An American Tale - Overwatch Goes West
by goldenEY3

Summary

Angela Ziegler has come to America to make a life for her as a doctor in the American Frontier. She dreams of excitement, harrowing stories, and a life that she can make for herself. She never expected to find a place to call home, a community to become her family, or a woman to be her love.

Characters and ships to be added as things unfold.
New Arrival

Chapter Summary

Angela arrives in America to make a future for herself. But as she begins her journey, she runs into someone who steals her breath away.

The ship dipped and rose as it sailed across the waves, getting closer and closer to New York City. The ship’s tall smokestacks continued to billow smoke as the boilers begged to be used, but were slowly being wound down as they drew closer to the port.

Angela was but one person that was glued to the railings of the boat, the trunk that held the entirety of her life right next to her. She had stayed on the deck for hours, ever since the call for land was first put out. The wind blew her long blonde hair and blue dress about. Fortunately, she was one of the first people to move to the railing, so she had the best view possible. She should be slightly cold, but she was so excited to see America, it just didn’t connect for her.

And she was smiling so broadly, her face was starting to cramp. It was hard not to keep a smile from her face; standing on a small island, getting larger by the minute, was a beautiful, tall, copper statue. It was a woman, wrapped in a robe, holding a tablet and a light, welcoming all to her shores. Angela knew much about the statue; she had bought a book on it before leaving, and had read it multiple times during their crossing.

Looking at it, she couldn’t help but think of the iconic lines inscribed on the base.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

“First time seeing America?”

She looked over, seeing a sailor standing next to her. No doubt he was shirking his job, but he had a nice, big smile.

“Ja,” she said. “This is just so…I’m so excited!”

“Of course you are! I can see it all over your face,” the sailor laughed. “But you know English, yes?”

“Yes! I've been practicing endlessly.”

“Then you'll do just fine,” the sailor said.

“Have you been to America before?”

“Of course. I’m a sailor, I live on the sea,” he smiled.

“Do you have any advice? Recommendations?”
“Plenty,” the sailor said. He looked around at the other passengers and sailors walking about. He seemed to be testing to see how much time he had to continue to shirk his duties.

“We’re sailing into New York. You’ve never seen so many people in one spot before, let me tell you! It will be very overwhelming, but everyone is here to help you. Now, Americans are a little loud. It might seem like you’re getting yelled at! But they’re a friendly people who like their space. And they only know English, so speaking German might not sit too well with them. It will take a little to adjust to, but you’ll like them just fine.”

She smiled at that.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, I almost forgot. Why are you crossing the big blue sea to come to America?”

“I’m going to go out west to be a doctor,” Angela beamed.

“Ah! Doctors are always needed, especially on the American frontier! You’ll make a wonderful new life for yourself here, I just know it!” The sailor said. “Now, you’ll have to forgive me, I have to help bring this ship into port. You’d better start speaking English, young lady!”

“Thank you,” Angela said, waving as the sailor ran along. She gathered up her trunk. It was big, coming up to her hip, and it contained everything she owned. All of her books, her medical tools, a handful of clothes, a few blankets, and all of her money. Everything that was to her name was in that trunk. And she was about to start a new life, one where she could see the wonderful country of the free.

A few months ago, she had just finished her doctorial. Now she was here, going to make her mark on this land. She looked out at the approaching port.

“Look out, America,” she said in English. “Dr. Angela Ziegler is here.”

The ship took almost half an hour to dock. The port was bustling with activity; the port was so crowded, Angela was sure that the ship would either ram into other ships, or crash into the land.

But the captain was skilled. He guided the ship into its proper berth, and sailors began tossing out dozens of thick ropes to the dockworkers on shore. Soon, with practiced hands, the ship was lashed in place, and a wooden gangway was put in place.

Gathering her trunk, Angela got in line with her fellow travelers. She walked down the long board, pausing at the very end for the briefest of seconds.

If I take another step, she thought, I’d be in America. No more Switzerland, no more Britain, no more Europe. America. I’ve never been further from home...

The man behind her politely coughed, snapping her back to reality. She stepped off the gangway, onto American soil.

I’m finally here.

The line of passengers were led into a building, where dozens of tables were set up, each manned
with a person to question, and hopefully welcome, them to the new country. The line moved fast, and soon Angela found herself standing in front of a bearded man.

“Good morning, young lady,” the man smiled. Just as the sailor had told her, the man had a big voice. It almost was like getting yelled at, but jovially. “Do you speak English?”

“I do,” Angela smiled back. “I’ve been practicing for this moment.”

“Ah! And you speak it so well! Much better than some of the other folks who passed through here, that’s good. Now, what’s your name? Do you have any paperwork on you?”

“Yes, I do. My name is Angela Ziegler,” she said, handing over her papers.

“A good name,” the man said. He scribbled on a form as he both read her papers, and talked to her. “What brings you to the United States of America?”

“I want to be a doctor. I want to help those in need.”

“The world could always use more doctors. Oh, and at twenty-two to boot! Amazing!”

Angela smiled, trying not to blush.

“You got a great head on your shoulders, young lady. What made you choose America? You could’ve been a big deal in…” he skimmed her papers, “Switzerland.”

“It’s because of America that Switzerland is changing. We’ve only recently became a Federal state, just like America. The future of Switzerland is bright, yes, but we’re modeling that shining future off of the United States.

“I came because I want to be part of a country that could so readily, so easily, influence the world. I’ve seen America as a shining city on a hill, and I want to be part of that glorious future.”

“Ah, so eloquent,” the immigration man smiled. “With those wonderful words and that cute accent, you’ll do just fine here.”

The man picked up a big stamp and gave it a hearty ring against her papers before giving it back to her.

“Welcome to America,” he smiled.

“Thank you so much!”

“Oh, I almost forgot; the bank down the hall can change your money.”

Angela gathered up her trunk, and walked to the bank. Like the line to get into the country, the line for the bank moved fast. Soon, it was her turn. The man behind the bars of the bank welcomed her with a smile. It took her a minute to rummage through her trunk to find her purse. Inside was all the money to her name.

“I need to change this from francs to dollars,” she said, sliding the stack of bills across the counter.

The banker counted her money, filed it away, and gave her the very first American money she would ever receive.

“Thank you!” She said, putting it in her purse. “I’m trying to go west; could you point me to the train station?”
The man smiled, and pointed outside.

“You’ll step on out, and walk two blocks. There’s a real big train station dead ahead, can’t miss it.”

“Thank you, again!” She gathered up her trunk, and walked out the door.

The sound of New York hit her first, then the sights.

The sailor was right; she had never seen so many people in one spot in her entire life, it was truly overwhelming. The sidewalk was filled to the brim with people, men and women and children. The streets were filled with horses, both drawing carriages and being ridden by single riders. She heard women talking, men laughing, children yelling, merchants hawking their wares, it was all too much.

It felt like she had walked into a wall. Angela could only blink and try to process as much of the controlled pandemonium as she could.

This was America. She was finally here.

In the distance, she saw a massive building of glass. It had to be the train station. She began walking, carrying her trunk. All the while, she just found it so hard to take her eyes off of the massive spectacle of the city. The buildings were so tall, and they were filled with people! It was shocking, amazing, but at the same time, so overwhelming. How could they live so close to each other?

She came to the train station, and got in line to purchase a ticket. The line moved fast, and she soon found herself standing in front of the teller.

“How can I help you?” He asked.

“Yes, I’d like to know how far west can I go?”

“Oh, you got that frontier spirit in you, eh?” He smiled. “We get those people all the time. We can set you up on a train going to the great state of Colorado, a town called Denver. Just to let you know, it’ll take a little more than a full day; it’s halfway through the States…”

“I’ll take it!”

“Can’t persuade you, can I?”

Angela felt a pang as she handed the money over. She only had so much money to her name, and most of it was gifts from her colleagues and professors at her old university, and the nuns at the orphanage she grew up at. But that just made the train ticket that was given to her all the more special.

“Welcome to America. You’ll take the train on platform four.”

“Thank you.” Smiling, she bustled off into the station. There were dozens of trains, each filling the air with steam and soot. The noise seemed to compound under the glass ceiling. It was like she was getting smothered.

Angela found the train. A conductor was standing in front of it, examining his watch.

“Excuse me, this is the train going west, yes?” She asked.

“One of ‘em,” he said. “You going to Denver?”

“I am.”
“Then get aboard, we were about to get ready to leave.”

He checked her ticket, taking out a metal clip that punched a hole in it, and let her on, giving her a hand with her trunk. Angela climbed the steps to the train, taking care not to trip over her dress, and then she was in. She walked down the hallway of the passenger car, and found an empty compartment. She opened the door, and almost fell in.

There was just so many people, so much noise…she closed the door and let herself relax for a few minutes.

“All aboard!” A conductor called from outside the train. “Last ride to Denver, moving out! All aboard!”

Angela had to stow her trunk. There were brass tubing that ran along the top of the compartment, it was a place for her to put her trunk. She tried picking it up, but having carried it so far already left her exhausted. She adjusted her grip, set her feet, and tried to pick it up to stow above her, but she forgot how many books she had taken.

Why, oh why, couldn’t she pack less?

But she couldn’t pack less. This was everything in her life, everything to her name. She couldn’t stand to part with any of it.

The train began to chug along, and Angela had just gotten the trunk onto the edge of the brass piping. The sudden jostle caused her to nearly toppled backwards. Angela caught herself, but she couldn’t catch her trunk. Her life briefly flashed before her eyes; she would be crushed under the weight of her life-filled trunk.

“Whoa!”

The door to her compartment was pulled open, and a pair of hands shot out; one grabbed her trunk, holding it in place, the other grabbed her shoulder, keeping her from falling.

“Are you okay?”

Angela looked up at her savior. It was a woman with flawless skin the color of the most perfect Swiss chocolate. Her hair was short, and raven black. It was so short, she almost looked like a boy. She was even dressed like a boy, with a long-sleeved dress shirt rolled up to her impressive biceps, a vest, and trousers.

But she was a woman. The shape of her hips and breasts made that obvious. Especially her breasts…

Her face had an undeniable beauty to it, with perfect cheekbones and full lips, and gorgeous, chocolate brown eyes. And she was so effortlessly holding up her heavy trunk, proving her strength.

Angela had had crushes before, both on men and women, but never had one that hit her so hard, so fast. She had been in America for less than an hour, but seeing this woman made her realize that she wasn’t going through a phase, she really was into women!

“Are you okay?” Her rescuer asked again, concern in her voice. It was only then that Angela realized she was struck dumb by her.

“I—I am now,” Angela stammered.

The woman chuckled.
“That’s good,” she smiled, sending butterflies straight into Angela’s stomach. “It looks like you need help. Would you mind if I lend you a hand?”

Angela’s brain decided that now was as good as any time to forget how to talk. She could only dumbly nod.

Her savior stepped in, setting her own bags on the ground. Then she easily gathered up her trunk, and lifted it.

“Oof! What do you have in here, bricks?”

Somehow, her brain was able to properly engage, and make sense of language.

“Uh…it’s…it’s everything I have.”

“It feels like it,” the woman chuckled, sliding it onto the overhead railing. Fortunately, the trunk fit just perfectly behind a bar to keep it place. “At least we know it’s not going anywhere.”

“T—thank you,” Angela stammered.

“My pleasure,” the woman smiled. “I hate to ask this so soon after helping, but the rest of the train is pretty full; would you mind if—”

She share the cabin with her?!

“Yes!”

“—my mother and I share this with you?”

Angela realized what she had blindly accepted. That was followed by the sudden realization that there would be another woman with them, and that she had to truly keep control over herself. With such a beauty here, how would she do that?!

“I mean, not at all,” she said, trying to force herself to talk.

“Thank you,” the woman smiled. She bent down to pick up her own bags. “Mom, down here.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” a voice said. An older woman with the same mouth-watering chocolate skin entered the cabin. Her hair was black as well, but was starting to silver. Her face was beginning to line with age, but she wore it with a grace rarely seen. Unlike her daughter, she wore a dark green dress. But very much like her daughter, she carried her own bags, which seemed just as heavy as Angela’s, belying her strength.

Both the young woman and her mother easily hefted their bags up to the overhead railing. Their bags were mostly cloth, soft-backed, not rigid trunks but rather duffle bags, but they both carried very similar long cloth bags that they treated with reverence. They set them by the door.

“Oh, thank you so much,” the older woman said, turning to Angela. She blinked; the woman’s left eye was a deep chocolate brown like her daughter’s, but her right eye was glassy, covered in a cataract. It was dead, blinded. “The train is so full, there’s barely any space left.”

“Oh, where are my manners?” The older woman said. “My name is Ana, Ana Amari.”

“I’m Fareeha, her daughter,” her rescuer smiled, offering her a hand. “What’s yours?”
“M-my…? Oh, my name,” Angela said, trying to force her brain to work. She reached out to shake the extended hand. “Angela. Angela Ziegler.”

“It’s a pleasure, Angela Ziegler,” Fareeha Amari said. Then she gently, demurely, kissed her hand. Angela almost melted on the spot.

Oh Scheiße, she thought. You can’t go making a mess out of yourself. Think, Angela, think!

“It is certainly a pleasure,” she was able to stammer out. “I mean, the pleasure is mine. But thank you so much for your help.”

“I couldn’t let such a beautiful woman hurt herself.”

Scheiße…

The train jolted again as it picked up speed. That was a sign for everyone to sit down. Angela took a seat opposite from Ana and Fareeha.

Keep it together, Angela. Just…make small talk. You’re on this train until Colorado. The man said it’s in the middle of the nation, you’re in this for the long haul. Fareeha will soon be gone, and you won’t have to worry about making a fool of yourself.

“So…where are you going?” She asked, smoothing her dress out to calm herself.

“We’re going out west,” Ana said.

“Denver, specifically,” Fareeha smiled. “Frontier or bust!”

Angela almost died on the spot. She had to share a train with this mysterious, drop-dead gorgeous woman until they got to Colorado, and somehow not make an ass of herself?!

Scheiße!!
New Arrival

Chapter Summary

Angela and Fareeha talk, sharing a little bit of their dreams of a new life.

“Y-you say you’re going to Denver?” Angela was somehow able to croak out.

“Yes,” Fareeha smiled. “We’re finding a new place to start our lives.”

“Well, we’re not sure we’ll stay in Colorado,” Ana said. “That’s just as far as this line goes.”

“That’s right. I wouldn’t mind traveling further west,” Fareeha said. “Maybe Wyoming or Utah…”

“What about you?” Ana asked. “You’re traveling all by yourself; I hope you don’t have long to go.”

Angela nervously laughed.

“I actually have a ticket to go to Denver, as well.”

“No!” Fareeha said, breaking out laughing. “You can’t be serious!”

Angela held up her punched ticket.

“Lord, what a world this is!” Ana said, leaning back to laugh. “This must be providence! It’s like the world is getting smaller all the time!”

“Yes,” Angela croaked. “Getting even smaller…”

How the hell was she going to deal with this?!

“Well, then we should definitely stay as cabin mates then, right?” Fareeha said. “If we’re both in this for the long haul, we might as well get to know each other—”

“Of course!” Angela said, cutting the woman off before she knew better. “I mean, ah-hem, of course. That makes sense.”

“Then you must let me buy us some tea to celebrate this serendipitous meeting,” Ana said. She stood up and left the compartment, making her way to the dining car. That left Angela alone with Fareeha. It was thrilling to be along with the beauty, but stressful because she had to keep herself from melting into a puddle.

“Colorado,” the mocha-skinned Fareeha chuckled. “What are the chances of that? I mean, New York is a giant city; and two random people going to the same place share the same cabin of the same train!”

“It’s certainly something,” Angela said, trying to breathe normally. She took a second to situate herself; she adjusted her seat, checked her posture, and made sure her dress was smoothed out properly. It helped calm her. “Are…are you and your mother moving from New York?”

“Goodness no. I’m not a city girl; it’s far too crowded for me,” Fareeha said. “We’re from
Pennsylvania originally."

Angela had to mentally picture a map of the United States. Fortunately, she had plenty of time on the boat ride to memorize the map. Pennsylvania…that was a state. It was quite away from New York City.

"Then why travel to New York City? Couldn’t you take a train from your home state?"

"Not one that would go so far west," Fareeha said. "It’s a little backwards, but the trains by our home town only go as far as Cleveland, Ohio. To go further west, we had to come east first. Strange, isn’t it?"

"Absolutely. You’ll have to forgive me, but your accent doesn’t seem purely American."

"Oh, not at all. I grew up in a city mostly made up of escaped slaves and freed men. Many of them still had their original African accents. It was a small town, everyone there knew everyone. I guess you can say that the city raised all of us kids! With all the mingling, this is some mash-up of African and Northern American accent; I’m told I sound Egyptian, but I wouldn’t know. I might have ancestors there, but it wasn’t documented well."

"Why wasn’t it?"

Fareeha cocked her eyebrow at that.

"You do know we just fought a civil war over it, right…?"

Angela blushed heavily.

"Oh God, I’m so sorry. I should have known."

"It’s fine. I helped make everything right. But yes, my accent confuses a lot of people."

"I think it’s wonderful…” Angela breathed.

"Oh, thank you!” Fareeha smiled, a blush rising to her cheeks. "I hope this doesn’t come across as weird, but you have an accent as well. Where are you from?"

"Switzerland, actually."

"Switzerland? Why come to America? I thought there was a lot of things happening there."

"There is,” Angela said. “But to me, it just felt like there was more in America.”

Now this she could talk about! This could help get her distracted from the dark haired goddess that was stealing her breath away.

"Switzerland has just become a federal state, much like America is. In fact, our current constitution is based heavily on the American Constitution!"

"Really?"

"Really! Well, the United States Constitution and the French Revolution, to be more accurate. The ideas of the enlightenment and scientific reasoning is very big, and things are changing all the time. It’s honestly fascinating, and the possibilities for the future of Switzerland is amazing. The possibilities seem like they’re only limited by what you can do.
“But despite all that, Switzerland is still living in the shadow of the United States. We’ve based so much of ourselves off this country, it feels like we’re trying to be an extension of you. There are still factions in Switzerland that want to maintain our own sense of identity, and there’s a lot of headbutting and chest pounding that comes with that.

“I came to America to find my own future in this nation, one where I’m not limited by what I can do, but by the sky itself. In Switzerland, I can grow, but in America, it feels that I can truly thrive.”

Fareeha was smiling at that; a warm smile that made Angela’s stomach flip.

“That has to be the most passionate reason for coming to America that I’ve heard,” Fareeha said.

“Have you heard a lot?”

“Only a few. But that is by far the best.”

The door slid open, and Ana returned carrying a tray. A tea kettle and three mugs sat on it. She set the tray down next to Angela, the gentle swaying of the train not threatening it in the least.

“Have I missed anything important?” She asked, passing out mugs.

“Not much, Angela was just telling me that she came from Switzerland.”

“When did you arrive?” Ana asked, pouring the tea.

“Just today.”

“You just got to America today?”

Angela rummaged through her purse, and pulled out her boat ticket to show it off.

“So you got off a boat, and you went right onto a train?” Fareeha said. “Damn, you really want to go west, don’t you?”

“Well, I don’t have much money to my name, so I can’t exactly sit around.”

“Your parents don’t have much to them?”

“I don’t have parents. I was raised in an orphanage.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” the older woman said.

“It’s fine, the orphanage was all I knew.” She sipped at the tea. “My, this is excellent. Thank you for sharing.”

“My pleasure,” Ana smiled.

“I guess that growing up in the orphanage is what made me want to be a doctor.”

“So not only are you a lovely Swiss lady, but you’re a doctor too?” Fareeha gasped.

“I am,” she said, trying not to blush at being called ‘lovely.’ “I grew up sharing a room with nearly a dozen girls, and going to school and church with even more boys. If someone got sick, it was usually only a matter of time until we all got sick. The nuns that raised us did they best they could for us, but it was inevitable.
“But their selflessness inspired me to want to help. I wasn’t very big or strong, but I was smart. I learned how to read before anyone else my age did, and I was reading much more difficult books than many of the older girls. I helped them when I could, and that taught me that I could give back by being smart; becoming a doctor just seemed natural.”

“You’ll have to forgive me, but you seem very young to be a doctor,” Ana said.

“I am! I’m twenty-two. The nuns that raised us had a massive library; nearly all of my free time was spent reading the various medical books. I got into Vienna’s medical school mostly by pestering them. The nuns gathered all the money they had to help put me through school, and I was very lucky to earn some accolades from the professors, which helped me graduate early.”

“A doctor at twenty-two! What have you done with your life?” Ana grinned, gently elbowing her daughter.

“Mom…”

“I’m so sorry, I’ve been talking about myself for so long,” Angela said. “I’m not usually so selfish.”

“Please, we asked a very loaded question,” Ana said. “And when asking why someone travels to a new nation, one expects a very big reason.”

“Oh, thank you. Then if I may, what is bringing you to the West? Fareeha mentioned that you come from a Pennsylvania town. It must’ve been very hard to leave; Fareeha made it out to be a wonderful, tight-knit place.”

“It was,” Ana said. “It was a truly great place.”

“Then why leave?”

“It just started to feel that we were hiding from the real world,” Ana said. “We live in the North, meaning we were born free. But just because we were born free didn’t make us equal. Neighboring towns were nice. They put up with us, but it was just that; they just put up with us. It didn’t feel like they really wanted us around, it was like we were living in our own little world, kept apart by everyone else; equal, but very, very separate.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, you weren’t the ones who shunned our town,” Ana said. “It was a welcome place, a wonderful place, but there wasn’t much else for us there.”

“A nice town is great, but it was stifling. We fought for our freedom, and we want to be as free as we could,” Fareeha said.

“You fought for your freedom?”

“We both fought in the Civil War,” Ana said.

“Well, I fought, she sat back and took pot shots at the rebels,” Fareeha laughed.

“Don’t you start with that again,” Ana snapped, but it was all in a good nature.

“I thought the Union wouldn’t let women fight.”

“They don’t! That’s why I cut my hair short and wrapped my chest to pass as a boy,” Fareeha said. "Although I was a lot smaller then…”
Angela did her best not to stare at the chocolate goddess' chest.

“And…and you fought too, Ana?”

“Officially, I was a camp attendant, a cook,” Ana said. She reached to the long cloth bag by the door and unzipped it, revealing a lever-action rifle. The stock of the rifle had a massive piece carved out of it, making it look like a hook. “But when the fighting started, there was no one who could truly keep me from finding a tree, or a tower, and picking off the officers.”

“Oh my.”

“Yes, those were trying times, and we had to do terrible things, but we were doing it to decide the fate, the very future, of our people. We had to do something.”

“Then if you were outside the battlefield, how did you…I mean, I don’t want to pry, but your eye…”

“It was lucky for a Confederate gunner, and unlucky for me,” she sighed, putting her rifle away. “I was the Battle of Cold Harbor. I found a house with a second floor to sit in, and I was doing what I did best; headhunting rebels. A team manning a cannon must’ve seen my muzzle flash, because they turned their cannon at me.

“I don’t know what happened; all I remember was coming to in a pile of rubble, with Fareeha trying to dig me out, just as the fighting was retreating for the day. As best I can figure, something smashed me on the head so hard, it took my eye from me. It also left me very injured.”

“Blunt force trauma can cause damage to the eye, enough to damage or even destroy eyesight.”

“That was a bad battle, and a bad day,” Fareeha mumbled. “But I’m so glad you survived.”

“The fact that you made it out in one piece is amazing,” Angela gasped. “And I thought I had an eventful life.”

“Everyone has their own struggles,” Ana smiled. “We can only hope to bear them with honor and grace.”

“Those are wise words,” Angela said. “My, what time is it?”

“Coming up on noon,” Fareeha said, pulling out a pocket watch.

“God, the time just flew by. There is a dining car, yes? Since you bought such wonderful tea, please let me get us all lunch.”

Traveling by train was surprisingly like traveling on a boat.

A boat would roll about, buffeted by the waves and currents of the ocean. The first few days were rough, having to adopt to the always-moving ship, especially below decks. Likewise, the train would rock from side to side as it traveled down the rails. It was a slight motion, but an easy one to adjust to, and it had the added benefit of not having a below deck to test one’s stomach.

On a boat, one had to become accustomed to the claustrophobic setting, the lack of personal space, and the dim light. That was exacerbated on a train, which had even fewer open spaces, but also less
people and more windows, which made the entire train seem more roomy. It was odd, but everything balanced each other out, and Angela found herself surprisingly at home on the train.

And while it was great to be able to go on the deck of the great ship and feel the refreshingly cool sea breeze on her skin, she found a great relief in traveling by train. That way, she got to see the American countryside.

As the day progressed, Angela tried re-reading some of her books in the lounge car. Of course, that didn’t last very long; she’d often end up staring out the window, looking at the pastoral country as it slid by.

Traveling by sea was fun, but when the only thing you could see is water and the horizon, it lost a little of its luster. Here, there was always something new.

They began by traveling out of New York City, traveling through various cities that were built before the American Revolution. But the cities gave way to truly pastoral scenery, with farms, rolling hills, and even some mountains breaking through the ground.

“Mind some company?”

Angela started with a jolt.

“I’m sorry,” Fareeha said. “I tried catching your attention, but you didn’t hear me.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine, I guess I just really lost touch with the world,” she said. “Though I do think I need a minute to get my heart under control.”

“Need some more space?” Fareeha grinned. “Or will you just lose touch again?”

“I’ll be fine,” she chuckled.

Fortunately, there was an open seat next to Angela in the lounge car. Fareeha sat down next to her.

“You’re sure spending a lot of time in these lounge cars.”

“Well, not a lot of people come to the last lounge car,” Angela said. “They mostly go to the ones closest to the engine.

“Can’t see why, we’re all seeing the same thing.”

“People are strange,” she laughed. “But at least there’s a spot that’s not overcrowded.”

“I guess we should count our blessings,” Fareeha said. “What are you reading?”

“I was trying to read more about the history of America,” she said, “seeing as I’ll probably be here for a while.”

“And let me guess: you couldn’t because of the scenery.”

“Exactly.”

“I was the same way when I was a soldier,” Fareeha said. “We took all sorts of trains to get to the front. Maybe it was nerves, but I just couldn’t look away from the passing scenes.”

“Why did you become a soldier? It couldn’t have been easy to fit in.”
“Oh, it wasn’t!” Fareeha laughed. “I was lucky to still be small and growing when I first joined, but as I grew, I really had to bind my chest. I wasn’t able to take a full breath for the last year of the war!”

“I figured, but didn’t want to assume,” Angela croaked, doing her best not to stare at the woman as she puffed out her impressive chest.

*Scheiße*!!

“Then why did you pretend to be a boy?”

“Because I wanted to fight to make my people free,” Fareeha said. “I’d fight to make sure anyone was able to be free.”

“And you were never found out?”

“Oh, my unit knew I was a woman the second I showed up,” Fareeha grinned. “But they let it slide.”

“I’m surprised they were so lax on their rules.”

“Not the regular troops. I fought in the 8th US Colored Infantry, one of the few units made up of all black soldiers. They were more forgiving; everyone wanted to fight for freedom, to crush slavery. So they let a lot of things get away.”

“Like having a woman fight?”

“I wasn’t the only woman who fought; there were a handful of others. But there were plenty of other people who shouldn’t have been there, but wanted to be. There were plenty of boys too young to shave let alone hold a rifle, but they fought all the same.”

“You make it sound like they were very young. How old are you?”

“I just turned eighteen,” she grinned. “But we had one kid who was twelve.”

She just turned eighteen? Fareeha was four years younger than her?! But Fareeha was bigger and taller and so much bustier than her! It wasn’t fair!

“My word,” she was somehow able to stammer, “how could you let him fight?”

“To the kid’s credit, he was really, really big for his age. We all wanted to be free, for everyone to be free; it was an unwritten rule that we’d help each other fight, and keep it under wraps when the higher-ups came around.”

“Is that why you’re so used to wearing men’s clothes?”

“I guess so. Trousers don’t get in your way like a dress does, and you don’t have to worry about sitting down the right way. I guess part of me was never meant to be a real gentlewoman, I was always more of a tomboy.”

“Do you miss wearing dresses?”

“You make it sound like I burned everything that had a hemline! I still have some dresses that I wear when it strikes me. Like when the weather get really hot; that’s when jeans and trousers get really stifling. I don’t know how men wear then in the summer.”

“What’s that like?”
“Your legs start sweating, and if you’re wearing jeans, nothing breathes. So you’re in your own private desert.”

“That does sound awful,” Angela cringed.

“It really is. That’s why I still have a few dresses to put on when it gets really bad. But there’s nothing better than wearing jeans in the winter. That’s when they really come in handy.”

“Then maybe I’m too much of a girly-girl. I’ve never worn proper trousers.”

“You better get used to it. I heard it gets downright frigid when the winter blows in on the frontier.”

“When that comes, you’ll have to help me pick out a good pair.”

“That’s a promise!”

Angela realized she was blushing. She turned to look out the window.

“What are you looking forward to the most on the frontier?” She asked.

Fareeha paused, spending a good minute thinking as she stared at the passing by wilderness.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I heard so many things about the West. Things like, ‘you can be whomever you want to be,’ to ‘there’s no law out there!’ The thing you have to know about my town is that it was a very small town.”

“You said that everyone knew everyone, right?”

“Exactly. There was no such thing as private matters; somehow, word would always get out. I can live with that, but the real bad thing was that you kind of knew how your life would go. You’d go to school for a bit, find out what you were good at, and it just so happened that they needed a person who could do that, either to take over for someone getting too old, or because they never had anyone that good at it before.

“Like, if you were good at carpentry, you’d go help a carpenter, and that was that. It was all laid out.”

“It sounds like you didn’t like what they had in mind for you.”

Fareeha looked out of the window.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry, I just—”

“It’s okay,” Fareeha said. “They said I’d make a good baker. I’m told I make some great bread. But I never really cared for it. I mean, I’d bake, and I’m good at it, but it was always just a chore.”

“Did your mother teach you?”

“She did,” Fareeha smiled. “She loves baking and cooking. Don’t get me wrong, she’s a dead shot with a rifle. Growing up, she’d go out and bag a deer or maybe a boar; we never went hungry, but she loves baking and cooking. She could do that all day and never get tired of it. Growing up, she taught me pretty much everything she knew. But it never really clicked in place for me like it did with her.

“Maybe that’s another reason I wanted to be a soldier. I wanted to do something, anything, other than baking. I liked it alright, I guess, but I’d never be a professional soldier.”
“Having a very full chest would get in the way,” Angela grinned. Then she blushed as she realized what she said.

Fortunately, Fareeha just laughed it off.

“Yes, can’t forget that! But going out West, finding the frontier, it sounds like a great way to really find myself. Somewhere out there, there’s something for me. And that’s what I’d like to find.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“It isn’t, it’s just a fancy way of saying I don’t want to be a bum,” Fareeha smiled. “I guess I’m just nervous that I’d get out there, and I’d find nothing new, just more of the same old.”

“Have you seen how big this country is?” Angela said, gesturing to the window. “You’re bound to find something!”

That pulled a laugh from Fareeha.

“I guess you’re right!”

“Of course I’m right. I’m a doctor.”

That only made Fareeha laugh again.

“Speaking of finding something, when do they say we’ll make it to Denver?” Angela asked.

“The full trip is said to be just over a day. So we’ll eat dinner, sleep, and we should make it there in time for breakfast. I’d love it if you’d join us for dinner.”

“I’d love to follow you,” Angela smiled.
Angela arrives at Denver. She wants to go further west, but runs into a snag.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Angela thought that sleeping on a train would be much worse than sleeping on a boat, but it turned out to be mostly the same. Thanks to her time on the rough high seas, it took no time for her to adjust to the train’s rocking, and the sleeping car had bunks that were bigger than the ones on the boat, if only by a little.

There were enough sleeping cars for the entire train to divide it between the sexes; men in two cars, women in two cars. A gentle arm roused Angela from her sleep.

“Come on, up and at ’em,” Ana smiled, gently shaking her shoulder.

“Mmm…What?”

“We’re here,” Fareeha said, standing by her mother. “Just pulled into Denver.”

Angela carefully pulled herself from the bunk bed. Like the boat, there were stacked three high, but were built into the walls of the train, as opposed to being bolted to the sides of the walls. She slept in her dress, like most of the other women. She took a minute to readjust herself, making sure neither her dress nor her undergarments were riding up on her.

“We’re here? So soon?” She asked, stretching.

“You make it sound like we were going to be on the train forever,” Ana smiled. “The North has much better trains than in the South. They can go three times faster than what the Confederates were able to do. That has to be one of the reasons we won the war.”

“God, I can’t imagine this taking three days,” Fareeha said.

“I can,” Angela yawned.

“Alright, Miss I-Crossed-An-Ocean,” Fareeha pouted. It only made Angela and her mother laugh.

“Come on, let’s gather our bags,” Ana said. “We can find a place to eat when we’re out of the train.”

Angela followed the two women through the train, gently passing by other passengers. They made their way to their cabin, and grabbed their bags. Fareeha helped pull Angela’s down.

“Thank you,” she smiled.

“Next time, try not to pack so many bricks, okay?” The mocha-skinned beauty winked. That sent Angela blushing and stammering.

They left the train, and the first thing that hit Angela was the smell. Denver smelled of horses, which
made sense because it seemed that everyone had horses. There were riding horses through the dirt streets, and there were multiple horse-drawn carriages everywhere.

But a breeze rolled in, bathing her in pure, mountain air. That was the true smell of Denver; fresher, more pure than New York City. What struck Angela next was how open Denver was; in her book about America, it said that Colorado was part of the Great Plains area of the country, but also contained mountainous areas.

There were dozens and dozens of buildings, but none of them were anywhere near as tall as the ones she saw in New York. That meant that the sky was so much more open. At least, as open as it could be with a mountain range all around them. The ground rose up almost to the skies, reminding her of home.

“This is beautiful,” Fareeha gasped.

“It is,” Ana said. “I never thought I’d see anything like this.”

The mass of bodies leaving the train pushed them forward. The roads were mostly dirt, which made Angela glad that her good shoes were packed away. They walked from the train station, where dozens of people were dispersing into the city. It was strange, seeing so many horses.

Fortunately, there were several diners for them to choose from. All of them had hitching rails in front of them. The number of horses hitched to the rails was an indicator of which one was busy.

“That one looks good,” Angela said, pointing to one that stayed relatively empty.

Everyone gathered up their trunks and bags, and made for the diner.

“Table for three?” A waitress asked as they walked in.

“Yes please,” Angela smiled.

“Here you go. I take it you folks are interested in breakfast?”

“Most certainly,” Ana said.

“Can I recommend our breakfast special? Eggs, hash browns, bacon, and toast.”

“That sounds lovely. Three, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Glasses of water were handed to them, and they sat at a rounded table.

“So, what next?” Fareeha asked.

Ana reached into one of her bags, and pulled out a map. She unfolded it, and laid it on the table.

“We have the entire frontier open to us,” she said. “Where would you like to go?”

Angela stared at the map. The table was about half a meter wide, and the map took up every centimeter of space. She knew that the United States was impossibly big, but just looking at one map of one state really hammered it home for her. They could fit five, maybe six Switzerlands into this one state! Just one state!

“Times like these I kind of want someone to telling me where to go,” Fareeha mumbled.
“Well, do you have any idea where to go, Angela?”

“Honestly, no,” she said. “The mountains here remind me of Switzerland, though.”

“More frontier folk, eh?” A voice said.

Everyone looked up. A slightly shorter, thin woman was sauntering up to the table. Like Fareeha, she wore pants and a shirt, but from the looks of it, they were hard-worn. They were clean to be sure, but clearly used to hard work. The woman’s brown hair was cut short, just past her ears, and was an absolute mess. But she had a cheerful look on her face, a big, friendly grin that was at odds with the gun belt on her thin waist.

“We must have a look about us,” Ana smiled.

“Got that right,” the woman said.

“I’m sorry,” Angela said, “but your accent; are you British?”

“Got a good ear, luv!” The woman grinned. “And I thought I heard an accent from across the diner. Funny running into another European here! Where you from?”

“Switzerland.”

“Oh! How’s that!” The British woman laughed. “Man, it’s like the world is getting smaller and smaller!”

“What do you mean, ‘getting smaller?’”

“Well, that’s a story, let me tell you,” the woman said. “The name’s Lena, by the way. Lena Oxton”

“Angela Ziegler.”

“Fareeha Amari.”

“Ana, her mother. Please, sit with us.”

“Thanks, luv,” Lena smiled, pulling a chair out. “Gotta say, this is a motley crew ya got.”

“You mention the world getting smaller and smaller; well, we just ran into each other,” Ana smiled. “We ended up going the same way, figured it be good to stick together.”

“Well, how ‘bout that! Running into people is the best way to meet people! And I gotta say, I really didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard that accent, and I had to pay attention.”

“Not at all,” Angela said. “It’s funny running into a British woman here; I spent a few days in London, waiting for my boat to carry me over to America.”

“Bet that was a fun little jaunt now, was it?”

“It had its charm.”

“That’s one thing to call it,” she grinned.

Lena seemed to like grinning. Her energy was infectious.

