. The horse was injured, yes, but to the point that it needed to be put out of its misery? No!

Gavin wordlessly yanked his gun out of Hank’s hands, fire blazing through brown eyes as he glared at the sheriff for a moment. Long, tense silence stretched out between them until Hank was seriously starting to think Gavin was going to whip the gun up and shoot the poor creature anyway - And maybe him too while he was at it. Finally, however, the deputy turned away and stalked off the way they had come, still silent… And Hank realized none of this had anything to do with an injured horse.

After a long moment of quiet, Silver gave a disgruntled snort and stumbled clumsily to distance himself from the sheriff, drawing Hank’s attention back to the matter at hand. “Come on, boy.” The man encouraged gently, slowly reaching out to take the reins even as the horse gave a displeased whinny and leaned his great head away from the human’s reaching fingertips. Hank reached again, slower this time and with a soft shushing sound just on his lips. Carefully, he closed his fingers around the leather rope and, despite his wariness, the horse didn’t try to bolt. Hank took the reins in his hands, tugging them forward gently in the way he had come and Silver reluctantly followed his guiding pull, limping as he went.

The trip back home was long and silent, as if there were some sort of wall between Hank and the deputy. Things got no better when they made it back to town. Weeks passed, and still Hank just couldn’t seem to see Gavin the same. Every time he looked at the man all he could see was the cold, ugly sneer he’d seen painted across the deputy’s face as he prepared to pull the trigger.

At least Silver’s shoulder had healed up pretty quickly. Apparently, Gavin was not the best shot and had only really skimmed the muscle, not buried lead deep inside of it as Hank had initially feared when he’d come at the bucking stallion, tweezers in hand. The horse even seemed to have started to warm up to Hank some, or at least, didn’t prance elegantly to the other side of the fence with an indignant snort every time the sheriff drew near.

On the last day of the third week, Hank heaved a weighty heap of hay over the wooden fence of the pen beside his house and Silver didn’t go running. The horse strode elegantly to the gate and blinked distastefully at the food, lowering his nose to the trough and snorting into it once, nostrils flaring indignantly as he raised his head back from the metal and stared expectantly at the sheriff.

“What, you’re picky now?” Hank questioned incredulously. “C’mon, it’s the same shit you eat every day!” The sheriff balked, gesturing at the food as if to prove his point. Proving his point to a silly, stubborn stallion, that’s how low he’d fallen.

“See, Nellie likes it just fine.” Hank pointed out as the horse in question walked up and buried her head in the trough without complaint, not bothering to worry herself with her rider and penmate’s petty debate. The steady mare was the only horse Hank had trusted to keep with the injured animal, knowing she wouldn’t excitedly injure his tender shoulder or go bounding around the pen to provoke him into doing something foolish. Hank got the distinct feeling Silver could be easily provoked into doing something foolish.

Silver snorted disinterestedly, turning his proud head away with a luxurious shake of his gleaming black mane.

“Maybe he named ‘ya Silver ‘cause you only accept your meals on a damn silver platter.” Hank muttered exasperatedly, tuning away from the pen to get on with his day. “Certainly had nothing to do with your shining white coat.” The man snorted, throwing his hand up exasperatedly as the absolute lunacy his life had descended into.
The moment Hank turned away, however, a sudden rush of cold air danced over his head, a brisk breeze that he certainly shouldn't be able to feel. “Son of a gun!” The sheriff spat, whipping around to find his hat plucked off his head and being absent mindedly chewed in Silver’s massive jaws. “Gimme that back, you little bastard!” The man demanded, reaching up to snag the item from the horse’s mouth but Silver pulled just out of reach, leaving Hank’s fingers to close around thin air.

“Fuck, come back here!” Hank growled, gripping the top bar of the fence and hoisting himself up as Silver went prancing lightly across the pen, prize held high and proud between his teeth. Nellie glanced up once as Hank swung his legs over the fence but went back to chewing with a tired huff of hot air.

“Sheriff.” A voice interrupted just as Hank hopped down into the pen and moved to go after the arrogant animal.

The man halted in his tracks and turned to see the same blonde girl he’d met days ago standing just outside of the fence. The woman’s blue eyes were downcast and she held her painted lip gently between her teeth as she stared at the ground between them, unwilling to glance up even as Hank pulled himself out of the horses’ pen and came to stand before her.

“You’re needed down at the jailhouse.” Is all the woman said before turning away and leaving Hank alone on the street, a sick, twisted feeling settling in his gut.

Hank’s hat found its way to his feet and the lawman didn’t question such a mercy, refusing to turn around and make literal on the old adage “don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” He plucked the thing up off the street and slowly made his way into town, his feet dragging on every step yet the anxious urge to run alway there sparking through him like embers flickering beside a dry hay field - Or maybe a still at this point.

The sheriff eventually came to the place he was called to and refused to let himself pause as he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

It was through a mouthful of blood that the Kid glanced up and offered a scratchy, “Howdy, Sheriff.”
Gavin drug the outlaw into an open cell by the collar of his jacket, pulling him roughly through the threshold even as the fugitive stumbled and barely managed to catch himself on the door to keep from hitting the floor. The deputy threw the Kid forward, sending him into the far wall of the cell where he hit with a dull thump and let himself sag down the concrete surface, a smudged crimson stain smearing down the stone wall in his wake.

The Kid caught himself before his body could crumple, bracing a hand against the wall and leaning heavily as he forced his legs to straighten and brought his head up to glare at the deputy. Blood ran from his nose in a steady stream, splattering over his lips where it joined a second stream seeping from a cut gouged into the pink flesh to drip down off his chin and stain the floor beneath him where he wavered. A colorful bruise blossomed around one eye and another marred the freckled ridge of his left cheek, turning pale skin into a portrait of twilight purple and black night.

The outlaw glared haughtily at Gavin and pulled himself up a bit higher, stumbling back into the wall before catching himself and forcing unsteady legs to stand. The deputy sneered back at the boy as if he were something disgusting left out to rot, cruel disdain painted across his face with unadulterated fury blazing like wildfire in his coffee eyes. Hank was seriously worried he might have to go in and pull the man out the cell before he went at the outlaw again.

After a moment, however, Gavin stepped back and slammed the cell door shut behind him, turning away from the fugitive with one final spit in his direction. He stalked away from the bars, stalking over to where Hank stood watching, unsure of what he thought, let alone what to say. Sure, he’d been after the Kid for years, he’d chased him miles, through wind and through rain but this… this.

The outlaw let himself sag into a heap the moment Gavin turned away, a wheezing breath that ended in a bloody cough wrenching through his lips. The Kid wiped the ruby droplet away from his lips with a groan, inspecting his hand with a dismal look before letting it drop to his side and letting his head loll after it soon after.

“Found him sneaking around my place just before dawn.” Gavin informed flatly, voice devoid of anything save for cold disinterest and the barest hint of disgust. The man sneered back at the captive with merciless disdain before pushing past Hank and heading for the front door, wiping at a busted lip as he went.

Hank thought he might have responded but he didn’t really know for sure; if he did, he sure didn’t know what the hell he’d said. He supposed he should be pleased about this. They’d caught the notorious murderer who’d terrorized this land for years. He should be happy. He should.

“Well, sheriff, guess you’re happy to see me behind bars, eh?” The Kid commented lightly after a few moments, echoing Hank’s own thoughts with a slight smile. The expression looked absolutely ridiculous with blood still smeared over his dimpled cheeks. Fucking ridiculous.

“Yep.” Hank deadpanned on instinct but his chopped voice didn’t sound convincing to even his own ears. The man forced himself to walk behind his desk and take a seat, striving for some sense of normalcy, some familiarity, just something - anything - that made sense.

This didn’t make sense.

He should be happy.
He wasn’t.

“Is Silver okay?” The outlaw asked after a long breath of silence, voice smaller for a moment, nervous almost. He brought his hands together in front of him and looked hard at his fingers as he waited for an answer, the non-busted side of his lower lip drawn between his teeth to roll gently about while the toe of his left boot tapped noisily into the stone floor of the cell in a fast, shaky rhythm. Definitely nervous.

“He’s-” Hank answered stiffly then forced himself to loosen up with a heavy sigh. He was overthinking things. “He’s fine, Kid. You asked me to watch out for him and I said I would, didn’t I?” The man reminded, sounding more irritated than he actually was; but when he glanced back at the outlaw, he was met with warm caramel eyes boring into him with glowing, unguarded relief and suddenly found himself swallowing his own tongue.

“I really am grateful, Sheriff.” The boy breathed softly, his body sagging a bit as if it’d had been held together by that lingering anxiety alone. However, the outlaw’s gaze soon flicked behind the sheriff and his cocky smirk returned full force, mischief illuminating his caramel eyes with its electric blaze once more. “I really am beautiful, aren’t I?” The Kid swooned arrogantly, bat-ting his long lashes for full effect as Hank turned to see what had brought about this declaration and was met by a crude sketch of the boy seated a few paces from him, big blocky letters reading The Kid printed under the drawing with a bounty pasted just under that. Whew, that was a lot of zeros.

“Oh yeah, you’re just gorgeous.” Hank agreed in a dry snort, rolling his eyes for full effect as he turned back around to give the outlaw the most deadpanned look he could muster. All he received for his effort, however, was a flattered smile and even the barest hint of pink blush dusting its way over bruised cheeks. Jesus, fuck him.

“A shy, blushing, pretty boy of an outlaw. That was going to be what finally fell the great Hank Anderson. Jesus Christ.

“Why do y’all call me that anyway?” The fugitive questioned, letting his gaze flick back to the poster. “The Kid. I’m in my thirties, you know.” The boy pointed out perturbedly, a little pout playing against his lips that was most certainly not, in any way at all, cute.

“Bullshit.” Hank snorted disbelievingly, giving the Kid a good once over. His face was too soft. His full cheeks flushed pretty pink with youth and his coffee eyes shone with a bright, mischievous light too young to be tainted by the harshness the world. Twenty two at most.

“Thirty three and counting.” The Kid revealed with a wiry smile, amusement glimmering in youthful orbs.

“No shit?” Hank asked wonderingly, still not quite convinced but the pleased, almost cocky, smile he received in response held no denial.

After a moment, the Kid placed a hand against the wall and slowly began the tedious process of standing up, his halting, clumsy movements a far cry from the fluid grace that had helped him elude Hank time and again. The outlaw let himself lean against the wall, shoulder sagging against concrete as he drug himself up onto unsteady legs and stumbled a few paces towards the long wooden bench running against the vertical wall of the cell. His steps were uneven, his left leg dragging behind and buckling each time he put a bit of weight on it but he made it to the bench
nevertheless and let himself fall in its general direction rather than actually stumble the last few remaining paces.

“Your deputy’s a real ass, you know.” The Kid spat bitterly, catching himself against the bench and pulling his body atop it with a last grunt of effort. Finally he flopped his butt onto the wooden surface and drug his right leg up to lay out beside him, knee bent and arm rested atop it - He might’ve appeared almost casual had he not looked like the poster child for death.

“Well, most people don’t react to well to finding outlaws creeping around their property in the wee hours of the morning.” Hank huffed dismissively but he couldn’t deny the persistent, pushed aside voice in his mind that whispered that the Kid might have a point. “What were you thinking, anyway - Breaking into a lawman’s house?” The sheriff questioned exasperatedly, even though he told himself he didn’t really care. He’d wanted the outlaw caught, hadn’t he?

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” The Kid dodged but there was an edge to his voice, something sharp and cynical that whispered of some unspoken poison behind the words.

“All right then.” Hank finished with an awkward stiffness, shifting about before snapping out a hand to pluck some random paper up off his desk. A complaint about missing earrings. Great. Super important, he best get right on that.

“Hey.” The Kid suddenly prompted after a few long moments, drawing Hank’s attention away from the dull mundanity he was supposed to crave back in his life.

“What?” Hank grunted gruffly, squinting at the sheet and hoping he looked like he was doing something really important instead of trying to figure out if some two cent jewelry was actually stolen or just eaten by Mrs. Higgen’s cat.

“Keep talking to me.” The Kid demanded but his voice had taken up that soft, unsettled edge once more, as if Hank’s voice had been the only thing keeping him out of the dark edges of his mind.

Hank should really say no, or at least question the request…

The man tossed the earring quest aside with an absent flick, anything had to be better than that. “So tell me, Kid.” The man began, decidedly not thinking about why he’d agreed without so much as a fight. “I’ve been after you for years,” The sheriff continued then paused a breath to reflect on his own words, feeling a hot blush creep up the back of his neck that the sly smirk the outlaw was currently giving him did nothing to help.

“Tell me,” Hank moved on with a curt cough. “How did Reed manage to do what I couldn’t?” The sheriff asked, frustrated and perturbed with the nagging question nipping at the back of his mind.

“Well, Sheriff,” The Kid drawled slowly, bending over to grab his left leg as she spoke. The outlaw then drug the limb up and flopped it on the bench with an obvious flinch, his teeth visibly grating even from where Hank sat as the boy grabbed the bloodied pant leg and delicately pulled it back with concerning care

“You usually don’t start shooting.” The Kid sighed tiredly, his face twisting into an ill grimace as he blinked down at his bloodied mess of a shin.
Under the Knife

“He shot you?” Hank echoed dumbly, momentarily taken aback by the revelation and absolutely flabbergasted no one had thought to mention this little fact to him earlier.

The Kid blinked blankly at his lower leg, which was smeared over with muddied blood and only seeping more of the crimson liquid onto the wooden bench as it sat, before lifting his gaze to cast the sheriff a deadpan stare.

“He shot you.” Hank answered his own question in a flustered huff, running his hands back through his graying hair to tug frustratedly at the long strands. Reed should’ve mentioned this. The Kid should’ve mentioned this. Somebody should’ve goddamned mentioned one of their prisoners had a bullet hole in his fucking leg!

“Boy, howdy, sure am glad you clarified that for me, Sheriff.” The Kid snarked acidly, his words carrying the poorly concealed hint of a breathless wince. The outlaw let his head fall heavily against the concrete wall behind him, his hat lost somewhere in the struggle so that sweat drenched hair fell limply into tired eyes as he let them slip closed.

“Hey!” Hank balked sharply, his sudden call causing the outlaw to jolt. “Don’t fall asleep!” The man commanded, a wavering note of concern he wished he couldn’t hear out of his own mouth raising his voice a little higher than he’d intended. All his shouting got from the outlaw, however, was the effort to let his head loll in Hank’s general direction and a slow blink, caramel eyes less than crystal clear as they fixed on the sheriff - Or, well, near the sheriff. Close enough.

“Um, okay. Okay.” Hank forced himself to settle and think, eyes skirting around his desk in search of anything that could possibly help him. His scouring gaze eventually landed on the curved edge of a knife, the silver blade gleaming sinisterly in the dim light of the jailhouse and he snagged it off the wooden surface, holding it up for inspection. It certainly wasn’t the sharpest thing Hank had over owned, he mostly kept it there for opening letters and fiddling with when he was bored after all, but hey, no time like the present to put it to new use. Not like he really had time to go hunting for anything proper.

