A Long And Winding Trail

by deathmallow

Summary

Various RDR2 prompts, ficlets, etc. from Tumblr. Unless otherwise specified, these are anonymous prompt requests.
October 1877: Hosea and Dutch find Arthur as a 14-year-old street kid

October 1877, San Francisco
They stepped out from the Bison Horn into another raw San Francisco evening, wind whipping cold off the bay with the promise of winter chasing not too far behind, but the whiskey sat warmly in Hosea’s belly all the same. Just a drink or two, to grease the gears a bit. Wouldn’t do to drink too much while sitting at the poker table. But being a jolly pal to a man’s opponents and treating them to rounds while discreetly pouring his own onto the sawdust-strewn floor of the saloon, well, that was all fair and good. Not his fault they liked their whiskey more than their sharpness at the gambling table.

“The eternal truth proven once again that fools and their money are soon parted,” Dutch said, patting the wad of cash tucked into his pocket.

“I wouldn’t say we ain’t fools ourselves. The trick is in being the least foolish man at the table.”

Dutch let out a low chuckle at that. “We do make that our art, my friend. You can find a fence tomorrow for that necklace, you was thinking?”

“Easier and quicker than Mr. Wilson will find his wife’s good graces again, I expect.” His wife wouldn’t love that he’d lost her mother’s necklace in a game of high-stakes poker, but such was life. “And yeah, Sam Yung will probably do it for us.” They’d used the man before a few times these past couple of weeks they’d been staying in town.

“Good. I’d as soon get the hell out of this place. Too much civilization makes my stomach turn.”

Hosea couldn’t disagree with that. Cities always gave him that uneasy feeling himself. Made him miss clean air, quiet, open skies, places where people weren’t living ten on top of each other like rats jammed into a cage, wallowing in everyone’s filth and misery. “Seeking friendlier skies and foolish rubes?”

Dutch let out a roar of laughter at that, putting an arm around Hosea’s shoulders. “Oh, there’s a motto!”

He couldn’t hold back a smile himself. Close to two years he’d known the man now, since fate or luck or whatever led them to share a fire one night on the road to Chicago. He’d headed there, an eye to finding chances in that massive modern Babylon jostling and fighting to rebuild after the huge fire back in ’71, and it seemed that two hucksters had the same notion about that vast theater of opportunity.

He’d had to leave Bessie behind in Fort Wayne that time, recovering from that last loss--God, the woman was made to be a mother, longed for it so badly. Four times now in six years they’d gotten their hopes up, only to have them dashed. The second time was the worst, and there was a small grave up in the shady mountains near Saratoga Springs--great pickings off the rich during the summer. They’d named him Daniel, for her father. Sure as hell didn’t want to name him for George Matthews. Born far, far too soon, struggled for a few agonizing breaths, and that was all, except for that tiny grave and a wooden cross. Hosea knew deep in his bones that it wasn’t her. It was something rotten in him. Why she stuck with him, he would never know, but all he could do was try to give her all he could, which was the merest portion of what a woman like Elizabeth Westin Matthews deserved.

He’d gone towards Chicago after losing another child, and found a brother instead. Gotten arrested
in Ohio with him, they’d broken out together, gone on the run. Scammed their way steadily westward. Found Susan nearly a year ago, and happy as he was that Dutch had a woman now, dear Jesus, did he regret taking a room next to them in Fort Collins. Bessie had muffled her laughter into her pillow half the night, slyly asking if they should give those two some competition.

Heading down the street, he nodded thoughtfully. “Montana next, I was thinking, we got that tip about stockyards--” Someone bumped into him, and he glanced down to see a boy heading the other way, head down, hurried steps, clearly lost in thought. Shook his head--careless little idiot not paying attention, but no harm done.

Though it took about ten seconds to realize yes indeed, there was some harm done, because the comforting weighty lump of that Godawful diamond and sapphire necklace was no longer in his pocket. He spun on his heel, looking for the kid. “Check your pockets,” he advised Dutch. “I just got picked.”

Dutch patted his pockets, a stormy scowl growing by the moment, a tightness in his lips and brow that Hosea had seen end with men dead on the ground. “Shit. He got my cash and my watch. You got him, Hosea?”

The devil was in the details for a crook and a con man, so that needed a sharp eye. He’d noted the kid’s clothing at that glance, and now he scanned with care, picked up the kid a ways down the street, slipping in and out of the crowd lithely, but in a little too much of a hurry to get away rather than stay completely blended in with the crowd. “Heading past the butcher’s right now. Black hat, dark red jacket.”

“Got him,” Dutch said with grim satisfaction.

“Your watch and your cash, and that necklace off me?” He couldn’t help but let out a low whistle. “Gotta tip my hat to the little bastard. Damn, he’s good.” He hadn’t seen a pickpocket that good in years, maybe not since his own nimble-fingered youth.

Dutch shot him a dark look, already setting off down the street. “We made it easy getting distracted with our Goddamn yarning, that’s all. Don’t tell me you’re thinking to let him go out of sheer admiration, now.”

“Course not.”

From the quick glances back over his shoulder, it was obvious the kid saw he his marks were now tailing him. He was good, but not good enough with two experienced outlaws on his tail, and with the two of them, it wasn’t that hard to herd him like a sheep and corner him in an alley. He still made a game attempt to jump up and haul himself over a wall into what smelled like a brewery, a brick wall that must have been damn near eight feet high, losing that hat in the process.

“You have something that belongs to us, boy,” Dutch said calmly. “I’d suggest you hand it back.”

The kid turned, a scowl etched on his face. There was a bulge of a pistol in the pocket of his ragged jacket, though from the cracked grip poking out, Hosea guessed it was old, not that well maintained. Hosea told him, “Well, kid, at least you’re smart enough to not pull a pathetic old Colt like that on two men with four good guns between them.”

The boy’s eyes drifted down to the twin revolvers on Hosea’s belt. Then he smirked, folding his arms across his chest. “You two dress flashy. You got nice guns, custom engraved, no less. Seems you’re flush enough to help the less fortunate. Consider me your own personal charity. The donation’s real appreciated.”
He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh at the sheer brass balls of this half-grown idiot trying to brazen it out rather than beg for mercy, or kick the kid’s ass. Maybe a bit of both. “Who taught you to dip a pocket like that?” Dutch asked him.

That chin lifted defiantly, the scowl etched even deeper. “Your momma did. Ain’t you never heard of ‘finders keepers’? So,” he took a step aside, avoiding a half-rotten apple, carefully scanning the two of them and probably trying to see if he could risk a rush and slip past them, “I found it, I keep it. Ain’t much my problem if you’re too careless to watch your pockets.”

“New Austin boy, huh?” He’d fleeced his share of ranchers and cowboys with that same rough twang. Though there was the faintest lingering hint of something else he couldn’t quite place.

“What’s that to you?”

“Son—” All right, the angry puppy act was now losing its charm. Though Jesus, he couldn’t help but look at the poor kid. He was rangy as a colt, too thin, pants and shirt a bit too short. He must have hit a growth spurt recently and probably half-starved his way through it. Clean, though. Even if his clothes had some of the dirt and stains of long use, he cared enough to try to keep himself mostly clean, skin lacking that greyish layer of rubbed in grime, and that dark brassy hair was too long and shaggy but he’d clearly washed in the last few days.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he snapped. “You calling me son, mister, while looking at me like that, let me tell you for Goddamn sure that I ain’t never gonna come sit on your knee, or nothing else for that matter.” From that ferocity, Hosea took a look from another angle, assessing him in a different light. Nice eyes of some unusual bright green-blue color that Bessie could probably name properly, long lashes, smooth skin, decent features, boyishly high voice. Fifteen, maybe? Yes, he would have gotten attention and offers from the kind of men who liked young, pretty boys.