“Now, like I said, I don’t mean to be eavesdropping, but you said you’re looking for a place to go to,
“Yes, we just got into Denver.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, I really mean no offense, but you think the frontier life is for you?”

“I do,” Angela said. “I came to America to make my mark.”

“And we’re out here to make our own way,” Fareeha said.

“That’s all well and good, but frontier life is hard,” Lena said. “Took me a good long while to come ’round to it. Some people just ain’t cut out for it.”

“Are you warning us away?” Ana gently smiled.

“I’m just giving you a friendly head’s up,” the Brit said, holding her hands up. “Life can be hard out there.”

“We’ve seen worse.”

“That sounds pretty tough, but I thought I’d give you a warning regardless,” she said. “Any idea where you’re heading?”

“We’re trying to figure that out ourselves,” Ana said. “Do you have any recommendations?”

“Oof. That’s a hard one,” Lena said, scratching her head. “America is really bloody big. Like, really, really bloody big. Plenty of places to get lost.”

“Where have you been?” Angela asked.

“All over. Where I put down my roots, I’m kinda the town courier.”

“Town courier? You run tasks for everyone?”

“Basically,” she said. “The folks at Crease can’t exactly drop what they’re doing and make a run to Denver or other towns, not when it takes a coupla days to travel, so they hire me.”

“Crease? Is that the place you live?”

“Damn right it is,” Lena grinned.

“Where’s that?”

“It’s actually in the Wyoming territory, north of here. Hold on.” Lena got up, went to her table, and came back just as the waitress came back with their food.

Ana folded up her map, and Lena unfolded hers. Her map was smaller, so they were able to look at it as they ate.

“Denver is down here,” she said, pointing to a place off the map. “Crease is just up here, maybe a couple day’s jaunt.”

She pointed to a point on the map that was on the middle of a crease.

“Is that why they call it ‘crease?’” Fareeha asked as she ate.

“Yup! Fitting, innit?” She grinned.
“What’s there?” Ana asked.

“It’s mostly a way point for ranchers,” she said. “One of the guys who lives up there, Mako, is a big name in ranching. He’s got all sorts of cattle he raises, moving them all over the area to let ‘em graze and grow. He’s got dozens of cowboys on the payroll, moving them all about, then sells ‘em mostly to butchers ‘round Denver.

“But we got plenty of farmers there, too. Crease is a small town, but the people there are friendly and helpful. The picture-perfect image of a small frontier town.”

“That sounds promising,” Fareeha said.

“Ahh, I got an idea,” Lena said. Angela didn’t know it was possible, but Lena’s eyes lit up even more. “How ’bout you come back with me, and you get to see what a little slice of frontier life is like? That way, in case you don’t like what you see, it won’t be the end of the world for you to turn ’round and make your way back here in Denver.”

As comforting as the mountains were making her, Angela was getting very nervous with the sudden changes. She was excited, yes, but there was a fair amount of anxiety there, as well.

“We don’t have any other plans,” Ana admitted.

“You didn’t mean any offense,” Fareeha said, “so don’t take this the wrong way, but how can we trust you just won’t lead us into a trap?”

“You wound me!” Lena said. “But I get where you’re coming from; can’t exactly trust everyone you just meet in a diner, and America does have a bit of a bandit problem.”

“I’m so glad you can understand that,” Fareeha said.

“Hey, how ’bout this? I’ll be your guide. Instead of paying me, I’ll give you all my bullets, and I won’t take watch during the night. That way, I won’t be able to jump ya, and you know I won’t be able to signal for any attack at night.”

Ana and Fareeha traded looks for a few seconds.

“Angela, does this ‘Crease’ sound like a worthwhile town to visit?”

“I am looking for a frontier town to move to,” she said. “Yes, it sounds good.”

“Then that sounds fair,” Ana said. “We’ll take you up on it.”

“Wicked,” Lena grinned, shaking hands with Ana, Fareeha, and the Angela. “When you want to start heading out?”

“We’ll need to get horses, first,” Fareeha said, finishing her breakfast.

As they left the diner, Lena made a bee-line to the hitching rail, where a gorgeous chestnut-red haired horse snorted at her, prancing in place.

“Come on, Emily, I had to be gone for under an hour,” Lena grinned, pulling the knot undone to let
her horse go. The horse, Angela had to assume it was a female, immediately went to nuzzling her.
“Everyone, this is Emily.”

“She’s a beautiful horse,” Fareeha said, holding her hand up. Emily sniffed her hand, and let Fareeha
pet her.

“Thanks. I got her when she was still a filly, only a few weeks old. She’s the fastest horses you’ve
ever seen, trust me on that!”

“We better get some good horses to keep up with you,” Ana said.

“Nonsense! I’m your guide, I’ll be going as fast as you want to. Livery is just over here for all your
horse needs.”

Lena led Emily along as they made their way through Denver. Fortunately, they didn’t have to wait
long to find the livery.

“They’re all so beautiful,” Angela gushed as they walked by the stalls full of horses.

“If ya like horses, ya came to the right country,” Lena smiled.

“But…how much are they?”

“Back during the war, they started at $100, but the good ones were up to $170,” Fareeha said. “They
might be expensive, but you don’t want to spent a hundred dollars on a walking glue factory
candidate.”

Angela felt her heart break. She gently tapped Fareeha’s shoulder.

“I…I don’t have anywhere near that much,” she mumbled, shamed faced.

“Shit.”

Fareeha waited, letting Lena hitch her horse and follow Ana inside the office.

“How did you expect to get to the frontier?” She asked.

“I…I just figured the train would take me as far as it could, and I could ride in a stagecoach to the
frontier.”

“’The frontier’ isn’t a city, it’s part of several states and territories. Most of the time, it’s practically
the middle of nowhere. Stagecoaches don’t always run there.”

“Maybe…maybe I got too caught up in the romantic myth of traveling west,” she mumbled.

“I’ll say you have.”

Angela sheepishly looked at the ground.

“Then…this is it, then, isn’t it?” She said.

“My mother and I sure don’t have the money to buy a third horse,” Fareeha said, trying to make light
of the situation with a lopsided grin. It helped a little.

“If you did, why would you be throwing everything away to go out west?” Angela laughed.
“Exactly,” Fareeha chuckled.

Angela blushed, trying to look away. She had only known Fareeha for a day, just a little longer than a day, but it felt like something truly great was ending.

“Well,” Fareeha said, putting on a good face. “If you ever find yourself in a town called Crease, maybe we’ll still be there.”

“I hope so,” Angela said. “It was nice traveling with you.”

“And it was nice to get to know you.”

Fareeha held her hand out. Angela reached out to shake it, but Fareeha gently took her hand, and just like when they first met, she demurely kissed her hand.

Angela really had to fight to keep her knees from shaking.

“I hope you find a place that you really like,” Fareeha smiled.

“L-likewise,” she was able to croak out.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered her trunk, and set on down the street. There was bound to be a stagecoach going somewhere.

She took one last look back at the woman with chocolate skin. She was picking up her bags, and walking into the livery to find her own horse to take her to some part of the frontier to find her own destiny.

Just like her other crushes, Angela felt like she had let her slip away a little too easily.

Scheiße…

Walking down the street, she eventually came upon a building that had a sign for stagecoaches. Angela walked in, and saw a massive map on the wall.

“Excuse me, sir, do you work here?” She asked a passing by man.

“I do. Are you looking for places to go?”

“Yes. I’m afraid I’m new here, and I don’t know where everything is going.”

“Not a problem. Step on over,” he smiled pleasantly. He had a nice smile, but Angela couldn’t get Fareeha’s grin out of her head.

“Where are you thinking of going?”

“I was trying to find a frontier town.”

“Oof. We don’t go to a lot of those; there’s always new towns popping up all the time, hope you can understand. If you want to go out west, we got coaches going to Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. We even have a few routes to Texas, but those don’t run all the time.”
“I’d just like to go west.”

“Then Utah would be your best bet.”

“How much would that coach be?”

“The driver can tell you the details, but it’ll be less than twenty.”

That left her with just enough money to buy a ticket, some nights at hotels, and food.

“When would the driver arrive?”

“He’s expected to get here a little later today,” the man said, checking his pocket watch. “You’ll have to wait a few hours, unfortunately. If you like, there’s a watering hole across the street. They have tables outside; you can keep an eye out for him there.”

She thanked the man, and carried her trunk outside. Denver was certainly a bustling city. There seemed to be dozens of people going about their business, carrying things, driving carriages, or just milling about. It was teeming with possibilities, but Angela couldn’t help but feel a little lost.

Maybe it was Fareeha. She shouldn’t have gotten so attached to the woman, even if they only traveled together for a day. But she couldn’t help but feel disappointed.

Just as the man said, there was a big saloon across the dirt street. Several tables were outside, with only a few men and women sitting there. She walked in; there were more people eating, drinking, and chatting.

“You need something to eat, sugar?” A waitress asked.

“Just some water, I’m waiting for a stagecoach,” she said.

“Ah, out for the American frontier? I got ya,” she smiled. “You want to sit outside?”

“Thank you.” Angela paused. “You know, I think I’ll take a beer.”

It certainly felt like she needed it.

“Coming right up!”

Picking up her trunk with a huff, she walked outside and found a table to sit at. The waitress came back with her beer. She thanked the woman, and looked at the city of Denver.

A new country. This is exactly what she wanted, but she couldn’t help but feel achingly alone. She never felt that way during her trip from Switzerland; she was taken aback by the feeling of loneliness. Was it because she was so excited to actually be going through with her plan? She had certainly waited long enough to make it come true, and during every single leg of the journey, she had never felt truly alone.

People came and went all the time; she made plenty of friends who were only with her for a few days, especially on the boat trip over. She had said her good-byes and moved on with much more grace than this. What was different?

Was it because she was actually in a new country, and the weight of it all was finally starting to set in? Was it because Fareeha was just so charming and strong and delectable that she just wanted to push her down, tear her clothes off, and—
She tried to drown that feeling with alcohol. The last thing she needed to feel was hot, bothered, and alone.

Her beer lasted a while, and it was alright. Certainly not as good as some of the beer she had in Switzerland or the German Empire, but it was fine.

“Need another one?” The waitress asked, checking up on her.

“Yes, please.”

Opening her trunk, she pulled out a book, the one she tried to read on the train. It was certainly easier reading now than it was trying to read on the train, where the rapidly passing by scenery was constantly distracting her. The weather was perfect, the sun was shining, the beer was acceptable, so she sat there, reading, and occasionally looking up at the bustling city.

All she needed was to get going to a different city. A stagecoach ride sounded like a great new adventure, a perfect place to meet new people, to get her mind off this latest setback. That’s all she needed, something else to take her mind off this, and of how Fareeha said her name.

“Angela.”

She’d forget all about the gorgeous woman, and work on making her way in this new country. She’s a doctor, she was in America, she was living her dream. She couldn’t focus on how the letters of her name rolled of Fareeha’s tongue.

“Angela.”

But she could still hear Fareeha’s voice on the wind, calling her.

“Angela, you here?”

Wait, that was Fareeha.

Drawn from her book, beer, and self-pity, Angela looked up. Sure enough, there was Fareeha, sitting with Lena on the back of her horse, Emily. Lena was moving her along at a trot, while Fareeha was sitting behind her, looking around.

“Hey, Angela!”

“H—here! Fareeha, over here,” she said, standing up.

Hearing her name, Fareeha turned around. A slew of carriages and coaches were passing by them, blocking them out, but Fareeha saw her for the briefest of seconds. By the time the carriages and coaches were passing them, they were trotting on their way over.

“Finally,” Fareeha sighed. “I thought I lost you.”

“What do you mean? I thought you were buying horses and going to Crease.”

“We were, but we hit a snag,” she said, dismounting and jumping to the ground.

“Remember when I said I was a courier?” Lena asked. “Well, once these two lovely ladies got their horses and broke the news that you’d be going your own way, I headed down to the post office to see if anything came through. You know, make sure I didn’t miss anything?

“Well, turns out something did come. We got two blacksmith sisters at Crease, and they put in an
order for stuff a while back. Said stuff came in early, that means I got a few heavy boxes of stuff to haul back.”

“That got me thinking,” Fareeha said, a twinkle in her eye. “If you and Lena split the cost of a wagon, we can hook our new horses up to it, haul it back, and you got a trip to Crease.”

Angela’s heart leapt in her breast, but her mind wasn’t so easily convinced.

“You’d buy a wagon, just for this? Isn’t that a little much?”

“Not at all,” Lena said. “I mean, I got a wagon back at Crease, but it’s old and run down; I’ve been putting off buying a new one, so this is as good a time as any. But even if I didn’t want to buy a new one, it’ll be a two-to-three day trip back to Crease, a day to relax, then another two-to-three days back to Denver, day to relax, then maybe a three-or-four day trip back. That’s nearly two weeks on the trail, just to haul a few boxes back! I mean, I get paid to deliver things, but that’s just wasteful. It’d drive my price up, and no one likes higher prices.”

“What do you say?” Fareeha smiled. “Want to check out Crease with me?”

“I would!”

“The wagon we’re looking at would put us both back about forty bucks,” Lena said.

Angela had her purse in hand in a second. She counted her money, paused, and counted it again.

“Well?” Fareeha asked. If Angela didn’t know any better, there was genuine anxiety in her voice.

“I’ll have to pay my tab,” she said, setting some coins down on the table, “but I think this would be a great adventure for me, a chance to see new things with a new friend.”

Fareeha broke into a wide grin.

“And that’s my two cents,” Angela said, giving Fareeha two pennies.

“That’s all you’re thinking?” Fareeha laughed.

“No, that’s all the money I have left,” she grinned. “After buying this wagon, I’m flat broke.”

“Damn, ain’t this some luck,” Lena smiled. “Come on, let’s head back.”

“You can go, Lena, we’ll meet you there,” Fareeha said.

“Suit yourself. Let’s go, Emily!”

Lena gently urged her mare on, and she broke in a trot.

“You don’t want a ride back?” Angela asked.

“And let a beautiful woman like you to carry that big old trunk of yours?” Fareeha smiled. “I think not.”

Angela really felt like blushing.

“Thank you for coming back for me,” she mumbled.

“Thank you for coming with us,” Fareeha said. “The adventure must go on!”
Fareeha picked up her trunk with a huff.

“Alright, hopefully it doesn’t have to go on too much,” she groaned, shifting the heavy trunk about, trying to find a comfortable position to carry it. Angela couldn’t help but laugh.

Back at the livery, Lena was waiting for them with Ana, who stood watch over their bags. In the time it took to get their horses, she had changed into her own pair of trousers and shirt to help make horse riding easier. Two horses, one black the other a red dun, stood by her, hitched to a rail.

“It looks like serendipity isn’t done with us yet,” Ana smiled.

“Yes, it seems that way,” Angela said.

“That’s good. You’re excellent company.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

The door to the livery’s business office opened, and a man walked out.

“Got the contract for a simple wagon ready for you,” he said. “Just need the money and a signature.”

Lena nodded to Angela, who pulled out her purse. Together, they paid for the wagon, and signed the papers. The man handed them a copy.

“Pleasure doing business with you. Bring the horses in, and we’ll get them hitched up.”

The man led them into the livery, where the wagon was waiting. It was a simple, uncovered wooden wagon, with a beam to hitch two horses to, and a simple bench by the front. Lena and Ana went to hitching the horses, while Fareeha packed the bags. Angela helped with the lighter bags.

“Right, now we just gotta head over to the post office, pick up some food, and we can hit the trail,” Lena said. “Come on!”

Fareeha reached down, offering Angela her hand. She demurely took it, and was pulled into the wagon. Ana climbed in without any trouble, proving that she was an old hand at this. Fareeha took the reins, and ushered the horses out of the livery, where Lena was waiting with Emily.

“This is so exciting!” Angela squeed.

“Now we can have a proper adventure,” Fareeha smiled.

They followed Lena through the streets to the post office. Lena hopped off, darted in, and came back with a small team of men carrying four wooden boxes. Angela could tell they were heavy; despite being well-muscled, the men trembled with exertion.

“Easy there, don’t pull anything,” Fareeha said, jumping to the back of the wagon to help them load it. The wagon’s leaf springs groaned under the weight, but easily held.

“Just a quick pop on over to the general store, and we’ll be on our way,” Lena said, leading the way with an enthusiastic Emily.
Sure enough, the general store was a few buildings down. Lena lashed Emily to the hitching rail, and dipped in. She must have moved fast, because she came back out with two big burlap bags filled with trail food, and several canteens of water.

“Right, this is good enough,” she said.

“Hold it,” Ana said. “You forgot one thing.”

“What?”

“Your bullets,” she said. “Part of the agreement, right?”

“Ah, silly me,” she smiled. “Just got so excited.”

“I bet,” Ana said.

But Lena pulled off her gun belt, plucked nearly twenty bullets from it, handed them over, and emptied her pistol.

“You better be a crack shot, I’m putting my life in your hands, luv.”

Ana pulled out her rifle, and held it across her lap.

“You’re in good hands,” she promised.

“Even with that eye?”

Ana cracked open the breech of her rifle to show it wasn’t loaded, and brought it to bear, pointing the barrel at the ground. The carved hook in the stock let her swing the rifle over to her left eye, despite shouldering it on her right.

“Nifty.”

“Plenty of rebel officers thought so,” she said, closing the breech as she set the rifle aside. “Well, they would if they were still alive.”

“I’m feeling safer already,” Lena grinned. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Angela said, practically bouncing in her seat.

Fareeha took a second to reach into her gun bag and pull out two gun belts, one for each hip. She also stowed a rifle under the bench.

“Let’s go,” she said, taking the reins again.

“Next stop, Crease!”

Chapter End Notes

Angela’s journey out west continues! You didn’t think I’d split our birbs up that easily, did you?
New Arrival

Chapter Summary

Angela has gotten a second chance to travel with Fareeha. With Lena and her noble steed Emily as their guides, they’re heading to a frontier town called Crease. Angela is looking forward to seeing the American Frontier, and with the lovely Fareeha to boot.

Denver was a big city. But it didn’t take a long time to travel from the city to the all-encompassing American wilderness. Following Emily and Lena’s lead, Angela, Fareeha, and Ana traveled into the hills, following one of the easier paths to avoid a true mountain climb. So far, it wasn’t very hard going, and according to Lena, it wouldn’t get too much worse.

As they traveled into the mountainous regions of the country, Fareeha reached into her bag. She pulled out a jacket and hat to help with the wind and sun, making her look even sharper to Angela’s eyes. Ana also pulled out a wide-brimmed straw hat, making it seem like she was on vacation instead of traveling to a new place to live. The wind picked up, but Angela was used to much worse in Switzerland. The weather here was so far perfect to her.

Along with her jacket and hat, Fareeha also pulled out a harmonica. As the wagon ambled onwards, she began idly playing a few songs. Angela had never heard a harmonica before, but she had to admit that Fareeha was quite good, a skill that Fareeha said she picked up from the army.

As Fareeha belted out songs, Ana joined in, singing along with whatever her daughter was playing. Lena also jumped in on the songs she knew. Both she and Fareeha had a fun time playing and singing various verses of “Drunken Sailor.” Being part of the sea-faring British Empire, Lena knew plenty of verses, many of which were certainly not meant to be sang in polite company.

Those illicit verses made Angela blush, but Fareeha just laughed, which often interrupting her harmonica playing. Ana would simply sigh and shake her head, but a grin would peak out from her closely held poker face. Thanks to the music and the subsequent chatting, the day passed quickly.

They set up camp in the mountainous woods just as the sun began to dip down in the sky. Fareeha went to gathering wood to make a fire while Ana examined the food Lena bought.

“You sure you want to cook?” Lena asked. “I could whip up something real quick.”

“Thank you, but cooking is a hobby of mine,” Ana said.

“Well, if you can save me from cooking and cleaning, I’ll certainly take that.”

While they had plenty of tin plates and utensils, the only cooking equipment they had were Lena’s pots and pans, which was made for one person. In order to feed everyone, Ana ended up cooking four separate meals, but it was clear that she enjoyed every second of it.

“I never thought you could cook beans like that,” Lena said, smiling as she ate in the firelight.

“This was very, very good,” Angela agreed. “How did you do this?”

“You’d be surprised what you can do with some beans, a tin of tomatoes, and spices,” Ana beamed.
“I’m glad you’re liking it.”

“If you like cooking so much, why don’t you come with me next time I gotta dip over to Denver? You’d make a good courier.”

“Thank you, but that’s work for the young,” Ana smiled. “I’d prefer to find a plot of land to call my own, and find some good work to keep it mine.”

“Damn. Thought I really lucked out.”

The sun continued to dip as they cleaned their metal plates and bowls.

“We should work out sleeping shifts,” Fareeha said. “Can’t have some bandits or highwaymen catching us sleeping. Who wants first watch?”

“I’ll tell ya, it ain’t me,” Lena grinned. “Part of the agreement, remember? Ya want to trust that I won’t lead some gang to rob you, so you let me off the hook.”

“Damn,” Fareeha grumbled. “Almost forgot about it.”

“Sure ya did,” Lena smiled. “Right, I’m gonna pitch my little tent, and I’m gonna get a full night’s sleep. Have fun!”

Angela watched as Lena pulled a canvas roll from her pack on Emily, and unrolled a simple tent. Angela wondered what would happen with her and the Amaris.

“Angela, you can sleep in the wagon,” Fareeha said.

“What do you mean?”

“You won’t be taking watch, you can just sleep.”

“And have you split watch duty with your mother? You’d be staying awake half the night.”

“That deal with Lena certainly came back to haunt us,” Ana sighed, “but my daughter is right, you should get all the sleep you can get.”

“But I want to help!”

“We’re trying to be nice,” Fareeha said.

“More acts of chivalry from you?”

“Kind of,” Fareeha grinned, “but it’s more than that. Have you ever shot at someone before?”

That made Angela stop.

“No…”

“Have you even shot a gun before?”

“No,” she mumbled.

“Then you’d be doing more harm than good if you took watch,” Fareeha said. “Standing watch means that you have to be ready to shoot someone if they want to do us harm, or if an animal attacks. Wolves stay away from humans, but if they’re hungry, they might try something. And bears, or
mountain lions? They’re certainly more territorial.”

“Don’t forget moose and boars,” Ana said.

“Can’t forget those! I’ve heard stories of a few of those animals roaming around areas like these. You need to be able to not only shoot fast, but to shoot well. So sleep, this is for the best.”

“Fine,” Angela grumbled. “But it still feels like I should be doing something.”

“You did do something,” Fareeha smiled warmly. “You helped buy a wagon to make everyone’s lives easier.”

Angela knew that Fareeha was right. Just by traveling with them, Angela was helping Lena with her delivery. And in addition, she was getting the chance to travel with the lovely Fareeha.

“Here, let’s get the tent set up in the wagon,” her chocolate crush said. “You probably won’t be able to sleep on the ground; not yet, at least.”

“Is it difficult to sleep on the ground?”

“I wouldn’t say difficult,” Fareeha said. “A challenge, yes. It’s just not for everyone.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Ana said, smiling.

“Then thank you, again,” Angela said.

Fareeha pulled out her own rolled-up tent, and Angela helped her unfold it and set it up. It was a simple A-frame tent, with a few poles to hold the thick canvas up. Stenciled on the side were a few faded words.

“What does that say?” Angela asked.

“Just the troop, unit, and squad I was in. A souvenir from my army days I walked away with,” Fareeha said with a grin. “This thing kept me dry and warm throughout the war. Well, warmer and drier than others were.”

“You said you pretended to be a man. Did you…did you have to share this with men?”

“God no! Remember, our squad knew that many of us weren’t who we said we were. I camped with a few of the girls who were able to dress and pass as men.”

“Oh, that’s good. I feel awkward for even thinking it.”

“Trust me, there were some pretty awkward things about pretending to be a man in a war,” Fareeha said. “Those are best left unsaid.”

Angela could feel herself blush at that.

“What will you and your mother do?”

“We have another tent. We’ll trade places when the time comes,” Fareeha said. “Don’t worry about us, we know what we’re doing. Just focus on getting some sleep.”

Angela pulled out a few blankets from her trunk. She rolled one up, to use as a pillow, then tightly wrapped herself with another one. The sun had finally set, and as darkness fell, it got surprisingly cold.
Fareeha also donated a simple woolen sleeping pad to go between her and the hard wood of the wagon, and after a little squirming and adjusting, she was able to fitfully drift off to sleep.

Angela woke with a start.

Something in the night was making noise. Her skin crawled as she heard a howl echoing through the night. It lasted only a few seconds before being joined by more howls. It took her a minute to realize what it was.

“Wolves,” she gasped.

They didn’t have wolves in Switzerland. Sitting up, she looked around. It was strange; the howls sounded so far away, but at the same time, she thought the wolves were upon them, breaking through the vegetation of the mountains to launch themselves on them, to rip and tear them to pieces…

But nothing happened. Insects chirped, the wind gently blew, the howls faded into the distance, and small insects seemed to move about, chirping and making noises as they lived. Angela even heard an owl hoot. It was utterly peaceful, but the wolves’ howling had set her on edge.

Angela rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but found she couldn’t. Everything was just so strange, new, and loud. Who was on watch now? Was it Fareeha? Maybe she could get some advice from her chocolate goddess on how to go back to sleep.

Rolling the flap to the tent back, Angela peeked out, half expecting some evil, large wolf to be waiting for her to take her head off. But the only thing she could see were the dim outlines of the horses, the crates on the wagon, two tents, and Ana sitting by the embers of the fire, her rifle lying across her lap.

Angela tried not to let the disappointment get to her. She was hoping that Fareeha would be the one who was still on watch. Still, she needed some kind of advice to help her get to sleep. She carefully climbed out of the wagon, wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, and did her best not to trip or get her dress too dirty. She walked up to Ana, and was thinking of what to say to not startle the woman, when Ana made her jump.

“Can’t sleep?” Ana whispered.

“Ach!”

Ana chuckled at the near heart attack Angela had.

“Did you really think I’d fall asleep on watch?” Ana asked.

“I—I don’t know,” Angela said, clutching her chest. “This is the first time I’m truly sleeping outside.”

“What do you think of it so far?”

“It’s so noisy,” she said. “There are so many bugs, the insects just seem so loud. And there’s so much going on. The wolves…we never had wolves in Switzerland, they were killed off generations
ago. How can you handle having the wolves around? Aren’t you afraid they’ll eat us?"

“Please, those are children’s stories,” Ana chuckled. “They’re warnings; no, they’re less than that. They’re fables, warnings about how people can be predators, not animals. Real wolves are scared of us; they leave us alone.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“When Fareeha and I were in the war, we only ever saw three wolves.”

“Was it a pack?”

“No, nothing like that,” Ana said. She gestured, and Angela sat down next to her. “One was dead; a farmer had killed it when it tried to sneak into his farm, and he hung it up as some kind of warning to the others. The second one was caught in a bear trap. It had been there so long, it was starting to gnaw it’s leg off to escape.”

“Mein Gott. What did you do?”

“Fareeha and I helped free the poor thing. I bribed it with some beef jerky to calm it down while Fareeha worked to pry open the trap. The very second it could pull it’s leg free, it was off and running. Well, it wasn’t really running, but it was moving as far away from us as it could, as fast as it could.”

“And the third one?”

“We had watch duty the night General Lee surrendered. The soldiers had celebrated the victory, and celebrated maybe a little too hard. It was sometime past midnight when Fareeha tapped me on the shoulder, pointing out into the woods. We only had the embers of a fire to give us light, but we could see several pairs of eyes in the woods, reflecting what little light there was. Then one brave wolf walked out. It was big, with a black coat with a silver patch at its breast. It looked at us for maybe five minutes, then walked back into the forest, taking the pack with it.

“I think that the army had partied so hard, the wolves was curious to see what could make such a racket.”

Angela chuckled at that.

“Then…then they won’t attack us?”

“Only if they’re very, very hungry. We have to worry more about bears than wolves.”

“Why’s that?”

“Wolves are scared of us. They hunt in a pack; they know what numbers can do. And us humans have a lot of numbers. But bears? They just don’t care. Bears are big and mean; there’s nothing they’re scared of.”

“Oh.” Angela said. “Then thank you for standing watch.”

“You’re welcome,” the older woman yawned.

“How can you be so tired now? All this noise is keeping me up.”

“Because I’m used to it,” she said. “All the noise you hear? To me, it’s nothing. It’s just the sound of the wilds, telling us that everything is good and fine.”
“How can I get to see it like that?”

“You just have to get used to it,” Ana shrugged. “It might take a night or two, but you’ll get it. I can’t imagine how this would be; just a few days ago, you were on the ocean. A few months ago, you must’ve been in Switzerland.”

“Yes, I was,” she said, pulling the blanket a little tighter.

The talk between them died as Angela looked around the dark forest. Now that she knew they weren’t going to be wolf food, she was beginning to realize just how beautiful it was. A gentle breeze rolled in, bringing with it a heavy scent of pines. Angela could feel her muscles relax.

“I need to thank you,” Ana said.

“Thank me? For what?”

“For the fortuitous timing of traveling with us,” she said. “Fareeha and I were going to travel west regardless of who we ran into, but Fareeha had the worst attitude about it.”

“What do you mean? She didn’t want to travel?”

“She did, but it took me a year to convince her. She was so certain that we’d face the same problems in the west that we had at home, she didn’t see the point of traveling. She was so sure that the treatment we got there would be the same as we got here, just ‘with a different backdrop.’

“The black race might be free now, but we’re far from equal. The other towns by us secretly thought that we’re trying to ruin them, either by drinking too much and lounging around, by licentiously spreading diseases, for taking their women, or working too hard and taking away their jobs, or by not working enough, or even working to destroy this nation. We were always suspected, held at arm’s length, and there was no right move we could make to put them at ease.”

“But you said you fought for the United States.”

“We fought for the Union, sweetheart.”

“What was the difference?”

“These days, not much; just a name that’s easier to say. But back then, there was most certainly a difference. It was either the Union, or the Confederacy.” She shrugged. “There’s so many who believe that we, as a race, can do no good. Because of that, it’s the small things that irks us. Buying things from an all-white store, we’d hand them our money, but they’d put our change on the counter top instead of in our hands. It was being passed over when ordering food, having the talk go quiet when we walk by, or having people cross the street to avoid walking by us. It’s grating, a very challenging thing to live with. We’ve dealt with it our whole lives, but Fareeha can’t stand it anymore. In many ways, she’s stronger than me; she doesn’t want to tolerate such things, she wants to fight it.”

“Then why wasn’t she more invested in traveling west?”

“My daughter was getting so cynical, so pessimistic. I blame the war for that. She thought traveling to a different city will have the same treatment, just with a different name. But when we got on that train in New York, when we met you, suddenly she started smiling.”

Angela felt her heart skip a beat.
“I guess she just needed to find a new friend to help her get better,” Ana chuckled. “And no offense, but you being white is excellent. It shows her that there are always good people around, regardless of their skin color.”

“Did she think that everyone…uh, everyone who’s white like me is bad?”

“I don’t think she truly believed that, not yet, but it was certainly the route she was going down,” Ana sighed. “I wanted to stop that behavior before it became worse. If she starts believing that, then she’ll end up just like the very people she hates; distrusting anyone with a different shade of skin.”

“Then I’m glad to help,” Angela smiled.

“Yes, thank you very much. But enough depressing talk,” Ana said. “Do you know what helped me sleep when we had to go to different states? Counting the stars.”

Angela looked up. She knew there were stars there, but being told to look at them was like Ana was casting a spell on her. She had never truly looked at the stars when she got to America; they were an endless sea of dots, motes of light, and it was impossibly beautiful.

“Count as many as you can, and think up constellations,” Ana said. “That always got me both relaxed and tired.”

“I’ll try that,” Angela said. “Thank you.”

“And thank you for getting my daughter to smile again.”

“I’ll do my best to make her smile every day.”

Counting the stars helped, but what truly helped Angela drift back off to sleep was the memory of Fareeha smiling that radiant smile of her, and knowing that she was the reason her chocolate crush was smiling.

The morning came, and with it, a very well-rested and smug Lena.

“What everyone sleep good?” She asked.

“Nice to know you like to rub it in,” Fareeha said as she stretched.

“All in good fun, luv,” she grinned. “And Ana, thank you for cooking again.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Ana smiled, handing out another fluffy biscuit. “Cooking has always been a hobby I’ve enjoyed.”

“You didn’t have to wake up early to cook, we could’ve just had a simple breakfast,” Lena said.

“Nonsense! These are sourdough biscuits; they needed to set overnight. They were ready to bake when I woke up. All I had to do was roll them out and get a fire lit.”

“Then let’s eat up real quick, and hit the trail.”

Angela wanted to change clothes, but Fareeha told her not to worry about it; they could freshen up
when they reached Crease, and besides, who would judge them? The birds and insects?

Fareeha had a point, but Angela wanted to wear something else, if only to show off to the dark-skinned goddess. Fareeha looked so good in her trousers, shirt with rolled up sleeves, and vest, not to mention the jacket and hat she wore. Angela wanted to dress up as well.

Once everyone ate, the horses were hitched to the wagon, and Lena blazed the trail with her trusty mare Emily. They traveled through the mountains, navigating the sometimes threatening but mostly harmless trail, chatting, singing, and laughter as they went. Angela had obviously never seen Fareeha before her fateful train trip, but Ana’s words rung in her ears: she was smiling more, and was smiling because of her.

Angela endlessly thought of that moment, replaying it over and over in her head. It made her heart flutter and stomach flip. She tried to slyly sneak glances at the dark-haired dusty woman who sat next to her on the wagon, just to see if she could spot the grin. Sure enough, Fareeha seemed to be in very high spirits; she was always ready to laugh, and played her harmonica with gusto. Angela’s spying led to some heart stopping moments when Fareeha would turn to look at her, and Angela would hastily turn away, looking at something out in the distance, but she’d always return to sneaking peaks at her.

Lunch consisted of jerky and apples, with oats and water from a stream for the horses. Ana borrowed one of Lena’s pots and boiled some water and refilled their canteens so they'd always have good water. Then it was onward, fording a few small streams and one big river. Crossing the river was the most dangerous part of the trip so far.

Lena led the way with her noble Emily, the water rising up to Lena’s waist as Emily swam. Fareeha eased the horses into the water, and Angela clutched at her arm as the water almost came up to the wooden bench they sat at.

But they were able to cross it, and without so much as a hiccup. Her dress got a little wet, but none of the goods they had got washed away. Ana and Lena were quick to call the fording a success, while Fareeha gently calmed her down with a reassuring one-armed hug, and her dazzling smile. It didn’t matter if they made it to Crease or not; all Angela needed was that smile.

“Thanks for cooking again, Ana,” Lena beamed. Even though the sun had set, lighting the sky on fire, Lena seemed just as energetic as ever.

“My pleasure,” Ana smiled at the chipper Brit. “You can go set up your tent, I’ll take care of the dishes and plates.”

“Can I help?” Angela asked.

“Thank you, but you need to get settled,” Ana said. “Fareeha has first watch, I’ll just go to bed after I’m done.”

“Come on, let’s get you set up,” Fareeha said, pulling out her tent from the back of the wagon.

“I’m amazed it can fold up so small,” Angela said, climbing into the wagon to help her. “You can carry this all in one bag!”
“Habit from the Army,” Fareeha grinned. “We had to pack light and tight. They don’t give us a whole lot of room to carry things, so the things we carry has to be really packed up.”

Angela helped set up the tent a little more than she got in the way, but Fareeha never once complained. The darkness grew thicker as the sun retreated further beneath the horizon, and Angela realized just how tired she was.

“See you in the morning,” Fareeha smiled.

“Thank you,” she said, gathering her blankets. She rolled one out on the floor of the wagon, and laid down. It felt like she had just drifted off, but the insects and sounds of nature woke her again, just like her first night.

Angela rolled around to get comfortable and was just about to drift back off to sleep when she saw the smoldering fire. Fareeha was sitting on the ground by the fire.

She was so tired that she was aching, but Angela had to get up. She gently climbed down from the wagon. She wanted to sneak up on Fareeha, but the young woman was too alert.

“Can’t sleep?” Fareeha asked as Angela stumbled over.

“Too noisy,” she mumbled, sitting down next to her.

“You’ll get used to it,” Fareeha smiled. She held her rifle across her lap, but set it to the side, letting Angela sit close to her.

“Not yet,” Angela yawned.

“You sure you want to try and stay up? You sound pretty tired.”

“Why aren’t you tired?” Angela pouted.

“Believe me, I am. But standing guard is habit for me, I did it all the time in the Army.”

Angela yawned again, her eyelids growing heavier and heavier. She wanted to go to sleep, but she was finally alone with Fareeha.

“Thank you for taking me with you,” she said, her words slurring from exhaustion.

“A-and thank you for coming with,” Fareeha stammered. “God, you made this trip worthwhile. I actually didn’t want to go out west.”

“Why? Were you worried about too many bad things?”

Fareeha looked at her, wondering how Angela could have known. She just smiled; it seemed that Ana didn’t tell her daughter they had talked last night.

“I just didn’t want to get disappointed,” Fareeha said quietly.

“You’re not disappointed anymore?”