“Um, Sheriff?” The Kid drawled carefully, his senses seeming to be roused some by the sight. “If you’re planning on putting me out of my misery, that’s mighty kind but I think I’m gonna decline that nice offer.” The outlaw joked through an awkward chuckle, pressing back into the wall to put what little distance he could between himself and the lawman, coffee eyes wide and nervous even as he forced a strangled laugh.

“What?” Hank questioned, confused for a moment until he glanced at the knife he still held clutched within his hand. Ah. Yeah. He could see how that could be taken the wrong way. “No, boy. We gotta get that thing outta your leg.” The man corrected hastily, reaching down to pull open a drawer and rifle through its contents in search of the rest of the necessary supplies. A roll of bandages ages old he’d shoved in there at some point. A bottle of whisky he’d kept tucked away for a bad day at work…

“You’re gonna…” The Kid began slowly, confusion etching its way across his soft face as he slowly let himself untense from his drawn up position. “Help me?” He finally finished uncertainly, lips twisting into a befuddled frown and eyes questioning as they flitted across the array of items Hank had spread out across the desk.

“Well, I can’t very well let you bleed all over my jail cell.” Hank dismissed gruffly, gathering the
things he’d found in his arms and carrying them over to the door of the cell. It was the humane thing to do. That’s all there was to it. What kind of sheriff would he be if he let his prisoners sit there and suffer?

“Now, I’m cracking open my work stash for you,” Hank began lifting up the bottle of whisky and swishing the amber liquid inside around in a slow circle. “So don’t make me regret this.” The sheriff warned, reaching over to where a thick metal ring with a few iron keys hung from a nail in the wall, the heavy things clattering noisily into one another when disturbed. The black iron of the key he sought gleamed coldly, flashes of dark metal catching in the low light as he drew it up, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger in a slow drawl.

The outlaw pushed himself up into a more alert position with a low groan and brought a hand up to his chest where he curled his other digits back to just leave a single finger extended. With a lopsided grin, he moved the tip of his index finger across his heart in a large X, just letting the pad of the long digit drag against his chest with slow, delicate grace. “You could tie me up if that’ll make you feel safer, Sheriff.” The boy offered, a pleased drawl to his lilting voice and a single eyebrow raised suggestively as he batted too long eyelashes at the man who seriously just wanted to do his damn job without having a heart attack on the jailhouse floor.

“Oh yeah, ‘cause that just worked so well the last time.” Hank snorted through a breathless wheeze, trying to focus on slipping the key into the lock only to miss the thing entirely. Smooth, Hank. Real smooth.

“Dunno, Sheriff.” The boy insisted, amused smile slowly playing its way across bruised cheeks. “Could be fun anyway.” He encouraged teasingly, shifting about to lean back on his hands as he spoke. Hank honestly wasn’t sure if it was for comfort or to show himself off at this point. What had his life come to?

Deciding to focus on the task at hand rather than any horny outlaws begging to be tied up, Hank finally managed to jam the key into the lock and twisted it open, slipping inside and pulling the door shut behind him before he could think about what a truly stupid idea this was. The lawman moved across the expanse of floor between them and lowered himself to take a knee in front of the bench the Kid still perched atop, watching him like a hawk.

The boy still looked nervous, muscles visibly tense and caramel eyes hyper fixated on Hank’s every move, as if the outlaw still expected the man to change his mind and stab him on a dime. Nevertheless, he moved his delicate fingers down to gently ease his bloodied pant leg back up from where it had fallen, movements slow and careful as his lithe fingertips cautiously tugged at the ruined material to expose the injury to the world. Pale skin was marred by crimson stains and a gaping hole tore through the bloodied flesh just off center, deep and jagged to display ripped muscle and decimated meat.

Hank grimaced at the gory sight. Had he not been used to seeing such injury, he was sure he would’ve been nauseous. Trying not to dwell on the scarring image, the man grabbed the top of his whisky and twisted the bottle open with little effort, heavy fingers making quick work of the seal and tossing the cap aside. He brought his knife up and tried to ignore how the outlaw shrank away the slightest bit at the sight of the blade as he tipped the bottle over the thing and sent the amber liquid spilling over the metal. Poor kid was as skittish and mistrustful as his damn horse.

“Drink this. It’ll dull the pain.” Hank instructed, rerighting the bottle to shove it into the outlaw’s pale hands, a slight tremor shaking through the Kid’s delicate digits a clear indication that he needed it. The sheriff shook the knife to rid it of the excess alcohol as he watched the boy bring the bottle top his lips and tip his head back, caramel eyes slipping shut in a sharp wince as his Adam’s
apple bobbed. Hey, Hank never said the shit tasted good, just that it was effective as hell.

The Kid pulled off the bottle with a wet pop that certainly didn’t go straight to Hank’s groin and a heavy breath wheezed through parted lips as he handed the thing back to the sheriff, coffee eyes half lidded and damp hair falling over flushed cheeks. Oh yeah, if Hank wasn't nervous as all hell and about to perform an impromptu surgery in a jail cell right now… Nevermind.

Hank took the offered bottle and placed it off to the side. He’d need it later to disinfect the wound but right now was time for the sucktastic part of things. “This is gonna hurt, Kid.” The sheriff warned as he brought the knife up and prepared for things to go horribly awry, though he was pretty sure the outlaw was already well aware of this fact and the dry scoff he received for his warning seemed anything but unexpectant. Hank almost found himself wondering if this wasn’t the first time the guy had a knife under his skin fishing around for a chunk of lead, though the sheriff had the horrible suspicion this was probably the first time he had anyone else wielding the blade.

No point in dragging this out any longer than necessary, Hank supposed, and carefully drug his knife to the wound, pressing the very edge of the blade against the bloodied flesh. The contact drew a low hiss from the Kid and his body tensed under Hank’s hands but the boy said nothing and made no moves to stop the lawman so the sheriff didn’t take the time to linger before digging the curved tip of the blade into the bloodied wound.

The fugitive's hand flew up to his mouth and his long fingers curled into a tight fist before he dug his teeth into the pale digits, a muffled sort of scream crawling from his throat around the intrusion. Caramel orbs squeezed shut and the boy’s nostrils flared with a heavy huff of strained air as Hank reluctantly pushed his knife farther into the injury, feeling no sign of the missing bullet yet.

A fresh wave of slow, lagging blood dribbled from the wound as Hank drove his blade as steadily as he could into the Kid’s tormented flesh, running down the silver edge of the knife in a steady stream before dribbling onto the sheriff's hand to stain his fingers red. The ruby liquid felt hot, and sticky, and wrong against the lawman’s skin, tainting the flesh of his fingers to smear across his palms and run over the back of his knuckles as he pushed on, trying his best not to look at his own bloodied hands.

Finally, Hank felt his blade hit something that shouldn’t be there and he tilted the knife down to try and get under it. The maneuver drew a mangled cry from the outlaw who jolted under the knife, only succeeding in jarring the blade worse with his squirming and bringing a strangled, ruined whistle from his own throat.

“Jesus! Stay stil!” Hank hissed, pressing his free hand into the outlaw’s leg in an attempt to keep him still, knowing he would only end up hurting the boy worse than he already was if the Kid kept jerking every time he moved the knife. “Maybe we should've tied you up.” The sheriff joked through a stressed huff, hoping conversation might draw the fugitive’s mind away from the blade in his leg.

The Kid gave a strangled, half hearted attempt at a laugh that sounded more like a choked sob than anything else but hey, at least he was trying. Hank could work with that.

“So, I have to ask,” Hank began, encouraged by the minor success of his latest attempt at conversation. “What the hell were you doing in a brothel the other night?” The man asked, while angling his blade to get under the bullet and nearly sighing in relief as he felt the edge catch on the thing, moving it some.
The Kid on the other hand did not seem quite so relieved, groaning and slamming his other hand into the bench in a tight fist before finally dislodging his teeth from his fingers, eyes slipping open an inch to glance at the man. He quickly shut them again though, looking ill and turning away - Hank couldn’t blame him. Who wouldn’t get sick at the sight of someone digging around in their leg?

“I was,” The Kid began shakily but soon lost his words to a high pitched noise in the back of his throat as Hank began dragging the bullet back up through the ruined flesh it had destroyed on its way in. “Was tracking down information.” The boy explained in a wheeze. He had to shove his fist back in his mouth as Hank nearly brought the thing to the surface, hot, sticky blood flowing thickly from the wound at the torment.

“You needed to wear a can can skirt for that, did you?” Hank snorted amusedly, forcing himself to be calm so he could do this right. He was close, he could just begin to see the black metal through the red stain of tarnished flesh and the silver gleam of his own blade pressed against the bullet.

“That was just for fun.” The outlaw managed to chuckle, voice strained but amused as it fought its way around the fist he still kept just on the edge of his teeth, the intrusion slurring the words a bit.

“And kissin’ me, that part of the fun too?” The sheriff joked lightly, expecting a quick and flippant no - That was obviously some necessary part of a plan Hank didn’t understand. He wasn’t foolish enough to think otherwise.

“Maybe.” The Kid purred sweetly, voice teasing even as it was strained through the pain.

Hank started, jolting at the unexpected response and twitching the knife pressing the bullet up through the wound some in the process. The mistake brought a sharp noise from the outlaw who nearly doubled over from the sudden onslaught of pain, crying out as he curled in on himself and over Hank in the process, hands suddenly flying to the sheriff’s shoulders in a scrambling search for relief.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Hank whispered sloppily, voice unclear with haste and movements unplanned as he drew a hand up grip the boy’s shoulder, trying to squeeze some reassurance into the outlaw. He couldn’t move his other hand for fear of losing the bullet or fucking up worse than before but he did what he could with the other, pressing it against the fugitive's neck as the Kid nearly pressed his forehead into the lawman’s shoulder; still craned over Hank to let hot, uneven breaths gasp out against the sheriff’s collar bones as delicate fingers slowly began to untangle from the coarse fabric of the sheriff's shirt.

“Shit! Don’t say shit like that when I’ve got a knife in your leg!” Hank growled unsteadily, hurriedly dragging the bullet up through the last bit he had left and flicking the atrocious thing away.

“You asked!” The Kid protested defensively, voice shaking but the beginnings of relief ringing through it clear as day as he finally began to lift his head and draw back from the man he still hadn't quite released his grip on yet. The outlaw pulled back just far enough to meet Hank’s eyes, honey dusted orbs brimming with unguarded gratitude and the beginnings of something else entirely. Something that looked almost like…

*Trust.*

The brief, warm moment was shattered before it could begin by the sound of a door being slammed open and heavy bootsteps stomping across the wooden floor.
“What the hell are you doing?” Gavin’s rough voice demanded, disgust and disbelief alike making Hank really wish he wasn’t on his knees in front of an outlaw who was currently curled over him and shaking like a leaf. Whose lithe body likely guarded Hank’s actual face from view of the door.

“Pulling a bullet out of his leg, Gavin.” Hank nearly growled, leaning over to make himself seen as the Kid slowly leaned back to turn and glare at the newcomer, face suddenly serious as once warm eyes became as cold and dark as the desert night.

“Waste of time.” The deputy informed icily, hard features twisted into a cold snarl. “He hangs at dawn.”
“When was that decided?” Hank demanded slowly, feeling ice creep into his words and a scowl threaten to overtake his features as he stared at Gavin through the bars. The man looked different through the metal gate, dark eyes full of cold malice and ugly snarl twisting harsh features into something cruel and wrong.

“The mayor just announced it.” The deputy informed curtly, voice clipped and harsh. “He’s as eager to watch the bastard sway as the rest of the good townsfolk.” The man went on, narrowing his eyes. There was something sharp in his tone, something cold and mean that implied Hank was somehow in the wrong.

“Hang the bastard!” The Kid seconded in a weak snark, pumping his fist towards the sky with a grim expression straightening his soft features. Well, he couldn't be too bad off if his humor was still intact, Hank supposed.

Gavin sneered at the boy, ignoring his words to turn back towards the door with a final, “See you at dawn.” Thrown over his shoulder in way of parting.

Silence followed in the wake of the door slamming shut behind Gavin, the sound echoing through the small jailhouse like the deafening thud of a final nail being hammered into a coffin. With a grim twist of his stomach, Hank supposed that’s what it was, after all.

“Let’s finish getting that leg wrapped up.” The sheriff finally prompted after a long moment, keeping his eyes locked on his hands as he reached for the supplies, not wanting to look at the boy damned for death. The sight that met him did nothing to help. The Kid’s blood still covered his hands, red smeared over his fingers and ran down his wrists as if he’d personally killed the boy himself.

Part of him felt like he had.

Soft fingers reached down and gently took a bloodied hand off where it sat uselessly on top of the bandage roll. Hank didn’t even realize he was shaking until he saw his fingers vibrate against the steady grip of the outlaw, delicate digits rubbing gently over the top of his hand to smear the crimson stain over the perfectly pale skin of the fugitive.

“It’s not your fault.” The Kid insisted, voice softened and steady. “Blame your ass of a deputy, if anyone.” The boy jibed easily, light touch of humor to his tone that didn’t match the tired sag of his shoulders at all.

Hank tried to focus his energy on something other than plotting out a million different plans to punch Gavin in the mouth that he’d never actually go through with. He picked the bottle of whisky up from where he’d sat it earlier and poured a splash over the now empty hole in the Kid’s leg before putting it aside once more. Then he grabbed the bandages and began carefully wrapping them around the cleaned injury, lifting the boy’s leg gently off the bench a few inches with one hand and circling the cloth over the wound a few times with the other. All the while, he felt as though he were in some sort of daze, like his body was simply going through the motions with his mind left in the dust behind him.
He just couldn’t shake how wrong all of this felt.

“Jeez, who died?” The Kid snarked as Hank finally drug himself out of the cell and locked it behind him; the click of the lock doing absolutely horrible things to his gut. The joke was in poor taste and did nothing to help the unsettled feeling burrowing its way into Hank's chest.

“Really, Sheriff, if I’m not making it to tomorrow; long, awkward silence is at the very bottom on the list of ways I’d like to spend my final hours.” The outlaw insisted earnestly, scooching down the bench as he spoke until he was laying flat on his back with his feet propped up against the wall and an arm dragging to the floor, fingertip drawing small shapes absently in the dust.

“What’s at the top?” Hank asked with a forced chuckle as he made his way back to his desk and sagged into his chair, feeling ages older than we’d he scrambled out of it minutes ago. The least he could do was humor the boy.

“Come back in here and I’ll show you.” The Kid purred, bringing up the hand not doodling on the ground to pump a fist in front his mouth, lips spread and tongue lolled out in invitation.

Hank really wished he didn’t feel so absolutely shitty - As it was, the weak stutter his heart gave at the suggestive display only served to leave his chest aching.

Before Hank could answer, the front door creaked open again, a low, droning noise different than the previous slammings the poor thing had endured all morning. The sheriff lifted his head to see an old man in a long, button up black shirt enter the room and glance around almost timid like, shoulders arched in constant tension and a book clutched to his chest so tightly his knuckles were beginning to turn white.

“Howdy, Sheriff.” The man greeted when his timid eyes fell on Hank, startling back some as if he hadn't expected the man to be sitting there. When he turned to the lawman, Hank could see the wooden beads slung around his neck and the shining cross at the end of it - And understood why the fellow was there with a nauseous twinge.