“I ain’t into that kind of thing. My friend here ain’t neither.”

The boy uncoiled maybe a fraction of an inch at that, but he was smart enough to still respect the danger of two annoyed and robbed men. “What you thinking here, Hosea?” Dutch asked him, voice carefully even.

“Me? I’m thinking what we got here is one angry, smart-mouthed little shit.” Somehow he suspected Dutch was already thinking the same thing, though. Wasn’t like two men in the business of confidence tricks and robbing ran across a kid with a clear flair for criminal enterprise already. “But he’s got quite a talent.”

At that, the kid finally tried to bolt for it, and Dutch reached out, neat as tripping a snare, and caught the boy by his collar. “Oh, now, don’t be rude. Stay a minute. Let us buy you a hot meal, my dear boy, and my associate and I would love to discuss opportunities in our...line of work, shall we say.” Yes, they were thinking the same thing. Maybe it was time to think bigger than just the two of them. Here was a boy with some talent, and living on the streets of this shitty, miserable city. It’d take a few years before he grew up enough to be involved in the actual jobs, but they’d have time. And mostly of all he thought of it because of Bessie--maybe a boy to care for, even an angry, smart-mouthed little shit, was exactly what she needed.

At that, he stopped struggling, eyeing Dutch with mingled interest and suspicion. “Exactly what kind of work you two in? You dress like a gambler, or a pimp. Ain’t exactly sure which. And as I said, hard ‘no thanks’ to the second option.”

Hosea couldn’t help a helpless cackle of laughter at that. “Well, gamblers and pimps are all about selling people on the flimsiest of dreams, kid, so maybe there’s not that much difference at the end of
the day. You got any family?”

“Naw, I’m a street brat out here picking pockets just cause I really fucking enjoy it.” He shot Hosea a look of irritated disdain. “Momma’s been dead a long time. Hanged my daddy three years ago for horse thieving. Been on my own since then. And like you give a shit.”

“That’s the way of it, huh?” A silky tone entered Dutch’s voice, and he leaned over a bit, the better to meet the boy’s eyes with his. “No fault of your own, son, that you ended up like this. It’s this lousy city. Told you that there’s no place for you in it. The problem is civilization. Chews people up and spits them out. Easy for boys to get lost in a cruel world like that. Nobody to turn to. Nobody to care. You know what you say to them as say you ain’t got a place at the table, that you’re just another of their high and mighty society’s castoffs?”

There went Dutch again, spinning himself up into that lofty rhetoric. Hosea might have been the one entertaining vague dreams of the priesthood, until he found out that was only for Catholics, but my God, in another life he could easily see Dutch Van Der Linde as one hell of a preacher. Maybe he still was, only the gospel he preached was about the sickness in America, rather than Jesus and hellfire. He could see the boy start to respond to it, leaning in ever so slightly, turning more towards Dutch like a flower instinctively turning towards sun. Fish on the line. “And what’s that?”

Dutch smiled a savage, wolfish grin. “Hosea and me? We’re con men and robbers, son. We tell those self-righteous pricks to fuck themselves and their high society, we take as much of their money as we can in doing it, and we like to make them thank us for the privilege when we can. How’s that kind of life sound to you?”

Hosea watched something come across the boy’s face, something vulnerable that finally made him look even younger, a glimpse of something almost like a desperate, wary hope. A puppy, all right, a puppy forced into a half-feral state, and really not sure whether to bite the hand or accept the caress. Angry and sarcastic, yes, but beneath it all, he was just a boy, thrown away by the world, left lost and alone and scared. Wanting to be saved, but not daring to hope for it, and now here someone wanted to throw him a rope.

He took a deep breath, gathered himself back together, that flicker of scared softness disappearing, replaced by a deeply satisfied look. “Sticking it to them posh folk? Yeah, I like the sound of that just fine.” He eyed Dutch, then Hosea again, and the wariness returned, unwilling to completely believe that it was just that simple. “You two really ain’t gonna set the law on me?”

“Oh, turn in a boy just trying to get by in this bad old world? We was never good men, son, but we got our ideals.” He couldn’t resist grinning, shaking his head slightly. “Besides, I ain’t seen a touch that deft on a pocket in many a year. You got pushed into me, I expect?”

“Yeah. Some lady with them ridiculous damn huge skirts. Had to move and bump you or have her cause a fuss.”

“Good choice. A lady causing a ruckus draws too much attention. And most any other man wouldn’t have suspected. Took me a few seconds, at that. You’d have got away clean. Left me much poorer, but none the wiser.” A small smile appeared on the boy’s face at that, a momentary glow in his eyes at the praise.

He dug in his pants pockets--smart move there too, because the jacket could always be lost--and produced the take. Gingerly he held it out, Dutch’s fat money clip and platinum watch in his palm, the garish strand of diamonds and sapphires looped around his hand. “You got a name, kid?” Hosea asked him, tucking the necklace away--in his pants pocket this time. Good reminder from this little thief that was a safer place.
“Arthur. Arthur Morgan.” As Hosea moved, picked up that fallen hat, he suddenly snarled, hands clenched into fists, “Don’t you touch that, it’s mine!”

That said plenty to Hosea, all right. Instinctive as the aggressive reaction was, he’d obviously threatened and fought to keep the thing before. It didn’t look like much—a man’s black leather hat a bit too big for him still, and around the crown there was a double-wrapped band of intricately braided brown leather. But it meant something to this boy, this Arthur Morgan. “Of course it’s yours. Your daddy’s before that, I assume?” He had nothing of his own father’s. Probably better that way.

He held the hat out, and eyeing him, Arthur took it, nodding in reply, swallowing hard. And when they left that alley, of course he followed them, all the way back to the hotel. “This ain’t—” he protested, backing away a couple of steps. “You said—” There was a spooked, panicked expression in his eyes, obviously wondering if he had, in fact, gotten drawn in by a pair of perverts looking to fuck him.

“We’re from out of town, so we were staying here. Just want you to meet the rest of us,” Hosea answered. “Bessie and Susan.” He relaxed visibly at the women’s names.

Dutch nodded. “I’ll get Susan to go get us all some grub to eat here. And tomorrow, young Arthur, we’ll get you some new clothes that fit.” Arthur’s expression was a little dazed at that, as if he still couldn’t quite believe it.

The desk clerk eyed the urchin with them but said nothing. Not paid enough to make it his business. Climbing to the second floor, Hosea knocked on the room door. Two taps, then three, then two more, so Bessie would know it was him. Their little thing. And there she was, the best girl in the world, opening the door with a wry smile on her face, auburn hair flowing down over her shoulders, and her sherry-brown eyes alight, leaning on the doorframe, arms folded over her chest. “And where have you been, Hosea Matthews? Promised me you’d be back an hour ago at least! The tables were that good?”

“Oh, the tables were good.” If that necklace wasn’t such a Goddamn monstrosity, he’d have had a notion to have her wear it, and nothing else, before he fenced it. Still might be fun. “Unexpected business, though.” He indicated the boy now suddenly gone shy, halfway hiding behind him. “This young fella here is Arthur Morgan. He’ll be staying with us. Arthur, my wife, Bessie.”

She shot him a look of You’re explaining all this later. He heard Dutch’s voice, and Susan’s, three doors down—never again next door since Fort Collins, but he only had eyes for the small spark of pleasure he saw on Bessie’s face as she looked at Arthur, the way she reached out, and touched the boy’s shoulder, as if carefully gentling a wild thing. “Bet it was a hard life you was living, Arthur. But we’re gonna take care of you.”