Fareeha put a gentle but firm hand on Angela’s shoulder to keep her upright. Angela realized just how much she was swaying. Oh, why couldn’t she stay awake anymore?

“No, I’m actually feeling really good about this trip,” Fareeha said. “I guess I really owe you a lot. You made this seem... just special.”
Angela giggled, sliding up next to Fareeha. The woman stiffened, but let her. Seconds later, her hand gently reached around Angela’s shoulder.

“I’m so glad I met you, too.”

“Sorry?”

Angela realized she had gotten so tired, she slipped back into German.

“Glad I meet you…”

Fareeha’s heart fluttered at that.

“And I’m glad I got to meet you, too.”

Angela was quiet. Fareeha looked over; the blonde doctor had fallen asleep with her head on her shoulder. Fareeha chuckled at that. She wanted the doctor to get some sleep, but she couldn’t move her back to her tent just yet, she might wake up again.

Fareeha gently scooted over, and eased the doctor down. Angela stirred once, but stayed asleep as Fareeha let Angela use her lap as a pillow. The doctor sighed contently, and went back to sleeping.

The night was so quiet and still, Fareeha knew she could shirk a little at her guard duty. Nothing made her hesitant, nothing gave her pause, nothing kept her from staring at Angela as she slept. Fareeha gently stroked the blonde’s hair, earning a happy sigh from the sleeping Angela.

Looking up, Fareeha stared at the pitch black sky and the countless stars that filled it. The air gently rustled through the leaves of the trees, bathing her in a cool breeze. The scent of pines filled her nose, with occasional hints of smoke from the slowly burning fire that danced on the wind. The sounds of the night echoed through the trees; the insects chirping, owls hooting, branches and leaves rustling, and the occasional howl of a far-away wolf. And of course, Fareeha couldn’t forget the feeling of Angela sleeping on her lap.

And in those moments, for the first time in a very long time, Fareeha realized just how happy she was.

The fire was slowly dying, turning more into smoldering embers than anything else. It needed another log. Fareeha guessed it had been long enough, so she decided to move Angela.

When she decided to pretend to be a boy to enter the Army, Fareeha knew she had to get strong. So she started doing push-ups outside, and pull-ups on a low-hanging tree branch. It toned her arms, giving her strength; it was enough for the Army to consider her just a pretty boy and not a girl.

Without that strength, she would never have been able to pick up and carry Angela without waking her. Fareeha carried Angela like a bride back to the wagon and the tent that was waiting for her. She gently set Angela down, placing a blanket on top of her.

Fareeha paused. Looking at Angela filled her with light, warmth, and happiness. She never, ever would have thought that she would end up here, with such a beautiful angel of a woman. She hesitated, but gently kissed Angela on her forehead.

Blushing, Fareeha went back to the fire, added another log, and checked her pocket watch. She had just over an hour left in her watch, but she was perfectly happy to wait. She just thought about having Angela resting her head in her lap.
Morning came to Angela by being gently shaken awake by Ana. Funny, she didn’t remember falling asleep in her tent. She barely remembered falling asleep at all. She yawned and stretched, trying to remember how she got into the borrowed tent. She thought she talked with Fareeha, something about a fire. Did she talk with Fareeha in front of the fire last night? She remembered lying on her, sleeping on her lap. No, that had to be a dream. She was in the tent, not with Fareeha, much to her disappointment.

Angela looked at Fareeha as they ate their trail breakfast; the chocolate woman was a little tired, but seemed perfectly happy, and a little bashful. She even made a few quick eyes at her over their meal. But it was just that; quick. Soon they were back to traveling. Angela laughed to herself. It was her third day in America, and she was already having excellent dreams.

Maybe an adjustment period was all she needed. When they started traveling, the wagon seemed very stiff, with jostles threatening to knock Angela about. But on their third day of travel, they barely gave her pause. And the wooden bench became quite tolerable as well, which is what Angela appreciated more. They continued on their journey, chatting and singing and listening to Fareeha skillfully play her harmonica.

Lena didn’t call for lunch, saying they were close enough. The path to the town of Crease led them up to a crest of a hill; that’s when Lena called for a stop.

Fareeha brought the horses and wagon to a stop. The land ahead of them turned into a plain, and a fertile one if Angela had to guess. There was some trees amid a sea of tallgrass that wildly grew on the plains, stretching on further than the eye could see, rippling with the wind as if it was the sea.

To their right, the mountains continued onward, turning further north. But ahead of them, the mountains dipped down as it stretched to the plains, turning into a small forest. Separating the mountains and forests from the plains was a wide, blue river.

All along the planes were farms. Angela could see neat rows of crops, fences for animals who appeared as small dots, and nearly a dozen barns. But a close to the banks of the river was a gathering of buildings. Squinting her eyes, Angela counted at least four large buildings forming the main street of the city, with over a dozen small family houses built up around the main street. Puffs of smoke came from chimneys.

“Here we are,” Lena said proudly. “Welcome to Crease!”

“It certainly is quaint,” Ana smiled.

“Yup! Just some good old frontier folk, making their scratch off the land!” Lena beamed. “Hey, if you look off in the distance over there on the plains, you can see one of Mako’s herds.”

“Who’s Mako?”

“Mako Rutledge. He’s the cattle owner I mentioned. Crease exists mostly because this was a sweet spot for his cowboys to lead the cattle. The river is a good spot for them to water up and refresh, but isn’t deep enough to keep ‘em from crossing. There’s even a few valleys here that lead north and southeast, perfect for leading them about and letting them graze.”
“Then let's check it out,” Fareeha said, urging the horses on.

They slowly descended the mountains and hills, drawing closer and closer to the city. Angela was filled with a mixture of anxiety, stress, and excitement. This was it; a true, honest to God American Frontier town. She couldn’t wait to see what it was like. But at the same time, Lena’s warning was in the back of her mind.

*Frontier life is hard,* Lena had said. *Took me a good long while to come around to it. Some people just ain’t cut out for it.*

But Angela would adjust to it. She had to; she was utterly broke, without a penny to her name. She was very much stuck here.

The road leading down from the mountains and through the forest towards Crease was barely more than hard packed dirt. But it was the best road they’d been on since they left Denver; they made excellent time down the hill, crossing a simple but wide wooden bridge, and plodded happily along towards the city. Once they crossed the bridge, they were in the sunny, breezy plains, passing grass that almost came up to the bottom of the wagon. Fortunately, the road was packed, and they traveled on in ease.

“What do you think?” Angela asked.

“It’s too early to tell,” Fareeha said, tilting her hat back, “but this feels good. It feels like…”

“Like hope?” She asked.

“Yes,” Fareeha smiled. “Hope, and a new beginning.”

“That sounds like something we all need,” Ana said. She took off her wide-brimmed straw hat, letting the air blow through her hair. “A fresh, new beginning.”

They drew closer to the little town, passing a few farms. Cows mooed, chickens clucked, pigs oinked, and a few farmhands saw them from the fields. They stood on their simple wooden fences, waving at the group as they passed by. A few recognized Lena, and called out a welcome. The perky Brit smiled and waved back.

Angela blinked. There were an equal number of black farmers as there were white farmers. She didn’t know what to expect, but she didn’t expect to see so many people like Fareeha. It was a pleasant surprise.

“Right, almost forgot one thing,” Lena said, falling in line next to the wagon’s bench. “Sheriff Morrison is a good guy. Thing is, he likes to run a tight ship. When we get in town, he’s gonna ask for your guns.”

“He wants our guns?” Ana said, raising the eyebrow above her dead eye.

“Not him personally, but it’s a law. Ah, there it is.”

Lena pointed ahead of them. There was a painted sign on the road, tall enough to stand above the grass.

*Welcome to Crease. By city ordnance, only law enforcement officials and select individuals may carry weapons. Please surrender your guns to the sheriff upon your arrival.*

“We have a right to have our guns,” Ana said.
“Yea, ya do, but Crease law says that only law enforcement officials, that’d be Morrison, or citizens deemed safe enough with them can carry a gun openly.”

“We have to prove that we’re good with a gun before we can carry it openly?” Fareeha asked, eyebrow raised.

“More of like proving that you aren’t planning to rob someone or start something.”

“Can he do that?”

“Morrison didn’t come up with the rule; it was voted on by the town, and everyone wanted it. Too many bad nights with Mako’s cowboys getting rowdy in Madam Lacroix’s saloon. They’re good guys, but they’ve been on the trail for a few weeks or months. Give ‘em some booze, flash ‘em some painted lady flesh and, well, you can’t really blame ‘em for jerking their guns.”

“‘Painted lady?’” Angela asked.

“Wha’, they don’t have them back in Switzerland?” Lena said. “They’re prostitutes. Ya know, whores.”

“They…I mean, that’s allowed?”

“Allowed?! Shit, the saloon was the first building to be built; it’s the heart of Crease. Madam Lacroix practically owns this town!”

Angela shifted awkwardly on the bench.

“I think we should avoid the saloon, then.”

“That’d be real hard to do, luv. You saw how many buildings there are? The saloon is, like, a quarter of the town. Oh, it’s also the town’s diner. And the unofficial town meeting hall.”

“It’s all of those things?”

“That’s the frontier for ya,” Lena grinned. “Everything pulls double- or triple-duty! ’Sides, not only do we need to get some food in us, I got a meeting with Madam Lacroix once I deliver these boxes.”

Angela looked over to Ana and Fareeha. They both had a strange, pained look on their faces.

“Are you two alright?” She asked.

“I’m not that keen on giving up my guns,” Fareeha said. “Even back home, we could keep them.”

“Back home there wasn’t a white person within two miles,” Ana said. “But I feel the same way. We need to keep ourselves safe.”

“Hey, no need to get your panties in a bunch,” Lena said. “Sheriff Morrison is a crack shot, and there are always a few cowboys on leave who can stand up for you.”

“The cowboys are the reason for the gun ban, and they’ll help protect us?” Fareeha snorted. “Forgive me if that sounds too good to be true.”

“Well, the cowboys won’t care who you are, but Madam Lacroix is as big as keeping the peace as Morrison is. She was the one who asked for the law to be put in place. If she puts the word out on someone, the stars themselves will practically bend to her will. All she has to do is give the cowboys a discount for the night, and they’ll do whatever she wants.”
“This Madam Lacroix sounds quite…controlling,” Angela said.

“You don’t know the half of it!” Lena grinned. “But she’s nice and easy to get along with, if a little intense. Come on, you’ll see.”

As they pulled closer to the little town, the road widened. Where it was once only a little wider than the wagon, it became three times as big. Soon, they came to their first house. It was a small, rough house with a small fence built around it. There wasn’t much grass around it, which was a big change from the wild grass that dominated the planes not just a few feet from their fences.

There was a big building, almost a small barn, that was attached to the house. A big chimney poked out of it, and black smoke rose from it. They were dozens of meters from the house, but Angela could hear the ringing of metal-on-metal.

“Thanks for pitching in for the wagon,” Lena said to her. “These are the sisters who put the order in.”

Lena rode up to the house’s gate, and climbed off Emily, quickly hitching the horse to the fence.

“Hey, Efi! Orisa! Special delivery!”

The metal-on-metal ringing stopped, and a big barn-style door was pushed open. One of the biggest women that Angela had ever seen stepped out into the sun. She was taller than almost anyone she had ever known; the woman was easily two meters tall, and built like a brick wall, with muscles that seemed more fitting on a man. Yet despite her muscles, she still had the markings of a woman, with a large chest, wide hips, and long black hair pulled into a bun.

It was clear that she was a blacksmith, but Angela thought it was more fitting that the blacksmithing profession chose the woman for itself, not the other way around.

The blacksmith woman wore a dirty pair of denim overalls, with an equally dirty and worn out long-sleeved undershirt. She pulled out a rag to mop the sweat off her forehead. And Angela thought that Fareeha was dark skinned; this woman seemed to have skin made of pitch.

“Lena? Back so soon?” The blacksmith asked with a thick accent. She walked up to the fence.

“I was only gone for a few days, Orisa,” Lena said.

“Did you really miss Madam Lacroix that much?” The woman, Orisa, grinned. She leaned on the fence surrounding the house.

“Come on, was that really necessary?” Lena pouted.

“Considering you, it might be.”

“If you keep that up, I’ll keep your order for myself.”

Orisa blinked at that.

“That’s not supposed to come in for at least a few more weeks.”

“Someone up the ladder must like you, then,” Lena said. “I got it in the back of the wagon.”

“So you finally got a new wagon.”

“Yea, it was past due. That, and I had a friend who helped me pick it up.”
“Are these your friends?”

“Yup! Met ‘em in Denver by chance. They’re frontier-bound folk.”

“I can see,” Orisa said, turning her attention to Angela and the Amaris. “I’m Orisa. It’s nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is ours,” Ana smiled. “I’m Ana Amari.”

“I’m Fareeha, her daughter.”

“And I’m Angela Ziegler.”

“Pleasant folk,” Orisa smiled. “You’re looking for a new beginning? You came to the right place. Crease is full of us misfits.”

Angela couldn’t help but chuckle at that. She, Fareeha, and Ana must seem quite the odd bunch.

“Now what’s this about our order coming in early?” Orisa asked.

“Just that. Found out about it by chance,” Lena said. “These fine folk hired me as their guide back to Crease; if I didn’t drop by the post office ‘fore leaving town, I’d have missed it.”

“Efi!” Orisa hollered. “Efi!! Drop your tinkerings, we got our order in! Bring the money!”

A few seconds later, a small girl ran from the house; she couldn’t be more than fourteen. Like Orisa, she wore denim overalls, but seemed much less dirty. Aside from their black skin, Angela didn’t think they were related. Where Orisa was muscular, Efi was thin and slight. Orisa was tall, but Efi seemed short for her age. And Efi seemed to have a skin tone closer to Fareeha than the older Orisa.

“It came?” The tiny girl, Efi, said, running up.

“Looks like it did,” Orisa said, patting her on the shoulder. “What do we owe Lena, sister?”

“Thank you, Lena! Thank you so much!” Efi said. “That was four dollars and seventy cents for the delivery, yes?”

“I…I think so?”

“Yes, it was,” Efi said. “You were wearing that deep orange shirt in the saloon when we hired you. I think you were sick that day; you were drinking a lot of water, but you weren’t eating anything, and you were cradling your head like it was going to split open.”

“It’s scary how good your memory is,” Lena mumbled, fighting a blush.

“Here you go,” Efi said, handing over the money as Orisa walked to the back of the wagon.

“Need a hand with those?” Fareeha asked.

“If you want to, sure,” the massive woman said.

Fareeha jumped up to help her, but didn’t help as much as she thought she would. The boxes were big and heavy, but Orisa seemed perfectly fine with the weight. Fareeha’s help was mostly to keep the boxes balanced, as they were too awkward a size for one person to comfortably carry.

As they moved the boxes from the wagon to the barn/workshop, Angela saw Orisa’s back. The
overalls weren’t enough to fully cover her, and the shirt she wore underneath was pitted with use, and the neck was stretched out to nearly three times its original size; it showed off a big part of Orisa’s back.

The parts of her back that could be seen was a crisscross of scars.

“Told you I can’t wait to get my hands on these,” Efi smiled, looking over the boxes.

“But these are the right ones, yes?” Orisa asked.

“They are.”

“Good. Get back inside, I’ll help you play with the stuff.”

Efi smiled and ran inside, but Orisa stayed, giving Angela a hard glare.

“You saw my back, didn’t you?”

Orisa might as well have been making a statement.

“How…?”

“You got a look in your eyes. I know that look.”


“Slavery happened,” Orisa said. “But I’m free now. That isn’t going to be a problem, is it?”

“No, not at all!”

“Orisa, ease up,” Lena said. “Angela here ain’t a rebel; she’s ain’t even from America. She came over from Switzerland.”

“Where’s that?”

“Across the sea, east into Europe.”

Orisa glared at her for a few more seconds, but relented.

“As long as she doesn’t make it a problem.”

“Trust me, she won’t,” Fareeha said. “She’s cool.”

“Were you enslaved?” Orisa asked, turning her attention to the Amaris.

“No, we were lucky,” Ana said. “But we did fight the rebels during the war.”

“You fought rebels?” A smile planted itself on Orisa’s lips.

“Well, I fought,” Fareeha said, “and she sat back and took pot shots.”

“The Union let you fight?”

“I dressed as a boy. I was a bit smaller then.”

“And they couldn’t stop me from headhunting rebel officers,” Ana said.
“How many rebels did you kill?”

“How many rebels did you kill?” Mother and daughter said that at the same time.

Orisa roared with laughter.

“Then I owe you both a drink!” She said. “We’re a bit busy today, but I’ll meet you in the saloon in a day or two.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Fareeha grinned. The two of them bumped fists, like they had known each other for years. Orisa sauntered back to her house, and Fareeha gently urged the horses on.

There were a few more building is Crease, and people walking about their business. Like the farmers, there seemed to be just as many black folk as there were white, but there were other people that Angela had to guess were Mexican. Crease was certainly a strange melting pot, but it felt homey.

The main street was wide, and it was thankfully dry. The wagon wheels didn’t get stuck in any ill-sort of muck, which helped keep the smell to a minimum. Signs made it easy to tell the buildings apart. There was a building for the City Hall, a big hotel, the even bigger and apparently quite infamous saloon, a building who’s sign said it was a general store, a church at the end of the street, and finally, a building for the sheriff. They were barely passing the sheriff’s office when the door opened.

Two men walked out onto the porch, in the middle of a conversation. One man was tall, with blonde hair, and a five o’clock shadow that was perhaps a day or so away from becoming a beard. He was strongly built, perhaps in his thirties. He wore what seemed to be a pair of dark colored trousers, a long sleeved shirt rolled to his biceps, a white hat, and a vest that had a star pinned to his breast. A gun belt sat on his waist, with two pistols at his hips.

The other man was much larger, perhaps larger than the sizable Orisa. He was also blonde, with a finely groomed moustache. He wore a suit, with dress pants, shirt, and a vest. He was the one that was talking, and his voice was loud and booming.

Seeing them arrive, the two men turned their attention to them.

“Lena, you’re back early,” the blonde man with the badge said.

“Heya, Sheriff. And Mr. Mayor, nice to see you up and about,” she said. “Yea, yea, I’m back early. Already got an earful on that from Orisa, so save it. Trip ended up being shorter than I thought.”

“Well, it’s always good to see you grin so easy,” the larger man, the one Lena called Mayor, said. “Are those new travelers that I see?”

“Yup, frontier-bound folks looking for a slice of that American dream. Found ‘em in Denver, and they took me as their guide.”

“Folks,” the Sheriff said, tipping his hat. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Jack Morrison, I’m sheriff of these parts.”

“I’m Fareeha Amari.”

“Ana, her mother.”

“I’m Angela Ziegler.”
“And I am Mayor Reinhardt Wilhelm,” the large man roared. At least, to Angela it sounded like he was yelling. His voice was naturally loud, she was sure he could make more noise if he wanted to. “When Madam Lacroix doesn’t mind butting in.”

He stepped off the porch, walking closer to the wagon. He saw Ana, and hesitated for the slightest of seconds.

“E-excuse me, but what was your name, again?” He asked, his loud, boisterous voice dropping a few levels.

“Ana. Ana Amari.”

“It is a wonder to meet you, Mrs. Amari,” he said.

“It’s Miss Amari, please,” she smiled. “I haven’t married.”

“A-ah, my apologies,” Reinhardt stammered. “Welcome to Crease, Miss Amari.”

He held his hand out, which Ana took. It seemed that chivalry was well-known in America, for Reinhardt gently kissed Ana’s hand, just as Fareeha had done to Angela.

“Oh!” Ana startled, a blush rising to her cheeks. “Such a warm welcome from the mayor!”

“A warm welcome for a lovely woman is the least I could do,” he smiled back.

“You mean ‘women,’” Fareeha said, a very hard edge creeping into her voice.

“Ach! You are right! My apologies, sometimes my English isn’t so good,” Reinhardt roared, smiling as wide and easy as Lena. He seemed to take Fareeha’s injection in step.

“Reinhardt, you said?” Angela said, switch to German.

“You speak German?” He said, surprised.

“I was raised in Switzerland. It is both of our mother language,” she smiled.

“Then this is quite the fortuitous day,” he roared. He turned to Sheriff Morrison, and switched back to English. “We are lucky to have such a wonderful group of travelers grace our town!”

“Yea, it’s quite a motley crew,” Morrison agreed with a chuckle. “Welcome to Crease. Since our mayor didn’t mention it, I assume that Lena told you of our city ordinance, right?”

“Ach, the ordinance!” Reinhardt said, smacking his forehead. “Thank you for catching that, sheriff.”

“Just one of the services I provide,” he smiled.

“Yes, Lena told us,” Fareeha said. “No guns unless you’re a lawman.”

“That’s right. And I’m the lawman here. That’s not gonna be a problem, is it?”

Fareeha paused, but Ana did not.

“Only as long as you look out for our guns,” she said.

“Don’t you worry about that,” Morrison said. “I keep everything in good order.”

Ana brought her rifle up, and pumped the lever, ejecting each bullet. When it was empty, she passed
it off to Morrison. Fareeha followed suit, and both women handed them their revolvers. Lena handed hers over without a word.

“That little angel isn’t carrying anything?”

“I don’t have a gun,” Angela said.

“That better not be a lie. I get mighty upset if people lie to me.”

“He does,” Reinhardt said. “You should see him when Gabriel tries to pull the wool over his eyes.”

“Who’s Gabriel?” Angela asked.

“The so-called ‘priest’ of this town,” Morrison growled. “He’s always slinking around here, sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“My nose is everywhere, because God is everywhere,” a man said.

Angela jumped a little. The speaker had walked up behind them, like he was a wraith or a ghost of some kind. He wore the black shirt and pants of a priest, with a clerical collar at his neck. He was dark skinned, almost as dark as Fareeha was. His hair was just as black; it was slicked back stylishly, and he wore a well-trimmed goatee.

“Speak of the Devil,” Morrison groaned, “and he shall appear.”

“Hey, I was passing by,” the priest grinned. “No need to be hostile.”

“After a lame line like that, I think that deserves a little hostility.”

“Sheriff, this is not the time to be bickering with a man of the cloth,” Mayor Reinhardt said.

“Yea, Jack, where are your manners?” The priest grinned. He turned to Angela. “I’m Father Gabriel Reyes. I take it you’re all new here?”

Reyes sounded Latin. And he had a small lilt to his words, a slight accent that sounded Romantic.

“Yes, we just got in,” Fareeha said.

“Then welcome! May you find what you’re looking for, and if you need guidance, I can always help.”

“Help guide them to the saloon, you mean?” Sheriff Morrison asked.

“Lead us to the saloon? He’s a man of the cloth,” Ana laughed.

“A man of the cloth, yes, but still just a man,” Father Reyes replied.

That got Ana to pause.

“I thought temperance is a virtue.”

“Undoubtedly, but too little is a deficiency,” Father Reyes said with a smile. “To live a truly just and virtuous life, you must maintain a balance between the two extremes. After all, one can’t drink only water, but if one drinks no water, then they suffer the same fate.”

“He’s good at twisting the teachings around to suit him,” Jack said.
“Hey! I’ll have you know that Jesus Christ himself kept company with whores and lepers. Sitting at a bar is in the spirit of Christianity.”

“This old excuse again!”

Angela blinked. Sheriff Morrison and Father Reyes were fighting, yelling at each other, but she couldn’t help but get the feeling that this was something they’d done before, and that it was something they liked doing. While both of them were spitting at each other, they both had an odd smirk at their lips, like this was an old dance they knew exceptionally well.

“Gentlemen, please,” Mayor Reinhardt gasped, “not in front of new arrivals.”

“Fine,” Jack said. “I gotta get these guns inside and log them.”

He stopped, counting the guns.

“Hold it,” Jack said. “I got the rifles and pistols from two people. Are you sure you don’t have a weapon?”

“I don’t have a gun, really,” Angela said. “I’ve only been in America for a few days.”

“Oh, a truly new arrival, eh?” He smiled. “Then welcome to America. Hope it’s to your liking.”

“So far it is,” she said, giving a quick look to Fareeha.

“Then I hope you have a good stay. If you need these back, just ask.”

Morrison tipped his hat to them, and walked back inside to secure their guns.

“Oh, and mayor,” he called from the doorway, “don’t forget you have to finish that report before you go carousing with the newbies.”

“Ach, such a busybody,” Reinhardt groaned. “Miss Amari, I wish I could show you and your companions around town, but unfortunately, I have to attend to my duties as mayor. May I have the pleasure of seeing you later?”

“Of course you may,” Ana smiled.

“After we settled in,” Fareeha said, injecting herself between the two dumbly grinning adults.

“Yes, yes, the journey must have been tiring,” Reinhardt said. “Please, let me know when you are available.”

“I’ll do my best,” Ana promised.

Reinhardt beamed at that, and walked off to the building next door, the one that was marked ‘City Hall.’

“As much as I’d like to introduce you to the city better, I better get back to the church, someone might actually want to repent for their sins,” Gabriel said, eyeing the door that Jack walked into. It looked like he was expecting a retort, but Morrison had left ear shot.

“Man, it’s just no fun if he doesn’t hear,” Gabriel sighed. He nodded politely to the group, and walked away.

“So, this is just a little taste of our humble town,” Lena smiled. “Now I don’t know about you lot, but
I'm hungry. Let’s get some food.”

“I like the sound of that,” Fareeha said hotly. Angela could tell she was a little cross at the Mayor making eyes at her mom. She urged the horses on, following Lena as she trotted Emily up to the massive saloon.

The wooden saloon was three stories tall, although the third story seemed to be built as an addition; the paint was newer, not as faded as the rest. There was a veranda that ran the full length of the saloon, giving it nearly ten feet of wooden deck space between the door and the street that was blissfully shaded. There were a few chairs set along the veranda, but the real resting place seemed to be inside; music spilled out into the street.

The saloon was long, too. Angela had to guess that it was at least twenty meters long. And there were big, glass windows running the length of the ground floor. She didn’t know much about the American west, but she hadn’t seen such big glass windows in Denver.

The final touch was the massive sign above the first floor’s deck.

*_Madam Lacroix’s Saloon._

“Here we are,” Lena said, hopping off Emily to hitch her to the railing. There were several horses hitched there, too, drinking from a very long trough. “Best place to eat in town.”

“From the looks of it, the only place to eat in town,” Ana said, stepping off to hitch their horses.

“Details!”

Fareeha gave Angela a hand down. The streets were dirt like Denver, but were less packed. Her shoes sank maybe an inch into the ground, but fortunately, it was still easy to walk through. Soon they were climbing the steps to the veranda, then they were pushing open the swinging doors.

The inside of the saloon was much bigger than Angela expected. There were dozens of tables, where men and woman sat, eating and drinking. A piano sat along the wall, while a very long bar sat on the opposite end. A man played the piano, while the bar was operated by women. Thanks to the long windows, the saloon was bathed with natural sunlight, making it easy to see. There also seemed to be windows in the ceiling, further helping the massive room remain visible. Waitresses with different skin tones walked from table to table, chatting and laughing with the patrons and delivering food and drink. Along the back wall was a small stage, which was currently empty.

But the women…they would have caused a scandal back in Switzerland. They all wore corsets and short dresses which only ended at their knees. Angela could feel her gaze linger a second too long, and a blush crept to her cheeks. It seemed her attraction to women didn’t end with Fareeha.

At the entrance was a maître d’ at a podium, with a woman waiting for new arrivals. Like all the waitresses, the maître d’ was a woman, and also like the other women, she wore a matching corset and short dress. The woman’s mocha-colored breasts were practically spilling out of the corset, but she held herself with such poise and grace, it seemed almost natural.

The woman had long locks of gorgeous black hair that cascaded down her back in gentle curls, and skin that seemed to match Father Reyes’. A blush rose to Fareeha’s cheeks, and she made a show of staring straight ahead, only looking at the women’s eyes, just as Angela was doing.

The maître d’ was writing in a book, idly sketching a beautiful scene of the American wilderness, but looked up as they approached.
“Hey, look who it is,” the woman grinned. “Que pasa, Lena? You came back quick.”

She spoke Spanish? She must be Mexican, like the priest.

“The trip ended up being shorter than expected, Olivia,” Lena said, leaning on the woman’s podium. “Turns out Efi and Orisa’s order came in sooner than expected.”

“But you only took Emily with you,” Olivia said. “You left your rust bucket wagon back at your shack. That must mean you finally got a new wagon, eh?”

“How’d you know that?”

“You should know I got a habit of sticking my nose in everything, chica,” Olivia grinned. “I see you got some new arrivals too, eh?”

“Found ‘em in Denver, suggested they try out Crease. The real cute blonde one helped me get a new wagon.”

Angela felt herself blush more. But Fareeha bristled at that.

“We all found we had a place to go, and found it better to travel as a group,” Fareeha said defensively. It sounded like she thought someone was planning to take her away.

“Then we’re glad you decided to drop by our humble abode,” Olivia said.

“If what everyone says is true, there’s no other place to eat,” Ana said.

“Details,” Oliva said, dismissing it with a gentle wave. “Sorry Lena, but Madam Lacroix is busy right now, you’ll have to wait. Until then, table for all of you?”

“Damn, was hoping to surprise her,” Lena pouted. “Yea, table for all of us. We need some food.”

“Right this way.”

Olivia gently stopped a passing-by girl, tapping her on the shoulder. The girl nodded at some unseen, non-verbal nod, and led them to a table, giving them all hand-written paper menus.

“I’d suggest the crepes,” Lena said. “Madam Lacroix makes sure they’re utterly top-notch.”

“Oh, crepes,” Angela said. “I haven’t had those in forever.”

“They have good crepes in Switzerland?”

“We have to. I grew up in a town close to the French border. If we made bad crepes, the French might find some way to bring Napoleon back!”

“And we can’t have that, can we?” Lena laughed.

The waitress came back to take their orders. Then Angela remembered her empty coin purse.

“Oh. You order, I won’t have anything,” Angela said.

“You’re not going to skip a meal like this,” Fareeha said. “This is our first time in Crease! Get what you want, I’ll spot you.”

“But…”
“I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer,” Fareeha smiled warmly.

“T-then thank you,” Angela blushed. She put in an order of crepes and a pint of ale, the same as everyone else. She waited for the woman to walk away before speaking again.

“These women…” Angela said, looking at the barely dressed women. “Are they…? I mean, they work here, right?”

“Of course they work here. Those corsets are nice, but they’re not exactly casual wear, right?” Lena said.

“No. Er, yes. I mean, yes, but that’s…” Angela tried to stop blushing. “I mean, they’re not just… waitresses, are they? I mean, are they…?”

“She’s asking if they’re the whores you mentioned,” Fareeha said. She wasn’t blushing as much as Angela was, but her voice was just as terse.

“Oh yea they are,” Lena said. “That’s what Madam Lacroix envisioned when she made the place. At least, that’s what she tells everyone. Every girl here is a waitress, barkeep, and whore. Even Olivia started out as a regular. I mean, she still is, but she’s got other duties to attend to. I don’t think she’s taken a client in a long time.”

“And this entire building is Madam Lacroix’s?” Ana asked, looking the bar over. Angela followed her gaze. She was so nervous, so taken aback by the salacious working women, she didn’t look up, and missed the higher floors.

There were two grand stairwells running to the second and third floors, starting on either side of the stage, feet from the performance area. They rose up, wrapping around the entire saloon, with a dozen of doors going to side rooms, no doubt that was where the whores made their money.

The waitress/working girl returned with their food and drinks.

“Yup,” Lena said, taking a pull of ale. “The entire building is hers. Every table, every plate, every drop of booze, every girl, it’s all Madam Lacroix’s.”

“Damn,” Fareeha whistled.

“She’s got a good head for business about her,” Lena said, digging into her plate of crepes. “I’m still surprised she didn’t run for mayor.”

“Then why is Reinhardt the mayor?”

“That’s a story that Madam Lacroix likes telling. She doesn’t want to deal with the day-to-day parts of running a town, she’s better at planning for the long term.”

Angela turned her attention to the crepes in front of her. As much as she wanted to order some savory crepes, she had to order the blueberries; the last time she had good blueberry crepes was when she was a girl.

She cut a piece off with a fork, and took a bite. Blueberries practically exploded in her mouth. But the sweet taste wasn’t overpowering; it merely helped bring out the taste of the fruit. And the crepes themselves were so utterly perfect, it simply didn’t make sense. It was so light and fluffy, it was like taking a bite out of a cloud.

“Like it?” Lena asked.
“It’s so good,” she moaned with a full mouth.

“Damn right they are,” Lena smiled. “Madam Lacroix is from France. She might not cook, but she wouldn’t dare disrespect her people with bad…”

Lena trailed off. Ana, Angela, and Fareeha looked up from their food. Lena was staring off into the distance, a blush on her cheeks. They all followed her gaze, and saw a tall woman walking down the nearest set of stairs.

Like every other woman, she wore a corset and dress; hers was purple, the only purple clothing Angela had seen since Switzerland. But this woman’s dress was longer than the others. While every other dress came down to the working girl’s knees or calves, this woman’s dress came down to the ankles, inches from touching the ground. Frill lace lined her full corset, her long dark hair was done in a very elegant braid, and hung on a shoulder with practiced ease.

And she was striking. She had high cheekbones, giving her a beauty that was hard to deny. Her cheekbones were further accentuated by a tasteful amount of rouge. She had full eyelashes, the slightest amount of eye shadow, and what seemed to be lipstick made of a very deep blue or purple.

And she was walking towards the table, hips swaying rhythmically. Angela found herself swallowing hard, almost as hard as Fareeha was swallowing, but nowhere near as hard, or as loud, as Lena.

“Has Napoleon rallied at Waterloo?” The striking woman asked in a French accent.

“He’s pushing against the English right now,” Lena replied breathlessly.

That threw Angela for a loop. Napoleon rallied at Waterloo? He never rallied, he lost at Waterloo. And what did she mean that he’s ‘pushing against the English?’ Was it some sort of code between the two?

“So,” the woman sighed with disinterest, “you came back.”

“Y—yes I did, Madam Lacroix,” Lena croaked.

“Tsk.”

The woman, Madam Lacroix, looked at the table.

“I thought you would be gone for longer.”

“Well, I…I mean, I thought so too, I—“

Madam Lacroix silenced the Brit by giving her the cold shoulder; the maître d' Olivia walked up to her.

“Yes?” Madam Lacroix said.

“Mako said he plans on his boys coming back in the next few days,” Olivia said. “Wants to rent some tables for them, and book a show. You know, the usual.”

“And what did he say about the prices?”

“He wanted a little more than the usual discount.”

“Just how adamant was he that he get it?”
“Very.”

Madam Lacroix ‘tsked’ again. Just hearing that sent shivers down Angela’s spine. It was clear that Madam Lacroix was very good at voicing her disapproval without using any actual words.

“Tell him the rate is as it always is,” she said. “Tell him…”

Madam Lacroix trailed off. She turned her gaze to Lena, who squirmed in her seat. Then the ghost of a smile traced along her lips.

“Actually,” she said, a dark humor on her voice, “give him the discount he asked for.”

“Really? You’re sure?” Olivia said, an eyebrow arching.

“I’m in a good mood; my Lena came back to me,” Madam Lacroix said. Now that made Lena shiver. “Give him the discount. But tell him he’s required to pay for the tables, show, girls, and at least one barrel of ale. All up front. If he goes over that, he’ll have to pay like everyone else.”

“Ah, give the discount, but raise the minimum,” Olivia grinned. “I get ya. Sure thing, boss. I’ll let you know if he takes it.”

Olivia walked off, and Madam Lacroix turned her attention to the table.

“New arrivals?” She asked.

“Uh, yes,” Ana said. It seemed that she was equally thrown for a loop as everyone else was, but wasn’t caught on her back foot like Angela and Fareeha were. “Lena was our guide. We helped her carry a package back.”

“Then you probably talked her into getting a new wagon,” Madam Lacroix said. “Did they, Lena?”

“Yes, they did,” Lena stammered.

“That was a very long time coming.” Madam Lacroix spoke in such a cold tone, Angela swore she felt the temperature drop. “You must get better at listening to me, my Lena. As for the rest of you, you must let me give you a proper welcome to Crease. Tomorrow is our weekly purchase of fresh groceries from the farmers; we celebrate with a large breakfast. You mustn’t miss it.”

“Er, we just want to see the town,” Ana said. “Maybe we’ll move on, maybe won’t.”

“You mistook me,” Madam Lacroix said. “To show my appreciation for bringing my Lena back to me early, you will come and eat, no charge.”

“Oh. That’s very kind of you.”

“It is an entirely selfish act, trust me,” Madam Lacroix smiled that barely-there smile. “But you are welcome. And welcome to my town.”

‘Her town?’ Didn’t Lena say that a man called Reinhardt was the mayor?


“B-but I’m not done eating.”

“Come. Here.”
Lena dropped her silverware and quickly ran over to Madam Lacroix, obediently following her upstairs like a puppy.

The talk from the surrounding tables never stopped, neither did the piano. It was like the bizarre scene that played out in front of them was a common occurrence.