“Mornin’, Reverend.” Hank grunted dryly, the words tasteless in his mouth and sticking in his throat like he’d swallowed a fistfull of sand.

The godly man turned away from the lawman and turned his attention instead to where the Kid was still lounging horizontally with his legs in the air against the wall, watching the pastor with unabashed wariness. “Are you a religious man?” The newcomer asked calmly, welcoming smile shining across his face as he flipped open his bible and flicked through a few pages.

Looking at him, you’d never know his charge was staring at him like a rabbit might stare down the slobbering snout of a fox, tense and ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

“No, sir.” The Kid answered evenly, bringing his hand up off the ground to lace his fingers together atop his stomach as he shifted his gaze to the ceiling.

“Can I interest you in my services anyway?” The man of god offered warmly, body language visibly more relaxed now that he was actually doing his work, clearly in his element.

“You sound just like my mother.” The Kid deadpanned, turning a little to give the pastor a wiry, dangerous smile that looked more like a coyote's sharp toothed smirk than anything.

The reverend paled slightly, stuttering out some unintelligible syllable before closing his mouth again so quick Hank swore he heard his teeth snap from where he was sitting, old eyes nearly bugging out of his head. “As you will.” The man dismissed stiffly, voice strained around a locked
jaw as he turned and made for the door without a second glance.

Despite his wolfish ways, when the minister had departed Hank swore he caught the softest hint of a quiet sigh from the jail cell, drawing his attention to the boy still lying atop the bench. However, the Kid had pulled his legs down from the wall and shifted to lay on his side, dragging his knees in close to himself atop the wooden platform, and was looking down at something in his hand. The sheriff couldn’t quite make out what it was from where he sat but it had a metallic glimmer to it and seemed to be hanging around his neck on a string, though he’d never seen it before so it must usually be kept under the outlaw’s clothes.

The Kid clasped the thing tightly within his hand, gripping onto it like a lifeline and rolling his thumb over it in slow, soothing stokes as if to settle himself. His features softened and a tiny frown played over his lips, almost like the conversation with the pastor had bothered him more than he was letting on. “That was a lie.” He sighed quietly, his voice small so that Hank wasn’t certain the words were meant for him.

“Of all the things you’ve done, lying to a man of God is the one that bothers you?” Hank snorted lightly, crossing his arms over his broad chest as he watched the boy carefully. This attitude shift was unexpected to say the least… Hank didn’t know what to make of it.

“I would just as soon lie to God himself, the sick bastard.” The outlaw chuckled with a shake of his head, amused smile making a brief appearance before it vanished as quickly as it had come. “I mean, my mother didn’t sound like that.” The boy went on after a long moment, eyes distant and culled as a stormy sky getting ready to open on the world. “She never worked in front of me.” He explained, soft voice thick and halting, as if every word tried to stick in his throat and choke the life out of him.

Hank was left silent, confusion crawling its way up the back of his neck leaving him wordless. If the Kid had murdered his mother, why did he speak so sadly of her now? It… Didn’t make any sense.

“Some guy tried once, after she’d already told ‘em to back off.” The outlaw mused, voice shifting to something fond. “She popped him right in the mouth. Knocked out a tooth right out of his ugly face.” The Kid chuckled warmly, amused smile creeping its way across his features as he recalled the memory.

Something strong and angry twisted in Hank’s gut as he watched the soft, almost happy expression play out gently across the Kid’s face. This… Didn’t seem right.

*This was wrong.*

“You know what would brighten the mood?” The lawman asked abruptly, his sudden outburst causing the outlaw to jolt as the sheriff pulled himself out from behind the desk and grabbed his whisky bottle off of it as he went. “A drink!” Hank announced cheerily, grinning widely as he moved across the room and flopped his ass heavily down just beside the cell.

“What are you doing?” The Kid asked slowly, confusion clear in his voice but the sound of him shuffling around and pulling himself up out of his lying position could be heard behind the lawman soon after.

“Nothin’.” Hank snorted then tipped back half the bottle in one fell swig before slamming it down heavily beside him. “Nothin’ at all.” He repeated slowly, drawing his jail keys off of his belt and twirling them around his finger, the metal jingling Merrily as he circled the large ring around the digit in a slow cycle. He was careful to keep his eyes fixed on the other side of the room.
Then he pretended to be surprised when he woke up on the cold, concrete floor of the jail cell with shattered glass caught in his hair and the smell of whisky covering his clothes.

Chapter End Notes

Speaking of hanging the bastard, have y'all ever seen Cannibal! The Musical?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7Q9ZEdOLSE

Cheaply made as all hell but where I draw 90% of my inspiration for this tbh XD
Hank groaned, bringing a hand up to the side of his head only to recoil sharply as his fingertips brushed a swelling lump, sending a sharp jolt of flaming pain searing through him. His head pounded, a dull, constant throb slamming behind his eyes as if someone had replaced his brain for an iron hammer and made his temple the forge.

Yet, all he found he truly felt was crashing, unsteadying relief, the light feeling swelling through him to leave him nearly lightheaded in its wake.

That was, until a light chuckle swept through his senses, bringing his reeling mind to a crashing halt.

Hank pushed himself off the floor and scrambled to his feet before he could think, a horrible decision that sent his aching head cartwheeling into the seventh inner circle of hell. The man’s eyes instantly locked to the shady outline of someone leaned against the cell door, the shadow lithe and captivating, pretty form and distinctive angles well pronounced against the dull light of the lamp flickering faintly in the far corner.

The Kid had reclaimed his hat and tilted his head so its curved brim guarded his eyes from the light, leaving stark shadows playing across his sharply lit face that wavered and changed in the warm flame. He spun the jailhouse keys around a single long finger left lingering down near his waist, metal jingling teasingly as he brought the thing around in slow circles. Even in the gloom, Hank was able to see the beginnings of a smile playing out over the boy’s lip under the crusting of dried blood still marring the pink flesh.

“What are you doing here?” The sheriff demanded, pushing aside his pounding headache to start towards the door, thoughts reeling a mile a minute.

“I think the question we should all be asking is, what are you doing in there, sheriff?” The outlaw purred, grabbing the keys in his hand to stop the slow twirling with a noisy clatter. He turned, bringing up a hand to wrap slow, delicate fingers around a long metal bar as he leaned forward, face coming to hover just inches away from the iron.

“Think I should be asking you that, Kid.” Hank shot back, pressing up against the bars with a low growl building in the back of his throat.

“Don’t play dumb with me, lawman.” The outlaw tsked lightly. “You and I both know you ain’t stupid.” The boy continued slowly, dragging himself a little closer to the cell so that his slender hips nearly pressed against the bars. “You wanna know what I think?” The fugitive whispered, dropping his voice so that only Hank could hear the hot breath of air ghosting between his busted lips.

“What do you think, outlaw?” Hank drawled with a gravel to his tone, narrowing his stormy eyes at the boy through the bars.

“I think you let me outta there, Sheriff.” The Kid breathed softly, sweet drawl honeying the words so that they dripped like sugar from his lips.

“I think you’re full of shit.” Hank scoffed immediately, crossing his arms over his chest with a
snort as if humored by the ridiculous notion.

“Is that so? ‘Cause you wanna know what I really think, Sheriff?” The outlaw asked quietly, leaning in so that his lips nearly brushed the bars. “I think you like me.” The Kid whispered like it was a dirty secret, letting caramel eyes slip nearly closed so he watched the man from under long lashes as he breathed the words.

“Maybe I just wanna be the one to catch you.” Hank countered in a low draw, leaning forward until he too was pressed flesh against the metal gate. He could feel the Kid’s hot breath ghost across his skin through the barrier, warm and fluttering. The outlaw was close enough Hank could nearly lean in and capture his cunning lips if he’d only tried.

The fugitive pulled back, pushing off the cell with a lawless grin and a mischievous glimmer striking through his eyes as if the wild wind itself had been stolen from the sky and put into his smile. “Maybe next time, sheriff.” The boy purred in a honey drawl and was gone from the door in the same breath, pausing only to let the jail keys fall from his fingertips with a noisy clatter before vanishing like mist over the water.

“Jesus!” Hank spat at nothing, slamming a fist into the metal of the gate and growling at the ground as he tried to get a handle on himself. His heart pounded in his throat and his breath caught right beside it, leaving him nearly shaking with the strength of it all as the memory of the outlaw’s breath against his skin played through his mind like a ghost. He was so close. Hank could nearly picture what it would have felt like to lean just that much farther and feel his lips press against the boy’s soft mouth again.

The lawman shook his head and bit his lip to keep from groaning. It was gonna be hard enough to explain why he was sitting in a jail cell with no outlaw to show for it when Reed came back - He didn’t want to have to explain an obvious bulge in his pants on top of it.

Luckily, it didn’t take too awful long for Gavin to actually show up. The man stepped into the jailhouse, full vicious sneer in place, lips twisted into a victorious snarl and eyes blazing with cruel malice and the most stomach turning hint of excitement gleaming in their cold depths.

Watching it slowly slip away into silent, baffled, disbelief was worth the migraine any day.

Unfortunately, Hank had only had his freedom for about an hour when he found himself summoned to the mayor’s office downtown. From one Reed straight to another... Yippee ki yay.

The man came to stand just before the elaborately designed building with a feeling of dull acceptance settling into his gut, a heavy weight that sat in his stomach and slowly expanded until it felt like it was going to swallow him whole. Patriotic colored banners draped from the front porch in elegant folds and swung merrily in a soft breeze, their bright colors nothing but a mockery of the dismal mood Hank felt settle in as he made his way to the front door and pushed his way inside.

The familiar face of the man behind the throne glanced up from whatever document he’d been scanning at the sound of the door, brown eyes detached and emotionless as they fell on Hank and flitted over his face momentarily. He had the same heavy, overbearing brow as his son but his grim orbs underneath were a few shades lighter and his hair wasn't quite as dark as Gavin's either. Still though, the similarity was unmistakable. “Ah, Sheriff Anderson. Come in.” The man invited as if Hank had a choice in the matter, straightening up in a large, padded chair behind a crowded desk and pushing a stack of messy paper off to the side.

Hank bit back a sigh and did as he was told, stalking slowly across the wooden floor until he came to stand just before the mayor’s overcrowded desk. Papers, pens, and everything of the sort lay
scattered around the top of the thing in utter disarray and all of it looked as boring as death having a smoke. Well, save for the ancient looking pamphlet for the Wild Stallion shoved haphazardly under an old book, that was, of course. The paper was old and yellowing with age, nearly falling apart where it sat. Hank likely wouldn’t have even noticed it had the corner left out not been showing that same, oddly familiar looking girl he’s noticed in the oil painting - But hey, everyone had needs, the lawman supposed. Who was he to judge? Hell, he’d nearly shoved his tongue down a fugitive’s throat naught but a few hours ago.

“Have a seat, sir.” The mayor offered, gesturing at a crude wooden chair across from the desk that looked like a medieval torture chamber in comparison to his own posh seat with its thick, luxurious cushions and elaborate trim.

Hank wordlessly complied, letting himself fall heavily into the chair without complaint even as his stomach roiled and twisted with violent discomfort. For some odd reason, he felt almost out of place in the room. Like he’d somehow grown distant from the rest of the town and its people and had no place with it anymore; and the mayor’s office only seemed to embody the sensation of subtle exclusion. Not to mention something about the man himself just seemed to sit wrong with the sheriff… Though he couldn’t say he’d ever noticed the odd feeling before.

“I believe you know why you’re here already, sir.” The mayor began, shooting Hank one of those election winning smiles as the lawman gave a slow acknowledging nod. It looked fake in his mouth and the sheriff found himself staring at the empty hole where a glimmering white tooth had once been, now empty and gaping into abysmal black.

“As you well know, the scourge on our fair land that escaped this evening as been plaguing the good people for years.” The man began, cold disgust creeping into his voice. “And for many a long year, you have been charged with the noble duty of protecting this town. Yet, this disgraceful mockery of our good way of life still roams free.” The mayor went on slowly, voice frigid as the desert wind and empty as the gap left where a tooth should have been.

“I know, sir-” Hank began but the man across from him held up a hand, stopping any further explanation before the sheriff could even begin.

“Mr. Anderson, I won’t drag this out any longer than it has to be.” The mayor drew out slowly, his voice chiding as if he were scolding a misbehaving child rather than speaking to a fully grown adult man. Well, at least they could agree on something - Hank wanted nothing less than to linger in this office any longer than he needed to.

“To make this quick: You’re fired.”

Chapter End Notes

Psyche final today - Wish me luck!
Hank’s fingers unconsciously reached up to touch the swatch of material his star was usually pinned to, pads brushing coarse fabric and falling away feeling empty and wrong when no metallic cold met their search. A heavy sigh breathed between his lips as he stepped out of the mayor’s office and into the graying streets beyond, dull midday creeping quietly to chase away the misty haze of dawn. The man began the slow plod back to his home with halting, listless steps, no reason to rush.

This dismal feeling of suffocating apathy came to sit heavily in his chest, seeming to drag the world around him to a slow crawl as he made his way through the small town. Things didn’t look quite the same as they had just a few short day ago. They felt… Different somehow. Like everything had been shifted two inches to the left when Hank turned away.

The people on the streets didn’t even feel like his own anymore.

The ex-lawman pushed the obscure notion away as he turned into the town square of sorts, just passing through in hopes of reaching his house as quickly as possible. As he went however, his gaze lingered on the gallows set up in the middle of everything, as if it were the centerpiece of the city itself. The thick, fraying rope already tied and readied for the day’s planned events swung ominously from the splintering wood, heavy and dragging even without a body dangling from its murderous hold.

Hank’s simmering feeling of apathy evaporated as soon as it had come at the sight. He alone was the only reason the outlaw with secrets swimming behind mischievous eyes didn’t hang limp and lifeless from that rope, caramel orbs dull and empty and delicate fingers hanging stiffly at his sides with the stillness of death - The rest of the town had no sympathy for the accused.

The man made it back to his house relatively quickly after that, the rush returning his step and new determination hardening his heart. The moment he came to the house, he stalked right past the front door and around to the pen out back, strides steady and confident as he stormed right up to the front gate and threw the thing open before he could reconsider.

A black streak of midnight whisked by the ex-sheriff before he’d even taken his hand off the wood, flying like lightning through the gate and taking the wind under his hooves as he ran. Gleaming mane burning like fire in the dying light and sleek hooves nearly taking flight from the dust underfoot. Silver clearly lived for freedom, the shadow of an animal becoming one with the wild western wind in the evening light.

Hanks started after the horse in a slow jog, conserving his energy. He had no doubt it would be a long trip.

For nearly an hour they kept up the relentless pace, Hank always making sure to keep Silver’s blazing ink blot of a tail in sight no matter how far he lagged behind. The man's chest screamed for reprieve but his aging muscles felt as strong as they ever had, like he could run for miles if that’s what it took. And he would too.

He could only be grateful that wasn’t necessary in the end.
Silver finally began to slow to a brisk trot after the first hour or so and a leisurely gallop soon after than until the animal finally let up enough for Hank to finally close the distance between them. The horse seemed practically unbothered by the man’s presence, allowing Hank to walk at his mighty side without so much as a prideful snort and keeping a slow, even gate when the ex-lawman reached a hand out to pat the creature's side.