Hours later, the boy had eaten what felt like half his weight, tearing into the food with the frenzy of someone who expected to have to bolt his meals quickly or risk fighting for them, though Hosea saw his gaze flicker over to how the four adults were eating, realizing it. He visibly slowed himself down after that, watching and imitating them, looking suddenly awkward and ashamed. Then he’d fallen asleep on a cot they’d gotten the clerk to bring up, scrunched up into a tight huddle. Sleeping, shorn of the bluster of that cocky fury, he looked like what he was, a half-grown boy—fourteen, he’d said over dinner—nowhere near to a man yet.

Bessie pulled the covers up over his shoulders, then came back and sat in the chair opposite Hosea. Kept her voice low, though any kid who could sleep out on the streets could likely sleep through most any kind of noise. “Poor boy. He’s had a hard time of it. You and Dutch did right bringing him here.”
“He ain’t--Bessie, I know--”

She reached out and shushed him with a finger to his lips, then dropping her hand down to hold his. “Blood ain’t everything. You found a brother, who never got born to you as one. I got a sister now in Susan, same way. So if we find us a child, seems to me as that’s a fine thing. Maybe that’s as it should be in this world. Looking out for them as need it rather than worrying only about your own blood like we was some kind of damn haughty European aristocrats.”

God, had any man ever had a finer wife? Though he was aware of the too-great stillness from that cot in the corner. “Let me guess, Arthur, you’re laying there right now wondering what ‘aristocrat’ means.”

Caught out, the boy chose to admit that he’d been listening in rather than pretending he was still asleep. “Yeah, maybe.”

He was smart enough to survive on his own, so that was a good start. “Can you read at all?”

A long silence followed, then a small, awkward cough that might have covered a bit of a sniffler or hitched sob. “Nah. Momma wanted to send me to school, but we never settled down, and then she died.”

Hosea could fill in the rest. With the boy’s father hanged for horse theft, the only things he taught his son probably involved larceny, not literacy. “Well, we’ll get started on that soon enough. Being a man as can read, that’s a big advantage in this life.” Being a man who could think, even more so, but they’d see about that.

Bessie got to her feet then, heading for the door. “We’ll go to Dutch and Susan’s room a while, let you sleep in peace and not keep you up with all our talking. You wake up and we ain’t back yet, we’ll be right down the hall, three down.” Might as well go talk with Susan and Dutch, it was true. Taking on the boy like this changed some things, plus they had that tip about Montana, plans to make.

Another of those pauses, as if Arthur couldn’t quite figure out how to respond to a thing like that. “OK then.” Though Hosea would swear as they closed the door behind them, he heard a hushed, rushed mumble of “Thanks.”
Arthur and Sadie find out that closing your bedroom door is essential and Dido always gets what she wants

He’d admit he’d been a late bloomer on some things. Didn’t learn to read or write until he was fourteen, nearly fifteen. Learned to ride that same year. Learned to shoot when he was seventeen and Dutch finally deemed his temper and patience sufficient for it. Been an indifferent hunter until circumstances forced him to pay hard attention on that at nearly thirty-six. Hadn’t much learned to think for himself, to give loyalty where it was truly earned, until that same time.

Love—well, learning that took him even longer. He was still learning that, truth be told. But if he’d give himself credit for something, it was that once he got going, he made for one determined and fast learner to make up for where he’d lacked.

And Sadie, she was one damn powerful motivation. He sometimes still woke wondering how it could be that he was alive, that she’d chosen to be with him of all the men in the world, even to the point of marrying him. But that ring on his finger was tangible proof that it wasn’t some dream. This was his life, and those bleak moments of doubt and wondering, they came on less and less.

This was some tangible proof too, made on the regular in this bed. Wheat-blond hair spread across the pillow, hazel eyes intent on him. The clutch of her hands on his shoulders, the press of those strong thighs on his hips, urging him on. The golden glow of her skin cast in lantern light, the rosy blush spreading across her throat and shoulders. The way she said his name, and that soft, low little sound she made usually made soon before she came. The look of her, the sound of her, the sheer incredible feel of her—every time he thought it couldn’t get better between them, somehow it did. Maybe he still had some things to learn.

He liked it fierce and wild as much as anyone, but tonight, it was slow and sweet between them, and were he to be honest, that was probably how he liked it best. He leaned down to kiss her, needing that as much as anything else about this.

Just at that moment, he got a bit of a shock realizing that there were three in this bed when he felt the sudden weight on his back, the silken brush of fur, and the pressure of those big paws kneading against him, a low rumbling demand for attention.

Sadie noticed the sudden hitch in things, and looked up at him. She reached up, one hand touching his cheek. “You go somewhere else there?” That happened sometimes, in him or in her, dark memories of far less pleasant things taking the reins for a moment. Maybe it always would. But they got by.

He shook his head, admitting sheepishly, “Nah. Ain’t nothing like that. It’s--ah--Dido sneaked in. She’s sitting on me right now.”

She’d been married before. If there was some kind of notion of how one dealt properly with this kind of thing, he’d truly love to hear it.

Sadie’s eyes went wide, and she let out a whoop of laughter, burying her face in the crook of his neck to muffle the sound, and for a moment he had her laughing and Dido purring, and trying to not just crack up himself, but losing that battle and starting to laugh.

It startled Dido enough that she gave an irritated mrrrp and hopped down off his back. Sauntered up towards the pillows and gave them both a very annoyed look with those big green eyes.
Sadie reached out and gave Dido a pat. “Guess you’d better focus on the other pussy for now.”

That did it, and he ended up laughing so hard it almost hurt. God, it felt good to be able to laugh without worrying about hacking up a lung. That was a feeling that would never lose its wonder for him either. “Well,” he said, when he could breathe again, “just about.” He kissed Sadie one more time and reluctantly pushed away from her, settling down beside her with one black-furred miscreant cat between them very visibly pleased with herself, thank you very much, for having gotten the attention she’d demanded. “After all, yours ain’t got claws.”

Sadie gave him a knowing smile, brushing her hair from her eyes. “No, but like this one, she does get upset at being neglected.”

He gave her back a smirk of his own. “Oh, does she? I promise I’ll make it up to her later.” Reaching out, caressing Dido under the chin while she rubbed up against his side, he sighed. Yeah, he still had some things to learn, and here was one of them. “One thing I do know for damn sure. We gotta remember to close the door next time.”
July 1894: Arthur and Abigail almost hook up, but end up friends instead

July 1894
Western Minnesota

It was one of the good nights, one of the real good nights. The bank job went over flawlessly that afternoon, and they’d made it back to camp. Whiskey and beer flowing, songs being sung—watch maintained by John and Javier first, though, just in case.

She felt good too. She’d been with them only a few months, but they’d become something special to her already. Family, a different kind of family from all the sisters she’d had growing up among painted ladies in Council Bluffs. She had menfolk in her life now too, and as more than transient marks or customers, and more than—well, Uncle sure wasn’t much, whatever he was. A father of sorts in Hosea, and the rest, some aimed to be brothers, and others, there was nothing to be ashamed of a girl having a good time with some fine-looking men. She and Javier had some fun, and Lord, the things that man knew how to do, wicked and gentle all at once. She’d had her share of men before that, but truly, she’d had little idea. Dutch—Dutch had been another thing entirely. She’d ended that night exhausted in the best way possible, but with the oddest sense he was done with her after that, and he hadn’t asked her back to his tent again.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but in her opinion, it did a pussy some good. Far better that she choose like this and enjoy it than it had been in a year of lying back for men who’d paid their fare for a ride, with no choice in that at all. Some of them hadn’t been so bad, but some had. She liked this life, wild and free. She liked these people, who gave her choices and looked at her as something more than something to scratch an itch.