“Well, that’s not something you see every day,” Ana said. “I’m not exactly sure what we just saw, but we certainly don’t see it every day.”
New Arrival

Chapter Summary

Angela is stuck in Crease, without a penny to her name. But the town seems to draw her in, and she finds herself in good company.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The hotel was across the street from the saloon. Angela was glad that they didn’t have to share much space next to the saloon/whorehouse. She actually wanted to sleep, not to overhear whatever debauchery was happening next door. Fortunately, the street was wide, putting plenty of space between them and the painted ladies of the night. There wasn’t much they heard, even though the windows to their second floor room were kept open to welcome in the cool night air.

“Thank you for letting me rest here,” Angela said. She finished changing to a simple nightdress behind a folding screen, and walked back to her bed setting her dress on her trunk. She carried a simple oil lamp with her, illuminating the room in a dull glow. The room had three beds and three nightstands, one for each of them. Ana had left, using the outhouse before turning in.

“It’s our pleasure,” Fareeha said. She herself had changed quickly, but wore simple cotton pants and shirt. She sat on her bed, fiddling with the empty gun belt.

“Are you okay?” Angela asked, sitting on her own bed.

“It’s…this is a new town. A strange town; I’d just feel a little safer with my guns.”

“But no one else in town seems to carry guns, only the Sheriff.”

“That does help, but I’d rather sleep with my irons,” Fareeha said. “At least, until I get used to this place.”

“It might take a day or so,” Angela smiled. “It did with me and sleeping under the stars.”

“You adjusted well, then,” Fareeha smiled back.

“Thank you,” Angela smiled. Then again, she did have a good dream to help her. “Will you be staying here for long?”

“I don’t know,” Fareeha sighed. “Mom wanted…I mean, mom and I wanted to find a new place to live, a new place to start our lives. We don’t really have a goal for what we want, we were just going to wander around, see what we like. I don’t know if we’re staying, and if we’re not, I don’t know how long we’ll be here.”

“I see.” Angela set the lamp on her nightstand and pulled her bed’s covers back, and got to getting comfortable. “I better find a job, then.”

“You can always come with us.”
“Thank you, but I don’t have any money. Right now, I’m living on the charity of strangers; I don’t much care for it.”

“I know what you mean,” Fareeha sighed. “It’s not a good feeling.”

“I mean, I’m thankful,” Angela stammered. “But…but I want to do things by myself. I came to America to make my own name, not live of someone else’s.”


“Oh. Thank you.”

“Then I guess tomorrow, you better see what you can find in Crease,” Fareeha said, getting in bed herself. “I just hope that there’s something in this town for both of us.”

“I’d like that,” Angela mumbled, unable to look Fareeha in the eye.

The door opened. Ana entered, carrying her own lamp.

“The outhouses here aren’t bad at all,” she said. “Just follow the stairs down, and it’ll lead you out.”

“Thanks mom,” Fareeha said, getting in her bed. “Tomorrow, let’s see what we can make of this town.”

Angela and Ana blew out their lamps, bathing the room in darkness. She snuggled into her bed, pulling the covers tightly over her. She hoped there would be some way for her to stay with Fareeha. She nearly lost her in Denver, and she realized she’d do anything to stay with the beautiful woman.

Hopefully something in Crease would keep them here, together. As Angela drifted off to sleep, she hoped she’d have another dream of sitting in front of a fire with Fareeha.

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Angela stirred, roused from her sleep by the shining ball of light in the sky, and the early-rising roosters. She slept long and heavily, waking up feeling truly refreshed, and very hungry.

She was the last one to wake. Ana was already up and dressed, and Fareeha’s bed was empty.

“Good morning,” Ana smiled.

“And a good morning to you, too,” Angela said, taking a moment to stretch.

“Ah, you’re up,” she heard Fareeha said. Angela looked around; Fareeha was behind the folding screen, getting dressed. Angela blushed a little, averting her eyes although there was no need. A few seconds later, Fareeha walked out wearing jeans and a new long sleeve shirt, again rolled to her biceps. “I was wondering when you’d wake up.”

“Don’t tease her,” Ana said. “We’re soldiers, used to rising early. It’s best to let the good doctor get her sleep in.”

“Thank you, but I’m a morning person,” Angela said. “I’m used to waking with the sun.”

“Ah, that’s good,” Ana smiled. “I was worrying that we’d wake you up.”
“No, it’s fine,” Angela said. With the morning sun illuminating the room, Angela did her best not to spy on the empty bathtub in the far corner of the room. She was dying for a bath, but she didn’t know how much it would cost to fill it with hot water, and she was tired of being a burden on the mother and daughter duo. “Do you think the saloon is open? They said they were having a large breakfast.”

“It has to be soon,” Fareeha said, walking over to the window, putting on a vest. “We saw some people trickling in as the sun came up.”

“Then we’d better get a good spot,” Angela said, getting up. “Let me change quick, then we can head down.”

As much as she wanted to wash up, Angela instead put on the same dress. It was quickly becoming fairly dirty, but she could wash it some other time. Like when she actually had money.

They walked down the stairs and across the street. Sure enough, there were already some people sitting at the tables waiting for the food to be served. They spied the Mexican woman Olivia seating people, while talking with a very stressed serving woman.

“We need to get the food ready,” she hissed to the poor overworked girl as they walked back to the front of the saloon. Today, Olivia wore a black-and-green corset and dress. “Tell the chefs that—! Ah, good morning! Just a moment, we’ll work on your seat.”

“Are the chefs working things out in the kitchen?” Ana asked.

“Nothing to be worried of,” Olivia smiled cheerfully.

“If it has the wait staff worried, I think I have a right to be worried,” Ana smiled gently. “Would you mind if I help? I’ve a few years of experience cooking for a large regiment in the Army.”

“Please help,” the serving woman pleaded.

“Anastasia!” Olivia chastised.

“Things are falling apart,” the woman, Anastasia, continued. “Madam Lacroix is trying to push the cooks to stick with the scheduled meals, but the food for it hasn’t come through.”

“Sounds like Madam Lacroix likes to have things go her way.”

“You don’t know the half of it…” Anastasia mumbled.

Olivia looked around, trying to see who had heard them talking. Fortunately, the patrons were plenty happy to sit and talk with each other, sipping cups of water, coffee, tea, or something stronger.

“You said you cooked for a regiment?” Olivia asked in a whisper.

“Yes, during the war.”

“Well, Anastasia is right; we need all the help we can get. This is a last minute surprise, and Madam Lacroix doesn’t like surprises. We’re trying to figure out what to do.”

“Just lead me back to the kitchen, I’ll see what I can do,” Ana said.

Olivia nodded, and Anastasia led Ana down one of the halls. Olivia took a second to take a deep breath and calm herself as best she could. She brushed her hair back, and was soon looking perfectly presentable instead of stressed out.
‘Table for two?’ She asked.

‘Yes, please,’ Fareeha laughed.

‘Right this way. I’ll fetch you some tea, on the house for the help.’

Ana was led into the kitchen, which had two chefs, a team of serving women who also seemed to double as whores, and the enraged Madam Lacroix. The two chefs were both a man and a woman, and they seemed to be stuck between whatever hand fate had drawn for them, and Madam Lacroix.

‘You need to stick with the menu!’ Madam Lacroix snapped.

‘There’s not enough ingredients to make everything on the menu,’” one chef, a man, pleaded. ‘‘Many of the tomatoes are rotten; we can’t use them.’’

‘The menu has been planned to perfection! There’s nothing else we can make!’

‘Ah-hem,’ Ana said, clearing her throat. Madam Lacroix rounded on her, and her eyes narrowed dangerously. Despite her excellent dress and corset, it was clear that she was dangerous.

‘Who let a patron back here?’ She demanded.

‘I—I did,’ Anastasia stammered. ‘She said she was a cook in the Army.’

‘I am sorry that you had to see us like this,’” Madam Lacroix said, walking over with barely held cold fury. ‘Please, return to your seat, breakfast would be served shortly.’

‘It sounds like breakfast won’t be served at all,’” Ana said. That made everyone wince, and got Madam Lacroix to glare at her.

‘I’m used to planning meals with what we have, and with very little time. Now, what happened?’

‘The groceries the farmers gave us,’” the head chef said, ‘‘there were some rotten bits in it. The rot spread to the good food overnight, spoiling most of it.’’

‘What was lost?’

‘Most of the tomatoes, nearly all of the potatoes, and half of the greens.’’

Ana tried to take a step forward, but Madam Lacroix blocked her.

‘May I?’ She asked the Frenchwoman.

Ana had to admit, Madam Lacroix knew how to glare; she could easily stare down a raging bull. But Ana knew that her dead eye gave her an edge, one that many people had a hard time meeting. Madam Lacroix might’ve held her glare, but with the stress of the ruined food on her mind, she relented.

‘If you can salvage this,’” she said, ‘‘I would be most impressed.’’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’” Ana said.
She walked over to the gathered groceries, examining what they had.

“Let me guess: you wanted to have a breakfast of mostly greens and vegetables. I have to say, it would have made a great breakfast. Plenty of eggs, too. Eggs Benedict?”

“Oui, they’re a staple.”

“Has the hollandaise sauce already made?”

“Yes, it’s right here,” the chef said.

“Hmmm…” Ana examined all of the ingredients. “Is there any day-old bread?”

“I am not serving my guests day old bread!” Madam Lacroix snapped.

“Well, not by itself,” Ana said. “Do you?”

“We do,” a chef said.

“Excellent. Are the ovens fired? Then here’s what we’re going to do: we’re going to make some strata. We’re going to mix the remaining good tomatoes and greens with the day-old bread, with chunks of meat. What kind do we have?”

“Some ground bison, and plenty of bacon.”

“Excellent. Most of the bacon we’ll make as a side to tide everyone over until we can finish; maybe we can make some more crepes to help, or candy some of the bacon. The rest of the bacon will go into the strata. Mix the hollandaise sauce with more scrambled eggs. We can’t let the strata soak overnight, but we can let it soak in some lower heat. Brighten the blueberries for the crepes up with some lime juice, we need to give it some kick to get everyone’s appetite ready.”

Ana grabbed an unused apron from a hook, and began pulling out the salvageable vegetables.

“What kind of spices do you have?” She asked, turning her attention to the chefs. They jumped into action, showing her about the kitchen, and taking her orders without a second’s hesitation. Madam Lacroix watched, briefly taken aback. Then she went to work, ordering her girls to bring more refreshments to the waiting guests.

Angela and Fareeha were sipping their complimentary tea when a shadow fell over them.

“Ah, Fareeha,” Mayor Reinhardt beamed. He wore a different outfit than the other day. This one was a sharp pinstripe navy blue suit, a matching vest, and a brilliantly white and very starched dress shirt underneath. He had shaved, his mustache was freshly trimmed, waxed, and Angela smelled a slightly-more-than-healthy dollop of aftershave about him. “And Angela! Two of our newest visitors! But where is Ana?”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Fareeha said frostily. “She heard of some trouble, and cooking is her hobby.”

“Ach, she can’t be working when she is a guest here,” he pouted.

“Try telling her that,” Fareeha said. “She can be very stubborn.”
“I see. Well, if you see her, tell her I said ‘hello.’”

“Mm-hmm.”

Reinhardt walked back to his own table, and pulled out a newspaper to read.

“He was just trying to be friendly,” Angela said.

“Yes, friendly with my mom,” Fareeha said tightly.

“Please, everyone here is just trying to be nice and polite.”

Fareeha took a deep breath.

“You’re right,” she said. “I guess I’m just getting a little touchy.”

“I’ll say you are.”

The doors to the kitchen opened, and waitresses began passing out crepes with a side of bacon to the waiting customers. Half of the bacon was grilled to perfection, while the other half was candied in brown sugar.

“Oh, more crepes,” Angela gushed, digging into her plate.

“If they get the Swiss seal of approval, they must be good,” Fareeha chuckled, taking a bite of hers. “Dear God, these are so good, it should be criminal.”

Angela tried not to laugh with a full mouth.

“Is this what the frontier is like?” She asked. “I mean, I know you’ve never been here before, but you must know more about it. It is your country, after all.”

“Ha! My country!” Fareeha said, taking a bite of bacon. “We might share a nation, but America is just as different, and as petty, as you can ever imagine. Maybe even more so! I mean, we just fought a civil war to free my enslaved cousins.”

Angela looked up. Sitting a few tables away were Orisa and Efi. They sat at a small table, but talked with a group of men and women. One of the women was Lena, who was sitting on a plush cushion, doing her best not to make any sudden movements and wincing when she did. Despite whatever lingering pain she had with her rear end, Lena had a big grin plastered to her face, looking like a cat who ate the canary.

“I ran into a group of Brits during the war,” Fareeha said. “They were sitting it out, stuck in America when the rebels put a town under blockade. They have a nice saying, ‘Americans think one hundred years is a long time, and Europeans think one hundred miles is a long way.’”

“That’s got a nice ring to it, but what does it mean?”

“Our countries see things very, very differently. We were hanging out with the Brits, not thinking anything of it. But they still saw us as ungrateful colonialists. I don’t know if that’s what every Brit thinks, but these ones did. It was just over one hundred years ago; everyone in my unit was riding them for it, wondering how they could still be so sore about something that happened so long ago.”

Fareeha finished the rest of her crepes and bacon.

“That’s when I realized that we’re both wrong. One hundred years is a long time, and one hundred
miles is a long way. It gets even longer the further you go. The North saw something and changed it, while the South saw the same thing, and doubled down on it. The distance of America split us, even though we share the same country. It’s fucked up when you think about it.”

Angela nodded. Fareeha made a good point. After all, America had just finished a very bloody civil war over an ideology, that the Confederates could leave the Union to keep their slaves. But at the same time, she couldn’t help but hear the bitterness in Fareeha’s voice. Then she remembered Ana’s words when they were camping out during their travel to Crease.

*My daughter was getting so cynical and pessimistic. I blame the war for that.*

Was this that cynicism and pessimism she heard about?

“But things are getting better,” she said. “America will get better. I mean, look at those people talking with Orisa and Efi, or the other black families. If they truly thought they were inferior, would they even be eating in the same room as them? Or with you, for that matter?”

Fareeha smiled.

“Yes, maybe things are getting better,” she said. “But they’re not getting better fast enough.”

“It’s been only a few years since the war ended,” Angela sighed. “It will take time.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

The doors to the kitchen opened, and waitresses carried out plates full of a steaming dish. They served everyone, setting the plates down in front of the patrons. The plate was filled with what seemed to be a cross between a casserole and scrambled eggs. Tomatoes, lettuce, bacon, ground bison, and bread were held in place by eggs. The smell was heavenly.

“Ah, strata,” Fareeha said. “Mom loves making this.”

Angela took a bite, and couldn’t help but voice her approval. The tomatoes were fresh, the lettuce wilted just right, and the bacon was cooked to perfection. The bread was a little hard, but it added a surprisingly nice crunch to the dish. The eggs were heavy, but not to the point of becoming too much.

The patrons seemed to enjoy it as much as she did. There were plenty of people who told the waitress to give their compliments to the chef.

“This is delicious,” Angela said.

“Yes, mom knows what she’s doing,” Fareeha said. Suddenly, she looked up. “Shit, I have to get going.”

“What? Why?”

Fareeha nodded to a place over Angela’s shoulder. She turned around, and saw Sheriff Morrison stand up from a table with Father Reyes, taking a big plate of food with him, walking out the door.

“I think he’s heading to his office,” Fareeha said. “I wanted to ask him some questions.”

“You go on ahead,” Angela said. “I want to take my time and savor this.”

“You sure?”
Fareeha swallowed the rest of her strata as fast as she could. She hated being ungrateful about food, but she was filled with questions, and she wanted to ask Sheriff Morrison before he got too busy. She got up, and followed him outside. Sure enough, he walked to the lawman’s office. She knocked, just to be polite.

“Come in.”

She opened the door, and saw Morrison sitting at a desk. There were a few desks, but only one looked like it was being used. Papers were covering the desk, and Morrison was leaning back in a chair, kicking his feet up while he ate. The other desks were empty, as were the four jail cells that lined the building. Across one wall was a gun rack, where rifles were kept locked up, and pistols chained to the wooden backing.

“Ah, you’re one of the new faces in town,” he said as he ate.

“Yes. I’m Fareeha.”

“Fareeha, that’s right. You’ll have to forgive me, names don’t come too easy to me.”

“Not a problem.”

“So, what can I help you with, Fareeha?”

“I was hoping to check on my guns.”

“I’m taking good care of them. It’s actually a good time you came, I was going to oil them all.”

“You’re oiling everyone’s guns? That’s fancy.”

“Nothing too fancy, I assure you. I’ll just be giving them a quick once-over, basic preventative maintenance. Can’t have people claiming I let their guns get rusty under my care.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

“I don’t mean to be prying, but you seem awfully concerned about your guns,” Morrison said, fixing her with a steely glare. “You planning anything?”

“No, nothing. It’s just, they got me through the war, and I hate not having them on me.”

“I didn’t know they let women fight in the civil war.”

“I pretended to be a boy.”

“That mustn’t have been very convincing,” Morrison said. He didn’t move, make a lewd gesture, or otherwise stare at her breasts, but Fareeha knew what he was talking about. She was expecting him to gaze hungrily at her chest; nearly everyone did, men and women. Angela only thought she was being discreet…

But when he mentioned her full bosom, Sheriff Morrison didn’t even bat an eye at her assets. It was
strange, but oddly refreshing.

“I was smaller then. Did a lot of growing the past year and a half.”

“Fair enough.” He paused, his gaze relenting. “It’s nice meeting another veteran.”

“You fought too?”

“Damn straight I did. Slavery was a heinous sin this nation committed, and had to be stamped out. Sergeant, 136th Indiana Infantry Regiment.”

“Then it’s an honor, sir. Corporal, 8th US Colored Infantry.”

Sheriff Morrison extended his hand. Fareeha was pleasantly surprised; most men had trouble shaking hands with a black woman. She gave it a hearty shake.

“The honor is mine. It’s not exactly in the rules, but if it helps a veteran, I’ll let you take a look at your weapons.” Morrison got up, unlocking one of the racks. Fareeha made a bee-line for her rifle and revolvers.

“Thank you,” she said, examining her guns.

“My pleasure.”

“Must be hard for you to be the only sheriff in town,” she said, checking the cylinders of her revolvers.

“There are moments where I have down time, but there’s always something going on,” he said. “Arguments, brief moments of passion making someone do something they’d never normally do, shit, I’m actually glad Crease has a no-guns policy. If it didn’t, I’d probably have to hang a lot more men.”

“Not looking forward to keeping the peace?”

“I like keeping the peace plenty, but I think there are options to keeping said peace while keeping both parties alive. Violence should be a last resort.”

Fareeha was taken aback by that.

“Not the answer you were looking for?”

“Not what I was expecting,” she admitted. “I’ve known a lot of lawmen who see the ends as the only justification they need. Some of them have even been pretty terrible themselves, liking draconian laws too much.”

Fareeha tried to keep her voice neutral, but she couldn’t help but grumble. Just the thought of those fuckers drove her cross-eyed mad.

“I hate those bloodthirsty bastards,” Morrison growled. “They’re barely better than the outlaws who roam the wilds.”

That got Fareeha to grin. It seemed she and Morrison had a few things in common.

“Are there lots of outlaws here?” Fareeha asked. Her revolvers passed her muster, and she turned her attention to her rifle, cracking open the chamber.
“Hard to tell. I get a lot of letters from the territory; wanted posters, general bulletins about some still wet-behind-the-ears kid trying to make a name for themselves and the such. Right now, I got about seven bounties on the board outside; you might’ve seen them.”

“Do the outlaws target Crease?”

“Not a whole lot. Mako and his cowboys act as the first line of defense, if by name only. A small group of pickpockets don’t usually plan to ride into a town with a few dozen trail-hardened cowboys. Especially since Madam Lacroix has them wrapped around her little finger.”

“Having a horde of cowboys at your beck and call must be nice,” she laughed. “But what happens when the cowboys are out on the trail?”

“Then things get interesting. Fortunately, we’re a small town, which means we don’t attract a lot of trouble, which is always nice.”

“Lets you get away with lounging around?” Fareeha smirked.

“Hardly,” Morrison laughed. “Still plenty of work to be done. Have to file paperwork, write up reports to send into the territory for when Lena makes a mail run, and do the dozens of different things that ‘keeping the peace’ entails. Most of it involves settling disputes.”

“And you have to write all that up?”

Fareeha returned her rifle and revolvers; they were all fine. She had expected to leave after that, but found herself drawn to an empty chair to keep on chatting.

“Of course. In a town as small as Crease, the sheriff is a pretty big position. But I’m a servant of the territory, and unless you missed it, the territory is pretty damn big! I have to justify that I’m worth their money; that means filling out paperwork.”

“So the West is less gunfights and more writing things out?” Fareeha asked, cocking her eyebrow.

“You were in the Army, you know how touchy they get with the bullets you use,” he said. “How many times did you have to take count of the amount of munitions you shot?”

“Ugh, too much.”

“Well, all those forms are a taste of what being a sheriff is like,” Morrison said. “When it’s slow, it’s not too bad, but when it picks up, it really picks up. All to tell the territory that yes, they really do need to pay me.”

“How do people get paid here? I didn’t see a bank.”

“There’s no bank. Not yet, anyways. Madam Lacroix is dying to get one, but there are some things in this world that don’t bow to her will.”

Again with Madam Lacroix. Did she own the town or something?

“Most of the money comes in through Mako’s boys. They get paid in big cities when they bring his cattle in, bring it back here to spend, and Madam Lacroix and her girls are all too happy to take it. They spread it around by buying groceries from the farmers and such, but the money they don’t spend they have to order stagecoaches to travel in, so when that happens, I usually ride with them. Meet them in the wilds, bring ‘em in, and escort them out.”
“That sounds exciting.”

“Sometimes it gets hairy. But the stagecoach has a guy riding shotgun, so it helps.”

“Then what happens after you chase the bandits off?” Fareeha laughed. “You go back to writing reports?”

“I have to,” Morrison grinned. “If I don’t get my budget approved, I’ll have to buy my own bullets!”

“That’s too much!”

“You’ll see that it really isn’t,” he said.

That made Fareeha blink.

“What do you mean, ‘I’ll see?’”

“You’re new to Crease. Do you have any idea what you’ll want to do to make a living?”

“Er, not really. I just figured I’d find something I liked…”

“Then why not work for me?”

“Work for you? Do you just offer jobs to every stranger who blows into town?”

“Hell no! But you’ve got the chops to cut it, I can tell,” he said. “I need a deputy, and you’re a veteran; hell, you fought to get into the war! You cut your hair, dressed in drag, bound your chest for years, the whole nine yards! I’ve known men who went through less effort to try and get out of the war. That tells me you’ve got a thirst for justice, and the drive to see it met.

“You made it through the war in one piece; that tells me you’re lucky, and you know your way around a gun. Both of those things are needed in a deputy, especially around here. And considering how much disdain you got in your voice about those draconian lawmen you mentioned, you seem to be keen on following the spirit of the law, not just the written word; I think that’s a damn good trait for a lawman to have. You seem like the perfect candidate for the spot. What do you say?”

Fareeha thought she would be scared, turned away. But something about Morrison’s offer felt right.

“A—are you sure you want me?” She asked. “Some people might not respect me because of my skin.”

“Crease ain’t like most places; you’ve probably seen that we’ve got a sizable African and Latino population. Plenty of people are used to working with your kin. Besides, you’re a tough-as-nails veteran, you’ll manage,” he smiled. “If anyone doesn’t want to see the light, you bring ‘em to it. That’s a standing order.”

Fareeha couldn’t help but smile at that.

“Isn’t there anything that might make me not good deputy material?”

“You can read and write, can you?”

“Of course.”

“Then I can’t think of a single goddamn reason to turn you down.”
Morrison held out his hand. Fareeha shook it in a heartbeat.

Angela sat at the table, finishing her strata. It was quite delicious, full of fresh ingredients and the perfect blend of spices. Since Fareeha had left a few minutes ago, Angela had taken a discarded newspaper to idly read. The paper was out of date by almost two weeks; it was crinkled and re-folded a dozen times over. Maybe it was brought in by Lena. The Brit said she was the one who made regular trips to Denver.

Angela idly read stories long since out of date just to kill time and to work on her written English. But her mind was turning with what she was to do. She had to get a job, but there didn’t seem to be much offered in Crease. She couldn’t just set up shop as a doctor. While she had her tools and some medicine in her trunk, she had to buy a building, or at least rent a room to practice medicine to truly get her start.

A shadow leaned over her. She looked up, and nearly jumped. Madam Lacroix was standing over her.

"Hello," she smiled in her French-accented English.

"H-hello," Angela stammered.

"I see you’re sitting alone. Would you mind if I take a moment of your time?"

Madam Lacroix was obviously French. It had been a while, but Angela decided to change languages.

"No, not at all," she said in French.

That made Madam Lacroix pause, her eyes widening in surprise.

"You speak French?" She said, switching languages.

"I grew up in Switzerland, close to the France border," Angela smiled. "It’s not my native tongue, but I quite like the language."

"God," Madam Lacroix sighed, an unbridled smile on her lips. "It’s been forever since I’ve been able to speak my mother tongue. Thank you."

"You’re welcome.

Madam Lacroix pulled out the chair that Fareeha sat in, and took a seat. She gave Angela a look over, making her shiver.

"Not much of a rind on you."

"E—excuse me?"

"You’re very soft, gentle, nice on the eyes," Madam Lacroix said. Her gaze trailed to her hips. "Curvy."

"Uh, thank you?"
“You’re welcome,” she smiled. “A woman like you can make quite a killing working here.”

Angela blinked.

“W—working?”

“Yes, working,” Madam Lacroix said. “I’ve had my eye on you since you arrived yesterday. When someone catches my eye, I have my girls keep tabs on them. Olivia tells me that you’re here by the grace of another person.”

Madam Lacroix was keeping an eye on her? But she had only been in town for a day. Suddenly, Angela realized why Madam Lacroix let her eat for free.

“You wanted to talk to me,” she said, realization dawning on her.

“I told you, this was a selfish act,” Madam Lacroix said. “I’m in the habit of knowing what goes on in my town, and who arrives in it. Olivia overheard your conversations, and told me about your predicament. You made it to Crease by luck, and the last of your money. America is a new country, one full of wonder and promise, but it is very much like the old world we left behind; it runs on money. If you’re out of money, you’re out of options.”

“I have some options,” Angela stammered.

“Yes, a few,” Madam Lacroix said. “Continue living off the gratitude of strangers, sell whatever possessions you have, or beg. I can tell you despise all of those options; I’m here to give you another.”

“By working for you? To become a whore?”

“To be blunt, yes,” the Frenchwoman said. “I know it is not a profession that women expect themselves to end up in; I certainly didn’t expect it for myself. But the world spins on, and it crushes dreams and people alike beneath its tireless wheels. We have to make the most of it.”

“On my back, taking money from men.”

“Yes.”

Madam Lacroix’s bluntness made her blink.

“I’ve had this talk dozens of times,” Madam Lacroix smiled. “I’ve been accepted and rejected in equal measures. I know how it goes. I don’t want to force you to do something; like I said, this is an option for you, one I want to give you so you can make the choice yourself.”

“Beg, or prostitute myself,” Angela snorted. “Quite the choice.”

“At least you have a choice.”

“Did someone force you to whore yourself out?”

“No person forced me. I had the option to survive, or to thrive. My parents, God rest their souls, did not sell everything we had, leave our homeland, and travel to the new world just for me to survive, so I chose to thrive. While I did not have many comfortable choices, I do not regret my decision. I want to give you something I didn’t have: a true, honest choice. I want you to have the option to accept or reject my proposition, before the choice is made for you. After all, whoring yourself out when you’re starving is just the same as being pimped by a man.”
“That…that does make a certain kind of sense,” Angela admitted.

“Exactly. I want you to make the choice when you still have other options, when you still have food in your belly. I want this to be as an empowering moment as it can be, because I know you detest the very thought of opening yourself to any man with the right amount of money. I understand that.”

“And what, you promise to keep me safe?”

“Of course you’ll be safe! I run this town,” Madam Lacroix smiled, leaning back. “I keep my girls safe, I tread them as if they were myself instead of some unfortunate, down-on-her-luck girl. There have been plenty of men, and a few women, whom I’ve run out of Crease, told to never come back. You’ll find that it’s actually quite easy when you see what power we have.”

“Then thank you for the choice, but I must turn you down. I don’t want to be a whore, I’m a doctor, and I can’t do that—"

“You’re what?” Madam Lacroix demanded, leaning in. Angela was again taken aback.

“I—I want to find my—“

“No, no, no, what did you say you were?” She pressed. A fire had entered her eyes, and she was very nearly leaning into Angela.

“I’m a doctor.”

“A doctor?!?” Madam Lacroix said, a smile on her lips. She grabbed Angela’s hand. “You’re a doctor?”

“Y—yes, I finished my—“

“Then you can’t leave.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can’t leave Crease, we need you here.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“What? No, never! But Crease needs a doctor.”

Angela looked at Madam Lacroix. She had a frantic look in her eyes, like Angela was suddenly a prize puzzle piece, one that had fallen into her lap.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve built Crease into the town that you see,” Madam Lacroix said. “But we’ve never had a doctor. Real towns have doctors, and I want Crease to be a real town. I want it to have a doctor, I want it to have you here, working for us.”

“Working for you?” Angela snorted. “I want to help everyone, not just your working girls.”

“No, I’m sorry, that came out wrong,” Madam Lacroix said. “I want you here, helping everyone who needs help, healing those who are hurt.”

“Why are you so interested in me all of a sudden?”
Madam Lacroix laughed.

“That is a story,” she said. “I’ll try to keep it short.

“When I first came to Crease, it was simply a watering hole the cowboys used to rest in. It didn’t even have a name then. The wind off the mountains were so blustery, they had to dig their tents into the ground to keep them from blowing away. The saying was there were three holes in Crease: the hole you slept in, the hole you crapped in, and the hole you died in.

“I changed that. I realized the cowboys lacked one simple thing: companionship. Back then, it wasn’t just sexual companionship or an easy fuck, they just the need to talk to a woman, to bare one’s self to someone who cared, or at least pretended to care. I was young then, but I’m told I’m older than my age. I was old enough to see the opportunity that was presented to me.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” Madam Lacroix smiled.

Angela blanched at that. Twenty-three? She was a year older than her, but Angela had to guess she was at least getting to her thirties.

“Y—you look older.”

“Like I said, I’m told that a lot,” Madam Lacroix smiled. “But the work I did, it was enough to get Crease a reputation as a way point. More people began traveling here, if only to relax on their travels out west. More people came, including women like me, who had no money or choices. I gave them an option, the same one I gave you; we began working together, and before I knew it, I had enough money to build this saloon.”

She gestured to the massive building around them.

“There was a time when Crease was just this one building! It only drew more people, and my business grew with it. Soon I had enough money to build the hotel across the street, then the general store, and then the church. By then, Crease was a small town; I petitioned the territory to recognize us as a town, and I built the city hall and sheriff’s office to help persuade them.”

“Wait,” Angela said. “You mean, all of the buildings, they’re yours?”

“Yes, I paid for all of them,” Madam Lacroix smiled. “Even many of the family homes and farms you see here are mine, if only in name. The families have taken out loans from me to have them built. Many have paid the loans back in full.”

“Oh.” No wonder Madam Lacroix seemed to own all of Crease. It really was her town!

“This is my town; I want it to grow, but it’s lacking several things. A bank is one of them, as is a railroad. But a doctor, that is something we need. We need you, not only to help everyone in the city, but to make us a bigger city. Can I talk you into staying?”

Angela paused for a second.

“You mean,” she stammered, “you want me to be a doctor for the city? You want me to help your girls?”

“Not just my girls, but anyone in need. I have no illusions that my girls will form the bulk of your clientele, but the cowboys get hurt all the time, as does everyone else.”
“You know I’m broke, I can’t afford to buy a house to practice my profession.”

“I can build a clinic for you,” Madam Lacroix said.

“I don’t want to rely on the kindness of strangers.”

“Then we will make it a loan,” she said. “I know the good you can do, and I want to support you. Stay here, stay in Crease, and help the city grow.”

“You’ll build a clinic, just for me?”

“I’ve built this entire city,” Madam Lacroix smiled. “One more building is nothing to me.”

“All this, so you can say that you talked a doctor into staying?”

“Making you stay is another selfish act, I won’t deny that. But I want you here because you’ll be the best for Crease, not just the best for me. I’m willing to bet a clinic on that.”

Angela thought for a good minute.

“I’ll…I’ll need some time,” she said.

“Take the time you need. My offer stands, and not just the offer to build you a clinic,” Madam Lacroix said. “I have to check on my kitchen staff. Please, stay here. Be our doctor.”

Angela remain rooted in her seat as Madam Lacroix stood up and walked away. She wanted to be a doctor, and the offer was given to her.

But she wanted to be a doctor by her own hand.

The morning rush had died down, along with the pressing urge to create a breakfast for the entire town. The chefs and waitresses were cooking up regular side dishes, the busboys were cleaning, but Ana still stood in front of a stove, mixing something up in a cast iron skillet.

Olivia frowned. What was the woman still doing here?

She knew that Ana had a dead eye, so she’d have to be careful walking up to her. Olivia didn’t want to scare the woman, but it left her wondering how to best approach her. She hesitantly walked up, but Ana made the move for her.

“Is there something that needs help?” She asked.

Olivia did her best not to jump; instead, she only flinched. Just how did the woman know she was coming? She’d have to be more careful next time.

“No, nothing like that,” she said.

“Ah, that’s good,” Ana smiled. “It was getting very hectic, wasn’t it?”

“The rush was fine, it was Madam Lacroix that made things tense.”

“She’s an intense woman, but I can understand how she wanted everything to go off perfectly. I’m
sorry, I’m still trying to learn names, what was yours again?”

“It’s fine. I’m Olivia.”

“Nice to meet you, Olivia,” Ana said. She went back to whisking her creation, but kept talking. “Can I help you with something?”

“Just wanted to talk, to see what got you to jump into the fire on this.”

“Well, cooking is a passion of mine. I told you that I cooked for the Army, yes?”

“Yo did. I’m just surprised that after that, you’d want to go back in to the kitchen!”

Ana laughed at that.

“Perhaps all that cooking had such a bad effect on me; I can’t live without it,” she laughed.

“I’ve heard that happening with some of the cowboys. They’ve been out on the trail so long, they can’t imagine leaving it,” Olivia said. “What are you cooking?”

“Some hot sauce. You seem to be running low.”

“Ah, gracias,” she smiled. “I was going to ask one of our cooks, but we never seemed to have time. Can I get a taste?”

“Be careful, I make it hot.”

“Please, I’m a Latina woman,” she smiled, grabbing a spoon. “‘Hot’ means nothing to me!”

Olivia took a spoon and got a dab of the sauce. Since it came from a hot cast iron skillet, she blew on it to make sure she wouldn’t actually burn her tongue, and ate it. The heat immediately hit her, making her eyes widen.

But it wasn’t the temperature of the sauce that got to her. It was the taste, the texture, the smooth burn of the sauce that hit her like a runaway train. It transported her back to when she was a girl.

Olivia was in the throw of memory now. She was a girl, barely seven, running through her home village. She ran back home, and saw her mother standing over the stove.

“Mama, are you feeling better?”

Her mother was pale and gaunt, but still smiled wide. She smiled so big, it was like she was making up for her constant sickness.

“Much better,” mama lied. “I have to do some cooking, make some sauce that will help you grow up into a big, strong woman, stronger than your mother. Here.”

Olivia, as a girl, tasted her mother’s sauce. It was hot, piping hot, but she could taste the love that went into it.

“Are you okay?” Ana asked, concern in her voice.
Olivia blinked. Where was she?

“Get some milk,” Ana said to a waitress. “Olivia needs something for the heat.”

“No, no, no,” she stammered.

“You’re crying.”

Olivia dabbed her eyes. Sure enough, there were tears.

“It’s not the sauce,” she mumbled. She could feel the tears coming. “This is delicious. It’s…it’s just like how my mama used to make it.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Ana sighed. “I was worried you bit off more than you could chew.”

“Just like how mama made it,” Olivia mumbled, her tears threatening to spill out. “Mama, it’s been so long…”

Ana paused, but hesitantly touched Olivia’s shoulder. She practically collapsed into the older woman, crying.

“You make it just like she used to…”

“What is going on here?” Madam Lacroix demanded, walking into the kitchen, no doubt to check up on everything.

Olivia tried to blink away her tears. Everyone in the kitchen was staring at her, off-put by her sudden breakdown.

“We have to keep her,” Olivia begged. “Please, let Ana work here.”

“What? Why?”

“She’s the best cook,” she stammered. “Her hot sauce, dios Mío, she makes it just like Mama did.”

Madam Lacroix paused.

“You’ve never talked about your family.”

“I never wanted to,” Olivia cried. “Too many bad things. Please, Amélie, let her stay as a cook. I’ve never asked a single thing of you before, but please, let her stay.”

Everyone turned to Madam Lacroix. Madam Lacroix never let anyone use her first name in public. But Olivia had been with her almost since the beginning. Maybe that is why she let it slide.