The horse’s fur felt sleek and soft under Hank’s fingertips as he absentmindedly stroked his walking companion, bringing his hand up to scratch at the animal’s ears only to receive a perturbed flick of the things at his efforts. Still picky as always.

“I see we have a traitor on our hands.” A jovial sing song voice chirped from just behind the pair, brining Hank’s gaze snapping back behind him. There, from his black boots to his tilted hat, stood the Kid, playful smile flitting across his lips and mischievous gleam shining in his honey touched eyes. Though his left eye was still surrounded by a blue black blotch and his cheek remained marred with the twilight purple of the fight, he looked indefinitely better out here in the trees than he had crouched against the back bench of the gloomy jail cell ready to snap at anything that got too close.

“This finicky thing?” Hank scoffed lightly, rolling his eyes at the traitor in question. “We can barely put up with each other.” The man snorted jovially, smacking the horse’s hindquarters and sending him prancing away with an offended snort.

Silver trotted back the few paces he’d gone too far and jammed his huge nose into the outlaw’s face, huffing a heavy breath of air directly onto the boy who made an elaborate show of gagging and pushed the horse’s snout away with both hands, a warm chuckle falling from his lips to ruin his antics and reveal the true relief one would have to be blind not to see.

“God, your breath reeks! What did he feed you?” The Kid asked the horse warmly, grabbing the creature’s snout with both hands to drag him in, rubbing his hands over the beast’s jaws in squishing circles that smooshed the animal’s face in odd, frankly ridiculous, shapes.

“No wonder he’s so prissy!” Hank huffed exasperatedly. “You spoil him!” The man accused pointedly, crossing his arms over his chest and rolling his eyes.

“I do not!” The Kid protested instantly, pulling his face off the horse’s to meet the sheriff’s gaze, offended pout firmly in place. “I only give my boy the best.” The outlaw corrected then stuck his tongue between his lips at the man who could only try to hold back a warm chuckle at the whole scene. God, it was hard to imagine the boy was supposed to be drug up the gallow this morning.

The thought sent a chill through Hank and he pushed it to the back of his mind.

“Come through these trees, I’ve got a camp set up that should be safe for a night or two.” The Kid directed, thankfully distracting Hank from his own thoughts as he waved the ex-lawman after him and disappeared behind a sparse covering of saplings.

Hank followed, pushing aside the twigs and trailing the outlaw’s footsteps until they came upon the camp in question. Well, if you really so kind as to call it that, that was. A small fire flickered up from a scraped together pile of sticks and a saddle bag lay open near it, a few odds and ends spilling out onto the forest floor. An old looking guitar lay not far from that; but aside from those few things, there no sign anyone had ever been here for more than a few minutes. Hank couldn’t help but wonder how it had to be to live like that - A few nights at a time.

“So what brings you out here, Sheriff?” The Kid asked, flopping down beside the pathetic excuse for a fire and patting the spot on the ground next to him.
Hank scoffed at the title as it left the outlaw’s mouth. “Not sheriff anymore.” The man corrected grimly, moving over to where he’d been directed and letting his body fall heavily down beside the boy, every muscle exhausted and his body seeming to sag under the weight of the declaration.

The Kid didn’t respond immediately, busted up mouth twisting into a cockeyed frown and eyes flickering to the embers where they smoldered in the gray ash. “You didn’t have to do that.” The boy pointed out after a long moment, delicate fingers carefully coming to rest just beside Hank’s hand, as if waiting for the man to pull away.

“Yes, I did.” Hank replied instantly, not a single doubt in his mind about that. Gentle fingers stretched carefully forward until they met the weathered skin of the ex-lawman, brushing softly over Hank’s rough digits before settling in with a firm squeeze.

“I’m not an innocent man, Sheriff.” The Kid admitted softly, firelight reflecting in his eyes as he watched the flames. “I once got so hungry I stuck a guy up for a buck fifty and half a sandwich.” The boy recalled, genuine remorse humming through his lilting voice like a song you couldn’t quite make out.

Hank waited a moment for the Kid to tell him he was joking; but when no denial came, the man couldn’t help the sharp bark of a laugh that spat past his lips. The breathless snort as disbelieving as it was amused. “You really gotta stop calling me Sheriff.” The man pointed out in a gruff chuckle, shaking his head and letting the warm grin that pricked at him spread across his face.

“She isn’t going to give me something else to call you.” The Kid threw out lightly, small chuckle playing on the corners of his lips.

“You,” Hank startled, thrown. “You don’t know my name.” The guy realized slowly, only receiving a slow shake of the boy's hand and an amused shrug in way of response. He’d always just assumed to constant use of his title was some kind of obscure flirt. “It’s Hank. Hank Anderson.” The man offered quickly, suddenly feeling odd for not having done so before.

“Hank.” The outlaw repeated, letting the name roll sweetly off his lips as if he were trying to get a feel for how it tasted on his tongue.

Something stirred in Hank’s gut. He wasn’t sure about the Kid but he, for one, certainly liked how it felt on the boy’s honeyed lips.

The fugitive shifted towards him, turning so his lithe frame angled towards the man and held out a hand before him. “Connor.” The boy introduced, pleased smile crinkling the corner of his honey eyes.

Hank blinked dumbly for a moment longer than he’d liked to admit. It wasn’t like he didn’t know the outlaw had a name different than that of the cheesy nickname pasted across the wanted posters stuck up around town but, well, sometimes it was hard to think past that - To remember that they were someone before this.

“Don’t have a last name.” The Kid- Connor offered after a moment, misinterpreting Hank’s pause. “Bastard, remember?” The boy reminded lightly, amused smirk sitting crooked on his lips.

Hank did vaguely remember the outlaw making some sort of comment like that when he was roped to a tree but he had been half asleep at the time and hadn’t thought much of it. “Nice to meet you, Connor.” The man offered with a warm chuckle, gripping the hand offered in a firm hold and giving a hearty shake for the hell of it. The boy’s hand felt small and delicate within his own but somehow the different felt kind of... nice.
“Hey, do you play?” Hank asked after a moment, nodding over at the guitar, eager to move by the awkward moment he nearly created.

“God, no. I don’t have the patience.” Connor snickered lightly, leaning back on his hands and rolling his shoulders. “Do you?” The boy asked after a moment, turning to gaze interestly at the man through long lashes.

It was nearly impossible to believe the pretty, flirty, little thing smiling at him now was supposed to be hanging from a rope in the middle of town square at this very moment. Hank swallowed a thick lump in his throat at the mere thought.

“Sure, I play some.” The ex-lawman offered slowly and the outlaw practically beamed at his companion as he scrambled up to grab the thing.

Hank really couldn’t help but find himself smiling back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for everyone's encouraging words ~ I totally aced the psyche final!
Guitar Strings

It had been awhile since Hank had tried to play anything, life demanding too much of his time and leaving him few in the ways of moments like this where could simply relax with a guitar. His chords were off at first, a few plucked strings that sounded more like a cat orgy then a soothing song but Connor watched his fingers strum over the wires with such genuine interest that the man couldn't help but carry on. After awhile, he started to slip back into it, pick of some of his old tunes and his notes didn’t quite pierce the ears so harshly.

Hank let his calloused fingers roll over the strings until he fell into a solid tune, a song he vaguely remembered knowing how to play once and some part of his mind still stored away in a dusty back corner somewhere. The slow, deep chords familiar. Something about love and the stars. He didn’t even know the words anymore, just the tune and the bittersweet story behind it.

“And if I could give you the stars…” Hank hummed the one or two lyrics he knew softly under the music of the strings, fingers working on memory alone and the song spilling from something deeper than he could recall.

“Then darlin’ I’d use them to decorate my heart so I could give them all to you…” Connor hummed along softly, smiling softly into the embers of the dying fire so that his bruised face was the only thing Hank could clearly make out in the blurred edges of the oncoming dusk.

“You know it?” Hank asked, watching the boy across from him curiously. Something soft had come over his expression, a small sort of smile that held genuine warmth, but it carried a sadness to it too, illuminated faintly in the flickering touch of the flames

“Yeah, my mother used to sing it to me when I couldn’t sleep.” Connor answered quietly, voice a gentle wisp like smoke circling carefully up to the sky from the fire.

Hank didn’t know what to say so he focused his attention back on his own hands, strumming the chords in slow succession and humming to a forgotten tune playing in the back of his mind.

“But, baby the stars burn out.” The boy continued in a drawing hum, voice dipping to something low as he turned his head so that his hat cast deep shadows over of soft features. “My love will linger as long as the stars do shine but, baby, the stars burn out.” Connor hummed gently, lilting voice rising and falling perfectly with the gentle chords as if carried on a breeze, sweet and melodious as the song itself and just as haunting in the burning sorrow hidden just beneath the words. The outlaw’s tones dipped softly with the last words of the song, drawing the sound out as his voice fell to something small and fragile that would shatter the moment the cord broke; but when Hank strummed the last lingering note, the boy was still whole.

“Hank,” Connor began after a quiet moment, voice soft and careful and honey eyes fixed to the dying embers so that their burning glow reflected in his orbs.

“You know it?” The man encouraged easily, placing the guitar aside and leaning forward to hear what the fugitive had to say. He seemed so… small like this, drawn up so his head rested on his knees and he arms curled over his legs to keep them close. It sparked something inside Hank that wanted to draw the boy into his arms and keep him there, close and safe from the world that wanted to see him sway.

“I didn’t kill my mother.” Connor whispered to the fire, long fingers clenching into fists against his pants legs and eyes refusing to rise from the dust.
Hank let the words wash over him, feeling them sink into his skin and rest over his chest like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “I know.” He replied simply. And he meant it. He’d known for some time…

“You believe me?” Connor balked sharply, eyes snapping up from the dirt to fix on Hank, wide and boring into him like the outlaw was trying to see the man’s soul through his skin.

“Yes.” Hank answered with a slow, steady nod. It was the only thing that made sense. It was the only thing he could believe.

“You believe me.” Connor breathed shakily and this time it wasn’t a question. The fugitive’s caramel eyes were wide and wild, like Hank’s words had broken him open and left everything to spill out all over the forest floor. His hands visibly shook even from where Hank sat a little ways away and a slow, shuddering sigh escaped his busted lips that seemed to do anything but steady him.

Hank only hesitated a moment, then pushed himself up off the ground with the butts of his hands to cross the small distance between them. The man sunk back to the floor in front of the fugitive and tentatively reached out to take his shaking hands in his own, giving the boy time to pull away before curling his large fingers tight over the outlaw’s trembling palms. “I believe you, Connor.” Hank repeated, a solemn promise.

A choked sort of noise strangled free from the back of the fugitive's throat, his caramel eyes searching over Hank’s face as if seeking a lie only to meet the man’s steady gaze with utter disbelief spilling forth from deep within. “You believe me.” The boy whispered softly, as if he said it too loud the world might hear and come to rip it away again. He let himself slump forward so his forehead pressed into Hank’s and another shuddering sigh escaped him, blowing gently into the ex-lawman’s face. “Oh my god, you believe me.” Connor breathed heavily, relief ringing clearly through his gentle tones like the song of a captive bird who’d just felt the wind under its feathers for the first time in its life. It was more beautiful than anything Hank could ever hope to play.

Soft lips were pressed against his before Hank could even think of a reply, gentle and sweet like every bit of gratitude and hope that existed in this world had been bottled up and poured over Connor’s lips. The rough scab of the bust just barely beginning to heal scratched against Hank’s lower lip, rough and coarse against the feather light brush of the outlaw’s mouth, an impossible contrast that only seemed to make the whole experience that much more real and tangible. It was so, unbelievably, different from the rough and rushed kiss Connor had stolen from him in Shady Belle yet so familiar in all the right ways.

Connor retreated the smallest hint of an inch, breathing a heavy breath of air against Hank’s mouth and opening caramel eyes to gaze at the man through long lashes, small smile just beginning to touch his lips.

“How could Gavin ever punch anything so pretty?” Hank asked the boy wonderingly, releasing his grip on one of Connor’s hand to move his calloused fingers up the outlaw’s neck, pressing his palm against the fugitive's pulse point to feel it flutter beneath his fingertips.

“I’m afraid my charm only works on you, Sheriff.” Connor purred, leaning into the man’s touch until Hank drew him back in for another kiss, a little more bite to it this time.

Hank wasn’t a sheriff anymore, his companion knew that as well as he did, but he would be lying if he said the authoritative title on the boy’s sinful lips didn’t do something for him. So instead of correcting the misuse of the word, Hank focused on pressing his lips into the outlaw’s, using his grip on the fugitive to press his thumb against Connor’s jaw and tip his head back for a better
A soft little moan escaped the fugitive at the sudden shift, the small noise vibrating against where Hank’s hand yet pressed against the outlaw’s throat and against his lips. The tiny sound drew a pleased growl from the man and, feeling encouraged, he gave a small nip to the fugitive's lower lip to try and draw it again, careful to avoid the tender scab for fear of hurting the boy.

Success was Hank’s to be had as his gentle bite drew a shuddering gasp from Connor, and more than that as the outlaw took the action as direction and compliantly parted his lips for the man. Eagerly taking the opportunity, Hank swallowed up the delicious little noise from the boy’s mouth and took what he’d been offered, sliding his tongue past the entrance of the fugitive’s teeth and relishing the pleased groan he received for his efforts.

Connor’s hand had found its way to Hank’s sleeve at some point and tightened in the fabric now, delicate fingers twisting in the cotton to keep the man close even as Hank pulled back for air. “Well, you’ve caught me, Sheriff.” The boy purred breathlessly, gorgeous eyes half lidded and kiss flushed lips parted ever so sweetly. “Whatcha gonna do? Hogtie me?” The outlaw teased, pressing in close so his delicate little body pressed flush against Hank’s larger frame and his cunning fingers crawled their way up the man’s chest to tug encouragingly at the top button of the thing.

“You know, I just might.” Hank growled, voice graveling in the back of his throat as his large hands found their way to Connor’s slender hips to keep him close against him. The man reveled in the feeling of the fugitive he’d been after for so long held tight against him like this, long legs pressing around Hank’s heavy thighs and sweet little waist under his hands. He’d never really realized how much bigger he was than Connor until he felt him under his fingers like this. The boy would be too easy to move; exactly how Hank wanted him…

But oh dear lord, he was so delicate Hank was absolutely terrified he would snap under his hands if he wasn’t careful. The man had never felt such an overwhelming mix of protectiveness and arousal in his life. It was dizzying.

“Ropes are in the saddle bag.” Connor offered with a sinful smirk dripping from his lips, trailing his arms up around the man’s neck and grinding his sweet little hips down against the man in a way that was absolutely maddening. Hank should’ve gotten a medal for not flipping the boy over and having him then and there, really.

“Gonna be a little hard to get with you in my lap.” Hank pointed out breathlessly, words rasping in his throat as his chest heaved under Conor’s feather soft finger tips.

God, if anyone had told him he’d begging a horny, squirming wet dream of a fugitive to stop grinding on him a week ago, he would’ve laughed them out of town.