Passing around the south end of camp, taking another slug of whiskey, she could hear Dutch’s happy holler, “—done Jesse James and Cole Younger one better, boys, they got run right outta Minnesota in ’76—”

There was a dry chuckle at that, and she turned. There was Arthur, sitting there on a crate, carefully loading bullets into the empty slots of a bandolier by lantern light. Though from how he fumbled with it a bit here and there, he’d obviously had his share of the bottle of whiskey on the barrel top alongside his project. He looked up, saw her, and gave her a crooked grin. “My God, to hear old Dutch talking, you’d think we knocked over that damn Northfield bank itself that turned back the James/Younger gang, not a little thing like Star Lake. That bank manager? I couldn’t hardly keep a straight face listening to that Swedish accent he got, or Norwegian, or whatever the hell it was.”

Laughing at it herself, she sat down on the other side of the barrel. “That accent were funny as hell, right? ‘Oh, Miss, don’tcha know that?’ Thought it’d take him a year to get a sentence out!” She tried picking up one of the bullets herself, threading it carefully into a leather loop.

“Other way,” he said, but not angrily. “I’m right handed. Bullet nose goes to the left so I can grab and load real easy, no need to turn it around, see?” He plucked one out, mimed loading it right into a revolver, motion easy and instinctive, even tipsy. Big hands, but deft ones—well, that sparked a wicked little notion in her mind that grew the more she let herself mull it over. “You want ‘em all put the same way for that.” She nodded, untucking the bullet and reversing it.

“You done good in that bank,” he went on. She’d been there playing a customer, keeping everyone quiet and acting terrified, and picking a few pockets in the bargain.

“Thanks.” They worked there together, finishing up the job. She looked up at him in increasingly
interested glances. Thirty, just about, and not at all a bad looking man, handsome in that big, broad, bluff and hearty sort of a way. Funny man too, at that. He seemed like the sort of man who could be a good time. The hook of curiosity was there and set. So she went right for the target. “Seems it’s a night for celebrating. Having a good time. So—I wouldn’t mind me some company tonight, if you was interested.”

He paused at that, really looking at her then. Brow furrowed for a second, and if he made some cheap remark about Dutch and Javier having had her first, he could fuck right off and jerk off, thank you very much. Then he reached out, took another fairly strong pull on the whiskey bottle. “Well, why not.” He gave a low chuckle, shaking his head. “Pretty girl like you, I’d have to be a fool to say ‘no’, wouldn’t I?”

His tent was right there, and soon enough he had the flaps closed behind them. She wouldn’t light the lantern—last thing this needed was casting shadows on the tent wall and giving everyone one of those Magic Lantern shows. The firelight cut through the tent wall enough to give some faint glow, so she could see enough.

One hand on his shoulder, she pushed him down towards his cot, and he went. Climbing on, straddling his hips, she braced up on those fine broad shoulders of his, leaning down to kiss him. Now here was a surprise—rather than going right at it, Arthur kissed far sweeter than she thought, his fingers weaving into her hair, the other hand on her back, holding her close. Soft and almost wistful, and apparently Dutch’s enforcer had something more to him than she’d thought. Not an unwelcome surprise at that.

She kissed him harder, reached down, got the buckle of his gun belt, undid it easily. He reacted like a damn spooked horse, practically freezing up under her, inhaling sharply, hands suddenly tense on her. She laughed at that, but kindly, in a way that was meant to make it all right again. “Been a bit since you had a woman? That’s all right. You work hard enough, guess you ain’t getting much time for pleasure. But you know what they say. All work and no play makes Arthur a dull boy.”

He gave a slow, rueful chuckle. “I fear I make a pretty dull boy no matter what.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.” She leaned in to kiss him again, but he ducked her lips, turning his head aside so the kiss landed on one stubbled cheek.

He breathed in deeply, then exhaled, breath with a whiff of whiskey warm against her cheek. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

Well, she could feel as she shifted on his lap that one part of him certainly wanted to be doing this, and the sooner the better. “Why not? I ain’t married to Javier. Or you bothered that I was with Dutch?”

“Fair’s fair. I figure a woman’s free to bed anyone she wants, if we fellas can.”

“Then really, what the hell is the problem?”

He reached up, touched her cheek, and gave a sad, awkward little smile. “Ain’t nothing about you. It’s me.”

Could he be more cryptic? But she’d seen some of the girls with their customers, men missing some girl they’d lost or couldn’t have, and Hosea had made some wry joke about him pining for a girl. “This about that girl, that Mary I heard about?” She leaned down, kissed him again, lightly. “You missing her? I could make you forget.” A whore was damn good at that, at being the girl they really wanted. She couldn’t say how many women’s names she’d been called by. “Or you can call me by
whatever name, if that’s what you need.”

“No, nothing to do with Mary. But there’s a girl I damn well shouldn’t let myself forget,” and there was a sudden grim note of iron in his voice. Carefully but firmly, he got her by the hips, lifting her off him, setting her to sit down beside him. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have even started this.”

There was something else in this now, something within her that she’d almost have to call a sort of fear. She’d gotten swept out far from the riverbank on this one. Gone in expecting cheerful fun with a man who seemed obvious and uncomplicated, and suddenly she’d seen there was a hell of a lot going on inside him, things she couldn’t touch and couldn’t understand. Depths to him that felt unseen and unknowable, and far, far too much for her. Who the hell are you really, Arthur Morgan? “It’s fine. I seen men before who need one woman in particular. They can’t pretend with anyone else. Whoever she is, she’s lucky.”

He huffed out a soft chuckling laugh, looking down at his hands, clasped between his knees. “Oh, now, I wouldn’t say she’s anything like lucky for having gotten tangled up with me.” There was a weary note in his voice that made him think perhaps she’d died, but she wouldn’t ask. “But you’re a good girl, Abigail Roberts. You deserve a man who ain’t in your bed only for the forgetting. Some lucky bastard who can’t barely believe he gets to call you his--calls you by your own name, too.”

She shook her head, incredulous. “That right there might be the finest thing a man’s said to me in a long time.”

“If that ain’t sad commentary on the brainless degenerates you been keeping company with, not sure what is.” He gave her a wry smile. “Counting myself among that number, mind.”

“Oh, you’re not so bad.”

“A lady having a good opinion of me? That’s rare as hen’s teeth.”

She scoffed at him at that. “I ain’t no lady!”

“And I ain’t no gentleman, so here we sit, you and me.” Reaching for the cigarettes on the barrel top by his bedside, he offered her the packet, and she drew one out. Taking one for himself, he struck a match, a tiny flare of light in the twilight gloom of the tent, and lit her cigarette for her. Sitting there beside him, having a peaceful smoke, wishing she could do something for him, sad and lonely as he was, strangely kind as he’d proved. Obviously fucking wasn’t on the menu, but he seemed a little brighter now even just having her sit there and talk, so maybe that helped.

Finishing his smoke, he dropped it, crushing it out underneath his boot heel. “Gotta go take my watch, but you can sleep here if you want. Quieter than bunking down around Uncle’s snores and farts.”

“That, and it lets everyone think we was very busy in here. Gets them off your back about going whoring for a few months, I reckon?”

He smirked, tapping his temple with two fingers, then pointing them at her. “There’s a clever girl. I figured you was one.”

She rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help but smile. Reached over and mussed up his hair a bit, as if she’d been running her fingers through it, feeling that momentary catch of tension in him again at her touch. Minnesota July air was humid enough, and closing the tent flaps made it even worse, so they probably both looked sweaty enough to sell the idea of having had a pretty vigorous tumble in his tent. “Don’t worry. They ask me about it, you was truly magnificent tonight.”
“Doing me a favor, then?”