Angela sat in her seat, looking at the newspaper but not really reading it. Madam Lacroix’s offer floated in her head; she sat, staring into space, weighing her options.

People came and went, but no one bothered her. She idly wondered if it was Madam Lacroix was telling her girls to leave her alone, to keep them from kicking her out.

“Angela!”
She snapped awake, looking up. Ana was standing in front of her, wearing an apron.

“Oh! I’m sorry,” she stammered.

“Good, you’re alive,” Ana smiled. “You were just sitting there, staring into space. I thought you died.”

“Just… just lost in thought,” she mumbled.

“I can see,” Ana said, sitting down. “Have you moved at all?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s lunch time. You’ve been sitting there for hours.”

“Oh! I didn’t know.”

“I could tell.”

A shadow fell across the table. Angela looked up; it was Fareeha, standing tall like she had conquered the world. She always looked dashing, but now she seemed impossibly regal. Maybe it was the wide grin that was planted on her lips, or maybe because she was posed with her chest puffed out.

“You seem awfully proud of yourself,” Ana said to her daughter.

“Watch that attitude,” Fareeha smiled, “you’re talking to the first deputy of Crease.”

Angela blinked, then looked at Fareeha’s chest. Sure enough, there was a brass star pinned to her breast.

“Deputy?!” Ana gasped.

“I talked with Jack,” she said. “Er, Sheriff Morrison. We ended up talking for almost the entire morning; he said I’d be perfect deputy material, so he offered me a job.”

“Oh my God,” Ana gushed. “Oh my God!”

“I know!” Fareeha said, almost shouting.

Her mother wrapped her in a fierce hug.

“Oh my God! My daughter! My daughter, the deputy!” She cried.

The two broke their embrace, just for Ana to kiss her daughter’s cheek.

“Oh God, I’m so proud of you!!”

Angela had to admit, she could see Fareeha being the bringer of justice. Something about it just seemed to suit her. Then she realized that Fareeha was looking at her with hungry eyes.

“Congratulations,” she said, standing up to give Fareeha a hug.

Fareeha scooped her up into her powerful arms, hugging her tight, much tighter than what Angela would have done. Not just twenty seconds ago, Angela was debating her future; now, she was being squeezed to death by the gorgeous woman whom she had a massive crush on.
“This is amazing,” Fareeha said, holding her tightly.

“It is,” Angela croaked.

Fareeha let her go. Angela almost told her not to.

“And mom, what’s with that apron?” Fareeha said, pointing to her mother.

“Ah, Madam Lacroix offered me a job working for her,” she smiled.

“Get out!”

“She saw how I handled the kitchen and the little breakfast fiasco, and she wants me to manage the kitchen for both the saloon, and the hotel!” She smiled. “I’ll be in charge of everything food related.”

“You’ll get to spend the entire day in the kitchen?” Fareeha said. “That must be a dream come true.”

“It is!”

The mother and daughter were grinning ear to ear. It looks like they had found their calling on the frontier.

“Well,” Angela started, “Madam Lacroix made me an offer, too.”

“What kind of offer?” Fareeha demanded, her voice changing from happiness to intense scrutiny in a second flat. It was like Fareeha wanted to protect her from falling back on to…well, her back.

“It’s nothing bad,” Angela smiled. “She found out that I’m a doctor, and she wants me to be the doctor of Crease. She offered me a loan to build a clinic, to keep me here.”

Ana smiled in joy, but Fareeha’s eyes positively lit up. It made Angela’s heart soar.

“You mean…?” Fareeha gasped. “You mean you’ll be staying here?!”

Angela wished she could see Fareeha smile like that every single day she was alive.

“Oh, yes,” she said, stammering and blushing. “Yes, I guess I am.”

Chapter End Notes

This wraps up the first arc of the story. We’ll be getting back to our birbs soon. But Madam Lacroix said she had a story to tell, and I can’t simply leave it at that.
Chapter Summary

Before she was Madam Lacroix, she was Amélie, a scared girl left alone in the world, with a harsh lesson to learn. But that lesson will transform her, and give her a town. Amélie will grow up into a woman she'd never dream of becoming, one who would make her own way in the world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five Years Ago

The wind blew across the hills of the area, cutting through the thick woods that grew from the mountains. It made the canvas top of the wagon puff and billow out. Amélie shuddered, drawing the blanket tighter around herself. It was one of the last things that she had of her father, before he… before he…

Non. Do not think that. Back down there.

"Here we are," the driver said, drawing the wagon to a stop at the top of a hill.

Amélie got up, looking out over the driver’s shoulder. She couldn’t see anything that looked like civilization. She saw the mountains to her left, the great, endless plains of the United States to her right, and woods ahead of her. There was a river just ahead of them, separating the three.

"I see nothing," she said.

"Over there, just across the river and on the plains," the driver said, nodding instead of pointing.

"I just see buffalo."

"They’re cattle, but it’s practically the same difference. There should be some cowboys with ‘em."

Amélie squinted her eyes, gazing out as far as she could. Sure enough, she was just able to pick out several men on horses, riding up and down the massive line of cattle, herding them along, moving them closer to the river.

"Those are Mako and his boys. They stay here to rest up, help the cattle grow before they sell ‘em. This is a good spot between the mountains and the planes. The river is wide enough so the cattle can drink up, but not deep enough to make crossing it a bitch."

"Where are we, even?"

The driver pulled out a map, unfolding the rough paper.

"Right here," he said, pointing to a small crease.
“Does this place have a name?”

“Not really, Mako just calls it a little crease to stay in.”

“And we are stopping here?” Amélie asked.

“We have to. The horses are getting hungry and tired, and this is as far as your money goes,” the driver said. “Unless, you got something else.”

She had sold almost everything she owned. She only had a few coins to buy food, a used tent, and a blanket.

“Non, I don’t.”

“Wasn’t talking about stuff, sweetheart.”

That made the rage buried deep in her heart roar.

Amélie turned away in disgust, going back into the wagon.

“Suit yourself,” the driver shrugged. “I’ll be here a few more days. If you change your mind, I can take you closer to civilization.”

She had to think of something. She had to do something. But what was there to do? She didn’t have any options or choices.

As they got closer and closer to the herd, the smell increased. Amélie had smelled cattle before, but this was overpowering. As much as she wanted to breathe through her mouth, she continued to breathe through her nose. She was going to be here in this ‘crease’ for a while; she would have to get used to the smell.

“Well, here ya go,” the driver said. “Get.”

Amélie gathered her things and jumped off the wagon; she didn’t have to carry much. She looked around. This was no town, this was nothing. The only thing she could see were several tents, a few bonfires, and rough hitch railings to lash horses to. The gusts of wind that blew from the mountain were powerful, making the tents rustle. They had to be buried into the ground to keep from being blown away.

She was stuck in the middle of goddamn nowhere, with only a blanket, tent, and twenty-five Canadian cents to her name.

Amélie was hurt, hungry, scared, and angry. Hurt at the rough hand providence had dealt her, hungry from the long trip with little money, scared at what the future held, and angry that her life had to go this way. But she was angry enough to do something about it. She would never be this scared again.

“Can I help you?”

Amélie blinked. There was a group of men walking up to her, hunger in their eyes.
“Oui,” she said. “I’m trying to get to a city. I heard Denver was close.”

“Denver is still quite a ride away,” the lead man said. He was practically drooling. “But we can help you out, if we had a kind of deal—“

He never finished. The largest man Amélie had ever seen walked up, and the talk suddenly died.

“What’s going on here?” The man was easily over six feet tall. He was so large, he practically bulged out of the trail clothes he wore. He had small eyes, and his hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He wasn’t muscular like a strongman was, but Amélie could feel it; if the man wanted to, he could easily tear someone in half. He was strong like a bull was big; not visibly muscular, but deceitfully powerful.

“Mako,” the men squeaked. “Just, er, being nice to the girl.”

“You? Nice?” The man chuckled. It came out as a kind of snort that a bull would make, or maybe a wild hog. “I doubt that. Go on. Get.”

The men scampered off, leaving Amélie with the huge, hulking Mako.

“You’re new here,” he said.

“O-oui, I am,” Amélie stammered.

“This is no place for a woman,” he said. “You should get out of here, back to a city.”

“I’m trying to get to Denver.”

“Where did you come from?”

“France, through Canada. My parents…we were looking for a new life.”

Mako looked around, seeing if anyone else came with Amélie.

“You’re the only one?” He asked.

“I am.”

“My condolences.” He paused. “I’m Mako. Mako Rutledge. These are my cattle, and my hired cowboys. I’ll make sure they don’t try anything funny.”

“Merci. Would, I mean, can I travel with you to Denver?”

Mako sighed.

“Right. Don’t take this the wrong way, but do you have any money?”

“I have twenty-five Canadian—“

“American money?”

Amélie swallowed.

“Non. I don’t.”

“Then you’re in trouble,” Mako said. “The world runs on money. If you don’t have it, well, I already said that you’re in trouble.”
“All I need is a trip to Denver,” Amélie gasped. “Can’t you let me ride along on your next trip?”

“Our next trip to Denver isn’t for a few more months.”

“Why? You’re so close to it! The man who took me here said it was a few days away!”

“The cattle aren’t ready,” Mako said. “They still got some growing to do. If I sell them now, I won’t make the most money from them. They need to roam, eat, and grow. But if you paid me, I can have a few of my boys ride you to Denver.”

They wouldn’t travel to Denver for months? Amélie didn’t have much of a choice. She swallowed, then forced herself to speak.

“I—if you’re going to Denver in a few months, I can wait,” she said. “Please, just let me ride along.”

“Can’t. You’ll need to pay your way.”

“What? Why?”

“Because we don’t have enough food to feed another few mouths,” Mako said. “My cowboys can live off the land, but they won’t be too happy about it. They need real food, not just the vegetables and roots they find. If you pay me, I can pay them to go without a few meals so you can eat. If you pay me, I can pay them to give you a ride on their horses. Traveling two to a saddle isn’t comfortable for long distances, but money will help them see the need for it.”

“You are unbelievable.”


Amélie glared at Mako. He looked back, apologetic.

“Then can you tell me where to go? I can make my own way to Denver.”

“Through this territory? I doubt it. You need food, water, supplies, not to mention a map and compass, because it’s easy to get lost.”

“And you can’t give me anything?” She demanded.

“Give? No. But if you buy it…”

Amélie hissed in frustration.

“This is unbelievable!”

“I know, and for what it counts, I’m sorry,” Mako said.

“Your apologies don’t fucking help me.”

“That’s why I said ‘for what it counts.’ Words don’t mean too much, it’s actions that speak.”

“Then what will become of me?”

“I don’t know. You’re stuck here, and unless you get some money, there’s not much I can do to help.” Mako paused. He seemed to be struggling against something. Finally, he sighed. “I can tell this is all a surprise to you. You must not know how the world works, and this is a terrible time and place to learn it.”
He jerked his head, nodding at her to follow him. Amélie hesitantly followed. He led her through the camp, to a campfire where nearly a dozen cowboys sat on logs.

“Give me a plate and cup.”

They quickly passed Mako a rough tin plate that was filled with beans and bits of meat. The cup held water. He handed both to Amélie.

“I’m sorry that you have to learn things this way,” he said. “This is my apology.”

Amélie’s stomach growled. She had to live on rough bread, fruit, and captured rabbits on the trip through Canada. She had felt so tired during the trip, she could only sleep. This plate smelled so heavenly…

She grabbed the plate, and began shoveling the food into her mouth. The beans were dull; there was little to no spices. The only thing that truly seasoned them was the grease from the meat, and the rough gravy it formed.

It was the best thing she had eaten on this damned trip. She finished, and downed the cup of water.

“Merci,” she gasped. She had eaten so fast, she barely had time to breathe. “Is…can I…please, I’m so hungry. Can I have any more?”

Mako looked at her with apologetic eyes. Hissing, Amélie rummaged through her pocket.

“Twenty-five cents?” She asked, holding the money up.

“Anyone use Canadian money here?” Mako asked.

“Yea, I got family up there, I’m due back soon,” a cowboy asked.

“This sound like a fair trade for dinner?”

“Sure, I’ll take it.”

Mako took her money, and handed it over to the cowboy. He passed Amélie his plate full of beans.

“Thank you,” she smiled. “Thank you so much.”

The cowboy nodded, trying not to stare as she shoveled the food into her mouth.

“Looks like you have your own tent. I’d set up a little away from the cowboys. I’ll tell ’em to leave you alone, but someone might try something before I can stop them.”

The sun woke Amélie up. She groaned, trying to find the energy to get up. She ended up rolling around, trying to go back to sleep, but the ground was so hard, and her blanket wasn’t plush enough to use as a bed rest. Even if she could, it would leave her exposed to the cold, windy air.

She could use it as bedding, or use it to stay warm, but not both. Such were the choices to her.

Her stomach growled. She had properly eaten two days ago. She had made due with scavenging the
nearby woods for berries and roots, but haven’t found much. She didn’t know what was good to eat, and what wasn’t.

Another day in this hell, Amélie thought.

She had to wait, had to wait for something. She was waiting, waiting, waiting…for what? She had no money, Mako wouldn’t help her, so what was she waiting for?

Amélie got out of her tent, and walked to the river. She knew that she shouldn’t drink straight from the river, she had to at least boil it to make it safe, but she needed a metal tin for that. She only had her tent, blanket, and the dirty dress she wore. So she knelt down, cupped her hands, and drank to slacken her thirst.

She took to walking around the area. She picked a place at the edge of the river, a spot between the woods, the planes, and the beginning of the hills and mountains. It was a few dozen meters from the nearest cowboy camp, but they still gave her a wide berth, most likely from the fear of God that Mako had put in them.

Amélie walked down the river, draping her blanket over her shoulders. The cowboys were waking up, eating their breakfasts. Just smelling the chuck wagon fire was enough to make her stomach rumble. She had to find something.

She walked past the camp, and turned around, ambling aimlessly. What was there to do? What was she going to do?

“Ah-hem.”

Amélie turned around. A cowboy was walking towards her through the thigh-high tall-grass. He was as dirty as she was, with a rough, unkempt beard, and almost threadbare clothes.

“E-e-excuse me,” he stammered. He quickly tipped his hat, almost as if he was unaccustomed to proper manners. Eventually he took it off. “Ma’am. Sorry to bother you, but…but I was hoping to talk to you, for a bit. If…if you don’t mind.”

Amélie looked at the man. She knew what pain looked like. Pain was her father when they buried her mother. Pain was what defined her as her father passed away in front of her. Pain is what she saw when she looked in a mirror, before she sold it. And the cowboy was in great pain.

“What can I do?” She asked.

“I just want to talk,” he said. “To a woman, I mean. It’s…well, no, it’s embarrassing. Can, can we just talk? I’d really like that.”

Amélie was about to say yes. After all, what else was she going to do?

But then Mako popped into her head. More specifically, the painful lesson she had learned.

“Do you have money?”

The cowboy paused for a second, then reached into his pocket.

“Let’s see…I have—“

Amélie’s rumbling stomach stopped him. She blushed, looking away. But the cowboy only chuckled, a chuckle of solidarity.
“I can get you breakfast.”

“I’d like that.”

“Uh, where should I meet you?”

“At my tent,” Amélie said. “I have a few logs there we can sit on.”

The cowboy nodded, and ran off. Amélie walked back to her tent. When she first set up her tent, she had found a few logs in the woods that were the perfect size for sitting on. It had taken her a long time to drag them into position, but she had nothing but time.

Minutes later, the cowboy came back with two plates, and a big mug of water.

“Sourdough biscuits and gravy,” he said, handing her the first plate, “and blueberry morning cake,” handing her the second.

Amélie practically inhaled the food. The sourdough biscuits was the best thing she ever had, tangy and somewhat sweet, a perfect complement for the sausage and the gravy. And the blueberry morning cake…

“You eat like a starved dog,” the cowboy chuckled in good humor.

That’s because I am a starved dog, Amélie thought as she ate. But she finished eating, and felt utterly happy. She even felt a little tired, like she needed a lie down after eating all that food. But the cowboy had bought her food in exchange for talking.

“Now, what did you want to talk about?”

“It’s…” The cowboy paused. He shifted on the log they sat on. “You’ll think it’s strange.”

Amélie wanted to say ‘yes, I bet,’ but the cowboy had brought her breakfast when she was starving.

“No, not at all,” she said instead.

The cowboy shifted on the log.

“You remind me of my daughter.”

Amélie paused at that.

“I mean, you’re nothing like her!” The cowboy said. “You’re a woman grown, and my girl is four years old. You got black hair, but she’s a redhead like her mother. You’re as thin as a rail, but my girl still got that baby fat on her. Nothing alike! But when I look at you, for some damned reason, I see my girl.”

The cowboy shook his head.

“I’ve been gone too long,” he mumbled. “I’m seeing her everywhere.”

“Hold old is your daughter?”

“She’s four now,” he said. “But I last saw her when she was almost about to turn two.”

“You last saw your daughter more than a year ago?”
“Yea, I have,” the cowboy said. “There ain’t any good jobs back home. Mako and his cowboys were riding through town at the time, and he’s always looking for cowpokes. It was the best money I could make, so I said yes. He’s got it set up so half of my share will get sent back to my wife. But… goddammit, I don’t even have enough money to buy a picture of them.”

Amélie placed her hand on the cowboy’s. He stiffened, but didn’t try to remove it.

“I miss her,” he said. “Goddammit, I miss my girl more than my wife. And I never, ever thought I’d miss someone more than my wife! I’m doing this for them, but I’ve been gone for so long, I’m worried she’d have moved on, taken my girl with her. I’m scared, and I can’t tell anyone that.”

The cowboy sniffled. Amélie realized he was crying.

“Can’t tell the boys, that’s for damn sure. I told ’em I’ve been gone for over a year, they just laugh. Say I’m a bad father for taking off. I know they’re just busting my chops, but it hurts, you know? It cuts deep. I’m doing this for her, but what if they’re right? God, I just want to go home.”

Amélie told the man he could talk to her because she saw that he was in pain. Hearing the cause of his pain, it only made her realize just how right she was.

He asked to talk to her, and just talk. But she couldn’t help but talk back.

“They’re right, you know,” she said. “You’re not a good father.”

The cowboy looked up at her, shock in his eyes.

“You’re a great father,” she said. “You knew that you had to do better for your family, and you found the job that let you give them more money. You’re out here, suffering for them so they may have a better life. That’s not something a good father does, that’s something a great father does.”

The cowboy turned away, almost ashamed to be seen crying.

“My daughter won’t see it that way,” he mumbled.

“She might not. But that’s not the point of being a parent. The point of being a parent is doing the hard work so your children can have a better life than you.”

“Yea…yea, you’re right.”

“Go on, and be the best father for your daughter. Be the best father here, because it means she lives a little better there,” she said. “And when you get back, hug her. Hug her and kiss her as often as you can.”

“Oh, I will,” the cowboy laughed. He looked up. In the distance, dust clouds was raising. “Shit, they’re getting started. I have to go.”

He stood up, dusted off his hat, and dried his eyes one last time.

“Thank you,” he said.

“De rien,” Amélie smiled. Then she remembered how hungry she had been. “If you want to talk again, you can always bring me some food or money.”

“Thank you, I will,” he said. The cowboy smiled at her one last time, then ran off back to the camp.

Amélie watched him go. She felt sorry for the man, but at the same time, she felt something in her
breast. It was...powerful. It was strong, it was...it was...

It was hope. Confidence that she could succeed. And it was intoxicating.

Mako was right. It was not personal that he turn her away; it was simply business. And she suddenly knew that she could make all the business she could handle. After all, she was the only woman in the camp. Shit, she might be the only woman in the territory for all anyone cared.

She yawned, suddenly realizing how tired she was. The breakfast the cowboy had bought her was heavenly, but also very, very heavy. At least, it was heavy on her empty, starving belly. Amélie was barely able to walk back to her tent; she nearly crawled, and collapsed onto the ground. She quickly drifted off to sleep, but not before a thought ran through her head.

She had options, she had choices, which was more than what she had yesterday.

Amélie woke up, just as the sun was cresting high in the sky. She ate herself into a food coma, but the sleep was just what she needed. She woke, feeling more awake and energetic than she had in weeks. Yes, a good, square meal in her belly was just what she needed.

She crawled out of her tent, and sat down on her little log. There wasn’t much for her to do but sit, think, and plan.

It was clear that the cowboys Mako hired had a need, a need only she could provide. She wasn’t too thrilled to provide it; maybe she could provide other services until she had enough money. She could be the one a cowboy confides in, a shoulder to cry on. She wondered how she would get word out about that.

She began working on a fire as the sun began dipping below the horizon. She was struggling to get it to catch when the cowboy came back, and carrying with dinner; pork chops and greens. He handed her the plate and helped her get the fire started. Once it was roaring, Amélie thanked him for the food, and ate as he talked.

“I couldn’t help but think about what you said this morning,” he said. “About being the best father I could be. I...I just never thought of it that way.”

“My mother told me that when I was growing up,” she said, licking up the grease that ran down her chin. “My father worked all day, doing everything he could so we could live well. She told me that when I asked her where he was.

“It didn’t help me at the time; I wanted my papa. But she also said that when I got older, and began learning the ways of the world, I’d know just how much he loved me. And she was right. Looking back, I could see how much it weighed on him, coming home in the night and leaving in the morning. But I knew that he did it for me, and that...and that...”

Amélie wasn’t the only one with wet eyes.

“But now, knowing that, it means the world to me,” she was able to stammer out. “Your daughter might not appreciate the work you do now, but when she gets old enough to see the world and how it works, she’ll look back, and she’ll know just how much you loved her.”
The cowboy didn’t look at her. He was staring into the fire, tears cutting through the grime on his face. Amélie moved over next to him, and wrapped her arm around him. He gently took her arm, and cried.

She could do this. She could be the one the cowboys confide in. Right now, it was getting her food. But deep down, Amélie knew she had to get real money. Food would keep her fed, but she wouldn’t thrive with just food.

But all that could wait, if only for tonight.

Amélie woke up, stretching as the sun broke across the horizon. It had been weeks since she first started talking to the cowboy, and word had spread that she could be talked to. At first, she had accepted food, but as she became well fed, she started asking for money.

She wanted to save up to buy a trip to Denver from Mako, but had splurged, if only for the sake of her back. The first thing she bought were more blankets. They were used and worn, but they were still clean. What was better was that they were warm and comfortable. She still slept on the ground, but now she could sleep on top of a blanket, as well as using one for warmth. Before, she had to choose: cushion the ground but freeze, or be warm but sleep on the cold ground. Now she could have both.

Crawling out of her tent, she walked to the nearest campfire. The cowboys were getting ready for their day, lining up at the chuck wagon for breakfast. She knew many of them by name now, and greeted them as she got in line. In turn, the cowboys tilted their hats and politely chatted with her as they waited.

Soon it was her turn to get food. She pulled out a few coins, paid the cook, and got a plate full of biscuits, bacon, eggs, and a tall mug of fresh water. She thanked the cook, ate, and walked back to her tent. It would be time to start working soon.

Her first appointment came soon after, a boy who was barely able to shave. He missed his sweetheart back home, and hoped that she would stay faithful to him. She consoled him, letting him wrap her in a tight hug just for comfort. Her next appointment missed his family, but wasn’t good at writing, just barely able to scratch out his name and a few more letters. He brought her a few pieces of paper, and dictated to her while she wrote down his feelings. For a man who was barely literate, he was shockingly eloquent.

When she was finished, it was time for the cowboys to get to work. That left her with most of the day to herself, and the choices she had.

She looked up. In the distance, she saw Mako walking among his cowboys, checking the cattle they herded. They looked at Mako, tilting their hats respectfully. They looked up to him. They respected him. And more than a few feared him.

Amélie watched him, and realized she was envious. She wanted to be the one that everyone looked up to, the one with all the power, the one to decide what happened and when it happened. She needed to get that, but at the same time, she knew that to get there she’d have to do things that she detested, things that she would surely regret.

She could continue doing her comforting work, being a shoulder to lean and cry on. It was now
paying her money, just enough to buy some of the bare necessities to live in this damned place; food, blankets, and eventually a ticket to Denver. Yes, she was surviving, and surviving well enough.

‘Survive.’ Thinking that word made the deep-buried feeling of rage curl her lip back and hiss at the very thought. Survive? She couldn’t just survive. Her parents didn’t uproot their lives, spend all of their money on a ticket to Newfoundland just for her to survive. Her mother didn’t pass away wishing for her to survive. Her father’s last words to her weren’t to just survive.

Fuck just surviving. They came to this land to *thrive*, to grow stronger than they ever could back in their native land, tall enough to touch the sky. They came here to be better, to become someone they could barely recognize. They could become nobility here! Why the fuck was she so stuck on *just* surviving?!

Her mother’s wisdom suddenly came back to her.

*Being an adult means changing things about yourself,* she had said. *A child might not like to work, but an adult knows the good it can do them. When the time comes, you must stop being a girl, and become a woman.*

Amélie wanted, *needed*, to thrive. She needed it like a fish needs water, or a bird needed to fly. She knew she had the means to it, so why was she hesitating? Was it because, deep in her heart, she was still a girl? A naïve little girl who was being blown about by the winds of fate from a cruel and indifferent world?

She hissed at the very thought of being at the mercy of anything ever again. Realization dawned on her; landing in this hellhole was not a curse, but a blessing. It had taught her one painful thing: if she was to thrive, she had to stop being a girl, and become a woman. Never again would she be pushed about by things beyond her control. From now on, she’d be the one making her own fate. She would kill the girl that was inside of her, and become the woman she knew she was meant to be.

The cowboys she talked to were often religious. They spoke of God, and the need to bow to His will. Amélie spat at that. There was no God; he was dead. There was no future that was made for her, there was no fate but what she would make for herself.

A girl would pray for fortune, but a woman would make her own.

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The cowboy sighed as he buckled his pants.

“Lord. Thank you.”

Amélie smiled at him, which made his knees shake. He left her tent, unable to meet her eyes.

Her heart was hammering in her chest, and her legs ached. But at the same, she could only count the money that she had earned. In the dying light of the day, it was hard to see, but that didn’t stop her from eyeing the bills that were given to her, or the dollar amount that was printed on them.

She was making money. And she liked it. With this one cowboy, she had made more money than she had being just a shoulder to cry on. She finally had enough money to buy a ticket to Denver. But Mako wasn’t leaving for at least a few more weeks. His cattle still had to grow to the right size to sell.
That meant there was still time for her to earn money. After all, there was a line of cowboys just
dying to meet her, and not all of them wanted sex. If she gave up now, she would only end up broke
and in Denver. She would go from just surviving here, to just surviving in Denver. But if she kept
working, she’d end up in Denver with money to spend. She would *thrive*.

It really wasn’t a choice at all.

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Amélie woke up, stretching as the sun broke across the horizon. She got off the simple yet
comfortable bed that was built into the wagon, taking a few minutes to dress. She had slept in rough
spun clothes, all second- and third- hand, but took the time to change into her usual undergarments
and dress. She was in desperate need of a new dress, but there wasn’t a reliable way to buy one.
Nearly everything she bought was from the cowboys.

Dressed, she climbed down from the wagon she had purchased two weeks ago. It was old, and she
was told that it was too rough to ride in. That didn’t bother her at all, the wagon’s hitching rail was
driven into the ground, and the wheels were blocked, turning it into a little house. It wasn’t going
anywhere without a fight.

She walked to the nearest chuck wagon campfire. The cowboys were getting ready for their day,
lining up for breakfast. She knew many of them by name now, and greeted them as she got in line. In
turn, the cowboys tilted their hats and politely chatted with her as they waited.

Mako said that he would be organizing a drive to Denver in less than two weeks’ time. She was
finally going to leave.

Soon it was her turn to get food. She pulled out a few coins, paid the cook, and got a plate full of
beans, eggs, and hash browns. She took a cup full of water, and sat by her wagon while she ate.
When the time came to leave, she’d sell it back to some cowboy who’d want to use the wagon
owned by the camp whore. It wouldn’t be hard, she already had a list of buyers in her head.

She looked out over the camp. Suddenly, the thought of leaving seemed oddly…strange. Amélie
never thought she’d grow attached to the camp, but here she was, suddenly questioning if she really
had to leave.

She wondered why, but deep down, she knew the reason. It was the way everyone looked at her, the
way they tipped their hats and spoke her name with reverence. It was the way they all saw her, the
way they looked at her.

It was power. *Her* power.

Amélie smiled at that. She never thought she’d become a whore, but at the same time, she had an
odd amount of power. Every cowboy respected her. They told her their secrets, they confided in her.
Yes, they fucked her as hard as they could, but she had seen a part of them they’d never dream of
showing anyone else, certainly not their sweethearts or wives, and she was good with tracking her
cycle to prevent any scares. It was oddly satisfying. No, not satisfying; she was proud of her work, of
how she was thriving.

And she’d be giving it all away.

Amélie shrugged. That was being an adult, she guessed. That was growing up, starting over again,
and rebuilding yourself. She had enough money to live comfortably in Denver, at least for a while. She could find a real job there, a better job.

But not one that would pay better.

The cowboys were always loud. They had to be; if they weren’t, they’d never hear each other from across the massive herd of cattle. But in the camp, they were somewhat restrained. Not now. They were chattering, yelling, more than a few were whistling. That made Amélie look up. A few cowboys were running by her wagon.

“What’s going on?” She asked.

“Another woman showed up!”

That made Amélie pay attention, but she didn’t get the chance to question them more; they were off running. Amélie finished her food, gathered up her dress, and ran in the direction of the cowboys. She didn’t have to run very far. There was a small mob of cowboys not far ahead, but they were being pushed away.

“Alright, this is enough,” she heard Mako shout. “We got work to do. Back to it. Come on, this isn’t what you’re getting paid for!”

Cowboys were being driven away by the massive Mako. He was so focused on making his money that he seemed to ignore the cute woman that was being mobbed. She was a brunette, hair the color of fresh baked bread. She was slight, but fully grown.

And she looked so scared and shaken up to be around such randy men. But seeing Amélie, relief broke across her face.

“Oh, thank God,” the woman gasped, running to Amélie. She hugged her, which took Amélie aback.

“D—do we know each other?” She stammered.

“No,” the woman said, “but I was so goddamn scared that there wasn’t anyone else here.”

“You mean another woman?”

“Yes!”

Amélie gently took the woman’s shoulders.

“What is your name?”

“Natalie.”

“Natalie. That’s a beautiful name,” Amélie smiled. “But what are you doing here, Natalie?”

“There was talk in the south of this being a spot to go to start a new life,” Natalie said. “A place up north, to start over again.”

“Who told you that?” Amélie snorted.

“Just…some trail hands that traveled by my home,” she said, blushing. “Message runners and the sort.”
“And what did these ‘trail hands’ tell you?”

“That it was a place of freedom, that the women here were strong and big.”

“‘Women?’” Amélie couldn’t help but cock her eyebrow at that. “Did they say women, or woman?”

Natalie blinked.

“Y—you mean, just…just one woman?” She asked.

“Yes. One woman, or many?”

Natalie blushed.

“It, uh, it might’ve been just one…”

That meant it was just Amélie herself that the trail hands had talked about. She was the woman that was strong and big. Amélie felt pride busting in her chest.

“Then you might’ve been tricked,” she said. “Or you made an assumption.”

“I might have,” Natalie admitted. “I haven’t seen any other women here.”

“That’s because there are none. I’m the only woman here. At least, until you arrived.”

That got Natalie to gape.

“What?” She demanded. “But I came here to make a new life for myself!”

“And you might have made the wrong choice,” Amélie said. “I’m trying to get out of this place, and to Denver.”

“Denver? That city is too big!” Natalie said.

“Too big? Do you have a thing against cities?”

“Well…I’m more of a country girl…”

“Then what will you do?”

“I…I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t have much money. Maybe I can find some job to get me a ticket out of here. How are you surviving here?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Amélie chuckled. “How will you take care of yourself?”

Natalie paused.

“I only have a few coins left,” she admitted. “How are you working here?”

“I have my ways,” Amélie smiled.

“Then can you tell me? I need some money to get out of here!”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Please! I need to get out of here!”
Amélie couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Natalie asked.

“Well, I guess you can say that I’m the camp whore.”

That made Natalie blanch.

“Y-y-you…”

“Yes, I guess I’m one of those women.”

“How? Why?”

Amélie gently took her hand, and brought her to her wagon.

“When I first came here, all I had was the dress I was wearing, a blanket, and a tent,” Amélie said. “Now I have a wagon, more than five blankets, and I can eat three meals a day.”

“What do you mean, you can eat three meals a day?”

“The cowboys charge you to eat.” Natalie stared at her. “Yes, they charge you for food. Does that surprise you?”

“I…I never had to pay for food before…”

“You must have had a big family to feed you.”

Natalie nodded.

“When I came here, I was hungry. I had a plate of food given to me, the only thing ever given to me. And it was an apology; an apology for having to learn the lesson the hard way.”

“What lesson?”

“That the world runs on money. The more you have, the more power you have. But if you don’t have it, well…”

Natalie couldn’t meet her gaze.

“How much is the food?” She mumbled.

“Twenty cents for each meal.”

Natalie counted her coins.

“I have thirty cents.” She said that so quietly, Amélie nearly missed it. She gently took the woman’s hands.

“I can buy you dinner tonight,” she said. “I can even lend you the tent I used. But you need to find a way to make some money. Then you can get free of this place, and go to somewhere you can truly live.”

“But what can I do?”

“I didn’t start out as the camp whore, I was a shoulder for men to lean on. It wasn’t sex, it wasn’t even getting naked. Most men just want someone to talk to. Some just wanted to see my
undergarments. Maybe you can do something…”

Natalie waited for her to continue. She was left waiting.

“Maybe I can do something what?” Natalie finally said.

“Maybe we can work together,” Amélie said.

“What?”

“We can work together,” she said. “There are so many cowboys here, more than any one person can handle. We can work together, pool our money together, buy food and shelter and a ticket out of here.”

“I’m not becoming the second camp whore!” Natalie spat.

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. You don’t have to become a whore like me, you can simply be a confidant. One who listens to the men.”

“It doesn’t matter! I have my honor!”

“Honor won’t feed you.”

“I don’t care!”

“That won’t last. Trust me, I used to be so hungry, I could barely move.”

Natalie scoffed at that.

“I’ll find a way out of here.”

“I hope you do,” Amélie said. “But if you change your mind, I can always use the help.”

Amélie sat at her wagon, eating dinner. She was tired today; a downside of having to service too many lonely cowboys. Not all of them wanted sex, they just wanted someone to listen to them, to hold them. It was strangely draining. Fortunately, Amélie had enough money to take a day or two off. Yes, a day or two off would help her feel better. Besides, it was getting close to her time of the month, and she wanted to play it safe.

Dinner tonight was a casserole of chicken, greens, and pasta, covered with bread crumbs. Amélie treated herself to a tall cup of whiskey. She sipped it, letting the alcohol worm its way through her body, just enough to feel nice and loose. She had sarsaparilla to cut it with, and water to help her from getting too drunk.

She was nearly finished with her food when a shadow crossed her. She looked up. It was Natalie, looking positively miserable. Her face was gaunt, her eyes dark, with deep bags under them. She didn’t even have a blanket to keep her warm; her arms were wrapped around her belly. Her stomach growled loudly.
“Have you eaten?” Amélie asked.

Natalie shook her head.

“How long have you gone without food?”

“I don’t know,” Natalie mumbled. “Only the meal you bought me, and half of a breakfast.”

“I see.”

Amélie stood up.

“Come with me,” she said. “We’ll get you some food.”

“Thank you,” Natalie mumbled.

“But we’ll have to talk about you feeding yourself. I can’t be spending money to support a stranger.”

Natalie stopped. She couldn’t meet Amélie’s eyes.

“I don’t want…”

Amélie had gotten good at reading people. She pulled Natalie in close to her, wrapping her arms around her. Natalie broke down.

“I don’t want to go hungry ever again,” she sobbed.

“I know, it’s painful.”

“I’ll do anything to not feel this way again.”

“Shush, shush,” Amélie said. “We’ll get you some food. Then we can talk. Then we can find something for you to do, and it doesn’t have to be sex work.”

________________________

“God, is it always this way?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Jesus.”

Natalie sat with Amélie, eating dinner.

“Jesus,” she said, chuckled despite herself. “I never knew those cowboys could be so lonely.”

“Out on the trail, there’s not much to keep them company. They need someone to talk to.”

“I should’ve figured. But who knew being a confidant could be so…so draining?” Natalie mumbled. “I’m sorry, but when you first told me we could work together, I thought…I thought you’d pimp me out.”

“I would never do such a thing,” Amélie said. “This is a bad position we are in, and we must make the most of it. I only want to help you do things you are comfortable with. Talking to the cowboys
earns you money."

“Not as much as what you get.”

“That is true,” Amélie admitted. “But you don’t have to do what I do.”

“Thank you,” Natalie said, looking off into the distance.

Amélie took a second to follow where Natalie was looking. She was looking out at the mountains in the distance.

“What I do is a necessity,” Amélie said.

“A necessity? To whom?”