But hey, here he was.
Chapter Notes

Alternative Title: I finally get to make that ride a cowboy joke

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Connor gave a huffy little pout that did nothing to strengthen Hank’s resolve not to have him here and now but thankfully complied, crawling off the ex-lawman’s lap and beginning to busy himself with the buttons of his vest. Delicate fingers made quick work of the garment and it was soon tossed aside to begin work on his undershirt; at which point, Hank begrudgingly forced himself to glance away before he gave up on the ropes and ripped the thing off himself. The sight of the pretty little thing’s soft hair falling into his honey eyes while he worked open his thin undershirt for Hank’s taking was not something the ex-lawman was a strong enough man to resist.

Turning his attention to the open saddle bag he’d noticed earlier, Hank rummaged through the miscellaneous odds and ends until his hands hit the familiar sensation of coarse, fibrous rope and he tugged it free from the mess. Setting the thick strands aside, a silver tin marked by a scrappy label caught the man’s attention, the words “Bear Grease” vaguely visible printed across the labeled paper where if flecked and scratched away to show metal underneath… Connor probably had it for greasing his guns - And boy howdy Hank never been so glad someone cared for their weaponry in his life.

Hank grabbed the tin from the bag and turned his attention back to the the boy, feeling himself slow and still at the sight. Connor had just finished undoing the last button of his shirt to let the sides of the thing hang open under his dark dust coat, pale fabric falling over warm, fire lit skin to leave the outlaw exposed from his smooth collar bones down to his slender naval. The boy’s chest was lean with a sparse dusting of dark freckles splashed across his skin to trail down the slim lines of his stomach and over the angular jutt of his hip bones. A long scar gouged across the slope of his waist to mar the creamy expanse of his stomach on one side and a few new ugly additions to Reed’s work made themselves known over his chest and stomach but beside that the outlaw was all supple skin and lean muscle, soft lines shading gently through pale moonlight to create living artwork. And he was all Hank’s to ravish.

“You gonna sit there and stare all night?” The outlaw quipped cheekily, mischievous eyes glowing in the fire flicker of the the dancing flames. “Or are you gonna come catch me, Sheriff?” The boy teased, pushing a hand under himself as if preparing to scramble up and run - But Hank didn’t give him the chance.

The ex-lawman pounced before the outlaw had a chance to move, overtaking the smaller male before the fugitive could so much as twitch and wasting no time in pulling the rope up after him. Connor squirmed like a snake under the man but Hank was bigger, and stronger, and had both of the boy’s wrists captured in one, large hand with pitiable ease, using his other hand to drag the fraying rope where he needed it.

“You have gotten on my very last nerve, boy.” Hank huffed in a low gravel, leaning in to growl the words directly against the shell of Connor’s ear as he drug the smaller male back by the hold on his wrists to make the job a bit easier.
A soft, breathless noise escaped Connor’s lips at the words against his throat, a shudder shivering through his lithe frame Hank could feel under his hands. “And what do you do to pesky outlaws when you finally catch them, Sheriff?” The fugitive teased in an airy gasp, squirming a little against Hank’s hold to no avail, lean muscle tensing under the ex-lawman’s fingertips and pale chest heaving with shaky breaths under the man’s huge hands.

“I’ll show you exactly what I’ll do with you.” Hank promised, enjoying the excited flutter the outlaw’s slender muscles gave under his hands as he tightened his grip on Connor’s wrists and looped the first section of rope around the boy’s wrists, pulling it taut. The man circled the fraying strand around the delicate limbs again, watching the boy underneath him shift restlessly, smooshed down on his knees with his back bowed under the relentless press of Hank’s heavy arm against him.

Connor’s hat fell nearly over his face, the dark brim knocked crooked as he twisted sideways to let the side of his head press against the ground. The position made at least part of his soft features visible, revealing the flushed blush sweetly staining his pale cheeks pretty pink and brushing across his neck and ears to tint them the same delicious shade. The outlaw’s lips were parted in soft, breathless little pants and his caramel eyes were half lidded so that long lashes brushed his flushed cheeks, his pupils dilated deep and dark with lust.

Hank felt his heart give a heavy lurch, a thick lump forming in his throat as a shuddering sigh escaped his lips and he finished up the rope to bring a hand up to the outlaw’s face, cupping Connor’s jaw reverently and brushing a coarse thumb over the soft crest of the fugitive’s bruised cheekbone. The boy had nearly hung for something he hadn’t done and yet here he was, leaning into the Hank’s touch with a sweet, soft moan hours after he should’ve been swinging in town square. It was nearly too much for the ex-lawman to bear.

“Hank.” Connor drew out on a near whine, squirming against the ropes and drawing the man out of his thoughts with a frustrated groan. “Could you please get your pants off already?” The outlaw begged in a huff, straining against his binds to little avail.

“I don’t know.” Hank drawled slowly, reaching his arms around the bound outlaw’s waist to creep his hands toward the buckle of his captive’s pants. “You haven’t been very good, outlaw.” The man reminded in a chiding voice, deft fingers making lightning quick work of the metal button and even quicker work of the zipper under that, bringing a strained sort of noise from the fugitive's throat. “Why should I give you what you want?” The ex-lawman growled in Connor’s ear, pressing a heavy hand to the back of the boy’s shoulder blades to keep him in place as he slid his hand under the rough denim and the outlaw jerked sharply at the contact, a sharp gasp snapping through his lips.

Hank wasted no time in wrapping his fingers around Connor. The man had the fugitive exactly where he wanted him and had every intention of turning the pretty boy outlaw into a trembling, whining little mess before he finally gave him what he wanted.

A soft gasp that ended in a drawn out moan broke from the outlaw’s lips and he arched up into where Hank currently leaned over him, halted by the man’s large hands before he could get anywhere. “Now you’ve caught me, Sheriff. I’ll be good.” The boy promised hastily, honey voice already beginning to sound a touch strained as he squirmed against the ropes, twisting his slender wrists uselessly against the thick, fraying cord.

“Oh, you will be.” Hank assured, fighting the urge to smirk as he ran his hand up the length of the fugitive's smooth cock and received a sharp gasp of a moan for his efforts, repeating the action to pull a shuddering whine of a noise from the boy.
Connor’s hips gave a cute, needy little buck against Hank’s hand as the man settled into a lagging, tormentous pace, stroking the boy slow with the intent to unthread him stitch by stitch until he was broken, and sobbing, and desperate in his arms. The outlaw shuddered under the ex-lawman’s fingertips, quick, breathy little moans falling from parted lips and hips trying to rock against his companion’s unyielding grip in search of friction Hank wouldn’t give him.

“So impatient.” Hank scolded chidingly, shaking his head down at the boy who gave a huffy pout at the accusation that was quickly lost to a lagging moan as the ex-lawman pulled another long stroke along his hard length. “How long has it been since someone touched you like this?” The man teased, rolling his thumb over the head of his captive’s cock to smear the first few drops of precum beginning to gather there.

Connor’s breath caught at the sudden action, taking the beginning of an answer right out of his mouth before he drew in a shuddering breath and tried again. “L-Long time.” He finally managed on a gasp but when he tried to go on his sweetly parted lips peaked downwards in the beginnings of a frown. “I- Didn’t wanna start throwin’ guns in people’s faces at first but I had to ea-” He tried to explain but the conversation only seemed to be drawing him someplace uncomfortable, not at all what Hank had been going for.

The man didn’t give Connor time to dwell or try to continue, thinking fast he grabbed the boy by the hips and spun him over before another forced word could leave the outlaw’s mouth, a startled yelp cutting off the story. The fugitive was left on his back, hands roped underneath him and blinking up at Hank with startled eyes that caught the starlight.

The man’s exposed chest heaved, each gasping breath lifting a crude copper ring slung around his neck by a thin strand of twine. The flickering light of the dying fire caught the metallic gleam of the thing and drew Hank’s eyes to it, wondering why he’d never seen it before. Yet, he was only a man at the end of the day and his gaze trailed lower, hungry eyes roving over pretty, pert nipples and pale skin basked in the sepia firelight until they met the obvious bulge he’d created pressing against Connor’s pants and his exposed cock pushed against his lean stomach where Hank had undone his zipper. Fucking gorgeous.

Hank leaned down and pressed his lips to the outlaw’s, soft, chaste, trying to draw him back to the moment and away from the memories of the wrongness he’d endured. The fugitive moved his mouth eagerly back against the ex-lawman’s, a pleased moan breathing against Hank’s lips before the man finally drew back, hand coming up to press against Connor’s soft cheek.

“You’re the first one I’ve wanted.” Connor whispered, turning his face to whisper the words into the palm of Hank’s hand, warm breath tickling the calloused skin there.

Hank’s gut clenched painfully and his heart gave a odd flutter that made him want to puke and want to smile all in the same moment but he couldn’t find the right words to communicate any of that, his tongue feeling bulky and dumb in his mouth. Instead he opted for what he could do and wrapped an arm under the outlaw, pulling his lithe body off the floor and inch so he could press his lips to the boy’s, relishing the way Connor responded in earnest, all breathy moans and teasing nips.

The delicate little thing arched to chase the sensation when Hank pulled away, lithe frame straining against his bonds with a soft, breathy whine. Hank could never deny such a sweet noise, especially with Connor’s lust hazed eyes fixed on him with wanton pleading spilling forth from their depths, so he tensed the arm still wrapped securely under his companion’s body and pulled him up with him.

Connor shifted his weight to straddle the man, smooth thighs pressing in on either side of Hank’s
waist to rest all of his hundred-and-something-wet pounds achingly against the throbbing bulge currently waging war on Hank’s jeans. A low groan fought its way through the ex-lawman’s lips at the friction and his hands found their way to the outlaw’s hips, large fingers trailing under the thin cloth of the fugitive’s undershirt to brush over the prominent slope of his arcing hip bones. The man’s fingers pressed against the soft skin of the boy’s waist, finger pads creating shaded divots in the supple flesh as he pulled the boy down against him, rocking the swell of his cock against the fugitive's pretty little ass.

A sweet, addictive noise escaped the outlaw’s parted lips and his caramel eyes fluttered closed, long lashes brushing against flushed cheeks as he rolled his hips down in return, knocking a groan from Hank’s chest.

“Thought you only rode horses?” The ex-lawman teased, leaning back on a hand and keeping his other against his companion’s hip. He’d never truly appreciated his own hands before, until he saw them wrapped around Connor’s delicate waist, large and commanding with his fingers pressed into the pale skin to guide the boy how he wanted. Yet, he found he liked the look of his big palms over the outlaw for a different reason too. They were all encompassing, overtaking the slender male in their entirety... He could keep Connor safe under those hands.

“Well, you know what they say, Sheriff.” The outlaw drawled, the wolfish grin playing at his lips an impossible contrast to the sweet blush dusting his soft cheeks. “Save a horse, ride a cowboy.” Connor purred, flirty smirk in full swing and mischievous eyes flashing hungrily in the firelight as he leaned in, bringing his sultry lips right up to the man’s ear and dropping his voice to a husky whisper. “But I ain’t ridin’ nothin’ yet. Why don’t we fix that, Sheriff?” The fugitive drew out in a private whisper, tongue dripping honey and dainty little body rolling against Hank’s throbbing cock in encouragement.

A guttural sort of growl replaced whatever Hank had been planning on saying and he wasted no more time, spurring into action the moment the teasing words escaped Connor’s sweet lips. The poor boy wasn’t gonna get a chance to ride the ex-lawman with a mouth like that, not when everything on his tongue made Hank want to spread him open and pound him until he couldn’t see straight. An impulse he was only encouraged to act upon when he pushed the fugitive back with a firm hand to the chest only to receive a sight to turn the purest of virgins into a pay by the hour whore.

Connor gave a surprised yelp as he went backwards but the moment he actually hit the ground he squirmed with an absolutely filthy moan, apparently pleased with the sudden turn of events… And then proceeded to splay his thighs wide open like his life depended on getting a dick inside him that very moment. This was it. This was the day Hank Anderson died. A heart attack was basically inevitable at this point.

“Eager, are we, outlaw?” Hank teased in a gravelled voice but made no moves to slow himself either, already going for his own belt buckle. “You want me that bad?” The man questioned in a low growl, making quick work of the belt and not bothering to waste the time to actually remove the thing before moving onto his pant’s button.

“Yes.” The fugitive huffed, straining fitfully against the ropes keeping his arms behind his back and getting nowhere, slender wrists twisting against the unyielding cords fruitlessly. Caramel eyes blown wide with want pleaded with the man as Hank finally got his pants undone and shifted them down a bit to pull himself free, cock springing up to slap against his stomach the moment it was free of his confines.

“Christ.” Connor breathed softly, eyes wide and fixed on the sight before him and Hank couldn’t
deny the hot wave of surging pride that washed over him as the outlaw bit his lower lip a touch worriedly.

“Too much for you, fugitive?” Hank drawled cockily, gripping a hand around the base of his dick and drawing it up in a slow pump, watching Connor’s eyes track the movement and drinking in the tiny, hungry sound the outlaw made through his bit lip. “Don’t worry,” The ex-lawman soothed in a warm growl, reaching over to snag the tin of bear grease from where it still lay nearby. “I’ll take good care of you.” The man promised, turning open the lid of the container and running his fingers over the top of the grease to scoop out a generous glob, keeping his gaze on the outlaw who squirmed impatiently and watched his every move with wide, eager eyes.

Hank circled his fingers around the thick base of his throbbing cock, coarse hair scratching against his knuckles, and drug his hand up slow and rough, merciless grip nearly aching as he slathered the stuff along his length. He wiped his hand against the side of his pants to rid himself of the excess and dallied no longer before gripping the waistband of Connor’s pants and beginning to pull the things away, trying to ignore the nervous shake of his hands obvious against the dark fabric.

The boy lifted his butt a few inches off the ground and shifted as best he could with his hands roped behind his back, not really doing much more than unhelpfully squirming around in Hank’s grip; but he honestly looked kinda cute squiggling around like that, so the lawman chose not to point out the uneffectiveness of the technique. Choosing to focus on getting rid of these obnoxious pants instead, Hank peeled the stubborn things down over the fugitive’s pronounced hip bones and wrestled them over the smooth curve of his ass, basking pale skin in the warm firelight and tossing them aside to be worried about later.

Traceable lines dipped from Connor’s hips to trail all the way down into his groin, smooth skin gleaming in the pale moonlight above and warmed in sputtering flickers of the fire. The boy’s pretty cock, flushed red at the tip with aching arousal, lay against the his lean stomach and dripped a gleaming pool of slick precum onto the gorgeous skin to shine in the dying light, sending a pleased rush of something warm through Hank at the thought that he’d done that to the boy.

Connor squirmed under Hank’s stare, flushed cheeks twinging a shade darker and lower lip drawing gently between his teeth. Despite the shy display, the outlaw didn’t hesitate before locking eyes with the man hovering above him and slowly spreading his long legs, no hesitation or doubt discernible in his intense gaze. Creamy thighs split to reveal the pink pucker of the boy’s ass, the tight hole quivering in tensed anticipation as Connor lifted his hips a little off the forest floor as if trying to present himself for the taking.

A low groan crawled its way up Hank’s throat as he took in the delicious sight, the blushing, gorgeous boy beneath him spreading for him and staring at him with such unadulterated want. It was enough to drive him over the edge alone. The man reached forward to place a hand on either one of Connor’s thighs, gripping with just enough force to maneuver the delicate boy how he wanted and lingering just long enough to relishing the feeling of smooth skin beneath his calloused fingertips before pressing the fugitive legs back.