“Oh, it’s doing me a favor too. Them boys already gotta push for the standards you been holding them to, right? They think that here’s one more thing you set the bar about impossibly high, they’re gonna have to work all the harder to keep up.” John especially would probably take that as a challenge and a half, given she could see he practically worshipped Arthur.

His laugh at that was deep and genuine, covering his eyes with one hand, shoulders shaking. “My God, you truly are something else, Abigail.”

Finishing her own cigarette, she lay back on the cot as he went and undid the tent flaps, cooler night air rushing in. He wasn’t wrong. This wasn’t fine living, but it was a bit more comfortable than her pallet underneath the wagon. “Good night,” she said, softly enough she thought he might not hear it.

Though from how he paused in the doorway of the tent, and nodded, apparently he had. Then he was gone.
Sadie stealing Arthur's clothes

She woke to the smell of woodsmoke. Turned her head to confirm no, Arthur wasn’t there, though the blankets were still warm where he’d lain, and he’d turned them back up. She’d thought she felt something brush her shoulder in that drowsy sleep. Must have been him tucking her back in. Sweet as that was, and given the fact he’d apparently started the fire for breakfast, some part of her wished he’d been there when she woke up, or that he’d woken her.

Rolling out of the blankets, she pushed her hair back out of her eyes. Glanced towards her saddlebags, but decided to hell with it. Getting fully dressed, considering what she fully intended to do to him all over again as soon as possible, seemed a bit stupid. Turning instead to his stuff, she pulled out one of his shirts, the green and black plaid, the fabric worn and soft. Slipped it on, buttoning it up. Falling well down her thighs as it did, it definitely covered all the necessary bits enough to go have breakfast and then coax him back into bed. Given the fine start they’d gotten last night, it shouldn’t be too hard.

Padding out barefoot from the tent, sand and rock beneath her feet pleasantly warm rather than blazingly hot as they would be by afternoon, she saw he had coffee on, and a skillet heating over the flames, bacon sizzling. The man himself sat on the ledge overlooking that short drop into the lake, watching the last of the sunrise.

Sitting down beside him, she teased, “Got an early start, did you?” He’d gotten fully dressed himself, missing only his hat. Silly man. She’d have to break him of that habit over the next couple of days, but it’d be good fun getting him undressed this morning.

He glanced at her, almost hesitant to meet her eyes, and gave one of those uncertain smiles he had. She read that look in those green eyes as clearly as anything written in a book. Well, you’ve had me, ain’t sure what you’re gonna do with me now?

Her effortless good mood came to a halt. It stung for a moment seeing it, something so wary and uncertain in him. After everything they’d been through together, after all this time, and after the night they’d had, didn’t he trust her? For a moment it felt like a swallowed stone, something lodged deep under her ribs. But then it cleared. It ain’t you he doubts. It’s him. It always is.

She’d been lucky waking up that first morning with Jake. They’d decided to leave Tumbleweed for good, decided they’d go make their own lives, get married finally. They’d celebrated by taking it up to her room, finally letting themselves have what they’d longed for all those years. To have him, really have all of him, to wake up with his arms around her, to know an impossible dream was finally real—she’d been so full of happiness she could have cried from it. She’d woken up so confident and secure in that feeling of love, never a flicker of doubt, no need to be shy or nervous. He’d never had that feeling of waking up next to someone and being safe and loved, not in his life, and here he was, seemingly afraid she was done with him already.

Her own flicker of doubt twisted in her gut. Not that she doubted him either, but she doubted herself. What to say that wouldn’t be too awkward, make it too obvious that she saw it? “Much as I appreciate you getting breakfast on, I woke up and you wasn’t there. I...missed that.”

Something eased in both his eyes and his shoulders at that, and that smile grew a bit bigger, turned softer and sweeter. “Sorry. I...look, I don’t know much of anything about all of this.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “You got a real good start on it last night.”
“I ain’t the brightest--”

“Oh, stop with that.” She nudged his shoulder with hers. “Don’t act like we don’t both know you’re smart as a whip.”

“I do learn fast, when I need. And you make one hell of a motivation, Sadie Griffith.” Now he seemed OK, whatever dark thoughts he’d been having turned away, and the look in his eyes now, that sparkle of delighted hope and almost unbridled joy that she’d caused in him—oh, she thought she’d remember that for the rest of her life. You’re one fine man. And you’re mine, you’re mine. Can’t hardly believe that. She’d never thought she’d have anything like this again, never thought she’d deserve it.

Feeling that giddy swoop in her stomach, the weight inside her eased off too with a sudden relief. “Well, here’s another lesson.” She reached out, tugging playfully on the ends of the black kerchief tied around his neck. “You gone and overdressed for the occasion.”

He eyed her, dressed only in his shirt, giving a slow smile promising all sorts of things once he got her back in that tent. “I guess I did. And you look right fine in that shirt, but you’d look even finer with it off you. Seems you overdressed too.”

She couldn’t help but give him an appreciative laugh at that. If he felt good enough to dare to tease her that brazenly in return, they’d do all right. She reached up, toyed with the top button, slipped it loose, turned to the next one. Held off on that, feeling the heat and intensity of his eyes on her, enjoying it. Then she shrugged casually, pushing up to her feet. “Nah, you’ve got some of breakfast on already, so we’d best finish it. No point wasting good food.” She made sure to slow her walk, giving him a good look at her in his shirt.

She heard his rueful laugh behind her as he got up himself, and then he caught her around the waist, turning her to him, leaning down to kiss her. Well, screw breakfast if need be, if he was that eager. But it turned out to be his own deliberate tease of her, giving her just a short kiss with the promise of a lot more to come, and then letting her go, and turning back to the fire, crouching to pull the coffee pot off. “Yeah, all right. Gotta keep our strength up.” Yes, the man did learn fast, and she looked forward to even more.
November 1869: Young Arthur and Sadie meet

November 1869
Tumbleweed, New Austin
They’d run from Rhondda, and now they were running from Armadillo too, one step ahead of the law again. Apparently Lyle’s lofty ambitions had gotten him in the end again--a stagecoach, he said. She wished he would stop with all of that. So now here Beatrice was in Tumbleweed, provisioning for the trip to Oregon or maybe California or whatever point Lyle had decided would be their next stopover, because by this point she found it hard to believe it could be anything but temporary. Her man was in the saloon, and she only hoped he wouldn’t lose too much money while he was there. The cards rarely favored him anyway, and it tended to make him drink more than was good for him.

The shopkeeper’s boy helped her bring the supplies out: flour, sugar, oats, bacon, saleratus, so many things. Stepping out on the porch, she saw Arthur where she had left him, though now he’d apparently made some friends, both human and canine. Sitting on the worn boards, petting a black-and-white dog whose tail was wagging with delight, there were two younger children sitting there with him, all three children’s fair hair shining in the strangely bright November desert sun. As if they could all have been hers--though she thought more often than not that given the life she lived, it was better that it was only Arthur for now, and perhaps for always. The boy looked to be about three, the same age she’d lost David, and she still missed him so fiercely. The little girl, maybe a year or so, and she’d always wanted a girl.

“Gotta be nice,” Arthur insisted earnestly, watching the other two kids, the boy now happily stroking the dog between the ears. “You pulled her tail, that ain’t nice.” He glanced at the girl. “How about you? You wanna pet him?”

She cocked her head, looking at him with a look of intense concentration. “Want dog?” She pointed to the dog, still basking in the attention.

“Yeah, you ‘want dog’ or no?”

She scooted closer, patted the dog on the side, giggling at the feeling of the plush fur under her fingers, doing it again. “Like dog!”