“To the cowboys, and to myself,” Amélie said. “I do it because it gives me power and money. You don’t have to do what I do, but we can’t work against each other either. If we work together, we keep each other safe. If we work against each other, it will only help the cowboys.”

“And I can’t stand those fuckers getting their way for more than a second.”

Amélie chuckled.

“We stick together, we keep each other safe, fed, and paid,” she said. “We can make something for ourselves.”

“I bet we can,” Natalie said. “Jesus, I just realized something.”

“What is that?”

“I never asked for your name.”

Amélie smiled.

“Amélie. Amélie Lacroix.”

“Then I’d love to work with you, Madam Lacroix.”

Chapter End Notes

And so begins the first chapter in a new arc! Don't worry, we'll be getting back to the 'present' day soon enough.
Why the break? Show, don't tell. Amélie has to start somewhere, yes? Anywho, here's a song about her struggle.
A Crease in the Map

Chapter Summary

Amélie continues to rise, becoming a person she couldn't dream of: Madam Lacroix.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five Years Ago

Amélie and Natalie stood next to each other. They were waiting for Mako’s cowboy to bring the wagon around. Surrounding them were the cowboys on horseback, readying up for the trip to Denver. Cattle mooed, men shouted, and in the distance, Mako was bellowing orders, getting things ready to move.

“Finally,” Natalie said. “Finally, we can get out of here.”

Amélie nodded. They were finally leaving for Denver. She looked around. She could sell her wagon, get even more money for her new life. But at the same time, she felt oddly uneasy.

Everyone knew her here. Everyone knew her name, knew what she could do for them, and they respected her for it. She had a measure of power, something she had built for herself, by herself. And she was going to leave, go to Denver and become another nobody in an even bigger town. Why was she so upset?

A wagon pulled up.

“Mako says you two are heading to Denver with us?” The driver asked.

“Yes, we are,” Natalie said.

“Damn. Things’ll get damn lonely here when we get back,” he sighed.

“What is that?” Natalie said, eyes scanning the horizon.

Looking out at the plains, Amélie saw a wagon train approaching, traveling from the general direction of Denver. She saw families sitting in wagons, but she also saw men traveling on horseback as well as on foot. She also saw women walking alongside the wagons; many were carrying small, simple bags. They seemed to be traveling alone as well. The wagon train was stopping, taking advantage of this little crease to stop and relax.

“Looks like travelers,” the wagon driver said. “I heard talk about folk traveling out west through here, but I didn’t think they’d actually show up.”

“This is a good place to rest from the trail,” Amélie admitted.

Looking at some of the women who were traveling, Amélie saw fear and apprehension in their eyes.
They were nervous, they were scared, and if their worn and dirty dresses were any indication, they were just like her when she first arrived: broke, hopeless, being blown about by the cruel winds of fate, with nothing to hold on to.

“Well, you got the money for the trip?” The driver asked.

Those newly arriving women were lost, just as she once was. Someone needed to help them learn the lesson she did, someone needed to give them a choice.

Natalie quickly handed her fare over. But Amélie paused.

“Are you coming?” Natalie asked.

Amélie realized that she didn’t want to go back to being a nobody. Being a somebody, even if she was a whore, was oddly growing on her. There were plenty of men traveling to this place. She could easily earn more money staying here. But the women who came...

Natalie had come to this area, chasing a false belief. She may not have been lied to, but she had traveled here on a rumor. Rumors spread like wildfire, taking shapes no one could suspect. If Natalie traveled here, it only meant that more women like her would come.

“No,” Amélie said.

“Are... are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m building a life here, for myself. I can’t throw that away.”

“But we can go to Denver together, find a new life for us there.” Natalie looked like she would cry.

“We don’t have to...”

Amélie nodded. She had no one to teach her about their profession, but she knew that their line of work was not for every woman. Natalie only did comfort work because she was starving. Denver had other opportunities better suited for her. But the women who were arriving with the traveling group may not know they have that option. They might only think they could survive by becoming whores, or they could sell themselves just to eat. If it wasn’t for her, Natalie could have suffered such a fate.

The women that came here might become prey to men who would mercilessly pimp them out. They didn’t know the choices they had. But Amélie knew. She could direct them, give them something she never had: a true choice.

“Don’t worry about me,” she smiled. “I’ll make my way here.”

Natalie hugged her.

“Thank you for helping me.”

“You’re welcome.”

Natalie dried her tears, and climbed into the wagon.

“Well, Mako and the boys will be back in a few weeks,” the driver said, tipping his hat to her. “But it looks like you got some business riding in.”

“Thank you,” Amélie said.
Natalie saw the cowboys as an unfortunate, but necessary, evil. Amélie saw them as potential. Potential money, and even power.

After all, money bought everything. If she had more money, she could do anything. And right now, with the power she had, she could help the lost women.

Amélie watched the wagon pull off, bringing up the rear of the herd of cattle. Natalie waved her good-byes, and she waved back. Amélie had options, she had money, and she had power. It was time to do something with it.

Smiling, she walked over to the newly arriving wagon trains. Some of the women looked up at her. Amélie could see the fear and apprehension in their eyes, but also the relief of seeing another woman.

“How are your travels?”

“Hey, you busy later tonight?”

“Sorry, I’m not that kinda woman,” Lena said, urging her mare, Emily, on.

“You came to this little crease, and you’re not that kinda woman?” The cowboy laughed, riding next to her. “What kind are ya, then?”

“I’m a courier,” she said. “I’ll take mail and deliver it for ya.”

“Really?” He said, his tone changing. “You’d ride off to some town to send mail?”

“Or a package, if it was small enough,” Lena said. “I charge more for that, though.”

The cowboy paused, thinking.

“I got a postcard for my family,” he said. “How much would it cost to send it?”

“Depends on where they are; further it goes, the more it costs,” she said. “I’ll be riding back to Denver in a day or so, see if anyone needs anything else. You got until then to write it, and find me.”

The cowboy nodded, thanking her, and rode off.

Lena had heard of this place, this crease in the map. She heard it was a place for cowboys and frontier families. It didn’t seem to be a place to set up shop and stay, but it was better than sleeping in the forest and doing what she could to protect herself.

America is such a bigger, stranger place than Britain. It was all so overwhelming. But at the same time, it was just what she needed. There were very little options for a poor Cockney girl such as herself back home, but in America, she could become someone.

For a while, that’s all Lena was: an exotic Cockney girl in America. But she had a love of horses, and a burning desire to roam about. She had worked odd jobs, first in New York, then further and further out west, until she had enough money to buy Emily when she was just a filly. She loved Emily, and she grew up to be the fastest horses that Lena had ever saw.
That was her true ticket out west. She quickly earned a reputation for having a fast horse, and keeping her word. Being a courier sent her to all kinds of places, including this crease in the map. A cattle herder was earning a killing here, and he undoubtedly needed some stuff sent about. This would be her next big meal ticket, and hopefully for a good long while.

She rode up to a large group of cowboys who were starting to gather around a chuck wagon.

“Hey ya!” She waved.

“We got another woman coming in,” one laughed, looking up.

“Only this one wears pants.”

“I’m not that kinda girl,” Lena groaned. Men and their assumptions! That was one reason she didn’t fancy them. “I’m a courier. Is your boss here? I was wondering if he needed something mailed anywhere.”

A large man stepped forward. He was almost as tall as Lena was, and she was sitting on Emily!

“That’d be me,” the big man said. “Mako Rutledge. How can I help you?”

“Er…I’m Lena. Lena Oxton,” she stammered out. “I got word that ‘bout a place like this, and I was wondering if you needed anything sent about. I can carry it for you.”

“Oxton, right?” Mako said, rubbing his chin. He was growing a five o’clock shadow. “Think I’ve heard of you last time we rode out there.”

“Hopefully it’s all good,” Lena smiled.

“It was,” Mako said. “Yes, I got a few letters that need to be shipped out. I’m sure my boys got some things to send back home, too.”

“Great,” Lena smiled. “I’ll be here for a day or two, so find me before then, and I’ll let you know what the price is, depending on where it’s going.”

“You might also want to stop by Madam Lacroix,” he said. “She or her girls might have things they want to send.”

“There are other women here?”

“There are,” Mako said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “You can find them down there.”

Lena tipped her hat, and eased Emily on. Sure enough, down a rough-beaten path, she found a group of four women. They sat at a tent city, but there were also a handful of wagons there, too. Unlike her, they wore dresses, and she even spied corsets about them, too. It was clear what they were.

“Hello,” Lena said, bringing Emily to a stop. “I heard there was a Madam Lacroix here?”

A tall, dark-haired beauty walked forward. Lena’s breath left her chest as her eyes drank the woman in. She had high cheekbones that only highlighted her beauty, and she had a grace that Lena had never seen before. She nearly fell off Emily.
“Yes?” Goddammit, even her voice was beautiful…

The woman cleared her voice.

“Can I help you?” She said again in a lovely French accent.

*Think, Lena, think!*

“Er, yea,” she managed to croak out. “I’m courier, I work as a Lena… wait, dammit, I’m Lena! I’m a courier!”

The woman, Madam Lacroix, laughed. Lena suddenly wanted to melt.

“Then how can I help you, courier who works as a Lena?”

Lena was embarrassed that she could be reduced to such a state, but since it was done to her by the most beautiful woman in the world, she was completely fine with it.

“I’m… I’m… I’m riding to Denver in a day or a bit,” she stammered. “Need me to take anything there?”

“How much would it cost?”

Finally, business! She could talk business!

“Depends on where it’s going, and how big it is,” Lena said, her head clearing. “I mostly do letters, newspapers, and a few small parcels.”

Madam Lacroix smiled. Lena wanted to make her smile like that every damn day…

“This is quite fortuitous,” Madam Lacroix said. “I was just about to hire a cowboy to do this, but if a courier such as yourself is here, I can use you instead.”

*You can use me all day long if you want,* Lena thought.

“I’m building a saloon here,” Madam Lacroix continued. “But I need to hire workers, buy supplies. Can you take a letter to a few lumber mills in Denver, get me quotes on what it will take to hire workers to travel out here?”

“I’d ride to hell for you,” Lena gushed.

“Merci,” Madam Lacroix smiled. “I’ll need a day to write everything up. Until then, would you like something to eat? My treat for such a lovely courier.”

Olivia jumped off the wagon the second it stopped.

“You sure you don’t need any help?” The driver asked.

“No, I’m fine,” she said, dusting her dress off.

“You sure?”
“Si, I am,” Olivia sighed, grabbing her bag. It held a few more clothes and some books, but other than that, it was the only thing to her name.

She took a second to look around. Her brow furrowed.

“Oy, I thought you said a city was here.”

“I said there’s a lot of people in this area. You thought it was a city.”

“So you’ll take my money and ditch me here?”

“You still got some traveling to do with the money you have, don’t you worry,” the driver said. “We’re just stopping for a day or so.”

“Where the hell is this damned place, anyways?”

The driver pulled out a map, and pointed to a small crease in the map. As much as she wanted to grumble, Olivia was glad for the break. There was only so much traveling one could do before a rest was needed.

“Ay, it looks like a cowboy wasteland,” she sighed, looking out at the place they had stopped at.

“This is mostly a stop for Mako and his cattle,” the driver admitted. “But we got plenty of families who pass through here on their way west. Besides, there are some women here, too.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Olivia sighed. “I was getting worried about the cows.”

The driver snorted at the implication of cow fucking, and went to hitching the horses. There really wasn’t anything around the area, just tent cities, wagons, horses, and cattle. Olivia made her way down a beaten path that seemed to be the closest thing to a street, watching where she stepped; there was horse shit everywhere. Then again, since it was a ranch stop, it was to be expected. As she walked, she saw a group of women sitting around a campfire. There had to be four women, sitting, eating, drinking, and chatting.

“Hola,” she smiled.

“A new girl,” one woman said.

“Uh, yes, I’m new,” Olivia blinked.

A tall woman stood up. She wore a worn dress, but was very pretty. She had long black hair, and a very good face.

“Hello,” she said. Olivia heard an accent. “My name is Amélie. What brings you to this little stop?”

“Nice to meet you, Amélie. I’m Olivia,” she said. “My driver called for a few day’s break. I didn’t know a lot of women were here. It’s kind of weird.”

That got the women to laugh.

“There is nothing weird about why we are here,” Amélie smiled.

“Why are you here?”

“It’s where the money is,” Amélie said. “We provide the cowboys with company.”
“Wait…you’re whores?”

“That’s one thing they call us.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t seem that taken aback,” Amélie said. “Most women shun us, or call us names.”

“I’ve known a few women who fell back on it when times got rough,” Olivia said. “There’s no need to be an asshole about it.”

“Then thank you for being so understanding.”

“Do you…I mean, you seem pretty comfortable. Is the money really that good?”

“There’s no one else around to give them comfort,” a woman laughed. “We’re it!”

“And the cowboys get a lot of money.”

The women nodded at that. Amélie only smiled.

“I’m sorry, this is just weird,” Olivia said. “This doesn’t seem to be the best place to…well, to fall back on the oldest profession.”

“It won’t stay that way forever,” Amélie said. “I’m building a saloon here.”

“You’re building a what now?”

“A saloon,” the tall woman smiled. “A place for us, to entertain and live in. I’ve sent a letter with a courier to go to Denver just a day ago; I’ll be hiring riders and ordering materials. They should be coming back within a few weeks.”

“And how are you going to build it?”

“When my courier is in Denver, they’re going to hire workers.”

“You can afford all that?”

“I can,” Amélie smiled. She was obviously proud of herself, and Olivia couldn’t blame her.

“Yes, Madam Lacroix takes care of us,” one woman grinned. The others laughed, but nodded.

“Would you like to join us?” Amélie asked. “For dinner, I mean. It’s getting late.”

“How much will the dinner cost me?”

That seemed to catch Amélie unaware, but it was clear that it was a pleasant surprise.

“It is your first night in this crease; it will be on me,” she said.

“Gracias,” Olivia sighed. She didn’t have that much money. But if the woman here was earning enough money to build a damn saloon, and hire workers from Denver to boot…

“Are,” she mumbled, “are you looking for someone else? I don’t have that much money, I was thinking…”

“Think on it more,” Amélie said. “I told you, this meal is on me. Eat, and think before you make a
decision. I’ve seen what hunger does to a woman, how it forces her hand, and I never want to see it again. Think on a full belly, and then make your choice.”

Four Years Ago

Amélie woke up, stretching as the sun broke across the horizon. Her bed was soft and warm, the room more than proof against the winds. She got up, opened the curtain, and looked out the glass window. Outside was a sweeping view of the nearby mountains and forest, and the omnipresent herd of cattle the cowboys were working.

She walked to her dresser, peeling off her night clothes, and donned her corset and dress. Everything she owned was made to be titillating, but she actually hadn’t slept with a cowboy in months. She was too busy managing her girls, handling payments, brewing beer and whiskey, and working on the upkeep of her saloon.

Her saloon. She never got tired of thinking that.

She walked out, greeting a few of the girls who were early to rise as well. She walked down the stairs to the nearly empty bar room. Olivia was already awake.

“Hey boss.” The Mexican woman sat at a table, eating a quick breakfast of eggs. “What’s on the schedule today?”

“More cowboys are coming in from the trail,” Amélie said, sitting down herself. “Hopefully my Lena will be back. And we might have travelers passing through.”

“Shit, ever since this place went up, more and more people are coming through.”

“If you build it, they will come,” Amélie chuckled. “A cowboy told me that once. It seems to be working.”

“Yea, business is booming.”

“Will you be staying?” She asked. “You’ve earned quite the killing. I would imagine you’d have left by now, many of the girls who first worked with me have.”

“I thought so, too,” Olivia admitted. “But the girls are great, the money is amazing, and…I don’t know, I like it here. I’m finding things out, hearing rumors and whispers. It’s nice to know what’s going on, to actually know where things are going instead of being surprised by it.”

“Then thank you for staying,” Amélie smiled. “And if you hear any good information, please tell me. I know you hear things, and I can make it worth your while.”

“Sure thing, Madam Lacroix,” she grinned.

Amélie laughed at that.

“You’ve been with me nearly since the beginning. You can call me by my first name.”
“Then sure thing, Amélie,” Olivia smiled. “Actually, there is one thing.”

“Anything for an old friend.”

Olivia flustered at that. Amélie knew how much Olivia liked keeping to herself; calling her an ‘old friend’ was her way of drawing Olivia in. Amélie knew she was buttering the Mexican woman up plenty, but a little flattery never hurt.

“Well, there’s a priest that’s come through town,” she said, suddenly unable to meet Amélie’s eyes. “I’m not religious, but…but a lot of girls are, and, well, my Mama…”

The only time Olivia mentioned her mother was to say she didn’t want to talk about her.

“Then we’d better get going,” Amélie said.

“You want to take mass?” Olivia said, eyes wide with shock.

“If talking about this priest is getting you to mention your mother, then he must be good.”

“I don’t know if he’s a good priest,” Olivia stammered. “But…Mama was very devout. I, I guess this is me just…you know, feeling close to her. One last time.”

“You don’t have to take mass to feel close to your mother,” Amélie said, resting a hand on Olivia’s shoulder. “I feel close to my mother whenever I see how far I’ve come. But if it helps, then you should do what is good for you.”

“Gracias, Amélie,” Olivia smiled.

Olivia stood up, busing her dishes to the kitchen. One of these days, Amélie would have to find a better chef; the one she had now was an old chuck wagon cook, and while the meals were satisfactory, she wanted better for her patrons. Together, they walked out of the saloon, and Olivia led her out to the front of this little gathering everyone called Crease.

Nearly a hundred meters from the saloon, she saw a big gathering of people. It was mostly cowboys, but she saw a dozen of her girls there, as well as a few farming families she was helping to put down roots; usually it meant helping them with loans to build houses and barns. They were all gathered around a rickety old wagon, where a man stood.

He was handsome. Very handsome, and very Mexican. The priest wore a well-trimmed beard that hugged his jaw and chin, meeting in a thin goatee. He was broad-shouldered, and if Amélie had learned anything about being a whore, she could spot strength when she saw it; the priest was strong.

“Is that the priest?” Amélie asked.

“Yea, it is,” Olivia grinned. “Handsome hunk, isn’t he?”

“I can see why you wanted to come.”

“Oh come on! It’s not like that, he’s a man of God!”

If Amélie didn’t know Olivia for over a year, she might believe that. Still, she let it slide.

The priest had begun mass by reading a Bible passage. He ended just as Amélie and Olivia found a spot to stand. He gestured, and everyone sat down on the ground. Amélie huffed a little, but bit her tongue; this was a good dress she was wearing. Still, she sat next to Olivia in the dirt, letting it get dirty.
The priest looked out at everyone, a warm smile on his lips.

“Jesus was walking through the Holy Land with his disciples,” he said, speaking to the crowd. He had a good voice, easy to project. Amélie could tell that he was a gifted orator. “As they’re walking, they come across a town. They walk in, and see a mob yelling and screaming, pushing a woman about, tearing at her clothes before tying her to a wooden pole in the middle of the town.

“Jesus turns to the crowd and says, ‘my good people, what are you doing to this woman?’

‘She’s an adulteress!’ They shout. ‘She’s unclean! We’re going to stone her!’

‘Very well,’ Jesus says. ‘That is your right. But I tell you this: let he who is sinless cast the first stone.’

“The mob stops. Every person realizes that, no matter how virtuous they are, they’re all sinners. They don’t have the moral right to judge her.

“But this one old lady at the front of the mob just looks at Jesus. Then she picks up a big rock, and heaves it at the woman. The rock hits the woman in the head, caving her skull in, killing her instantly.

“Jesus looks at the woman and says, ‘dammit Mom, I’m trying to prove a point here!!’”

Amélie wasn’t the only one who is laughing. Everyone is reduced to stitches. Olivia howled with laughter, completely caught off guard. The priest isn’t some snobby, stuck-up man of God, he knows how to relate to the common man.

“Only God may judge us,” the priest said with a smile. “Only Him, Jesus his Son, and the Virgin Mary, seeing as she was born without sin. Only they may judge us, and no one else. If you meet a man or woman who says they speak with the authority of God, well, I can tell you that they’re trying to sell you something. Unless they can turn water into wine right in front of you, that is.”

“Amen!” A cowboy yelled.

“And an amen to that,” the priest yelled back. “So if they’re the only ones who can judge us, who among us can?”

Silence fell on the crowd. Men and women looked at each other, wondering what the answer was.

“No one,” he finally said. “No one can judge us. Only God in the highest, his Son, and the Virgin Mary. Only those three, and no one else. After all, we are all sinners. We are born with the Original Sin, damned from birth when Adam and Eve bit that apple. We are all sinners, so we cannot be the ones who judge.

“We cannot sit upon a throne and cast judgment down upon our fellow man. It would be hypocritical, utterly pointless to do so. Then if we cannot judge each other, then what shall we do?”

The priest looked out on the crowd, looking for someone to answer. A few men and women shrunk away, trying to avoid his gaze. Amélie looked dead at him as he scanned the crowd. Eventually, his eyes met hers. She held his gaze; she wouldn’t volunteer herself, but she was trying to challenge the priest.

The priest looked at her. She looked at him. Then she blinked. Amélie looked away for the briefest second. The priest smiled, and continued to scan the crowd.
“No one? No one has an answer?” He asked. “Guess it’s a good thing I’m here, then. If we cannot judge our fellow man, then all that’s left to do is to love him.

“Jesus gave us a message of love. We are all sinners, but that doesn’t matter. It is in this Good Book, written in Romans, 5:8. ‘But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’

“We are all sinners. But Christ still died for us. Is that not love? To know someone has done ill, and to forgive them anyways? When was the last time we stuck our necks out for someone when they had done wrong?”

A few cowboys mumbled, but ultimately kept their peace. One boy raised his hand from a family of farmers.

“Let me guess,” the priest said, “a brother messed up, and you covered for him?”

The boy nodded.

“Did it hurt you?”

“Oh, yes it did,” the boy chuckled.

“Would it have been easier to say nothing?”

“Y-yes sir, it would have.”

“Then why did you do it?”

The boy was quiet.

“Why did you do it?”

“Because I didn’t want my brother to get hurt,” he mumbled.

The priest pointed to the boy.

“Is that not love?” He asked. “Is that not the ultimate act of love? To protect someone from pain, even if it means you get hurt yourself? That is what God, and Jesus, have done for us. Even though we are the ones who are guilty, they stood in front of us, they have taken the brunt of the force of Death itself, all because He love us.

“God loves us. Only He may judge us. We cannot judge each other, so if we cannot judge each other, then we can only love each other, and forgive each other of the sins we commit. That is what God is: love. God is love, and the acceptance of those who we might call failures.

“After all, God loved us so much, he gave his only Son to die for us.”

The priest stepped down from the wagon, gathering pieces of bread to be given out as the Eucharist. Everyone stood up, forming lines to receive the body of Christ, but Amélie stayed where she was. She had seen the people get along with each other, but only just. They tolerated each other, but after hearing the priest talk, they willingly stood by each other. Black families stood next to white cowboys, who only hesitated for a second before greeting them as if they were old friends.

That was what this was missing. An element to bond everyone. This growing town of hers was missing a priest, of all things!
Olivia went to take communion. Amélie let her, waiting until everyone was served, and dispersed for the day. Only then did she walk up to the priest.

“Ah, you came just in time,” he said with a smile. “Still got a few pieces left for you.”

Amélie paused. She didn’t want to take communion. She had never taken communion, not in the years since her mother died. But looking at the priest, she could feel something on her. A power. A love, even. She held out her hands, and the priest passed a small piece to her. It weighed nothing, but Amélie felt like she could barely lift it. Somehow, she picked it up from her palm, and passed it to her mouth. In that moment, she felt something she hadn’t felt in such a long time.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” The priest asked.

Oh, he was good. She needed him.

“I was wondering,” Amélie said, “are you traveling through, or looking for a congregation?”

“That’s a loaded question,” the priest chuckled. “Right now, I’m just going where the Lord puts me.”

“Then I think he put you here.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do,” Amélie said. “I think you’re wandering, and you need a town to call your own.”

She was only dimly aware that Olivia was standing behind her, looking on with surprise.

“I think you need to find a flock, and I just so happen to have one that needs a man like you.”

“Is that so?” The priest said. “Well, this is a small town; smallest one I’ve seen.”

“This really isn’t a town,” Amélie laughed. “Not yet.”

“Ah, then you want me to make this a town.”

She paused. Was she that obvious?

“Yes, I guess I do,” she said.

The priest nodded.

“Well, there are a lot of rough cowboys here,” he chuckled. “They probably need someone to keep them in line. And plenty of families here, too.”

“More families are coming every day,” Amélie said. “This place is growing.”

“Then they truly need a priest,” the priest laughed. “Can’t tell a lie, it would be nice to stop all this wandering and put down some roots, even if it’s for a bit. But I’ll need to make a church.”

“I can donate the money for that,” Amélie said.

“The church relies on donations,” the priest smiled. “I thank you, Ms…”

“Madam. Madam Lacroix.”

“Ah, the town’s madam,” he laughed.
“Will that be a problem, Father…”

“Reyes. Gabriel Reyes. And no, it won’t. Don’t you remember my sermon? Only God may judge us. I mean, if you really wanted me to, I could call you a few dirty names, but my heart just wouldn’t be into it.”

“No thank you,” she laughed.

“That’s a relief. I’m not too good at name calling,” Father Reyes smiled.

She held out her hand, and Father Reyes shook it.

Her town was growing yet again.

_Her_ town. That sent chills down Amélie’s spine.

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**Three Years Ago**

The saloon was loud, full of voices talking, laughing, yelling, and a few trying to sing along to the piano that was being played. It was the sound of money changing hands, of money flowing into Amélie’s coffers.

She never got tired of it.

Amélie sat at the bar, looking out over the sea of faces. It seemed that the more buildings and homes she put up, the more people came to this little town of hers. She had just put up a general store and a hotel, all run by her girls, not to mention the church for Father Reyes, and even two farms and four small homes. And still more and more people came in, building houses by her buildings, often loaned with her coin.

Hard to believe that just two years ago, she was starving in a little tent. Now she was planning the next addition to her town. But what she really needed was a bank, and certainly a doctor. If fate was nice to her, even a railroad.

“E—excuse me,” a voice said.

That snapped Amélie back to reality. She turned; standing next to her, leaning on a bar, was Lena.

“So,” Amélie smiled, “you came back from Denver.”

“Yes, Madam Lacroix, I have,” Lena stammered.

Amélie smiled. It was like Lena was playing a game with her for over a year. She didn’t know the game that Lena was playing, but she liked playing it all the same. It was all the teasing, all the genuine attention Lena showed to her, and how she seemed to float away whenever she would return such affection, either kindly or coldly. Especially coldly.

“I thought you’d find some other town to courier for. But you’ve always come back here.”
“You’re here,” Lena breathed.

Amélie felt her heart swell at that. It was clear that the Brit was smitten with her; she was always tongue-tied, hemming and hawing, stumbling over herself. And she was just so damn beautiful. It made Amélie’s heart flutter.

Suddenly, Amélie realized what Lena had always wanted: it was her. The Brit wanted her. That made her blink. She had never been with a woman before, and she hadn’t sold herself in quite some time.

Still, money was money, and Lena was quite comely.

“Then thank you for coming back,” she said, holding her hand out.

Lena quickly reached out to shake her hand. But instead of shaking hands like an American would, Amélie gently took her fingers, feeling the callouses and brushing her thumb over Lena’s small fingers. Amélie made sure to be as delicate as possible, and was rewarded by seeing Lena shiver all over.

She was beginning to like this idea of being with Lena.

“We’ve known each other for such a long time, but I don’t think we’ve actually gotten to know each other,” Amélie said. “What brought you to America?”

Lena stammered for nearly four seconds, trying to remember how words worked.

“I’m…I’m just a cliché,” she said. “Coming to the ungrateful colonists to find a new life—“

A scream went up from upstairs. Things crashed, and the sound of a fist hitting flesh reached her ears. Amélie stiffened with rage. Someone was hitting her girls.

More voices joined in, women screaming and yelling. Eventually, a cowboy was pushed towards the stairs, his pants barely on.

“Shut up, whore!” He yelled.

“Get out of here! You don’t touch us!”

“I fucking paid for you, you’ll do what I want!”

“Get the fuck out!!”

The cowboy huffed, buckled his pants, and walked down the stairs to a table where a group of men was waiting for him. Amélie had to guess it was his friends. The saloon had gone quiet at that.

Upstairs, a woman was crying. One of her girls was crying.

Amélie saw red. She stormed over to the woman-beater.

“What happened?” She demanded.

“Listen, whore, you don’t—“

“That’s Madam Lacroix, you idiot,” the cowboy’s friend snapped, cutting him off.

The woman-beater in question didn’t seem impressed, but his friends knew who she was. That meant they were scared of her.
“You mean that?” He said, jerking his head to the rooms upstairs. “Just some mouthy whore who got what was coming to her.”

“I see,” Amélie said frostily. “You’re not welcome here.”

“I’m not what now?” The cowboy snorted.

“You are not welcome. Get out.”

He stood up, looming over her.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart.”

“Do you really want to do this?”

“Like you can stop me.”

“You’re right, I can’t stop you,” Amélie said.

The cowboy grinned, and sat back down. Amélie turned to the saloon. Every set of eyes was on her.

“Is that man working for Mako?” She asked.

A few people mumbled ‘yes.’

“I see. Mako needs to hire better men. So long as he’s in my saloon, the rate for everyone has tripled.”

That got the cowboys to truly stop.

“Food, drink, my girls, everything has tripled for everyone as long as this man is in my saloon,” she said, pointing to the woman-beater. “But, if some men want to help get him out and teach him some manners, I can show you my appreciation with a discount.”

The room was quiet still. The woman-beater tensely looked out at the sea of faces.

“She’s lying,” he mumbled. “She’d never—”

He never finished. One of his ‘friends’ grabbed him, and hauled him up.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” He took a swing at the man who pulled him up. That just got another cowboy to jump in, fists swinging.

Amélie watched, a coy little smile growing on her lips as two more big, burly cowboys waded into the melee. The woman-beater was suddenly outnumbered. He swung wildly, forcing the four men back. She had to admit, he was handy in a fight. He kept his hands up to block punches and hit back with practiced ease.

One of the cowboys pulled out a gun, and pistol-whipped the woman-beater; it sent a tooth flying across her saloon. The woman-beater went down, and the four truly ganged up on him, kicking and stomping. The cowboy on the ground curled into a ball, coughing and groaning at the kicks that sunk into his gut, ribs, and face. One cowboy even landed a heavy kick to his groin. Soon, he was a mess of bleeding, swelling meat.

“Thank you, that’s enough.”
The cowboys stopped. The woman-beater whimpered, still curled into a ball.

“Get him out of here.”

Two of the cowboys grabbed the man on the ground, dragged him to the door, and threw him into the street.

“You’ve all been so helpful,” Amélie smiled. “For the night, your drinks are free. And if you find one of my girls who tickles your fancy, you only have to pay half of the normal price.”

“Thank you, Madam Lacroix,” they said with toothy smiles.

“And since that man is out of my saloon, the price for everyone has gone back to normal.” That earned a massive sigh of relief from her patrons.

It was quite a discount she was giving to the cowboys who helped her; Amélie knew she was losing money. Drinks were a large source of revenue for her, and she’d never dream of paying her girls anything less. In fact, she would give a bonus to the girls who entertained the cowboys who helped her.

Yes, she was losing money, but there were two things she knew: first, she could easily afford it. Second, she wasn’t wasting money, she was teaching a lesson. Now she had to make sure that lesson was understood.

Amélie walked out of her saloon. The woman-beater was lolling on the ground, moaning in pain. Fortunately, there was still enough daylight to make out every detail of his sad and bloody state. There were also people walking by, staring as they made their way either to the hotel, the saloon, or the general store. She knelt by him, grabbed his hair, and pulled his head up off the ground.

“What is this town called?” She asked.

“W—w—what?”

“This town. What is it called?”

One of the cowboy’s eyes was already swollen shut.

“Crease,” he mumbled, blood pouring out of his mouth and nose.

“Who runs Crease?”

The cowboy refused to talk.

“Who runs Crease?” She pressed.

“…you do.”

“You know my name,” Amélie snapped, shaking his head. That made his moan and weep. “Use it.”

“Madam Lacroix.”

“Madam Lacroix…what?”

“…Madam Lacroix runs Crease.”

“Louder.”
“Madam Lacroix runs Crease.”

“Louder!”

“Madam Lacroix runs Crease!!” He cried.

“And don’t you fucking forget it, chien,” she snarled.

Amélie threw his head down into the dirt of the road. She walked back to her saloon. The music had already resumed, and talk was coming back. But Lena was standing at the door, watching with rapt attention. She was standing bolt upright, and was even more flush than she was a minute ago.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Amélie said, walking up the steps of the veranda.

“I’m not,” Lena croaked.

That made Amélie stop.

“Yes…?”

Lena was looking at her with hungry eyes, but not the kind of eyes that wanted to take her. Lena was standing tall, almost quivering with desire, like she needed Amélie right then and there.

Amélie was quite taken aback. Lena was so utterly adorable, and she found herself in a very worked-up mood having dealt with the woman-beater and making him yell her name to the world. Then she realized just how wet she was, and just what she wanted.

Amélie grabbed Lena’s hair, and hungrily kissed her. The Brit moaned into the kiss; she was absolutely swept up by Amélie, putty in her hands.

“Go upstairs,” she commanded. “My room is the double-door. Wait for me there, I have to check on my girl.”

“Thank you,” Lena groaned.

“‘Thank you’ what?”

“Thank you, Madam Lacroix.”

Chapter End Notes

Amélie has a town! But real towns have sheriffs. Whom could be a good sheriff? Next chapter should be the last of the flashback arc. We’ll get back to our birbs soon!
A Crease in the Map

Chapter Summary

Amélie has sent petitions to the territory to have Crease recognized as a town. To have a town, she has to have sheriff. But when the sheriff arrives, she finds out that something else is needed: a mayor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three Years Ago

There was a quick knock at the door. Amélie knew it was Olivia that was knocking, and she knew the Mexican woman would open the door regardless of what reply was given.

“Hey, Amélie,” Olivia said, opening the door. “We got a—“

Olivia stopped dead in her tracks. Amélie was leaning back in her chair, had her dress hiked up to her waist, and had Lena kneeling between her legs, having spent the last several minutes going down on her. She could feel the Brit squirm, but she kept a firm grip on her hair, holding her in place.

“Am…I interrupting something?” Olivia asked.

“Oui,” Amélie sighed in pleasure. Lena never stopped her tongue. “You need to wait for permission to enter.”

“Sorry,” Olivia said, blushing heavily as her eyes dropped to the floor.

“What is going on?”

“Er, a man just rode in, said he’s the sheriff-to-be.”

“Thank you, Olivia.”

“Sorry for busting in,” she mumbled, eyes still glued to the floor as she closed the door.

“I’m sorry, Lena, but we’ll have to stop for now.”

Her Lena looked up. She was burning bright red from embarrassment at the intrusion, but her enthusiasm, and her tongue, had only increased when Olivia walked in on them. Being told to stop, she was genuinely disappointed. Amélie made a mental note of her state, should it come in handy later.

“Can we continue later?” Lena asked.

“Most certainly,” Amélie smiled, wiping drool and juices from Lena’s lips and chin. Her Brit hungrily sucked her thumb clean. “I wouldn’t miss you for the world. But I need to tend to this.”
She stood up, readjusting her dress. Lena got up, a smile on her face and a spring in her step as she left her office; she practically floated away. That gave Amélie a few more minutes to muse about with her hair, quickly re-braiding it. She left, closing the double door of her room behind her and walked down the stairs, smiling and greeting everyone who wished her a good morning before stepping outside.

There was a tall blonde man waiting with a gray horse. He wore a wide brimmed white hat, and had a gun belt with two pistols at his hips.

“Salute,” she said. “I heard you are the new sheriff?”

“Ma’am,” he said, tipping his hat. What a gentleman. “Yes, I am. Jack Morrison, the territory assigned me here.”

“I am Madam Lacroix. How can I help?”

“Would you know where the mayor is?”

“We don’t have a mayor,” Amélie said. “I am the one who sent letters to the territory to have you brought in.”

“There’s no mayor?” Jack shifted uneasily. “That puts me in a strange bind.”

“What do you mean?”

“A sheriff is a public official,” he said. “I keep the peace and enforce the laws. But a town needs laws to enforce; I thought I would be coming to a fully developed town, not an unincorporated gathering of buildings.”

Amélie grew flush at that.

“Crease is a town,” she snapped. “I had sent dozens of letters to the territory to have it officially recognized as such!”

“With respect, ma’am, it isn’t,” Morrison said. “It needs a mayor to become a true town.”

“I’ve asked for a sheriff to keep the peace. We have dozens of families living here. How is this not a true town? Why is a mayor needed to look over this town?”

“You said your name is Madam Lacroix, right? I dare to assume the saloon is yours,” Jack said, looking at the sign above her. “That makes you a private business owner. I can’t report to you, I can only report to the elected official. I have to serve the public interest. That’s what makes me a sheriff, and not a hired goon; I hope you can understand the difference.”