The man leaned forward, using his grip on Connor’s thighs to push the boy’s legs back and make room for himself as he slotted himself against the curve of the fugitive’s ass, pressing in until the tip of his cock just prodded the outlaw’s entrance. Tight resistance met him as Hank eased himself forward and he slowed; despite the snarking foreplay and the heat behind their constant game of cat and mouse, no part of him would ever dream of just slamming into the boy like a battering ram plowing through a wall and the last thing he wanted to do was accidentally harm the lithe male under his hands.
“Gotta relax for me.” Hank rumbled softly, letting his grip on Connor’s left leg slip to drag the hand up to the boy’s neck instead, pressing his palm there and running a thumb over the fugitive’s cheek as Connor turned to nuzzle into the touch.

The outlaw released a slow, shuddering breath and seemed to try and comply with Hank’s request, his muscles untensing under the man’s fingertips and his frame going lax in his companion’s hands. The boy met the ex-lawman’s gaze and gave a small nod, honey flecked eyes brimming with unguarded emotion and staring at Hank as if he were the center of the universe.

Swallowing a nervous lump in the back of his throat, Hank eased himself forward an inch to breach the boy’s entrance, a heavy groan bubbling up from deep inside him as the very tip of his throbbing cock slid inside.

A sharp gasp burst from Connor’s parted lips, caramel eyes flying wide and lithe frame straining under Hank’s hands. “Christ, you’re big.” The boy rasped breathlessly, light ghost of a laugh shaking after the words as he got over the initial jolt and managed to bring his eyes back to Hank’s waiting gaze, earnest fun glowing there and soothing the man’s worried mind.

He really didn’t have the heart to tell Connor he’d only gotten the tip in.

Hank eased himself forward a bit, watching the boy underneath him groan and rise into an arch with absolute enrapturement. The feeling of Connor’s tight ass squeezing around him was enough to make him want to bust his load with a shuddering scream right then and there but at the same time he wanted to just draw it out forever. “Fuck, Connor.” The man couldn’t help but groan as he finally bottomed out. Every fiber in his body was on fire, burning just under his skin and searing at every point of contact with roaring bliss.

A sweet moan broke from the outlaw’s lips, gorgeous eyes fluttering shut and body trembling up into Hank’s fingertips. “Say my name again.” The boy asked in a hesitant voice without breath behind it. “Please, Hank, I can’t remember the last time anybody called me by my name.” The fugitive pleaded, straining against his bonds with a tiny whine as his hips gave a cute little stutter. The request startled the man at first, simply because he hadn’t expected it, but it didn’t take long for him to latch onto the words. He leaned forward, pressing himself just that much deeper as he brought his lips to the outlaw’s ear and let his breath ghost out in a heavy groan. “You’re so good, Connor.” The man praised reverently, tentatively beginning to move as he spoke, drawing out a bit only to push back in slowly, burying himself deep inside the fugitive.

A whining moan, breathless and sharp escaped Connor’s lips, a sweet sound that Hank swore he could get drunker off than the most expensive bottle of whisky money could buy. The outlaw’s body shuddered under Hank’s hands, pressing up into the man’s grip with a needy sound.

“So fucking good, Connor.” Hank pressed on, encouraged. “Connor, you’re so tight. So perfect.” The man praised, accentuating his words with a slow, deep thrust and earning a shuddering moan from his partner in response. “Doing so good for me, Connor,” He whispered reverently, and again, “Connor,” as he slid nearly out of the boy only to slam himself back in down to base.

Whether it was his words or his thrusting, Hank wasn’t sure; but Connor practically writhed. The outlaw moaned and twisted against the ropes holding him, bucking up into thin air with a shuddering cry of a noise every time his name passed the ex-lawman’s lips. Caramel eyes fluttered to a half lidded haze and bitten lips stayed parted in sharp, breathless pants as Hank fell into a rhythm, steadily increasing his pace once he was sure the fugitive had adjusted and wouldn’t rip in half underneath him.
Hank’s cock ached at the tightness of the outlaw, taking him in all the way and fluttering against his sensitive nerves as Connor clenched around him. The man groaned as he fucked into the gorgeous boy, drinking in the noises he elicited from the little teases’ dirty mouth and finding his eyes fixed to the unforgettable sight beneath him, unable to look away.

Connor’s eyes were hazed and his lips parted, his exposed chest heaving with ragged breaths and his slender hips arched to the sky. His pretty, leaking cock bounced against his slender stomach every time Hank slammed his hips into him and his wrists twisted in the makeshift bonds, fingers clenching uselessly around thin air.

The sight alone was enough to send the ex-lawman careening towards the edge, a warm feeling coiling in his stomach and threatening to spill over if Connor so much as moaned his name. Wanting that for his partner too, Hank wrapped a large hand around the fugitive's untouched cock, left woefully ignored for too long.

Connor’s eyes slipped shut the moment Hank’s fingers wrapped around him, a sweet, relieved moan riding a halting sigh. “Hank, oh.” The boy managed to whisper through a shuddering groan as his hips gave a stuttering jerk into the man’s grip, his body desperately craving the friction it had been so wrongly denied - And that almost capsized the boat then and there.

Hank’s movements were sloppy at best, unrefined and jerky with his orgasm building just out of reach. The ex-lawman gave the boy a few rough jerks, struggling to find a rhythm when his own thrusts were becoming haphazard and rushed with his stomach tightening like a coiled snake about to strike had nested there in place of his gut.

Nevertheless, after being left untouched and craving reprieve, it wasn’t long before Connor’s eyes were fluttering open, wide and startled as if he hadn’t quite expected it to feel like this. “Ha-nk!” The outlaw cried, long legs crossing to wrap around the man and his lithe body arched under Hank’s fingertips, trembling into the ex-lawman’s hands as his orgasm crashed over him. Cum streaked across his stomach and splattered onto his chest in shuddering spurts, running down over Hank’s fingers were he still stroked as evenly as he could, doing his best to work Connor through the haze of ecstasy still visibly rolling over his body in retreating waves.

Though, it was a little difficult with his own orgasm rolling over him like a freight train, crashing into the man and bowling him over as he took in the mesmerizing sight of Connor cum splattered at shaking under his hands. Colored splotches blurred the edges of Hank’s vision as the pressure building in his stomach mounted and finally exploded. His hips jerked sloppily into the tight heat of Connor’s ass as trembling legs kept him in place, pulling him close as his body yanked to a shuddering halt.

Every ounce of tension in his stomach uncoiled bit by bit, leaving Hank with his head bowed and his body shaking over top of Connor’s lithe form. His graying hair fell over his face and his breath came out in ragged heaves as he forced himself to move at least enough to pull out of the outlaw, getting little farther than that before he let his exhausted body flop to the forest floor beside the boy.

He lay on his side, still shaking as he gazed over at the fugitive he’d just taken and Connor shifted over to gaze back at him soon after, soft smile playing across a bruised yet beautiful face. Hank lifted a hand to gently trace the outlaw’s gorgeous features, crooking his fingers to brush his knuckles against the boy’s cheek bone and run the pad of his thumb over the corner of his busted lip.

Something strong swelled inside Hank as he gazed at the boy and he’d never meant anything more in his life than when he opened his mouth and declared, “I’m gonna prove you’re innocent.”
This is, like, only my 2nd ever attempt at writing porn
“Ha-What?” Connor startled, jolting upright only to flop heavily back to the ground as his body remembered it was bound. “Get me outta these so I can knock some sense across your handsome face!” The outlaw insisted sharply, squirming onto his stomach so Hank could reach his hands, flushed cheek smooshing into the dirt to slur his words in the process.

Hank floundered for a moment, glancing around the disturbed ground for anything in the smudged dust until the lingering afterglow haze slowing his thoughts to a warm drawl began to evaporated into the cool night air and he recalled a pocket knife jammed in his pant’s pocket. The man fished around for a moment before wrapping his hands around the cold handle of the thing and he drawing it out, bringing the blade up to the rope and carefully fitting the pointed tip under a loop. The ex-lawman drug the sharp edge along the thick cords in a slow saw, always cautious not to let the gleaming metal cut into the boy under the ropes, until the knot gave way under the blade. Brushing the separated edges aside, Hank was easily able to unwind the remaining loops until Connor’s pale skin met the moonlight and the limp strands fell away to leave him free. Harsh lines drug through the soft flesh where the unforgiving ropes had left their mark, red and angry as they ridged across the boy’s delicate wrists in tight paths. As much as he’d enjoyed the outlaw writhing against the cords - Hank decidedly did not like the ropes on the boy in the end.

Connor flexed his unbound arms, twisting in the ways he couldn’t with newfound freedom before pushing himself up to sit facing the ex-lawman, eyes blazing with fierce determination. “Listen here, Sheriff,” He began sharply, crossing his lean arms defiantly over his exposed chest. “This has been real fun - But you need to get out of here before the mobs show up.” The boy demanded, pulling up a hand to jab a slender finger pointedly into the man’s chest.

“What?” Hank balked incredulously, face contorting into a confused grimace. “Connor, I’m not going anywhere.” The man insisted determinedly, voice firm and unyielding as he reached a slow hand up to capture the delicate hand prodding his chest. “This has been real fun - But you need to get out of here before the mobs show up.” The boy demanded, pulling up a hand to jab a slender finger pointedly into the man’s chest.

“Hank…” The outlaw began slowly, caramel eyes fixed to his wrists under the man’s gentle touch. “You can’t. This life, it’s not nice.” The boy denied softly, busted lips turned downwards in the ghost of a frown. “They’ll kill you if they find you here.” Connor whispered solemnly, drawing his eyes up from their hands to meet Hank’s gaze, honey orbs sad but certain.

Hank’s grip of the boy’s captured wrist tightened, drawing him closer as he brought his other hand up to press a heavy palm against the outlaw’s neck. “Which is why we’re going to prove you didn’t do this.” The man insisted, determination hardening his voice. “I’m not letting you hang.” He promised softly, dropping his tones to a tense whisper as he pulled Connor towards him with the guiding hand against his neck, large thumb pressing into the boy’s jaw.

Connor’s lower lip drew between his teeth, the gnawed flesh rolling under his dull fangs. He stared at the man, expression unreadable and body language tense, muscles taunt and drawn under Hank’s fingers and slender digits of his free hand clenched tight against his leg. “I can’t change your mind?” He finally asked slowly, finally letting himself sink into the caress to be drawn forward, lips meeting Hank’s in a small, soft brush.
The ex-lawman shook his head adamantly, trying to push as much certainty as he could into the reassuring peck. This wasn’t something he would be swayed on: He was going to get Connor out of this.

“Okay.” Connor breathed hesitantly, voice nothing more than a gentle touch of air against Hank’s lips. “Okay, let’s go.” The outlaw restated, taking Hank by surprise as he pulled back to press his pale hands into dirt and began push his body off the floor.

“What? Right now?” Hank balked incredulously, leaning up on a hand as he watched the outlaw, roiling disbelief written all over face. Not only was it ass o’clock at night and dark as Silver out here, but Hank, for one, couldn’t feel his fucking legs.

“Yes, right now!” Connor shot back, wavering to an unsteady stand. However, his long legs didn’t quite seem in touch with the rest of lithe body, refusing to cooperate and visibly shaking under his weight. The fugitive took one, unsteady step forward - and Hank was almost impressed - but he didn’t make it a second before his left leg promptly gave out, sending him flailing unoothly until he hit the ground with muffled “oomph.”

“What say we get some rest and go tomorrow?” Hank suggested in a warm chuckle, smirking over at the outlaw who pulled up off the ground with a leaf stuck to his cheek and an indignant glare blazing across his face. Even when he was pouting and prissy, he was still fucking cute.

“You and your fuckin’ big dick.” Connor groaned spitefully, flicking the persistent scrap of nature with a miffed snort, but the light smile pricking at the very corner of his lip assured the man there was no actual malice behind it. Despite his sharp words, the outlaw shifted over to flop down at Hank’s side with an overexaggerated huff, his angular shoulders just brushing the ex-lawman’s as he crooked an arm behind his head and let his gaze shift up to the sky, dying moonlight playing softly over his pale cheeks.

“The stars are out.” Connor hummed in a pleased voice, soft smile brushing over his lips as his small hand found Hank’s on the ground and he interlocked their fingers with a warm squeeze, delicate digits soft and breakable under Hank’s large hand.

“They are.” Hank agreed, turning to watch the bright shine of happiness spark through Connor’s honey eyes.

When the man stirred into wakefulness the next morning, the first thought that hit him was the stomach twisting fear that Connor had changed his mind about letting the ex-lawman help him and disappeared in the night as he was so good at. However, as he slowly became aware of himself, Hank also became aware of the warm weight tucked into his side and the subtle smell of lemons and honey tickling his nose. The man’s eyes blinked blearily open to take in smudges of mahogany overrunning his vision, vague shapes that slowly took shaped into wild locks of Connor’s hair. The strands were mussed and sticking up in ways Hank had never seen them before, defying gravity to sweep straight vertically in places and sticking flat to his head in others in a complete, disarrayed mess. One particular strand was conducting a valiant conquest for Hank’s left nostril.

The man couldn’t feel his right arm whatsoever, just a dull, numb fuzz of sensation pricking through his deprived nerves where there had one been a functional limb, but Hank was willing to give up the ability to feel his arm any day if it meant he got to wake up to this every morning. Connor’s head lay atop his arm - which was still actually there, thankfully - and his face nuzzled in to press against the man’s broad chest, messy hair framing his sleeping features and flying up wildly in defiance of the laws of physics most normal people were usually willing to submit to.
Connor’s long, dark lashes dusted against his pale cheeks and his pink lips parted in small, warm breaths Hank could feel barely ghost against his bare skin. The ugly bruises Gavin had dealt him still stained his moonlight skin, deep purple beginning to give way to green on the edges and a dark scab still sat on the edge of his lower lip, but his face was still as gorgeous as ever as if just to spite the cruel wounds. It was not the undeniable prettiness of the outlaw’s dainty features that had the man so enraptured, however, but the rare look of calm settled over his face. His eyes closed softly, with no hint of tiredness straining the edges, and his brows were smooth and uncreased. No worry lines marred his full cheeks and stress kept its hands off his bitten lips, no frown or worrying teeth tormenting the supple flesh.

Hank made it his mission in life to make Connor look that peaceful awake too.

The fugitive’s long legs tangled with the man’s and he slotted up against Hank’s side as if he were crafted to fit there, lithe body pressed tight into the man’s and held securely there by Hank’s large arm flopped across them both to wrap around the outlaw’s slim waist. Connor’s hand rested against the ex-lawman’s chest, delicate fingers curled into the mess of thick, coarse hair growing there as if there had been some definite petting before he’d fallen asleep.

Hank couldn’t get over how vulnerable Connor was like this, not a single defense to his name or a guard in place to protect him had the ex-lawman decided he wanted his old job back and knew how to get it. Seeing the fugitive's defenses completely down, especially when it was such a risk for the boy Hank knew had learned well to be mistrustful and wary of the world, sent a rising wave of something hot and protective flaming through him like wildfire catching on a dry field. The overwhelming trust nearly made the man queasy - The weight of it settling over his chest like a boulder.