“Me too.” Arthur grinned at that, and it did Beatrice good to see him smiling like this. There were times she thought perhaps it would have been better...no, never mind it. She kept trying to believe Lyle only needed to find a place where things could be better. Somewhere peaceful and with opportunities that could help quiet the anger in his heart. Though in the deepest corners of her own heart, she still thanked God that Arthur seemed to take after his father very little. A sweet child, he was, running to her with a fistful of flowers to try and make her smile, always drawing those little animals on any paper he could get his hands on. Her grocery list today had, as usual, the small sketches of things in her careful hand--a flower for flour, and didn’t the sound of English help with that one, and help her remember the word? She’d drawn bread back in Wales for it. A sweet in its wrapper for sugar, a percolator for coffee, and so on. Her doodles, lacking the ability to simply write the list, obviously been an invitation to Arthur for his own contribution, as it now had what she thought were charmingly lumpy deer and horses at the bottom edge. He was mad for horses, and even back in Rhondda, from the moment he could walk, she’d had to save him from getting himself kicked more than once trying to be friends with horses who were too nervous for it. He kept pleading for a horse.

“Henry, Sadie, Pa’s done, let’s go!” Lost in the sight as she’d been, she hadn’t noticed the woman standing near the edge of the porch, keeping an eye on the children. It looked as though her third
child was already on the way. She nodded to Beatrice in acknowledgment. “Is that your boy?” She wasn’t from these parts either, as her accent wasn’t this strange New Austin twang either, the way Arthur sounded, and that would serve him better than a Welsh lilt in this country.

“Yes, that’s my Arthur.” She couldn’t help a smile of pride coming over her.

She got a smile and a nod of approval in return. “Nice kid. Maybe Henry will stop trying to pull them dogs’ tails now. You from around here?”

“No, passing through, I’m afraid.” Too bad, at that. Arthur probably could have used friends. She certainly could. But things would be better in California. They would settle down. She could send Arthur to school, to get that smart mind of his all that it needed. Unlike her and Lyle, because back in the village, the closest school was twenty miles away. Not many educated spinsters were of a mood to come work in Welsh coal valleys. She’d get her citizenship next year, and Arthur with her, and as a true American, an educated man, he’d have any number of roads open to him. He’d be able to read, write, vote—with all of that, and the kind heart she knew he had, he could be far more than his father before him, and wasn’t that the dream of America?

The two younger kids pushed up off the boards, heading to their mother. She reached down to grab the hand of the little girl, who already looked prepared to rush off into all sorts of mischief. “Say goodbye now.”

Sadie, the little girl, waved enthusiastically at Arthur with her free hand, beaming at him. “Bye-bye!”

He waved back with a shy smile, watching her toddle off with her mother. “Yeah, bye.”

Once they were gone, headed for a wagon of their own with the husband already waiting, watching him help his wife into the wagon with a wistfulness in her heart, she looked back at the porch.

“Come, Arthur, we’d best go find your da and be on our way.”

He nodded at that, coming down the steps to her. Hesitated a moment, looking back at the dog still sitting there, looking at him hopefully. “That dog ain’t nobody’s, Momma, can we take her with us?”

She sighed, hating to disappoint him. And for just a brief moment that felt like biting into a rotten apple, she had the thought that perhaps it would be better to have a poor beast there when Lyle grew angry—better the dog than her or Arthur. But she dismissed it, ashamed at herself. No, what temper he had, he had his reasons, and it wasn’t fair he should go after a little boy, so she would take that on herself, but his anger with her had its explanations. “We’ve a long journey ahead, love. I don’t think that a dog would take to it so kindly. And your da might not like it.”

“So Daddy don’t like much,” he said, features drawing into a scowl, kicking at a rock in the street. “Whiskey, maybe.” Yes, he was far too smart for his own good.

She sighed, crouching down to meet his eyes, putting a hand on his shoulder. He’d gotten her green-blue eyes, and his hair was too fair to be Lyle’s, though she expected it would darken from that bright gold it was right now, as hers had. “Things have been hard, and that makes him angry. He’s still your da, for all that. But maybe when we get to California we’ll see about a dog for you. Things will be better there, you’ll see.”

He smiled at that, eyes lighting up again with happiness. “What’s California gonna be like?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never seen it, mind. People say it’s lovely land, though. Gold there, too, so perhaps we’ll become prospectors!” With him by her side, they walked towards the saloon.
Abigail had gone to bed early, tired out from the baby. John hadn’t remembered that from Jack. Though he’d avoided most of anything to do with the child Abigail told him was his, so admittedly he hadn’t paid all that much attention seven years ago. Besides, Abigail had Susan there, and then Karen too. They’d taken care of her. But this time it was him, and he was trying. Trying so damn hard, and he knew this child was part of this new start, of laying the past aside. Being more than two stupid kids who’d made a baby, and instead being a family, choosing that for real. But it seemed impossible most days. The past was there, two years gone by in the blink of an eye, and nothing could be forgotten.

Jack fell asleep more quickly than usual too, tired out from a long day running and playing after school. His boy was going to school here in Whitehorse, like he never had, and maybe it was a ramshackle thing for a handful of kids in a splintery shack, but the point stood. John couldn’t help but feel some pride in that notion. He paused for a minute, looking back in on the sleeping boy. Tell me a story?

Well, uh, I ain’t much good at all that.

Uncle Arthur had the goodest stories. When we gonna see him again, Pa?

The idea of big, tough, grumbling Arthur telling Jack bedtime stories had almost made him laugh. But he’d missed a lot in the year he’d been gone. And Arthur—well, there had been a lot to Arthur that he hadn’t seen, until the very end. Right after the urge to laugh came the heartbreak at the innocent question. How little had he been when he first encountered death? Not much older than Jack’s six years, he was sure. I don’t know, Jack. But I’m sure he’s happy and OK. Arthur must have gone to heaven in the end. Or else God really was a bastard.

A quiet evening, and left alone with himself and his thoughts, he found himself rummaging in the trunk full of things he hadn’t touched in a while. The gold and cash and jewelry in that satchel he’d used. What was left now was curious odds and ends. A couple of books, some good-luck trinkets. Herbs long since dried to dust, though the scent of mint still wafted up when he opened the trunk, like a ghost.

He touched the old hat for a moment. He’d stolen it once, back when he was fourteen, just to piss Arthur off, because all of them knew how particular Arthur was about that damn hat, how he’d fusssed about riding back two hours to get it when he realized he’d left it in a saloon when he was drunk. He’d been capering around camp, giving his best impersonation of Arthur, when the man himself came back from washing up in the lake. Arthur snatched it off his head, eyes blazing murder, and promptly caught John around the waist, threw him over his shoulder like a sack of corn, dumping him in a mud puddle, standing over him, jabbing a finger in his face. Don’t you ever touch that hat again unless you want a thrashing, brat. He’d never worn it after Arthur put it on him back on Bluestone Ridge. But he’d given it to John, in the end. Some boots, or hats as it were, were felt too big to fill. Still, he was trying.

It was like that with them. Back and forth like a whipsaw. Arthur going between kindness and teaching John things, and then being pissed off as a hornet, barely able to stand the sight of him and acting like a dog guarding a bone. John wanting so much for this damn near-god who Dutch and Hosea had taken on first, this grown man who could do everything so effortlessly, to like him, and
then wanting so much to outdo Arthur and show him up. Round and round they went over the years.

The worst times were the ones when he looked at Arthur and thought with a sort of vengeful fury, *Don’t you lord it over me. All them things you can do and Dutch still likes me better. Guess he saw something in you that made him give up, so he come and found me, huh?* Or after Abigail, being smug that he had a woman and Arthur’s had told him to go to hell years ago, so there was one area he would always win.