She did know the difference, and knew the importance of it. Mako hired goons and leg breakers to keep some of the more troublesome cowboys in line, but Crease needed a sheriff. Amélie bore the news with as much grace as she could. However, she knew she held a tight poker face.

“I’ve commissioned an office for you,” she said, gesturing to the new building. The sheriff’s office sat across the street from her saloon. The first floor was the actual office, with desks and jail cells. The second was living quarters for the sheriff and even a few deputies.

“And I thank you for the donation to the cause of law and order,” he said. “But if you want government protection, you need a government, not a rich business owner. Can you understand where I’m coming from? I really don’t want there to be any hard feelings.”
Amélie knew sincerity when she heard it.

“Oui, I understand,” she said. “What would need to happen to become a mayor?”

“You’ll need an election,” Jack said.

“Then we’ll have one.”

“Hold on, it’s not that simple,” he said. “A mayor can’t own a business while he, or she, is in office. That’s a conflict of interest; we can’t have that. If you want to run for mayor, you’ll have to give up any businesses you’ll have. Otherwise, you’ll be making your own rules, double-dealing and the such. That’s not very fair.”

Give up her saloon?! She’d rather die!

“No need to make everything happen now,” Jack said, politely holding up his hands. “There’s no real time limit as it is. For the time, I’ll just be a man passing through. Once that election happens, then I can be the sheriff. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll have to get a hotel room.”

“There is a perfectly good office for you there.”

“And I can’t use it until this becomes an official city.”

“Such a straight shooter.”

“I’ve heard that plenty of times,” he chuckled. He tipped his hat to her. “Ma’am.”

If Crease wanted law and order, it needed a sheriff. But to have a sheriff, it needed a mayor. But Amélie would not give up her saloon.

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Jack walked into the saloon. It had been a few days since he rode into town, but it still felt weird to be going to a place of drinking and whoring for breakfast. Thing is, there wasn’t any other place to buy a meal. If he was taken on as sheriff, maybe he would end up building a house so he could cook himself.

“Good morning, sheriff,” Olivia smiled from the front desk.

“I’m not a sheriff yet,” he said, politely taking off his hat to abide by Madam Lacroix’s rules. “Just here to get some food.”

“Help yourself,” Olivia winked.

Was she trying to drum up business for herself, or was she just being friendly? Jack decided to go with the ‘friendly’ option. Olivia was pretty, there was no denying that, but she just wasn’t his taste.

He chuckled to himself as he sat down at a small table. Maybe he should buy some time with Olivia. This was a new beginning for him, and he should put on airs again to get some unwanted attention off of him. Lord, did that take him back home.

Olivia walked up, giving him a cup of coffee. She leaned down real low as she poured him a cup, giving him a real good view of her assets.
“Want any crème or sugar?” She said, a smile in her voice.

“I’ll take it black, thank you,” he said.

“Sure thing, sheriff.”

“I’m not the sheriff yet,” Jack sighed.

“I’ll get you a plate of eggs and hash,” Olivia smiled. “Sheriff.”

Jack tried not to groan as Olivia sashayed away, drawing plenty of eyes to her swaying hips. Well, if she was going to so blatantly flirt with him, he might as well buy some time with her. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about anyone asking questions about him and his tastes.

“Looks like you’re getting a rep already, ese.”

Jack looked up. He was a little surprised to see a man of the cloth sitting at the table next to him.

“Despite my efforts to tell people otherwise,” he said.

“Guess that just means people are getting excited about this place becoming a real town,” the priest said. “Lord, where are my manners? Gabriel.”

“I’ve heard of you. Not big on ‘Father Reyes?’”

“Are you a sheriff right now?”

“Does this mean you’re not a priest now?” Jack asked, cocking his eyebrow.

“I find it better to be relaxed about the whole priesthood thing,” Gabriel said. “Some people like the ‘always watching over the flock, always on guard’ kind of priest, but that’s not my style.”

“A relaxed man of the cloth. Have to say, that’s a first for me. I’m Jack.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jack,” Gabriel smiled, raising his cup of coffee. Jack raised his, finishing the toast.

He had to admit, Gabriel was a looker. A broad chest, a nice, well-trimmed goatee, sun-kissed skin, and the man didn’t have a stick up his ass, unlike so many other priests he’d seen.

Jack shook his head. This was a man of the cloth, not someone he should be stealing looks at.

“So what brought you out here, Gabriel?”

“The Lord in His infinite wisdom,” Gabriel said dramatically. “I felt His holy words in a dream, telling me to move west.”

“Never knew a priest could be so full of shit,” Jack chuckled.

“Hey, if I’m stuck with this collar, I might as well have some fun with it,” Gabriel laughed. “I was just passing on through. There were a few homesteaders heading out this way, and I didn’t have anywhere else to go. They were kind enough to help me along, so I put in some work to help them along, you know, paying my way. The priest-thing was mostly a side job for them. We ended up here, and Madam Lacroix offered to build a church for me.”

“That Madam Lacroix sure is something.”
“She really is. She just wants this place to grow, to be a home for us wayward souls. Truth be told, I’d have stayed here even if she didn’t build a congregation. Something about this place just feels warm and inviting.”

Olivia came back with Jack’s food.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said politely.

“Let me know if I can get you anything else,” she said with a smile and a wink before strutting on away.

“Thinking of staying here regardless?” Gabriel grinned. “Might have something else on the menu to slacken a thirst or so, eh?”

Jack’s eyes traveled from Gabriel, who had a lopsided grin on his lips, back to the waitress/whore, then back again.

“You’re a priest!”

“Hey, I never said I’d partake myself. Not exactly my taste, ese.”

That got Jack to blink. ‘Not his taste?’ Because he was a priest? He’d known a few priests who indulged in vice, was Gabriel not one of them? Or did he mean something else…?

“Well, it’s not my taste either,” Jack said, going back to his food.

“Don’t you worry, ese. You’ll find that this place is for all kinds of people.”

Lena knocked on the double-door.

“Come in,” Amélie said.

“Hey luv,” she said. “You planning on coming out anytime soon?”

Amélie sat at her desk, rifling through papers.

“I mean, you’ve been working up a storm for the past few days,” Lena said, sitting at the foot of Amélie's bed, only a few feet from her desk.

“I’m sorry, Lena, but I…I have to put things in order,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I have to work on several legal papers,” her lover said. “Mon Dieu, I wish we had a lawyer who could help.”

“This about the mayor thing?”

“Oui, it is. Sheriff Morrison said that one could not be a business owner and a mayor at the same time, so I am working on giving the saloon to Olivia.”

“Wait, you can’t mean to give this up,” Lena said.
“I have to,” Amélie said, her upper lip curling. “My town needs a mayor. I cannot be both a mayor and a Madam.”

“Hold on now,” Lena said, getting up to run over to Madam Lacroix. “You can't seriously be thinking of give this place up! You love your saloon.”

“Of course I do. But Crease needs a mayor.”

“Why do you think it has to be you?”

“Who else would be a mayor? Lena, I have to do this.”

“No, you don't,” Lena said, gently taking Amélie's hand. “You love this place. Lord, I remember how happy you were when it was being built, how you smiled when everything was done. Being mayor isn't worth throwing this away.”

“But Crease needs a mayor. It needs me to run it.”

“Luv, you already run everything. How many families did you give a loan to build their houses?” Lena asked. “No one gets a loan from a mayor, they get it from you. Can't you see that?”

Amélie had a great poker face. But Lena knew her, and she knew how scared Amélie was, how much it was hurting her to even think of giving away her saloon.

“But Crease needs a mayor,” she said stubbornly.

“It does, but I know you'd hate being the mayor,” Lena said. “One thing these Yanks love is their elections. If you got elected, you'd have to stay elected. That means you'd have to always be helping people. That means you'd have to take some orders from them so you can get their favor and their votes.”

Amélie grimaced at that.

“Yea, I knew you'd hate thinking that,” Lena chuckled. “Got to say, it's a pretty funny system these ungrateful colonists came up with, but I can see where they're coming from. You'd be at their mercy all the time. Is giving up your saloon worth that?”

Amélie stared straight ahead. Lena could see her grapple with herself; her lover knew what had to be done, but was being too stubborn about it.

“Listen,” Lena said. “This town is growing. It’s like a kid, your kid. I get it, I really do. But sometimes you have to do things for your kids that are best for them, not for you. Did I ever tell you I nearly didn’t make it to America?”

“You mean you almost stayed in Britain?”

“Damn nearly did,” Lena mumbled. “My mum wanted me to stay. It was just the two of us, mum and me. She wasn’t even like a mum to me, she was like my best friend. Shit, I even told her I liked women over men, but she didn’t do anything about it. I mean, she got angry for a good long while, but she couldn’t stay mad. And I love her for that.

“Mum worked for a local landlord, a Mr. and Mrs. Taylor. They were good folk, but I saw my future etched on a wall: I would go work for them, get a little house to live in, and work it ‘till I died.”

“Is that…is that what happened to your father?” Amélie asked. “I’m sorry, but Lena, you never
“Nah, dad didn’t stick around. Never knew what happened to him, it was just mum and me. She never mentioned it, and I never felt like pushing it,” she said. “Mum liked working for Mr. Taylor; he treated her right, but I never wanted to do what she was doing. I had to move, I had to get away. Mum always said I learned how to run ‘fore I learned to crawl. If I stayed at home, I’d be stuck there, working with Mr. Taylor ‘till my last days. And don’t even get me started on the men. Some of them were asking ‘bout me, looking to tie me down.

“I couldn’t live like that. I just couldn’t. I talked with Mum about moving to America ‘bout a year or two ‘fore I took the trip. At first, she wouldn’t have it. She hated the idea of me moving to the colonies more than she hated me being with women! She wanted me to stay, where she could help me find my place.

“But she knew how wrong home was for me. She knew I could never live her life, I had to find my place somewhere else. She slowly came around, but it still broke her heart. She realized how much better it would be for me to take the trip over here then stay there. God, I can still see her crying when she helped me buy that ticket to cross the pond. But she knew what was best for me, even though it wasn’t the best thing for her.”

Lena put both of her hands on Amélie’s.

“Crease is like your kid. I get that. I love how your eyes brighten up when you talk ‘bout your town. But your saloon is part of you. And I can’t stand seeing you give up part of yourself like this. It’d be like cutting off your arm. Could you really do that?”

Amélie’s face was awash with emotions.

“Non,” she finally said. “I could not.”

“Thought so,” Lena smiled. “I can’t let you do this to yourself. You have to do what is best for your kid, even if it isn’t the best thing for you.”

“Then who’d become the mayor?”

“There’s over a hundred people in this little crease, I’m sure one of them is up to the task,” Lena said.

Amélie looked at her. It wasn’t pain in her eyes, it was fear. Fear that she had nearly given up what she truly loved to get something she only wanted.

“What happened to your mother?” She asked.

“I still get letters every so often,” Lena said. “I send ‘em back when I get to the big towns, the ones who could pass it across the pond. She’s doing great. I miss her terribly, but I’m glad that I have the life I have here, ‘cause I’d be fuckin’ miserable back home.”

Amélie’s eyes watered.

“What would I do without you?”

“You'd have a lot more boring life, that's what,” Lena beamed.

Amélie grabbed her by the lapels and pulled her in for a kiss. Lena was so glad she found this little crease in the map. She knew she had found her place here.
The town was awash with the news. Amélie felt herself grow hot at the whispers and chattering of the people who lived in her city. And it was her city. When she first arrived at this desolate spot, the only people there were cowboys. Now, there were families that were moving in. There were already over one hundred people living here, farmers on the plains where the ground was rich and deep, families looking for a new beginning, even some prospectors were seeing if the mountains held any gold.

But to become a true city, it needed a sheriff. And a sheriff needed a mayor. She could either be the mayor, or the owner of her saloon. And thanks to her Lena, she knew she could never give up her saloon.

Amélie took a deep breath to steady herself. For the umpteenth time, she preened at herself, making sure she looked perfect in the mirror.

“You’ll do great,” Lena asked from their bed.

“I know,” she said. “Crease has to grow. I just have to make sure we’re ready for this.”

“You sure like using the royal we, luv,” Lena smiled.

Amélie had to smile at that.

“What I want is what Crease wants; after all, I built this town. I think I’m allowed a little vanity.”

Amélie finally got her hair right. Lena got up, still wearing her undergarments, and walked over to her.

“Hey, you’ll be fine,” she said, wrapping her arms around Amélie. “You’re the toughest woman here. I believe in you.”

Hearing that made her heart flutter.

“You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right, your Lena would never lie to you,” she smiled.

“Merci,” Amélie chuckled. She walked to the door. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

“Just long enough to make sure we’re somewhat of a secret, I know,” Lena said. “I’ll see you down there.”

Amélie walked down the hallway, then down the stairs to the dining room of her saloon. Many of the town’s folk were there to eat breakfast. Seeing her, some went quiet, waiting for her to talk. Amélie instead sat down at a table, and drank some water.

Lena soon came down, fully dressed. She sat down at her own table, and smiled at her.

“If I may,” Amélie said, standing up. The room went quiet as all eyes fell on her.

“As many of you have heard, I have announced an election for the office of mayor,” she said. “And I have not decided to run.”
Whispers and chatter erupted at that. She could see Jack Morrison in the crowd, eating breakfast with Father Reyes, and he seemed genuinely surprised at her decision. But he nodded his approval.

“I decided not to run because I would have to give up my saloon, and I am dedicated to servicing Crease in any way,” she said. “It was a difficult choice, but I can best serve the city this way. The election is less than a month away. If you want to become the mayor, you now have your chance. You can talk to your fellow citizens here and now, to try and earn their vote.”

Everyone traded looks. If Madam Lacroix wasn’t running, it was anyone’s race. She could see some eyes growing greedy. Crease could be theirs…

Like she would let them. Her Lena had made her realize that she could never imagine giving up her saloon. But as she thought on it, she realized that not running for mayor gave her another advantage.

One benefit for not running was so she could influence things behind the scenes, doing what she wanted without the hindrance of laws, laws that she had only recently learned from Jack. Not that she lived outside the law, it was just easier this way. It gave her more choices.

Her saloon doors opened, and Amélie’s face darkened. It was Mako and a handful of his cowboys.

“It looks like we’re a little late,” Mako rumbled. It had been two years since she had first met him, but Mako hadn’t changed the least. He was still as big as he was then. The only thing that truly changed were his clothes. As Crease grew, so did his business, the size of his cattle herds, and his coffers. He no longer had to ride with his cowboys every day, he had a small office in the outskirts of the city.

“Mr. Rutledge, this is a surprise,” Amélie said. “It looks like you want to make an announcement of some kind.”

“In a way.”

“If you wish to run for mayor, you’ll have to surrender your business, as I would have to.”

“That’s why I’m not running for mayor,” he said.

“I’ll be the one running,” a cowboy smiled.

Where Mako was enormous, the cowboy who spoke was rail skinny. He had a long face, intense eyes, and a grin that seemed etched into his face.

“The name’s Jamie Fawkes,” he said. Even his regular talking voice seemed like he was cackling. “I’ll be running for mayor.”

“You’re one of Mako’s cowboys,” Amélie said.

“Aye, but I’m not Mako,” he said. “I ain’t got no business to run.”

Amélie hissed. She should have expected Mako to try something like this. He wanted to take her town from her!

“Well, this day is already going to be full of surprises,” Morrison said, standing up. “We have one man in the running so far. Anyone else want to run?”

“I will,” a big voice said.

The man who spoke was a farmer, new to the area. Like Morrison, he had blonde hair. Like Mako,
he was absolutely enormous. But where Mako was big, even fat maybe, the man was lean and strong.

“Mr. Fawkes might be running for mayor, but he has not lived in Crease for long,” the man said. “My name is Reinhardt Wilhelm, and I think I’ll toss my hat into the ring. After all, I do live here.”

“Anyone else?” Morrison asked.

No one said anything.

“You’ve got a few days to decide if you want to or not,” he said. “I’ll work with the two candidates and see if we can organize a debate. Thank you for your time, everyone.”

The people in the saloon went back to whispering and chattering, unsure of the sudden change of events. Reinhardt sat down to finish his breakfast, where Mako and Jamie went to sit down. Amélie marched up to Mako.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“I think we do.”

She nodded, leading him to the rear of the saloon. She took him outside, where they had an entire back ally to themselves.

“What are you planning?” She demanded.

“One of my boys heard the rumor of there being an open field to be mayor,” he said. “He wanted to try his luck.”

“So you want to install one of your cowboys to do what you want him to do?”

“I was expecting you to put one of your girls forward,” he said. “We can both achieve great things if we control the mayor.”

“I want Crease to grow as a city.”

“And if you have the mayor in your pocket, your business can grow with it. It’s nothing personal—“

“It’s simply business, I know. You’ve taught me that long ago.”

“Then I haven’t done a good enough job teaching you,” he grinned. “As a business owner, I can do so much more if I have a mayor. So I’ll try to get my man elected. You know how many cowboys I have.”

Amélie glared at Mako. He simply smiled.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll be getting breakfast,” he said, walking back inside.

The debate was held in the saloon. In the week that it was announced, three more men decided to step in, and try to run for the spot of the mayor. Those three stood on stage, along with Reinhardt and Jamie. Men and women stood, asking them all questions, and they took their time to answer.
Reinhardt was talking miles around Jamie. The three other men talked confidently, but none could match the gregarious enthusiasm of the massive German farmer.

But there were dozens of Mako’s cowboys stuffing the room, outnumbering everyone else by nearly two-to-one. They cheered and applauded whenever Jamie spoke, making it seem that Jamie was doing a much better job than all the others.

As a whore, Amélie knew how much appearances mattered. She stood in the back, watching with a growing sense of horror. She knew in the back of her mind that she was going to lose her town. She took another pull of whiskey.

“This is pretty one sided,” Morrison said, sliding up to her.

“Spare me the pleasantries,” she snapped. “I know where this is going.”

“Yea, it looks like Mako wants to stuff his own guy in the office,” Morrison said.

“And he’s got the votes to do it.”

“What do you mean?”

“His cowboys will all vote for Jamie, and he’ll get the office. Then Crease is no longer my town.”

“Are his cowboys permanent residents, or are they more migrant workers?” Jack asked.

“They live here when the cattle come, and leave when Mako tells them,” she said. “Why is that important?”

“You do know that in an election, you have to live in the place you want to vote in, right?” Morrison said. “If they don’t live here for at least six months, they can’t vote.”

Amélie blinked.

“You didn’t, did you?” He smiled. “You’re a good business woman, but politics isn’t a business.”

Maybe it was a good thing that she wasn’t going to be mayor. As loathe as she was to admit it, Morrison was right, she was much better at business than politics.

“So his cowboys won’t be able to vote?”

“Unless they live here for at least six months. Imagine if anyone could vote anywhere; that’d be chaos! No, we have to impose some kind of law and order on this, if only for the good of the towns.”

Amélie looked at the stage. If the cowboys couldn’t vote, then maybe she could still keep her town! Then an idea spun in the back of her mind; she might not be mayor, but she had her girls; and all of her girls had lived in Crease for at least a year.

That right there was twenty votes, twenty-two if she included Lena and herself. That was a sizable block of votes in Crease. Then there were the people she helped, the families who at first struggled to feed themselves when they arrived, those who took her money to build their homes, or the woman who almost joined her girls. She had made sure they were all fed before making their decision to join her or not.

She couldn’t tell them who to vote for, but all she had to do was say where she was voting, and people would follow here.
She could become a kingmaker.

Amélie couldn’t help but smile at that. Yes, it was good that she decided not to run for mayor. She realized how right her Lena was to stop her from giving up her saloon.

She ordered another whiskey. The debate was drawing to a close, and sitting in the crowd was Mako, a tidy grin on his lips. He thought stuffing the house with his cowboys would win him favor. He might be right; that meant it was time to fight back against his sphere of influence.

Soon, there were no more questions. Amélie made her way to the stairs, to stand on the stage.

“Thank you, everyone who has decided to run for mayor,” she smiled radiantly. “This has been the most informative night. We have learned where everyone stands on a wide variety of issues, and what their plans for the town are.”

Mako was giving her a questioning look. He knew she had something planned.

“We will all need time to make up our minds. After all, the election is a mere week away. I would also like to remind the good people watching this to be able to mark the day you came to Crease. In America, you can only vote if you have lived in a city, or any location, for at least six months.”

Mako’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head at that.

“You’re making that up!” He roared, getting to his feet.

“She isn’t,” Morrison said. “You need to live in a place if you want to decide it’s future. That is the rule set up by the territory.”

Talk erupted in the crowd. Mako’s cowboys seemed particularly shocked. And Jamie had a dumbfounded look on his face.

“When it comes time to vote, you might have to tell us when you moved into Crease,” Amélie smiled. “Be prepared for that.”

She walked off the stage. She had a week to find a candidate to publicly back. That was a week of selecting the right man to be mayor.

Amélie knocked on the door. A minute later, Reinhardt answered it.

“I heard you were making the rounds,” he said tightly.

“I want to take the time to talk to all the candidates personally,” Amélie said.

“Yes, I’m sure.” But he still opened the door to his rough farm home. She walked in, and sat down at the nearby dining room table.

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“I assume it has to do with the election,” Reinhardt said, sitting down himself.

“Yes, it is.”
Then I will have to stop you there,” he said, holding up a big hand. “I want to be a good mayor, not a stool pigeon. I won’t be like that Jamie fellow, doing this so he can get a bigger cut from his boss. So if you want to threaten me, don’t. If you want to throw your weight behind another candidate, do that, but I will not let you push me around.”

“My dear Reinhardt,” she said, “I don’t want to threaten you. I want to tell you that I’ll be voting for you.”

“You can find another puppet to—what?”

“I’ll be voting for you.” She repeated.

“Just like that?” He sputtered. “Why?”

“Because the other three men looking to be mayor immediately wanted to be my ‘stool pigeon,’” she said. “I want a mayor who will be good for Crease. That means thinking for themselves. When pressed, they had no backbone. They had to get their confidence, their power, from someone else.”

“There is nothing more terrifying than a coward in power,” Reinhardt snorted. “That is why I left the old world.”

“Then we’re of equal minds,” Amélie said. “I own Crease. I built it from nothing. I will not have my town fall into the hands of a weak, spineless coward. The others offered me access to the mayor if I backed them, but I want a man who will grow this town.”

“And what of ‘your town?’ You’ll just give it away?”

“I’ll still build it, but my way,” she said. “I’ve been talking with Jack; I’ve learned much from him. What I’ve learned is that there are good things and bad things that come from being a mayor; perks and limitations. I don’t like the limitations. To me, they do not justify the perks. So I’ll be doing things my way, the same way I’ve always done them. And I want you to be a strong leader, one who does not bow and scrape to people like me.”

“Oh, this is quite the day,” Reinhardt roared.

“I bet,” Amélie smiled. “I’ll be telling the town that you are an honorable man, in charge of his own fate and thinking. You are not a man who will be controlled, but one who can be trusted. With many of the cowboys not able to vote, I think that many will vote along with me.”

“The election hasn’t been run yet.”

“Yes, but I have a very good idea where it will go.”

The saloon was packed, almost to the rafters. That reminded Amélie, she needed to add a third floor to her saloon; it was getting small. All of Crease had turned out for the vote, not to mention the cowboys that Mako brought in. The voting had finished, and they were being counted by Morrison, who sat on the stage with the box of ballets. At the base of the stage were the candidates in question, waiting to hear the news.

Mako sat across the saloon, far away from the bar. He had tried to get his cowboys to vote, but since
many weren’t able to prove they had lived in Crease for at least six months, most were politely turned away.

The day seemed to drag as Morrison logged every vote.

Amélie sat at the bar with her girls and her Lena, sipping a glass of whiskey.

“How do you think it went?” Olivia asked, sitting next to her.

“It went very well,” Amélie said.

“How can you tell?” Her Lena said. She was on the other side of her, almost grinding on Amélie. The crowd gave Lena plenty of plausible reasons to be close to her, which she was capitalizing on. Since turnabout was fair play, Amélie let her hand wander across her Lena’s waist.

“A woman’s intuition,” Amélie smiled.

Morrison stood up.

“Before I go on, I want to reiterate this,” he said, his voice rising to be heard. “I was sent here to become the sheriff; while I’m not a true vote counter, I’m possibly the only one in this town who’s got no dog in this fight. I didn’t come here to vote, and even if I did, I would not be able to cast a vote. I came here to keep the peace and uphold the laws. I have neither miscounted, nor tilted the scales in any way.”

Despite speaking in an even tone, and looking everyone in the eyes, Morrison’s gaze lingered on Mako. Mako nodded once, as if to say that he understood that there was no vote tampering.

“The vote came down to two people: Jamie Fawkes, and Reinhardt Wilhelm. Mr. Fawkes had thirty-two percent of the vote, while Mr. Wilhelm walked away with forty-eight percent. He will become the first mayor of Crease.”

The saloon exploded in cheers as Reinhardt stood up, a dazzling grin on his face. He accepted the cheers, but the first thing he did was go to his opponents, and took the time to shake their hands. The other men seemed satisfied with the results, with Jamie Fawkes looking especially relieved.

Reinhardt climbed onto the stage, shaking hands with Morrison.

“Today is a new day for Crease,” he said, his naturally loud voice filling the saloon, and beyond. The news had easily passed through the saloon, and to the waiting crowds outside. “A day where we have become a true town! I will work hard to make this a town we can all call home, where we can all grow, and celebrate the fruits of our labors!”

Amélie had to admit, it was a good speech if a little short. Then again, with the saloon cheering its new mayor, it didn’t give much time or patience for talking. Even Reinhardt’s massive voice was being overwhelmed.

A shadow loomed over her. Mako walked up to her.

“Congratulations,” he said, offering her a hand.

“Are you not disappointed?” She asked.

“Of course I am. But I’m not a petty man; I can admit defeat with grace and dignity.”

Amélie smiled at that. She shook his hand.
“Please understand that I meant no offense by trying to take your town,” he said. “It was not personal, it was—“

“Simply business,” Amélie finished.

“Exactly,” Mako smiled.

“Mr. Rutledge, I understand completely. Please know that my saloon, my services, and my girls are still open to you and your men.”

“Thank you for being so amicable,” Mako said. He walked away, leaving Amélie to bask in her victory.

A mayor. Crease was finally a town. And it had the best man for the job because of her.

She had made a mayor. Amélie could feel a pride growing in her breast, the same pride she felt when she could finally feed herself, when she began earning more money than she could ever dream of having, of seeing her own saloon being built, of knowing that she ran this town.

Reinhardt might be the mayor, but she’d keep running her town her way.

“Let’s go,” Amélie said, placing a hand on her Lena’s shoulder.

“Why? The party’s down here,” the Brit said.

“I’m the woman who just turned a farmer into a mayor,” she said, passion in her voice. “I convinced everyone to vote for him. I made this town, and I made him. We are going to go into my room to celebrate.”

“But—“

“Now, my Lena,” she snapped.

Lena shivered at being called hers, but a smile grew on her face as she enthusiastically nodded and dutifully followed her mistress up the stairs.

The party continued into the night. Even though it showed no signs of stopping, Jack had drank his fill, and decided to skip on out before he woke up on the floor again. Now that there was a mayor, that made him a sheriff, and he had an example to set. He wasn’t going to act like his young punk self.

Walking out of the saloon and over to the building that would be his station, he took a second to gaze up into the star-strewn night sky. It was truly beautiful out here in the Wyoming territory. He’d like his time here, he just knew it.

“You running away, ese?”

Jack groaned. Gabriel was sauntering over to him, more than a little tipsy.

“What do you want?” He asked.
“So rude,” Gabriel pouted. “Come on, you gotta lighten up a bit. Don’t tell me you’re getting a stick up your ass.”

“Last thing I need is advice from a drunkard priest.”

That got Gabriel to straighten up a bit, his handsome face hardening.

“We’re only human,” he said. “And to err is to be human.”

“Sounds like good justification for hitting the communion wine.”

“Communion wine? What do you take me for, ese? I was drinking beer and whiskey, same as you.”

Jack snorted at that.

“Still makes you a drunkard.”

“Ah, so all it takes is an election, and suddenly you’re the straight-laced, stick up his ass sheriff, eh?” Gabriel hissed, storming up to him. “Shit, that didn’t take long at all. I thought you’d be a little more laid back, ese.”

“I was sent here to uphold the law,” Jack snarled, stepping close.

“Sounds like good justification to be an asshole.”

Jack drew himself up to Gabriel, glaring at the priest. His heart was suddenly pounding in his chest. Why was he so nervous?

“You getting a good look, ese?”

“I’m looking at a cowardly priest.”

“Cowardly? I think I’m doing a good job keeping you in line.”

Jack blinked. He was spitting at Gabriel, almost yelling, and the priest was returning the favor. He knew they were about to fight, but why did it sound so light and playful between them? Was it because they were both more than a little drunk? No, he’d gotten into his share of drunken fights before. This was something else, something new.

“Oh, then you know everything, because your fucking infallible God told you so,” Jack said, doing his best to snarl. In his mind, it was a curse. But when it left his lips, it sounded like a jape.

“I don’t need to have God’s knowledge to figure you out, ese. You’re dead fucking simple,” Gabriel replied. Jack knew it was an insult, but it sounded like Gabriel was laughing, not at him, but with him.

Goddammit, he was too drunk for this. But at the same time, he was just drunk enough.

Jack leaned forward just as Gabriel did. Their lips met, and their arms wrapped around each other. Jack couldn’t believe this was happening; this was a priest! A gorgeous, handsome priest who was squeezing his ass just the way he liked it! His heart was hammering wildly in his chest, then his boots were knocking against wood; it was the little veranda of the sheriff’s office.

Suddenly, the door knob was in his hand, fumbling about with it until the damn door finally fell open, nearly making both him and Gabriel collapse into the floor. Jack didn’t know whom caught whom, but it didn’t stop him from dragging the handsome man to the nearest flat surface, grinding
his hips against Gabriel’s, feeling his stiff manhood press against his.

Pencils and papers pressed into his back. He took a second to brush them off as Gabriel fell on top of him. Hands were grabbing at clothing, both his and Gabriel’s. He couldn’t catch his breath, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

He knew he’d like this little town.

Chapter End Notes

So ends the flashback arc! Madam Lacroix got what she wanted: a strong town, a mayor, and a sheriff.
Next chapter, we'll get back to the 'present' day to see how our birbs are settling in.
Trouble at High Noon

Chapter Summary

It's been nearly a year since Angela and the Amaris had traveled to Crease, a year of her working hard as a doctor. With the completion of her clinic, Angela finally becomes a member of the town proper.
But a stranger blows into town, making things more interesting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Present

Angela woke up with the sun, and the echoes of the roosters as they crowed through Crease. She sat up, stretching to get her blood pumping, to get ready for the waning cold weather. For nearly a year, she had rented a room at the hotel across the street from the saloon. Madam Lacroix had tried to pay for the room herself, but Angela insisted on paying her back. Fortunately, Madam Lacroix understood her desire to make her own life her own way. Angela was slowly paying back Madam Lacroix’s loan, thanks to being the only doctor in Crease.

Getting out of bed, she changed from her sleepwear to a pleasant ankle-length baby-blue dress and a dark navy frock coat. In the year she had been living in Crease, she had had the opportunity to buy new clothes from the general store. The fabric was comfortable and durable to the frontier, and having worn them for nearly a year, everything was properly broken in, just like the ankle-high shoes she laced.

Leaving the hotel, she was thankful for her frock coat. It was March, almost April, and while the frontier winter was fading, it was still decently cold. But a chilly as it was, it reminded Angela of her home back in Switzerland. She walked across the street to the saloon for breakfast.

“Good morning, Olivia,” she smiled as she walked in.

“Ah, Dr. Ziegler,” Olivia smiled, standing at her maître d’ spot by the door. She wore her usual ensemble of a corset and short dress, but had a knit shawl over her shoulders to ward off the wind that blew through the door. “Good morning!”

“The wind isn't bothering you too much, is it?”

"Not a whole lot," Olivia grinned. "You get used to it."

"If you get a cough, I can always take a look at you. I take it I’m in time for breakfast?"

“Mama’s got it cooking as we speak,” Olivia smiled.

‘Mama.’ Thanks to Olivia, it only took a few days before everyone in Crease was calling Ana ‘Mama.’ Maybe it was because she was always in the kitchen, making food so good it made Angela want to cry.

Fareeha called that kind of cooking ‘slap ya mama’ good, because ‘it makes you want to slap ya
mama for not cooking half as good.'

“Thank you,” she said, walking to her usual table, which had a dashing deputy sitting at it. Fareeha saw Angela walking up, and pulled a chair out for her.

“Morning,” Fareeha said.

“Good morning to you, too,” Angela smiled.

Fareeha smiled. Like usual, she wore jeans, a button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and a vest. Her worn jacket was draped over the chair, and her brass deputy badge was pinned to her chest, freshly polished. Her hat sat on the table, respectful to Madam Lacroix’s rule for not wearing it indoors.

“You look very chipper today,” Fareeha said.

“It feels like a good day,” Angela smiled.

Anastasia, one of Madam Lacroix’s trusted girls, came out with plates of food for both of them. She set a plate of huevos rancheros with a side of hash browns in front of Angela, while Fareeha had a skillet of eggs, peppers, and sausage placed in front of her.

“Thank you,” Angela said.

“It’s always a pleasure, Dr. Ziegler,” Anastasia smiled.

Angela loved being called that.

“So what’s on the schedule for you today?” Fareeha asked.

“I have a few appointments,” she said. “But I should have the afternoon free.”

“I think I’ll have that free, too,” Fareeha said. “Can I take you a nice, long horse ride around the river?”

Another chance to see the picturesque frontier and to finally be alone with Fareeha?!

“I’d love to!” She smiled.

“Oy!”

Angela and Fareeha looked up. Lena was back, knocking errant snow off her boots. The Brit ran over to the table.

“Lena, you’re back early,” Angela said. “Did you miss Madam Lacroix that much?”

“Ha ha, like I haven’t heard that a million times before,” Lena rolled her eyes. “I just came back with the last bit of Denver haul.”

“Wait, you mean…?”

“Yup,” Lena smiled. “With this, your new office and home will be finished!”

Angela couldn’t help but squeal at that. It had been a year, but her office would be completed!

“You mean it?” Fareeha said.
“Yup! The last of the furniture has just come in,” Lena smiled.

Angela couldn’t believe it. She was finally able to move into her new house!

“I’ll talk to Jack,” Fareeha said, excitement in her voice. “I’ll try to get the day off so I can help you move in.”

“Thank you,” Angela said. She got up to hug Lena. “And thank you, too!”

“Not a problem, luv,” the Brit smiled, squeezing her back. “Just doing my job.”

Angela wanted to savor her food, but she had been waiting months for the final part of her order to come in. Frankly, she was amazed the workers continued building her new place throughout the winter. Maybe Crease really did need a doctor. She ate quickly, almost as quickly as Fareeha, who practically stuffed her face with food.

“I’ll be back,” Fareeha said, mouth still full, as she got up, grabbing her jacket and hat.

Angela finished soon after her and ran outside, her coat barely on. Just outside of the saloon was a small caravan of wagons, carrying her newly paid for belongings, all thanks to the loan she had gotten from Madam Lacroix. Fareeha was waiting for her, along with Father Reyes.

“I just got the news,” Gabriel smiled. “Looks like you’re finally part of this town proper.”

“Yes, I am,” Angela beamed.

“A quick prayer to help you settle in,” Gabriel said. He raised a hand and bowed his head. The men driving the wagons doffed their hats and bowed their heads.

“Lord our Father, please bless these items so they may become personal, and let them fill the house with the warmth of your love. Amen.” Father Reyes raised his head. “There; guaranteed to keep you well-rested and safe.”

“Thank you,” Angela smiled. She might not be very religious, but she appreciated the gesture.

“Fareeha, what did Jack say?”

“I got the day free,” she grinned.

“Excellent! Then can I get your help to move me in?”

“You’d have to fight me to keep me away.”

That made Angela’s heart flutter.

“T—then this way,” she said to the wagon caravan. She did need the help, but as much as she loved having Fareeha around, she was getting tired of it. For the past year, whenever Angela thought she’d finally be alone with Fareeha, someone would barge in, or otherwise spoil their possible time alone. Patients, deputy duties, an errant person wandering into the room, at first it wasn’t a big deal, but as time went on, it soured into a sort of perpetual tease. Being next to the gorgeous woman had kept her at a constant state of frustration, and she couldn’t do anything about it! It was driving her crazy! Better to just be alone than have to deal with this.

Still, she really needed the help to finish her move. She led the movers, Fareeha, and Gabriel down the street. The main buildings of Crease were the saloon, sheriff’s office, city hall, hotel, and general store. Past them were a couple of houses for the local families, even a prospector gambling for his
fortune. But not far beyond that was her new house and clinic.

Madam Lacroix given her a very nice loan. Her new home and office was two stories tall; the clinic was on the first floor, while her living quarters were on the second. The first floor was mostly open space, with places for beds for the infirm and injured. On the second floor was more than enough space for Angela to live in. She could even start a family if she wanted!