Hank tried to twitch the fingers of his lost arm but motor control seemed to have been forgone long ago and they didn’t so much as move an inch. With a sigh, he abandoned the useless quest and let his tired eyelids slip closed again, drawing Connor’s dainty body in close and hoping to whatever god was in charge of sleep that the boy didn’t open his open his eyes just yet. He wanted to preserve that rare peaceful look as long as possible.

Sadly, the gods were apparently not feeling so benevolent this morning and Connor shifted against the man’s side not a moment later, an unintelligible sound of groggy protest groaning past his lips as he turned his face into Hank’s chest to escape the cruel light of dawn. The boy’s upturned nose buried in the man’s curling chest hair and a huffy little noise escaped him as if it tickled but he wiggled himself in deeper nevertheless, burrowing down with a tiny, digging nuzzle as Hank bought a large hand up to rest against his head.

The man stroked over the mussed strands, pressing the boy’s messy hair back under the smooth run of his hand and tangling his fingers through wild locks. Hank let his nails drag gently over the outlaw’s scalp as soft strands caught between his thick digits, earning a sleepy hum of pleasure from the boy laying across his chest.

Connor eventually shifted, bringing his nose up out of Hank’s chest to gaze lazily up at him, coffee eyes blinking slowly as a small smile played across his lips. “ ‘Could get used to this.” The fugitive admitted warmly, contentment dancing over his soft features as he leaned into Hank’s touch, honey orbs slipping closed once more and relaxed sigh breathing heavily out against the hair covering the ex-lawman’s chest. It kinda tickled.

“If I could feel my arm, I’m sure I would agree.” Hank seconded in a gruff chuckle, smiling down at the boy with something warm expanding in his chest, swelling up like a balloon until it pressed into his bones and sent a sepia dawnlight dripping through his veins.
Connor gave an amused snort of a laugh and pushed himself up so his angled shoulder no longer blocked circulation, sending an explosive chill down the limb as blood rushed out to greet it, pricking nerves sparking back to life in a way that was anything but pleasant. “We should head out as soon as possible, I didn’t mean for us to sleep this late.” The outlaw decided, refocusing himself with a long stretch, slender arms pulled up over his head and back arching to create a smooth curve showing off every lean muscle of the boy’s tensed stomach until a loud pop could be heard and his face contorted into a twisted but oddly satisfied grimace.

“Alright.” Hank agreed easily, pushing himself up off the forest floor and wondering at how his back miraculously wasn’t screaming bloody murder after all it had been forced through. Then again, Connor did still make him feel years younger than he had in ages, even when he wasn’t chasing him down. “Where to?” The man asked, as eager as his companion to hurry on their mission and put an end to all this. Connor deserved a life where he didn’t have to hide from every snapping twig and Hank was determined to make sure he got it.

“Your deputy’s house.” Connor informed instantly, not a flicker of doubt in his blazing eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your supportive comments on the last chapter - Considering I've never posted smut before, I was really glad to hear you all enjoyed it :)

Side note: Wow. Writing this as the same time as my Reverse AU Christmas short had been such emotional whiplash XD
First Date for the Record Books

Gavin’s house was a little way out of town, set apart from the rest of the village to take up the space just inside the beginnings of the wild woods. Hank could see the building through the trees far before they actually came to it, tall walls and peaking rooftop visible through the spare wooding like a beacon in the trees. The house was bigger than most, as the Reed’s were a wealthy, well known family and was crafted exquisitely, with elegant trimmings flourishing at the edges and a second story built on though only the one man lived there as far as the ex-lawman knew.

Hank walked just behind Connor, trailing in the boy’s wake as the outlaw stalked silently through the trees, riding boots noiseless on the leaf covered ground as if his feet never actually touched the earth. His lithe body constantly ducked behind some tree or brush to conceal him in shadows.

Hank, on the other hand, felt like a walking stampede in his companion’s wake, large boots falling heavily to crunch against every leaf in the goddamn forest, a deafening roar in the silence of the woods, and bulky build impossible to hide in the sparse coverings available.

The man wouldn’t lie, he thought this was a bad idea. The last time Connor tried to break into Gavin’s place, he’d ended up bloodied and beaten in a cell. Yet, here he was and didn’t plan on going anywhere anytime soon. He had no choice.

Nervousness roiled in Hank’s gut as the boy he followed finally began to slow and came to a halt just at the peak of a swelling crest, delicate frame slunk behind a pine to stay hidden from sight. The ex-lawman’s heart pounded against his chest like a battering ram until he could hear the rush of his blood in his ears, a dull roar he was sure the forest had to able to hear at this point as he ducked behind the tree as well, pressing in close to the outlaw to avoid detection.

“His horse is gone.” Connor pointed out in a soft whisper, craning his head a bit to the side and turning it back to touch his mouth nearly to Hank’s ear as the man craned over the outlaw’s sharp shoulder. “He’s probably out stealing your job.” The fugitive chuckled lightly, his words humored and warm even where they stood at Hell’s gate.

Hank gave a huff of a laugh, the sound bursting free around where his lips drew up at one corner, Connor’s mischievous snark more responsible for the fighting smile than the joke itself. The actual thought of Gavin becoming sheriff, on the other hand, was not a pleasant one. The man had it out for the outlaw Hank ran with and if he became the law, the previous sheriff had no doubt Reed wouldn’t rest until Connor hung dead in town square for all to see.

“Let’s get down there before he comes back then.” Hank suggested determinedly, face hardening as the chilling, stomach churning thought passed through his mind and left his blood running cold in its wake. He wouldn’t let that happen.

Connor gave a sharp, affirmative nod and slid out from behind the tree, moving like a shadow around the trunk before beginning down the small hill, skirting the edge of the forest. The boy threaded through the sparse woods like a wisp of mist on a breeze, slinking behind saplings and crawling around bushes to be nothing more than a soft rustle in the early dawn light.

Hank made after his companion, wincing at every noisy step as he blundered over sticks and tried to smoosh himself behind the thick trunks of the largest trees in their path. It was slow going, trying to avoid eyes that probably weren’t even there and the ex-lawman found his gaze snapping to every leaf caught in a breeze and flutter of bird startled into flight by their presence, his paranoid mind providing shadows that weren't there and sounds that didn’t exist in the whisper of the wind.
Finally, however they made it to the bottom of the swell and came to a halt a few paces from the 
house, still sticking to the woods and keeping to the shadows where they drew out long in the early 
light of sunrise. A white painted door framed by wide windows adorned the front of the building, 
an almost pleasant sort of style that seemed a mockery to the man who lived there himself and 
elaborate curls were carved into the wood to speak of wealth and indulgence.

“Door’s probably locked.” Connor hissed softly, lilting voice barely more than a breeze as he 
leaned forward to squint at the entrance critically. “Let’s head around back. Best to do this quiet if 
we can.” The man explained and waited for Hank to give a solid nod before beginning to creep 
along the edge of the trees, knees bent and back lowered to stay close to the ground.

Hank tried to mimic the position but his back gave a sharp twinge in protest, sending him jolting 
upright with a grimace twisting his features. Opting instead to simply keep a close eye out, he 
followed Connor around the building until they could see the other side, same white paint and 
elaborate trimming adorning the rich wood as they’d seen out front. However, a discrepancy stood 
out and a long finger in front of his face pointed to it just as Hank himself caught the sight.

“Pretty dumb to leave your window open with an outlaw on the loose.” Connor drew with a 
wolfish grin playing at the corners of his busted lips. His slender digit curved smoothly towards 
where a white paned section of glass was pulled up to let warm beige curtains blow through the 
gap, the thick cloth catching the breeze to whisk out into the open air.

“Someone could break in!” Hank agreed in an over dramatic drawl, keeping his voice lowered for 
safety sake but letting a cunning smirk rip across his face nevertheless. Maybe things were finally 
starting to go their way.

“My thoughts exactly.” Connor agreed in a sinister purr, returning the wide smile with that familiar 
spark of mischief dancing like lightning through his caramel eyes. The boy cast a quick glance 
around then darted out from behind his current hiding spot, a tree he’d curled his lithe body around 
like a snake. Just a dark smudge of motion, the outlaw’s dust coat whipped behind him as his riding 
boots kicked up dust in his wake, putting the short expanse of yard between him and the woods in 
an instant and pressing his body tightly into the wall of the house the moment he met it.

Hank felt his body tense up in sick anticipation as he waited for things to go wrong, muscles taunt 
and ready for action. All it would take was for Gavin to come strolling up the path, shotgun in 
hand to put a quick and bloody end to the outlaw and Hank didn’t think he’d ever get over 
witnessing Connor die at the end of Reed’s barrel. However, the tense moment stretched on for a 
minute and nothing seemed to stir in the quiet, all still and silent as the dawn’s creeping rays 
basked the sleeping world in their warm light.

Eventually, Connor began edging himself along the painted walls of the house and come to stand 
pressed just beside the window, pulling back one of the curtains and craning his neck to glance 
inside without sticking his whole head in and asking to be blown away. The outlaw drew back a 
moment later and returned his gaze to where he’d left Hank at the edge of the woods, meeting the 
man’s waiting eyes and giving a small nod before turning back to the window.

Hank cast one last suspicious glance about before he spurred himself into motion and dashed 
across the yard, nearly expecting to hear a shot go off as he finally crossed the distance and 
skidded to a hasty halt at Connor’s side. The man’s heart raced but he forced himself to remain 
calm and keep an eye on things as his companion curled his slender digits over the edge of the 
window sill and carefully leaned inside, a wayward lock of mahogany hair falling into his eyes as 
he dipped forward through the open window.

“Coast’s clear.” Connor informed softly, leaning back to whisper the words before dipping into the
window again, this time bringing a long leg up with him. The outlaw pushed himself with the butts of his hands and drew his knee up so he practically crouched in the window for a long moment, glancing around once more before swinging his other leg over the barrier and letting it hit the other side.

Hank moved to stand in front of the window as Connor slid the rest of the way in through the small gap, watching to make sure nothing befell the boy as his dark boots hit the wooden floor and he came to stand in the wide living room of sorts beyond. However, everything stayed as it had been and the large bookshelves spanning the brown walls made no moves to attack the outlaw as Hank paranoidly feared they might.

The ex-lawman wasted no time in gripping the edge of the window himself; and throwing a leg over it, pulling the other through much less gracefully than Connor had. His feet hit the wooden floor heavily as Hank ducked to pull the rest of his body through, only succeeding in banging his forehead painfully on the glass pane in a pointed reminder that he was nowhere near as small and agile as his companion. Rubbing his head, the man ducked lower and slipped under the glass, coming to stand on the other side and glance around the living room.

The place was spacious but empty. A few bookshelves lined the walls with a layer of dust thicker than a cow’s leastered hide settled over them like a blanket and a desk sat near the far corner, as barren and empty as the desert outside. Ebony floors creaked under Hank’s boots as he moved away from the window and turned in a slow circle, taking in his surrounds and watching for any sign of movement but his eyes caught nothing to raise suspicion.

A soft metallic clatter sounded from the edge of the room, nearly gave Hank a heart attack; but when he snapped his head in that direction, all his eyes found was Connor picking up a revolver from a small table set near the doorway. The boy turned the thing over in his hand, running long fingers over the barrel but he tossed it back down again a moment later, apparently not anything he’d come here to find.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Hank hissed in a sharp whisper, returning his attention to the room around him just in case any of the bookshelves had moved when he wasn’t looking.

“A blade.” Connor answered quietly and his voice sounded odd, off almost, soft and distant like he wasn’t all in the room with Hank anymore.

“A blade isn’t gonna get us very far.” Hank pointed out strategically. They were gonna need something indisputable, especially with Gavin’s father being the mayor and all.

“This blade will.” Connor promised, stalking silently across the room to begin peeking in between shelves. “The wound wasn’t normal, whatever made it had a distinctive shape.” The boy detailed, voice carefully detached as he pulled back a random book and glanced behind it only to push it back where it was a moment later. “They just chose to ignore that ‘cause they already had a convenient suspect.” He added dryly, pulling back the next book in line and sliding it back in place just as quickly.

“We’ll find it.” Hank promised solemnly, blood running ice cold in a silent, smoldering anger that seared deep in his chest. Connor didn’t deserve any of what he’d endured and no matter how well Hank made up for it now, as he was determined too, the ex-lawman would always resent that.

“I know we will.” Conor agreed determinedly then let his long fingers fall from their current task to turn towards the man, intense gaze seeming to nail Hank to the spot. “Thank you.” He added softly, piercing eyes swimming with too many things to pick out just one.
The look sent a warmth rushing through Hank’s chilled veins and he let himself smile back before actually getting to work, making for the empty desk at the far side of the room since Connor seemed to have the bookshelves covered. The top was truly barren with nothing to offer but a few scratches and the occasional coffee stain but its front was lined with a collection of small drawers, elegantly carved with deep bronze handles gleaming in the low light.

Hank wrapped his thick fingers around the handle of the top drawer and tugged it open slowly, trying not to let the mess inside clatter about too noisily. Odds and ins scattered around the wooden bottom of the thing; but none of it seemed that important, so Hank closed it and moved on to the next rather quickly. A piece of string. A bible. About a dozen loose buttons. Two cent candy wrappers and a deck of cards. A toy pony with a bright, flowing mane..? Nothing to prove Connor’s innocence.

When Hank wrapped a hand over the handle of the third and final drawer, it wouldn’t budge. The man gave a rough yank, thinking it was probably just another wooden pony jamming up the works, but something caught and stuck the wood fast even then. “This one’s locked.” The man hissed over to his companion, turning to see Connor shove back yet another book with a disgruntled grimace only to fall into a muffled coughing fit as a huge cloud of dust exploded out in vengeance.

“She’s see it.” The boy huffed scratchily, waving a delicate hand in front of his face to clear the dust and try to find fresh air again as he crossed the floor to stand at Hank’s side. The outlaw squinted critically at the lock for a short moment before reaching a hand into the saddle bag he currently had slung over his lean shoulder and rummaging through. After a second, his long fingers re-emerged; and clasped between them, he held a thin wire, small and bent in the middle to create two long prongs.

“I think I can get this open.” Connor explained, crouching down low in front of the desk and bringing the makeshift lock pick to the hole. The fugitive slipped the small wire inside and leaned against the wood, caramel eyes narrowing in concentration as his delicate fingers twirled over the metal in small, careful motions.

Skilled fingertips moving with practiced confidence, it didn’t take long for a quiet click to sound from inside the lock and a vicious smirk to crawl across Connor’s busted lips. “Gotcha!” He whispered to the lock and leaned back, pulling out his wire and bringing it to his lips to press a grateful kiss to the metal - Which Hank was definitely not jealous of - before stretching back up to stand his full height. One dainty hand tugged on the brass handle of the drawer and it slid out effortlessly, both men craning over to get a look in the thing the moment it was open.

Papers. Tons and tons of fucking papers spilled forth, falling from the edges of the drawer to flit to the floor below as the scraps fought for space in the crowded hole, old papers, yellowing and beginning to tear at the edges.