He wished now things had been better, especially before Blackwater, and shortly after. So many things neither of them said or did when they had the chance. He found himself reaching for that brown leather-bound journal. Arthur always scribbling in it, particularly back at camp, and John had snidely joked about how he couldn’t have much interesting to say, still stinging from a rebuke earlier that day from Arthur about Jack and Abigail. Arthur raised an eyebrow, and kept writing.

He took it and headed to the front room, where the kerosene lantern still burned. Drew the curtains, seeing the soft snowfall outside, knowing Jack would likely want to go play in it come morning. Sat down near the slowly fading fire and held that book in his hands for a moment, the leather of it well-worn from Arthur’s hands, not wanting to pry, and yet, the man was dead. He’d given this to John with all the rest of it, and there was some part of him that so wanted to remember, to feel close to that man who he’d said goodbye to on Bluestone Ridge. All the pretense and bullshit gone. They were brothers and he’d been full to bursting with so many words. *You stupid bastard, don’t you see it, you’re my family too, come with me, Abigail and me will look after you, and even if that TB kills you, you don’t need to die alone. Not like this, Arthur.* But as usual, he never could tell Arthur what to do.

He opened it, and flipped through a couple of sketches first. He’d known Arthur had a fair hand for drawing, from work he’d done for various job plans. He’d been able to draft maps and plans of buildings and the like with ease. But this wasn’t draftsmanship. It was sketching those things merely for the pleasure of it, and it was surprisingly well done. People and places and animals and birds and whatever else, pure art for the beauty of it.

That handwriting, another area where Arthur put him to shame with that beautiful looping script compared to John’s awkward, crabbed letters. The first words: *I bought this new journal, after the last one got destroyed in that fire all those months ago, whenever it was.*

He sat there and read, and read, flipping through the words and the sketches. Gave an irritated snort at Arthur claiming maybe he should have married Abigail. But all in all, enthralled and confused by the man in those pages, someone buried so deep from the rest of them. The Arthur Morgan the world saw was the perfect enforcer, ruthless and determined and confident and frighteningly capable. The Arthur Morgan in this journal was a man John felt as though he’d barely known. Troubled and thoughtful, smart and kind, confused, lonely, awkward, hating himself, and above all, achingly, desperately sad. Like there was a sorrowful bleakness in the center of him nothing could touch, and that despair rippled out to everything. He’d hidden it well, that was all.

Pouring out his woes and worries on blank pages because there had been nobody he could unburden himself to like that, so it would seem. All the concerns about Dutch and the way things kept going further and further wrong like a runaway train, all the forlorn thoughts about the girl who’d jilted him. The accepting of his tuberculosis, and taking it like some kind of due penance, and amidst all that fear and guilt, there was a new kind of determination.

He flipped a page and that was it. Nothing more, only a blank expanse. So he found himself turning the page back and reading some of those last words. *Just hope I did some good once I learnt to see the world for what it was.*
John, protect Abigail and Jack.

Dutch, start listening to them as really loved you.

He sat there with that journal in his hands and closed his eyes, not sure how all at once he could feel the searing grief and the release of something he couldn’t even name. Thought of Arthur sitting there in Beaver Hollow, all that strength and restless energy gone, sagging in on himself like a worn scarecrow, and that cough that eventually got so tired as the rest of him. But no matter what, he’d keep getting to his feet again. Exhausted beyond a healthy man’s knowing, but still determined and suddenly wise, and that had carried him all the way to Bluestone Ridge and beyond.

It would mean a lot to me. Please.

Be loyal to what matters.

When the time comes, you gotta run, and don’t look back.

John, protect Abigail and Jack.

He’d watched Arthur climb that slope, that bleak and empty feeling welling up in him. Now he thought he could place that mingled relief and sorrow, after reading this journal, after seeing Arthur Morgan truly for the first time—his courage, his kindness, his thoughtfulness. Finally able to put everything into focus.

He’d spent so many years chasing the high mark Arthur set at damn near everything, smarter and stronger and more skilled. Then at the very end, there he went one more time. Closed eyes still, John could almost imagine Arthur there, standing at the fire and warming his hands, then looking at John and judging him one more time, seeing how he’d fallen short again. But this time the look in those green-blue eyes wasn’t a smug challenge or amused condescension, but a gentler thing. A hand pointing the way, rather than a gauntlet thrown down. Come on, Johnny. I shown you the path. You see how it is. Ain’t just enough to be a man in the end. You go find how to be a good man.

It felt impossible. He’d probably spend the rest of his life striving to be the good man his brother had been and kept hidden for so long, and never make it. But maybe…but maybe he could. In the end, Arthur had shown him the kind of man that someone, even an outlaw, could be, despite the sins and regrets.

Trouble was, he still didn’t know how. They were here in Canada, the gold rush had busted before they even got to the Klondike, and most folks didn’t want to hire a man with peculiar scars, unsettling skills, and no history to speak of. They were making ends meet, but barely. The frustration rose up in him almost every damn day, and a baby on the way too pulled that tension even tighter.

But if Arthur could find the bravery to do all he’d done while suffering so much, John couldn’t dare any less than to try. It took Arthur a good while to figure it all out, didn’t it? Thirty-six, he’d been. So maybe it would take him a while, but he would try, and try, because that was the only way forward. The price had been paid for this life he had, and he could never forget that. He would put that journal away now, glad to finally know Arthur like that. Thank you, he thought to Arthur in gratitude, wherever he was, as he opened his eyes, and got up from the chair. Brother.
Sadie heard Arthur coming up the stairs, well after dark. Working long hours again, trying his best to take care of her and Karen both. She hated that she could do so little some days, but if people were reluctant to hire a woman on for odd jobs, they were ten times more so for a woman with a big pregnant belly, and anything that truly paid well, which meant physical labor or risk, was right out. She and Karen still picked up some money helping the market vendors covering shifts for them, and cooking at the inn, and that had the bonus for Karen of sharpening her Spanish in a hurry. They still had a decent bit of that nest egg from the train job, and the bounties they’d hunted this year had added to that. But that wouldn’t last. That left Arthur picking up the slack. At least he’d finally been released from the Cactus sessions after two years of it, Felipe fully signing off on him to go live his life, and that was worth celebrating. But she worried about him pushing too hard, because Arthur still didn’t know when to quit.

She could hear the hint of exhausted hesitancy in his footsteps as he walked into the room, though he headed right for the washbasin. She caught the whiff of sweat, saw the chalky streaks on his shirt and face and arms, one mixed with blood from a scratch on his arm. Building houses, he’d been. He got his suspenders down, fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, and she got up, shaking her head, and went to him, nudging his shaking fatigue-clumsy fingers aside, doing the job herself. Pushing the shirt from his shoulders, then grabbing the washrag, helping clean him up, hands gentle as she could make them. She saw his eyes sliding half-closed, both from the tiredness, and the contentment at being cared for like this. He still protested, “You don’t have to do all that,” even as he stood there and let her do it. Needing to hear again that it was no burden to care for him, that he deserved that kindness. It came less these days, but it did still show up.

“Maybe I want to,” she reminded him, kissing him lightly on the cheek. “You been working that hard for us, ain’t no trouble to do things for you. And Karen,” she kissed him again, giving a soft laugh, “sure ain’t gonna be doing this one.”

He gave a low chuckle himself, and a faint smile. Getting his boots, socks, and pants off, down to his drawers, he came to bed after throwing the wash water cloudy with the adobe mud out the window.

Lying there quietly for a while, curled up together, her fingers interlaced with his, felt good, but she finally ventured, “You realize we got down here two years ago today?” Barely a stone’s throw from their front door to the train station, or so it felt, but so much was different. Both of them so transformed from the desperate, broken people—the ghosts—they’d been that day. Wearing their suffering and their sorrow like a dark and heavy coat, weighing them down. A great deal locked away within him, within her, trusting each other with their lives and some glances at all that made up that secret self, but so much still an unknown mystery.

“Didn’t notice the date, but you’re right.” He inhaled deeply, and as ever, she felt grateful to not hear a wheezing catch in it. “Hell of a lot’s changed since then.” He raised an eyebrow, assuring her, “For the better, mind.”

“Was gonna say, you’d best be qualifying that statement, mister,” she teased him.

He laughed, and she felt the rumble of that in his chest, then he turned her face to his, kissing her,
then again. She knew him well enough now to sense the edge of something more than sweetness to those kisses. “You too tired—?”

“Tired, sure, but,” he said with some humor, “if you want me, no trouble to do something for you.” He gave her a bit of a wink. “Ain’t like I won’t thoroughly enjoy it.” It had been a few weeks without this, either him being too exhausted, or her feeling like crap, and she’d damn well ached for him some nights. She’d been relieved when Felipe told them months ago it was no trouble to the baby, because if anything, the need for him redoubled once she got past those early months. If he was up for it tonight, she wasn’t going to question it. Tugging off her chemise while he dealt with his drawers, she reveled once again at the feel of his skin on hers.

Though those few weeks had made a difference—the swell of her belly now felt too ungainly for her to get on top of him as they’d been doing. They figured it out, though, him tucked up behind her. Jake had liked doing it like this, some lazy mornings up in the mountains, but her and Arthur—they’d never tried. She thought she understood why when he gave a hesitant, almost shy, “Can’t see your face much like this.”

He wasn’t wrong, but she couldn’t ever mistake him for Jake or anyone else, not even without looking. The feel of his body, the way he touched her, the sound of his voice, all distinctive as anything. She looked back over her shoulder, reaching one hand down to touch his, him having ceased for a moment his teasing her, making her ready and hot with impatience. “It’s still me, though. And I know it’s you. Can’t be anyone else here right now.” Stretching back to kiss him, she hooked one leg over his, pushing her hips back against his in clear invitation, then he let out a low groan of satisfaction against her lips as he slid up into her. Obviously he’d been missing this too.

This way was good for lazy, but God, when she’d craved the feeling of him inside her for weeks, it made for an exquisite kind of torment, him thrusting slow and deep. So did his dropping soft little kisses on her shoulder and her neck, and after what seemed like endless minutes, she couldn’t help reaching back, needing to touch him, clutching at his arm, running her fingers restlessly over whatever parts of him she could easily reach. He let out a low laugh when she frantically grabbed his ass, giving a low growl of frustration, trying to somehow yank his hips closer, urge him on. “What’s that, now?”

“Harder,” she insisted, or pleaded, or maybe some of both. He could have delighted in teasing her and holding back, and sometimes they both played that game with each other, promising payback for it. “Art. Please. Shit, I need—”

“I got you,” he murmured. Her breath caught as he listened and moved just right, and she grabbed his hand where it rested still on her hip, guiding it around the mound of her belly and back down between her thighs, urging him on there too. He gave her what she asked there too and she closed her eyes for a moment at the sheer relief of it, the stroke of his fingers carrying her higher, her hand clutching his wrist still.

The crest of pleasure hit like a strike of lightning, fierce and sudden and white-hot, waves of pleasure rolling through her, rippling outward. He followed not too long after, and then there they were, content and spent and moving apart just enough so they were no longer joined. She lay there in the circle of his arms, not wanting to move at all. Brushing her braid aside, he kissed her again on the shoulder, and she squeezed his fingers in hers, letting their joined hands rest on the swell of the baby. No need to say anything. They both knew. A lot had changed in two years. In two more, things would change even further. But they’d faced all of it so far together, and they’d face that, because what would come would be its share of trials and hardship, but so much joy too. They were ready for it.
They’d left the windows open after the afternoon shower, the smell of spring coming in with the evening breeze–petrichor, flowers, and green growing things, all fresh and light and wild. Still something of a marvel to Sadie, even forty years after she’d first left the sands of New Austin for the Ambarino mountains, and how many places she’d been since then.

It had been a good Sunday, the kids and grandkids all gone home for the night now. The sound of the radio drifting in from the living room still, where they’d sat and listened to Buck Jones’ weekly adventure with the little ones, excited to hear Jack Marston’s latest tale.

“So you ought to be getting co-author credit from Jack,” she said jokingly, hearing Arthur’s footsteps come into the kitchen behind her as she watched the car go down the drive, waving in case any of the little ones looked back, smiling as Matt must have seen it, because he gave a quick double tap on the horn as acknowledgment. “Given Buck’s pretty much some version of you, and Jack’s using some of your stories.”

“Don’t need to ask for trouble by getting credit for any of it. Arthur Morgan’s been dead a real long time, right? Besides, I was never a sheriff,” he said dryly, rolling up his sleeves and heading to the sink. “Or courting a cattle baron’s daughter.”

She couldn’t help but roll her eyes at that, reaching for the dishtowel to dry, waiting for him to hand her the first plate, scrubbed clean. “Sure. Cause that’s the important difference. Mr. ‘Oliver Twist of the Old West, gone to the side of good’.” She teased him with the tagline from the radioplay, looking over to see him smiling a little to himself.

“Maybe. Did have a fair maiden save my life like him, though,” he said, gaze on hers as he handed her that plate, that smile broadening into something light and boyish, eyes alight.

Something caught in her chest at that, even after all these years, a tug at her heart. She’d looked at him at Beaver Hollow, sick and fading and dying, knowing in her heart chances were he wouldn’t see thirty-seven. Then at Las Hermanas, after getting through the first six months, watching him in his exhaustion slowly rebuilding his strength day by laborious day, she’d hoped he’d make it to thirty-eight. Chuparosa—their wedding day, seeing him hold Bea for the first time, she’d begun to believe that maybe she could stop holding her breath and praying for the span of another year, and hope for more. Always imagined the TB might well clip some years off his life still, but here he was, stubborn as anything.

She took the plate from him, drying it carefully, putting it on the counter. He didn’t turn back to the sink, standing there, watching her. “I’ll take the ‘fair’, but don’t think I was much of a blushing maiden,” she said teasingly. “Though Miss Adelaide ain’t either, I suppose.”

“Expect they’ll be real happy together, whenever Buck finally gets his head out of his ass,” Arthur replied. “You and me figured it out.” He handed her another plate, his fingers brushing against hers.

Finishing the dishes a few minutes later, he turned to her, saying, “So, could a fella ask a fine gal to the movies next Saturday?”

May 1st coming up—their anniversary. She couldn’t help but smile. “What’s playing?”
“Some kind of nonsense with a singing cowboy. Should be good fun.”

She stepped in, wrapping her arms around him, content to hold him tight and be held in turn in those still-strong arms of his, swaying lightly together to the bright, brassy big band music playing out in the living room. That summer and fall of 1899 was half a lifetime ago now. Some things had changed in all those years. Living a life that included electric lights, indoor plumbing, the radio that brought plays and all sorts of music right into their house, the movie theater in town that played cartoons and talkies, medicine and art and technology that had changed so much in ways she’d never even imagined as a girl.

They’d changed plenty too. Made a life together, raised kids together, let the pain of the past scar over and recede, year by year, growing into different versions of themselves from those two people who’d met one frightful night so many years ago.

Now she’d seen Arthur at forty, then fifty, sixty, seventy, as a father, as a grandfather. Watched those first bits of silver in his hair slowly taking over all of the dark gold, year by year. Spotted all the creases and lines and spots and wrinkles of age coming on over the years. And truth be told, she cherished every bit of it, and he was as fine to her now as he’d ever been. She kissed him, touching his cheek with her hand. “That sounds real fine.”

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