Before he could say anything, a voice sounded from the doorway, cruel and grating. “Looking for this?” Gavin’s familiar tones demanded disgustedly; and when Hank turned, he saw the man standing there, the silver revolver from the table in one hand and a blade, curved over and again like a snake, twirled between his fingers in the other.
Gavin sneered at the pair with flaming malice blazing in dark eyes, finger poised over the trigger and barrel aim straight at Connor’s chest. “You, I expected.” He began acidly, disgusted grimace deepening as he narrowed his eyes at the outlaw. “But you,” The man went on, flicking his eyes back over to where Hank stood frozen, court documents still clasped tightly in his fist. “I didn’t expect you, Hank.” Reed sighed with a pitying frown, as if he were disappointed in his old riding partner.

“You know me, Hank.” Gavin implored, meeting Hank’s bewildered gaze. “You rode with me. You trusted me. How could you believe this scum?” The man questioned insistently, as if trying to make one last bid at winning Hank back over.

Hank could only stare at the man he used to know. Part of him hadn’t wanted to believe it; but now, seeing Reed with the blade in his hand and his weapon trained on Connor, he had no choice. “What did you do, Gavin?” The ex-lawman sighed quietly, horrified at how it had all played out but unable to deny the saddened twinge he felt at the back of his mind. The man he’d called his deputy had chosen the wrong path and all Hank could do was watch.

“I didn’t do anything!” Gavin spat sharply, anger flashing through his eyes like sparks striking out of a burning forge. “This wasn’t my fault!” The man protested but all Hank could do was shake his head, sorry regret was all he felt for his old riding partner now. Not pity and not forgiveness.

“It’s all his fault!” Reed insisted jabbing the muzzle of his gun in Connor’s direction with an enraged sneer twisting his words into a mangled growl.

“You killed my mother.” Connor breathed, his voice naught but a numb whisper and his eyes fixed not to Reed himself but the curved blade clasped within his hand. Slowly his wide orbs crawled up to meet the lawman’s, dull horror brimming in their caramel depths and irrecognition flickering over his face as he finally faced the man who’d ruined his life.

“Because she had you.” Gavin snarled dangerously, lips twisting in a vicious sneer as his words dripped like poison from his tongue. “Everything is because of you.” The man growled cruelly, venom lacing through the last word to make it slice.

“Because she had me, with your father.” Connor corrected slowly, hands tightening into pale knuckled fists at his side.

The words send a jolt through Hank, confusion rushing through him in a wave as he gazed from one man to another, each locked in a stare off with the other. There were similarities, a few shades difference in their hair color and eye color alike and a vague resemblance of the other in their facial structure but the man never would have guessed half-brothers. Yet, it made sense when he stood back and looked at the facts: The brothel in the town Gavin had spent summers in, the girl in picture that had seemed so similar there…

“Because when you started to get older and she realized which one of her cocks you came from your whore mother decided the world had to know.” Gavin growled angrily, spitting the words like he couldn’t stand how they tasted in his mouth. “My father was going to put this town back on the map - And she was going to ruin everything!” The lawman snapped, voice rising vengefully on the
end of the words until he was nearly shouting into the empty house.

“We couldn’t-” Reed began hastily. “I couldn’t let some whore and her bastard son destroy everything we’d worked toward!” The man insisted, gaze snapping imploringly back to Hank, willing his ex-partner to understand.

Hank stared openmouthed and silent, letting the information sink in and having no easier time comprehending it then. Gavin killed Connor’s mother. The mayor was Connor’s father. Gavin was Connor’s half-brother. *Gavin killed Connor’s mother.*

“Don’t make this worse, Reed,” The ex-lawman finally began after a long moment, pushing away his horror and the simmering rage he could just begin to feel bubbling up past the initial shock. “You kill a woman of the evenin’, you kill an outlaw, you might be able to get off with a life sentence; but you kill the previous sheriff, and you ain’t gonna have a life to serve a sentence with.” Hank tried to rationalize, willing the man to listen to reason. As much as every fiber of his being screamed to put a fat fist right through Gavin’s mouth, there was no way he could so much as move without the lawman pulling the trigger and putting a bullet straight into Connor’s chest.

He wasn’t about to watch Connor bleed out on Reed’s floor. Rage would have to wait...

“*I* didn’t kill the old sheriff,” Gavin began sinisterly, wicked smirk pulling his lips up into a mockery of a smile. “The notorious murdering outlaw did.” He explained slyly and slowly turned his gun on Hank. “I tried to save you, risked my life against that sick bastard.” He continued, painting a picture of a fantasy he knew as well as Hank the townspeople would readily accept. They hated the condemned and loved their good mayor and his people. “Though I nearly lost my life to that mongrel, it was still too late for you.” He finished snidely and raised his gun, finger curled around the gleaming metal.

“Wait!” Connor interjected sharply, voice carrying a fine edge of fear. “I’ll go with you! Tell them whatever story you want!” The boy tried, imploring. “Just, please, you can’t take him too.” The outlaw pleaded, lifting his hands in a show of surrender and taking a small step forward before Hank could snap out a hand and grab him.

Gavin paused, face contorting thoughtfully as he appeared to consider the proposition, grip on his weapon loosening slightly as if he were going to agree. However he suddenly whipped his gun back up the moment Hank thought about moving, cold sneer twisted firmly in place once more and nothing but heartless malice burning through his dark eyes. “He won’t stay quiet.” Reed snarled and Hank could do naught but squeeze his eyes closed and wait for the pain.

*Click.*

Hank cracked his eyes open an inch, the obvious fact that he wasn’t shot sparking some curiosity and the unexpected sharp, metallic sound drawing him back to the world.

Reed stood where he had a moment ago, scarred face twisting into a dumb look of utter confusion. He stared at Hank, eyes wide and uncomprehending and pulled the trigger again: *Click.* The man balked, twisting the weapon over in his hands and gaping like a fish out of water. *Click.* *Click.*

“What the hell?” Gavin demanded of no one, glaring at the gun bewilderedly as he turned it over in his hands and took a hasty step back.

“Oh,” Connor’s honey voice drawled from Hank’s side and the ex-lawman snapped his gaze over to see the outlaw pull out a fistfull of gleaming metal bullets. “You’re not looking for these, are
“You?” The fugitive asked sweetly, letting the things fall between his fingers to clatter noisily to the wooden floor below in a symphony of tinkling metal. He must’ve taken them out when he’d been messing with the weapon earlier, Hank realized.

“How did you-?” Gavin began incredulously but let his words trail off in a growl, taking another stumbling step back with a spat curse.

The lawman turned as if to run but Hank had already started moving, racing across the expanse of the living room before Gavin could so much as make it another step. The ex-lawman slammed into his old riding partner with his shoulder, ripping the gun from his hand while Reed was still stunned from the initial impact and taking full advantage of the moment. He pulled his muscled arm back and brought the weapon across Gavin’s face in an instant, whipping blunt metal into the man’s temple and sending him to the floor.

Hank went down after the murderer, slamming a huge hand into Gavin’s back to keep him pinned and wrestling his arms behind his back. He held a hand out without looking, keeping the criminal down with the other, and a rope was thrust into his waiting fingers almost as soon as he reached for it. “Gavin Reed, you are under arrest for murder and the framing of an innocent man.” Hank snarled coldly, beginning to loop the rope over the man he thought he knew’s captured wrists and pulling it mercilessly tight, no care to avoid tearing into the flesh as he’d taken with his lover last night.

Connor stalked around to stand in front of the pair, Gavin twisting to glare up at him with a hate filled sneer of absolute loathing twisting his features into something hideous. It was impossible to think anyone as beautiful as the innocent man looking down at the struggle could be related to the murderer.

“You don’t wanna know where those ropes have been.” Connor promised smugly, bringing a hand up to brush delicate fingers over his other wrist and draw attention to the light rope burns still visible in the pale skin there.

Gavin stared for a long moment, face slowly twisting from one of confusion into one of utter disgust.

He didn’t stop gagging after that.

Chapter End Notes

*Gasp* Dun dun dunnnn!

Thanks for sticking through with me guys - There’s only the epilogue after this. I loved reading everyone's encouraging comments: Hearing the theories, listing to the guesses, accidentally making you all cry (Sorry!)

You guys are why I write <3
The sound of light, prancing hoof beats met Hank’s ears as he finally turned the last corner and came to stand at the edge of his property. He turned to see the tawny points of Nellie’s ears peeking over the splintering wooden beam of a fence, giving an eager twitch as the man abandoned his course momentarily to veer over to her, coming to stand just beside the pen.

The old mare butted her nose out to push up the beige brim of Hank’s hat the moment he was in reach, large hand unable to push the persistent animal away as a heavy snort of air nearly sent the disturbed garment flying. She’d really gotten some of her old spring back in her step.

With a heavy pat, Hank leaned back and moved to carry on as he had planned; but just as he was about to stroll away, the papers he’d kept clasped in one hand were abruptly plucked from his fingertips."Hey!" The man snapped, whipping his gaze to where the culprit stood behind the fence, black mane glistening in the early light and papers grasped loosely between his massive jaws.

"Those are important!" Hank scolded chidingly, reaching up to snap the papers free of the stallion’s teeth and glancing down at them to inspect the damage. Thick horse saliva dripped from one corner and ran down to smudge a few of the words, wet and disgusting, but nothing seemed too illegible. Good. Hank settled for wiping the things against the coarse fabric of his pants with a disgusted groan, trying not to feel the warm wetness against his fingers lest he start gagging all over the documents himself.

Silver gave an offended whinny, turning away with a majestic shake of his head as if insulted by the notion he wasn’t capable of handling important documents. His raven fur gleamed in the early light and his long mane shone with the action, clean and combed to reflect the sun like a sheet of glass blazing back the roaring flames of a fire as he pranced indignantly on the spot.

With a Huff, Hank turned to walk away once more but didn’t get two steps before a jolting jab to the back of the head nearly knocked his hat off, sharp and pointed. He whipped around, hand clasped to the back of his hat and deadpan look set dryly in place but he failed to see much more than a face full of black fur, the soft fluff crowding his vision to block out all else.

Finally, Hank brought his hands up to the creature’s head, running large fingers over Silver’s persistent snout and scratching heartily behind the animal’s swiveling ears to abate the attack, manhandling the creature’s massive head in an abrasive assault of his own, petting roughly and pushing Silver’s dark ears back under his palms like a giant, annoying cat.

The horse finally relented with a satisfied snort, shaking himself high over the fence with a look as smug and victorious as a horse could possibly muster. “Ha!” It seemed to say, “I always get the pets.”

“Attention whore-se.” Hank snarked jovially, waving away the prissy creature and continuing though his yard until he finally stepped up onto the wooden porch.

Hank pushed open the front door of his home and walked inside, heavy riding boots falling heavily onto the old oaken floor so it creaked and groaned with each step. He tossed his pile of papers onto
a wooden table as he passed through the kitchen and moved into a short hallway beyond, the
passage dimly lit by a wide window at the end of the path. The man took a few heavy steps before
reaching out to grip the edge of a wooden doorway that rested at about the halfway point of the hall
and leaned inside, a smile beginning to pull warmly at the corner lips of his lips as his gaze finally
fell on what he sought.

A lean body lay tangled in the blankets of his bed and a mess of mahogany hair buried in one of
two pillows, stuck up at odd angles and flying every which direction as if set on spitting gravity
itself. Blue fabric draped across pale skin in haphazard folds where a loose shirt rode up high over
his lean stomach as slender limbs shifted and knotted themselves worse around the soft covers,
pulling taunt as Connor squirmed into the mattress, nuzzling his nose into the fluff of the pillow
before abruptly pulling up off the bed to spin himself over.

“What the hell are you doing?” Hank chuckled with an affectionate snort, crossing the floor to
stand above the bed and stare down at the boy with heavy arms crossed over his broad chest.

“You try living on the run for sixteen years!” Connor snarked lightly, bright smile flashing across
his soft features as he dug his angular shoulders into the mattress with a pleased shimmy, slender
hips arching off the bed with the action. “I will never take a real bed for granted again.” The boy
promised with a happy sigh, caramel eyes slipping shut at he bit the soft flesh of his lower lip in a
pleasurable groan, the skin there smooth and unblemished by scab or bite. Connor’s full cheeks
were clear and markless, only moonlight pale skin where there had once been twilight bruises and
they carried a pretty pink flush that still held Hank’s heart in a merciless fist. When the boy
reopened his honey flecked orbs, they gleamed brightly up at his companion with nothing to
darken their glowing shine.

Hank felt a pressing surge of pride and relief alike as he took in the sight. He had done this.

“I thought you had sheriff-y things to do down at the courthouse?” Connor asked curiously,
pushing himself up with the butts of his hands and swinging his long legs around to sit on the edge
of the bed, reaching his slender arms up as he did so.

Hank leaned in to let long, delicate limbs twist around his neck and pull him down for a kiss,
gentle fingers carding softly through his hair as his lips met the boy’s. Connor’s mouth was warm
and welcoming against the lawman’s, soft and supple and pressing eagerly up into the kiss as the
very tip of his little tongue flicked teasingly between Hank’s teeth. A grating bite, gentle but sharp
enough to send an electric jolt down Hank’s spine, nipped into the chapped skin of the man’s lips
just as they parted, mischief gleaming like lighting in the honey oceans that filled his vision.

“You know I don’t like sheriff-ing without my deputy.” Hank reminded in a low, warm voice,
bringing a hand up to touch his calloused fingers lightly to the bronze star pinned just over
Connor’s heart, the cold metal harsh against his fingertips when everything else about his partner
was so soft and warm. “I was actually trying to get something for you.” He admitted after a
moment, meeting Connor’s questioning eyes with a slow smile as he lowered himself to sit on the
bed, pushing back to lean on his elbows as he watched the boy.

Connor followed after him, shifting to lay out across the bed so his long legs stretched over the
mattress as he pressed up against Hank’s chest, head resting over the man’s heart and delicate
fingers splayed out atop the lawman’s stomach. “Hank,” He began softly, his lithe body a warm,
welcome weight against Hank’s side. “What more could you possibly give me?” The deputy asked
slowly, voice reverent as his hand found the man’s and Drug it up to the star over his heart,
interlocking their digits there with a solemn squeeze.

Hank shifted to gaze down at the boy snuggled in close, bringing a hand up to his companion’s jaw
to press a large palm there and tilt Connor’s eyes up to meet his, reveling in the warm trust brimming there and the soft smile playing across his gorgeous face. “I thought maybe I could interest you in a last name.” The sheriff offered, brushing the rough pad of his thumb over his lover’s bruise-less cheek.

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap!

Thank you everyone for reading and for all the wonderful comments :}


Announcement

Hey guys! I've been shopping this bad boy to publishers recently which is incredibly exciting and a big step for me - But, unfortunately, means that it'll have to come down from here...

I'm gonna leave it up for a few more days to give everyone a chance to see this - And if you're interested in non-fanfic version feel free to contact me for the Amazon link

Twitter: @The_DramaQueer

Tumblr: @subject-a7-the-leader

Email: deliamaguire2001@gmail.com

Thanks for understanding - I wouldn't be here without your support :)

End Notes

Get ready for gross overuse of the phrase Yeehaw ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!