“Here we are,” she said.

“We can unload from here,” the driver of the caravan said, bringing the horses to a halt.

“What can we take out first?” Fareeha said, making a show of dusting her hands off to show she was ready to work.

“There’s a bed frame that looks very heavy.”

Grinning, Fareeha went to the wagon in question. Working with Father Gabriel a few of the drivers, she lifted the heavy steel frame and carried it into the house, slowly moving towards the second floor.

Angela thought it would be an easy affair to unpack everything. After all, this was the last caravan to bring her purchased furnishings; but it took nearly the entire day to get everything unpacked and squared away. Soon, it was the late afternoon, and Ana herself approached her new home, carrying a bag filled with food.

“This looks positively homey,” Ana said, walking in.

“You’ve been working so hard,” Ana said. “Please, take a bath. Now that you have your own home, you can use as much water as you like!”

“Thank you, but—“

“I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer,” Ana said. “I came here to cook you a celebratory diner, and I plan on making good on it. Go take a bath.”

“Thank you,” Angela smiled.

“Fareeha, you can—“

“Take a bath too, I smell like death, I know,” Fareeha groaned.

“You know me so well,” her mother smiled, kissing her cheek.

“I’m pretty sure I could use something to take this smell off, too,” Father Gabriel laughed. “Angela, this is a lovely house. I wish you the best in making it a home.”

“Thank you, Gabriel,” she smiled. He nodded, and left. “Ana, the kitchen is past that door.”

Angela waited until Ana walked through the door, and made sure it was closed. She turned to Fareeha. “I don’t think you smell like death.”

“I know,” Fareeha smiled. “But mom likes giving me a hard time.”
“She must really love you.”

“Yes; sometimes it hurts!”

As much as Angela didn’t want the moment to end, she knew she couldn’t do anything because Ana was in the room over. She was getting really, really frustrated that she was never able to get Fareeha alone…

She let Fareeha walk back to the small house that she shared with her mother. She went to the second floor where the tub was, and saw that there was already plenty of water set on a metal stove. That gave her enough warm water to take a bath with.

It was just what she needed. The bath lasted a long time, despite the cool air. Once it started getting cold, Angela drained the tub, dried off, and got dressed; she could hear the drained water running through a gutter, dumping outside the house. This time, she wore a new light-green dress, which had the benefit of having a plunging neckline. If she was going to be frustrated by her inability to get Fareeha alone, maybe she could get Fareeha to be frustrated as well. After all, turnabout was fair play.

She had splurged and bought a full-length mirror to hang on the wall, and spent a few minutes preening herself. She was looking good. Her chest wasn’t nearly as big as Fareeha’s, but she knew how to work with what she had; her dress clung to her hips in all the right way. Not as well as a pair of jeans could, but she was more of a dress kind of woman; Fareeha was the one who liked wearing pants.

Dressed and ready, she got her hair just right and walked to the kitchen, where she found Fareeha and Mayor Reinhardt sitting at the table. Ana was at the kitchen, cooking.

“This is a surprise,” she said. “Mr. Mayor, thank you for coming.”

“Please, none of this ‘mayor’ business now, just call me Reinhardt,” he smiled. As usual, he was sharply dressed. He handed her a celebratory bottle of wine. “Congratulations on your new clinic being finished. Does that mean you won’t be treating people in the hotel?”

“Only if the worst comes to pass,” Angela said, sitting down next to Fareeha. That left a spot next to Reinhardt; it was the only one for Ana to take without pulling up a chair.

Reinhardt winked at her for her sly move. Angela winked back; she had promised Mayor Reinhardt that she’d help him woo Ana, all while keeping Fareeha blissfully ignorant. Not that it helped; Fareeha knew that Reinhardt wanted her mother, but kept herself limited to simply shooting Reinhardt withering glares.

Ana came back, carrying plates of food. Tonight, it was pork chops cooked with apples, mashed potatoes, and Brussels sprouts with bacon. She served everyone, then sat down next to Reinhardt.

“To a new home,” Fareeha said, raising a glass of wine in toast.

“Prost!” Angela smiled. The wine was very good, with just the right amount of sweetness without having it become overpowering.

“So, now that you’re not going to be living in the hotel,” Ana said, “is there anything you will miss?”

“There’s not much that I’d miss,” Angela said. She leaned over the table to grab a plate of food. Thanks to the low neckline, she gave Fareeha a quick little show. “I had to work in an empty hotel room; there just wasn’t enough space for everything.”
“B-but now you’ll have your own building,” Fareeha croaked, undoubtedly liking what she was seeing. “Doesn’t that feel good?”

“Better that you’d ever imagine,” Angela smiled. “It was awkward to be working in such a small place. Remember when I had to fix that poor cowboy’s shattered arm? I had to set the bones and keep him as quiet as possible so he wouldn’t scare the baby that was next door.”

“You think that’s awkward, try having a town full of whores calling your mother ‘Mama,’” Fareeha said dryly.

Angela and Reinhardt roared with laughter, Reinhardt more so. Ana smiled, but kept her grace about her.

“I guess I’m really good at being a mother,” she said. “Some of those girls have had such a hard time; I like helping them. Of course, for women as strong and independent as they are, that just means being there to listen to them, offer them a shoulder, or fix them up with a good meal.”

“Yes, never underestimate how much good a home cooked meal can do,” Reinhardt said. “It is a true miracle cure!”

“But being called ‘Mama…? ’” Fareeha asked.

“I know, it’s weird, but I’m doing good work there. Madam Lacroix is a great businesswoman, but bless her heart, she wasn’t the best at the day-to-day operations. She can plan for events weeks down the line, but handling the menu every day is just a little beyond her.”

“Then it’s a good thing you helped manage an army regiment, yes?” Fareeha smiled.

“Yes, it is good,” Ana laughed. “I liked that, too. The day to day challenges, making sure everything ran as smoothly as possible, I actually miss that. This gives me more of those moments that I really love.”

Angela nodded. Ana truly took a shining to her work at Madam Lacroix’s. She was quickly becoming the go-to person for quick remedies, help with cooking, or general help around the home. She really was a mother to everyone.

“Speaking of doing things you love, how do you like working with Jack?” Reinhardt asked.

“There’s a lot of things that are challenging, but I really like it,” Fareeha said, unconsciously puffing her chest out as she spoke with pride. “Keeping the peace, helping run this town, I’m loving it! Every day I learn something new, and I feel like I’m just getting bigger!”

“Get any bigger and your clothes won’t fit,” Ana said dryly.

“Mother!!”

Angela did her best to hide her laughter, but failed as Fareeha blushed furiously. Reinhardt didn’t even try to hide it, he leaned back, howling and slapping his knee. Angela hoped she wasn’t blushing too hard…

The evening, and the talking, went on and on, and the wine was passed around. After a few glasses, Angela found it harder and harder to concentrate. Fareeha was sitting next to her, so close to her, yet so far away, and she was giving her looks. But during all of her secret stares, Fareeha had been looking at her, too.
Eventually, the night grew darker and darker, and everyone found themselves fading fast.

“God,” Reinhardt groaned, “this has been quite the dinner party.”

“Yes,” Ana said. “Thank you for letting me cook for you.”

“I should thank you for cooking,” Angela said. “And thank you for the wine, Reinhardt.”

“You are very welcome,” he smiled.

“God, I can’t stay here anymore,” Ana said. “I have to get up early tomorrow, get ready for the breakfast rush.”

“I hope you have a good meal planned.”

“When don’t I?” Ana said, getting up.

“I can walk you home,” Reinhardt said, standing up himself. “I have to start early, too. More people are deciding to make Crease their home, and they want their own houses. I have to make sure they’re all planned out properly.”

“I can stay and help with dishes,” Fareeha said.

“No, it’s okay,” Angela said. “You have to get up early, too. I know how much Jack likes to start his mornings with the sun.”

“That can wait, I can’t leave you here with a house full of dirty dishes,” Fareeha smiled. “My mother raised me right: if someone cooks, you clean.”

“That’s my girl,” Ana laughed.

“T—then thank you,” Angela stammered.

Ana and Reinhardt left, and Angela suddenly realized she was finally alone with Fareeha. That, and a table full of dirty dishes. Once again, something was keeping them apart!

Angela walked to the kitchen. There was a small well that was dug by the house, giving her water to pump into a massive sink. She filled it with water and soap, while Fareeha carried all of the dishes in. Soon it was full, both of water and dishes.

“Well, I guess we should get started,” Angela said, rolling her sleeves up. “Can you—“

She turned around, but stopped dead. Fareeha was inches from her, and moving closer. Angela backed up, only to be backed into a wall.

“Can I what?” Fareeha asked, her hot breath inches from Angela’s lips.

It took Angela a few seconds before she could answer. She suddenly realized that Fareeha had pinned her to the wall, a strong arm to the side of her. Her free hand traced a path along the plunging neckline of Angela’s dress, gently dancing along her breast while pulling down the neckline. It set her nerves on fire.

“Uh, I… help with the dishes…?” She shivered. Fareeha’s leg was between her thighs; Angela was practically grinding on her.

“They can wait,” Fareeha breathed. “I’ve waited a year for this.”
Fareeha must have thought she’d be the one to start the kissing, but Angela grabbed her by the lapels and pulled her close, mashing her lips against Fareeha’s. It startled the woman, but only for a second. Then Fareeha was kissing her back.

All of her pent-up frustration was finally being undone. Fareeha’s hands reached down, at first caressing her thighs, then pulling her closer. Angela couldn’t help but moan. Fareeha’s hands were so strong, but gentle and warm. The way they roamed about her body made her think that she had died and went to heaven.

Angela tried to pull Fareeha to her room, but it was hard when Fareeha was pulling their clothes off. She laughed as she stumbled about, trying to discard her clothes while walking up the stairs while making sure her lips never left Fareeha’s, all at the same time. Fareeha was equally invested in not parting; she was practically glued to Angela as they fumbled about, nearly tripping as they made their way up the stairs.

Somehow, they made it to her bed just in time.

A gentle stirring woke Angela. It was Fareeha, only just waking up herself. Looking at Fareeha, Angela felt her heart soar. Fareeha’s hair had grown out in the year since they had met, and was making its way down to her shoulders. But as Fareeha’s hair grew, it gently curled. It was that mixture of her curly hair and bed head that made her seem all that more beautiful.

But it was her eyes that did Angela in.

“Mmm,” Fareeha sighed, waking up. “Good morning—“

Angela silenced her with a kiss.

“I should start every day like this,” Fareeha groaned when Angela was finally finished with her.

“I should wake you like this every day,” she smiled, snuggling closer to Fareeha.

“Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?” Angela asked.

“Make me want to stay here all day with you.”

“You mean you don’t?” Angela grinned.

“O—of course I do!” Fareeha stammered. “I told you, I waited a year for this! But I have to help Jack, and I do like my job.”

“Jobs can wait,” Angela said, nestling her head on Fareeha’s arm. “This is a dream come true.”

“Does it remind you of our nights traveling when you first got here?”

“It’s better than those nights. I finally have you to myself.”

“You had me to yourself the second night,” Fareeha said. “Don’t you remember?”
'Remember? Remember what?'

“You woke up, and stumbled on over to me,” Fareeha grinned. “I was on watch, and you tried to stay up talking with me. But you fell asleep.”

“I… I thought that was a dream.”

“You were pretty tired,” Fareeha said. “I carried you back to the tent.”

“God, I never thought that had happened,” Angela said. “That makes it so much better. Now I want to stay in here with you even more.”

“But my job…”

“It can wait.”

Her stomach decided that this was a good time to tell everyone that she was hungry. Angela blushed as it rumbled.

“Jobs might wait, but food can’t,” Fareeha laughed.

“But I want to stay here, with you…”

That got Fareeha to blush, and blush hard.

“I do, too,” she mumbled. “More than anyone in the world.”

“Then why don’t you come back?”

“When were done eating? I’ll have to get to work.”

“No, I mean tonight,” Angela said. “And every night.”

“You… you want me to move in with you?”

“Yes. I’ve never slept better than with you. God, I’ve waited a year to kiss you, and now I just don’t want to stop.”

“Then how can I turn down a beautiful woman?” Fareeha said.

“You mean…?”

“Yes, I’d love to move in with you.”

Angela pulled her close. Fareeha returned the hug, and held her until her stomach started growling again.

Angela walked down the street in a haze. She was holding Fareeha’s hand, in public. She felt like she was on top of the world.

“God, my mother is probably worried about me,” Fareeha chuckled.
“I think she knew where you were.”

“That’s only part of the reason I’m worried.”

“Worried that she won’t want you around?”

“No, that she’ll give me high hell about not telling her where I was.”

“You’re a woman grown, you can do what you want.”

“Try telling her…” Fareeha trailed off. “Oh my God, I can do what I want! She always told me she’d kick me out if I broke curfew or her rules, but now I have a place to go! Ha!”

“She does that?”

“Mothers do that all the time,” Fareeha said.

“Then the nuns who raised me might as well have been my mother. The rules we had to follow then…”

“Do those rules forbid you from kissing women?” Fareeha grinned wolfishly.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m not very religious,” she blushed. They walked to the saloon, only for the doors to be slammed open as two bodies flew out and into the mud and snow covered street, limbs tangled.

“Oh God dammit, not again,” Fareeha spat.

Gabriel was not being a very good priest by fighting Jack. Jack, meanwhile, was not being a very good sheriff by fighting back. The two grunted, rolling to their feet. Gabriel righted himself just a split second before Jack. Seeing an opening, he roared and launched himself at Jack, wrapping both arms around his waist and squeezing him tight.

There were a few people walking by. They took a look at the two men entangled in each other, sighed, and went about their business.

“Oy, don’t kill each other,” Lena said half-heartedly, walking out onto the saloon’s veranda. Gabriel, his arms tight around Jack’s waist, slammed Jack to the ground. He rolled up, mounting Jack, and began raining down punches. Jack grunted, but kept his guard up, taking everything that Gabriel was giving him with practiced ease.

“How long have they been like this?” Fareeha asked.

“A few minutes,” Lena said.

“We should probably stop them,” Angela sighed.

“Yea, we should, but just give ’em another minute to get it out of their systems, yea?” Jack bucked his hips, forcing Gabriel to check his balance to stay on top. Jack kicked a leg up, hooking his heel around Gabriel’s chin. He was able to pry the priest off of him, pushing him down into the dirt with his boot, and escaped from under him.

Gabriel thrashed, pulling his chin free, but by then, Jack had climbed on top of Gabriel, pinning one
of the priest’s arms to the ground. Jack was able to get two punches in before Gabriel headbutted him.

Jack fell back, his nose bleeding. It gave Gabriel a second to get back to his feet, where the two went back to slugging it out, hissing, grunting, and drenched in sweat all the while.

“What got them started?” Angela asked.

“What doesn’t get ‘em going?” Lena snorted. “Those two will find a reason to fight.”

“I figured. You think this is enough?”

“Yea, about,” Fareeha sighed, rolling up her sleeves. “Better stop them.”

Just as she was about to pull the two apart, Jack landed a hook that sent Gabriel crashing to the ground. He stood on uneasy legs over Gabriel, gasping for breath.

Then Gabriel started laughing.

Jack tried to keep his face straight, but as Gabriel laughed more and more, he fell on his ass, laughing himself.

“Ah, that was a good one,” Gabriel howled from the ground. “Shit, that hook.”

“That goddamn tackle of yours,” Jack laughed, sitting flat on his ass. “I thought I was in real trouble there.”

“You got out of that way too fast, ese. What the fuck was that?”

“I’m used to getting out from under big men.”

“Shit, that was something!”

“Are you two done?” Fareeha groaned. “You do know you’ve got to look somewhat respectable, right?”

“Yea, I’m done,” Gabriel said, rolling on the ground.

“Good, I don’t think I have another one of those in me,” Jack said.

“Your nose would appreciate it if you stop,” Angela said, looking Jack over. “Put pressure on it, and a wet rag to help stop the bleeding. Put some snow in it so the rag is cold, that will help.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As for you,” she said, turning her attention to the priest on the ground who was trying to push himself to his feet, “have a big glass of cool water, and lay down. Get some ice to help with the swelling on your eye.”

“Think I’ll do the ol’ ‘steak on the black eye’ thing,” Gabriel groaned.

“Please don’t,” Angela sighed.

“Come on, Jack, let’s get you to the office,” Fareeha said, giving Jack a hand up. “You can lay down there.”
“Do you need help?” Lena asked, walking over to Gabriel.

“Thank, but I got it,” he groaned, finally pulling himself off the ground. “Just gonna go back and draw a cold bath.”

“Fareeha, if you could, get some more eggs,” Jack said. “That asshole over there ruined our breakfast.”

Jack tried to spit it out like it was a true curse, but with a grin plastered on his face, it came off more as a friendly jape. Gabriel laughed at that.

“If it’ll keep you out of trouble, fine,” Fareeha said, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“Good fight, Jack,” Gabriel said.

“A hella good fight,” Jack laughed. “They always are!”

The two staggered away, barely walking in straight lines. No one in Crease paid them any mind; it was a near-weekly occurrence.

“This was a mess,” Lena sighed.

“Tell me about it,” Angela said.

“Damn. And I thought I was strange with my trysts with Madam Lacroix. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Someone desperately needs to teach those two how to flirt,” Fareeha said.

“For them, I think that is flirting,” Angela said.

Fareeha walked into the office, carrying two plates of food. Jack was sitting in his chair, in full recline. The wooden chair was precariously balanced, the two back wooden legs almost at a perfect vertical line, his boots kicked up on the table. A big, wet rag was draped over his nose, which was pinched to help fight the bloody nose he had.

“You could’ve had that fight later,” she said, setting the plate of eggs and honeyed biscuits next to his boots. “You cost me a good breakfast.”

“Sorry about that,” Jack groaned, his voice nasally from having to pinch it shut. The damp towel was flecked red with blood, but the bleeding had finally stopping.

“You could be sorrier,” she said, sitting down, digging into her own food. “Now I have to stay here and make sure you don’t do anything else just as stupid.”

“When you got fire in the blood, you gotta do something to get it out of the system,” he said, setting the chair down and grabbing the plate. “You know how it feels to get caged up. You gotta let out some stress.”

“By getting into a fight with a priest?”
“He’s a shitty priest,” Jack laughed, digging into his second attempt at breakfast.

“You keep this up, you’ll be a shitty sheriff.”

“That cuts deep.”

“That’s the point,” Fareeha huffed.

“You’re really upset. I’m sorry I ruined things for you.”

“No,” she sighed, “it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “From the looks of it, you finally had that good night you’ve been talking about.”

“How do you know?” Fareeha demanded.

“That love mark you got tells me what I need to know,” Jack grinned, pointed at his neck.

“Shit!” Fareeha quickly went to fixing her collar.

“So, was it worth the wait?” He laughed.

Fareeha paused. She was blushing heavily, but couldn’t help but grin.

“Yes, yes it was,” she stammered. “Angela even asked me to move in with her.”

“And you said ‘yes?’”

“Of course.”

“You big slut! Good for you!” Jack grinned.

“Stop it,” Fareeha laughed. “Can’t you do something normal with Gabriel?”

“Hey, there have been plenty of nights I was able to finally get through to him.”

“You mean you let yourself get taken by him?”

“I’m not pushing you for details, you don’t need to push back.”

“You’re right, sorry.”

Jack set his empty plate down at the table.

“Damn, this is nice,” he sighed.

“You still talking about that fight?”

“No. Well, yea, that fight was great, but I mean this. Just being able to talk about what we like. You know, our preferences,” he said. “When you first sussed me out, I thought that was it; I’d be run out of town by the priest for my ‘odd taste.’”

“Didn’t Gabriel start a fight about your tastes, too?”

“He did, and things went sideways.”
“More like one of you went sideways.”

“Again, details; don’t ask unless you really want to know.”

“Come on, I had to,” Fareeha chuckled.

“Yea, fine, it was a good line,” Jack laughed. “But being able to talk about it…damn, this just feels nice.”

“Yea, it does,” Fareeha said. “Had a few heart-to-heart moments in the army with a few other girls who dressed as boys.”

“Can’t see that going well.”

“It didn’t. Don’t get me wrong, we all had fun, and I learned plenty of tricks from them, but it didn’t end well,” Fareeha sighed. “Then again, with my mom so close, it felt like I had to put on airs for her.”

“Tell me about it. I grew up in a small farming town in Indiana; imagine the airs I had to put on there!”

“Oof, just thinking about that makes me cringe.”

“Don’t worry, it’s better now. Speaking of which, now that you got your taste of Angela, does your mom know what kind of dish you like?”

“No,” Fareeha mumbled. “But I…I ended up sleeping at her place. Mom might know.”

“I’d talk to her about this,” Jack said. “Better for her to hear it from you than to suss it out herself. You know, take control of the narrative, that whole thing.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Fareeha said. “Sometimes I wish you liked women; you’d be a great match with mom.”

“Ana is a great woman. I’m glad I can call her a friend, and close friend at that. And it’s real sweet that you think of me that way kid, but you know that’s not something I can do,” Jack laughed.

“A damn shame,” Fareeha laughed.

There was a knock at the door, and Efi walked in.

“Hey, Efi,” Fareeha smiled. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen you!”

“I’m working a lot with Orisa,” she said.

Efi’s voice made the hair on the back of Fareeha’s neck stand up. Normally, Efi was bright and cheerful; but now, her voice was flat and even. The girl was nervous.

“Where’s your sister?” She asked. Now was the time for business.

“In the saloon, eating,” Efi said. “A new man rode into town, and he’s eating there. He’s still got his gun.”

Fareeha wished she could keep talking with Jack, but duty called.

“I’ll handle it,” she said, getting up. “You make sure your nose doesn’t start bleeding everywhere.”
“Thanks,” Jack said.

“Is Orisa in the saloon?”

“She is,” Efi said. “But the man with the gun...he’s got two other men with him. They’re tied up, bound and gagged. Mama’s looking out for him, too.”

It really was too early in the morning to deal with this. She just wanted to sit here, talking with Jack about Angela, or even finding a way to sneak over to Angela’s clinic. Sometimes she hated being good at her job.

Fareeha sighed, and went to the gun rack, unlocking it. She pulled out an extra pistol for Orisa, her mother's rifle, and two tin badges. It was time to make a few temporary deputies.

Fareeha snuck into the back of the saloon. The back door led to the kitchen, where many of the girls were gathered, along with the two cooks and, more importantly, her mother.

“Efi told me about the stranger who blew into town,” Fareeha said. “And the two he brought with him.”

“Word spreads fast in this town,” Ana said. “He refused to give up his gun. You don’t need to worry about the two men, they’re tied up well enough.”

“So I’ve heard,” Fareeha said. She gave her mother her rifle, along with one of the tin badges. “Temporary deputy. You’ve got the right to hold a gun, and if the worst comes to pass, you’ll help to keep the town safe, as well as the deputy, blah blah blah, we all know the song and dance.”

“I’ll make sure nothing ever happens to you,” Ana swore, gently cupping her cheek. “You’re in good hands.”

That made Fareeha’s heart swell.

“Thanks, mom,” she smiled.

“You’re welcome,” Ana smiled back. “Now go out there and make me proud.”

Fareeha snuck out the back door, and jogged to the front of the saloon. She had an extra revolver; it was time to put on airs, and make the cowboy realize just what was in store for him.

She walked into the saloon again, only this time, she made sure that the double-hinged doors were battered open. She was announcing her presence to the world; she had to own her entrance.

The few people in the saloon turned to look at her. They saw the extra gun belt in her hand, and easily reasoned why she was here. Fareeha walked over to Olivia.

“Morning, Olivia,” Fareeha said, tipping her hat to the girl before she took it off.

“Morning, Fareeha,” Olivia said.

“You know why I’m here.”
Olivia nodded.

“Over there.”

Fareeha walked in, and saw Orisa sitting at a table. She was done eating, but sat, staring in the direction of the armed cowboy.

“Orisa,” Fareeha said.

“Fareeha,” Orisa said.

Fareeha handed her the revolver, and another deputy badge.

“You know what the deal is.”

Orisa nodded, and grabbed the revolver. The gun was big, but in Orisa’s sizable hands, it seemed tiny.

Fareeha looked up. There was a slat in the wall that led to the kitchen; it was made so the kitchen could easily pass food to the waitresses. Ana stood there, her gaze hard as she readied herself for anything. But she kept her rifle hidden, for now.

Taking a deep breath, Fareeha walked up to the cowboy. She made no attempt to hide arming Orisa. The entire point of that was to tell the cowboy that there was someone else with a gun. Maybe that would be enough to persuade him to give up without a fight.

There were two men, one at each side of the cowboy, and just as Fareeha had heard, they were bound and gagged. They wore rough, dirty clothes, and had patchy beards. They couldn’t be more than nineteen. Still, they were familiar; they were the Bricket Brothers, semi-infamous cattle rustlers in the area, and a pain in Mako’s backside. Balled-up neckerchiefs were stuffed into their mouths and tied in place with another kerchief.

Meanwhile, the cowboy sat at a table, taking a bite of his food. His hat was on the table, a sign that he respected Madam Lacroix’s rule of no hats indoors. His hair was jet black and long, but not shaggy. It bled into a rough beard on his face.

He was dressed in worn clothes, and leather chaps. The most striking thing about him was the red serape he wore around his shoulders. He wore it under his worn, heavy winter jacket.

“Morning,” Fareeha said, walking up to the table.

“Morning, darling,” the cowboy said, speaking with a southern drawl. If Fareeha had to guess, he was a Texan.

“I’m not your darling.”

“Sorry, old habit from home,” the cowboy said. “I mean no offense.”

Well, he was certainly a polite Southerner. Might as well give that politeness back.

“None taken,” Fareeha said. “I heard you just came into town.”

“Yes ma’am,” the cowboy said, “I did.”

“And these two men that are with you?” She nodded to the bound men.
“They came, but with a little extra incentive.”

“And they are…?” Fareeha knew who they were, but she wanted to see if the cowboy was going to lie.

“They’re the Bricket Brothers, ma’am,” the cowboy said. “I caught ’em in the mountains, and brought them back. They got a bounty on their heads, and I’m looking to collect.”

“Then if you came to Crease, then you know about our no-gun rule, yes?”

“I do,” he said. “Are you the sheriff?”

“No, I’m the deputy.”

The cowboy sighed.

“I’d like to live by the rules of your town,” he said, “I really would. I hope you take no further offense from this, but I’d like to give my guns to the sheriff, not the deputy.”

“You want me to bring the sheriff to you?” Fareeha asked, cocking her eyebrows.

“I’ll surrender my gun to the sheriff. Again, I hope I’m giving no further offense.”

“Then when I go back to the sheriff to bring him here, who do I tell him wants to surrender to him?”

“Jesse McCree.”

Chapter End Notes

A wild McCree appears! Wonder if this means we’ll get a gunfight or two?
Chapter Summary

The cowboy McCree blows into town, but trouble rides in after him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“His name is ‘Jesse McCree?’” Jack said. He still kept a hand, and the wet rag, pinched to his nose.

“That’s what he said,” Fareeha sighed.

“Oh Lord, that name sounds familiar…”

Jack groaned, and tossed the rag away. His nose was still busted, but it wasn’t leaking blood, which was an improvement. Although from the way he sniffed, Fareeha thought he would start leaking blood at any second.

“Right,” he said, sniffing deep as if to keep his blood in his body. “If he wants to turn his gun over to me, I better get that taken care of.”

“You sure you’re up to it?”

“Times like these reminds me of what my daddy would tell me when food was running low, we only had a handful of bullets to bag dinner for the week, and it was my turn to hunt.”

“What did he say?”

“Handle it.”

“Damn, I feel left out,” Fareeha snorted. “Makes me wish I had a father like that.”

“He was a bastard, but he did teach me a lot.”

“Like how not to be a father?”

“That was one of his lessons, but not one he ever intended on giving,” Jack sighed. “Who’s got an eye on this cowboy?”

“Orisa and my mom.”

“Shit, if your mother has her eye on him, the Devil himself wouldn’t be able to spirit this cowboy away. Still, I guess we should do our job.”

Jack made sure his gun belt was on right, and walked to the door. Fareeha led him to the saloon, and to Jesse McCree’s table.

The cowboy had finished eating and was sitting back, reading an old newspaper that Lena had brought back from Denver. The two bound up brothers, however, were stuck where they were.
“Good morning,” Jack said.

Jesse looked up from the newspaper. The brothers looked up as well.

“Looks like it was a hell of a morning for you,” McCree said, tapping his nose.

“Nothing like getting the blood pumping to chase away the night.”

“Do I know that,” McCree laughed.

“So, you’re new to this town.”

“Yes sir, I am.”

“And you know about our no-gun-rule.”

“Yes sir, I do.”

“Then why didn’t you surrender your weapon to my deputy?” Jack asked, nodding towards Fareeha.

“With all due respect, sir, I’d rather disarm myself to the elected official, not just a deputy. I’m attached to my iron, and I’d rather make sure it is in the care of an honorable man.”

Jesse stood up, and slowly undid his gun belt. Once it was off, he handed it over to Jack, and then handed over a Bowie knife that was stuck in his boot.

“I don’t have another firearm on me,” he said, raising his serape and slowly turned around. Under said serape was a dirty long-sleeved shirt that was tucked into his jeans, and his chaps. Aside from the pistol and knife, the cowboy was quite unarmed, just as he said.

It wasn’t every day one got to meet a polite, honorable, Southern cowboy. If any regular cowboy blew through town, Fareeha usually got an earful from them, just for being a black woman. But this Jesse was the best cowboy she had ever seen. Hell, he was probably the best non-native Crease man she ever met.

“Thank you,” Jack said.

“You’re welcome, sir,” Jesse said. “I have your word that you’ll take good care of my iron?”

“Like it was my own.”

“Then again, I thank you,” Jesse said. “I know this might’ve ruffled some feathers, so I hope this is enough to bury the hatchet; these two fine young men I’m with are the Bricket brothers. I assume you know who they are?”

“Aye, we do,” Jack said.

“Excellent. These two have a warrant for their arrest; dead or alive,” McCree said, pulling a folded-up piece of paper from his pocket. As he unfolded it, Fareeha saw that it was a wanted poster with a very detailed sketch of the two brothers standing side by side. “I told them about the bounty on their heads, and the ‘dead or alive’ part. I gave ‘em the choice to pick; they chose to come in alive.”

Jack took the wanted poster from Jesse.

“Looks legit,” he said, handing it off to Fareeha. He knew it was legit, but he wanted to let her say it. Fareeha felt that it was to give her some standing with the cowboy McCree.
“It is,” she said, playing her part. “Got a judge’s signature and everything.”

“Then you’re here to pick up a reward for them?”

“Sadly, a bed, bullets, and food ain’t free,” Jesse sighed. “This is to pay the bills. Hope you understand.”

“No need to apologize, bounty hunting helps us out,” Jack said. “If you’re done eating, you can come to the office, we’ll get you set up.”

Jesse nodded. He pulled a few coins from his pocket to pay for his meal, and pulled the two bound brothers to their feet.

Fareeha walked to the kitchen door; her mother was waiting for her. She handed over the rifle and badge.

“I have something I’d like to talk to you about,” she said. “When you’re free.”

Fareeha’s stomach did a flip, like it always did when her mother said she wanted to talk about something.

“W-what about?”

“What happened last night.”

Ah, shit.

“Don’t worry, I still love you,” Ana smiled. “It’s just a little talk. And bring Angela when you’re able.”

As much as she wanted to get the talk done and over with, Fareeha had a job to do. She gave her mother a quick hug, then walked over to Orisa, who handed over her gun.

“We need to get a drink sometime,” Orisa said. “It’s been too long.”

Too long since the both of them drank themselves stupid and laughed about anything and everything.

“It really has been,” Fareeha grinned. “I’ll let you know when I’m free.”

Orisa smiled, surrendered her revolver, and stood up. Now that there wasn’t going to be a gunfight, Efi ran over, and the two walked out of the saloon, heading back to their forge.

Jack and Jesse led the brothers to the jail cell, undoing the rope that held them in place.

“This isn’t the end of it, McCree,” the older brother spat as soon as the gag was removed. “We got friends who’ll come for us.”

“I bet,” Jesse said, shoving him into the cell. “Bounty only said it was the two of you.”

“We made friends.”

“Now that boggles the mind.”

Jack slammed the jail cell closed, and walked to the safe in the corner of the building.

“I better get a letter going,” he said, sitting down. “We’ll have a paddy wagon come up from Denver
to gather them up.”

Opening the safe, he counted out some bills, and handed it over to Jesse.

“‘Till then, here you go. Thank you for helping restore law and order.”

“You’re very welcome,” Jesse said, taking the money. “After all, justice ain’t gonna dispense itself.”

“Got that right,” Fareeha laughed. “It’s up to people like us to help it along.”

“If you’re gonna stay in town, there are a few more bounties we can use a hand with,” Jack said.

“I’ll probably help out a bit. Gotta find the next place to wander on over to.”

“You a drifter by trade?”

“More like trying to find a new place to start a life,” he said. “I walked away from my old one.”

“Well, Crease is full of people like you,” Fareeha grinned. “Everyone here’s got a story, and a dream to make it—“

“Help! Help!!”

A small team of horses were galloping into town, and riding hard.

“Help! We need a doctor!”

Fareeha was the first to run out the door. Four cowboys were riding into town, one of them lolling in his saddle. Their horses were skittish, antsy. They rode in, kicking up mud and snow. They had seen action.

The injured cowboy was cradling his arm. Blood soaked his shirt.

“The doctor is down there,” Fareeha said, pointing to Angela’s new clinic. “Let’s go.”

She, Jack, and Jesse ran with the cowboys. Angela had heard the commotion, and was standing on the clinic’s veranda.

“What’s going on?” She said.

“Dan here got shot,” one cowboy said, helping the injured man from his horse.

“Get him inside, now.”

Everyone crowded into the clinic. Fortunately, it was big enough to easily handle everyone. Angela led the man to a bed, and sat him down. She pulled out a pair of scissors and cut the arm of his shirt off.

“Fareeha, please give him something for the pain.”

“Sure thing,” Fareeha said. “Whiskey, rye, or gin?”

“Whiskey,” the injured man gasped.

She walked over to one of the cabinets and handed out a bottle of whiskey, which the cowboy gratefully took, taking a few long pulls just as Angela rolled up her sleeves to go to work. Jesse took out a cigar and was about to light it.
“Don’t smoke inside,” Angela snapped.

He respectfully put the cigar away.

“What happened?” Jack asked the cowboy’s friends.

“We were riding by the mountains,” he said. “We were told a few cattle had gotten away, and we were bringing them back. Suddenly, Dan got shot. We rode out as fast as we could; those assholes were still shooting at us as we ran.”

“You said it was by the mountains, right?” Jesse said. “That wouldn’t happen to be by a little gully that feeds into the river?”

“Yea, that’s about the place.”

“Well that’s just great,” Jesse groaned. “It looks like the brothers weren’t just putting on airs; that’s the place I caught ‘em. They said they had a few more men, looking to make an easy life by rustling cattle.”

“How many men were shooting at you?” Fareeha asked the cowboys.

“I don’t know, I think they were taking pot shots at us with long guns. It might’ve been three guns going off.”

“Three at the very least. This is just great,” Jack said. “Thank you for your help. We’ll take care of it.”

“And how’s Dan?”

“He should be fine,” Angela said, cleaning the wound out. The injured cowboy, Dan, was biting down on a leather strap to keep from crying; Angela was working as fast as she could, but the whiskey wasn’t cutting the pain fast enough. “You did a good job with the field dressing.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Let’s get back to the office,” Jack said.

They walked back, only to see the two Bricket brothers grinning in their cell.

“Looks like you found our friends,” Bricket the elder said.

“Yes, we did,” Jack said. “How many of your friends are there?”

“I’m not saying shit, lawman. They’ll come for us, bust us out.”

“That I doubt,” Jack said. “Cattle rustling is for cowards. They’d never ride into town to save you.”

“Sure they will.”

“We gotta deal with these outlaws,” Jack said, turning to Fareeha, “before they try something really dumb and dangerous.”

“Would you mind if I help?” Jesse asked. “The Brickets are my bounty, and I don’t like leaving things half finished. Besides, all of this is kind of my fault.”

“No fault in maintaining law and order. We’ll take your help,” Jack said. “I gotta stay here and keep
an eye on the brothers, or hold down the fort if their dumbass friends ride in to shoot the place up.”

He walked over to the gun cabinet, and pulled out Jesse’s gun and knife. He handed them back to him, along with a tin badge.

“Temporary deputy. You’ll be taking orders from Fareeha; that going to be a problem?”

“No sir, not at all. This ain’t the first time I took orders from a woman.”

“Good,” Fareeha said. “Let’s get going, while we still have daylight.”

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Armed with her rifle and trusty revolvers, Fareeha dropped by the clinic to tell Angela what she’d be doing. Angela gave her a quick kiss, and told her to be careful. The kiss completely revitalized her, making Fareeha feel like she was ten feet tall. Bundled up for the waning winter cold, she got her horse. Jesse was waiting for her by the no-gun sign on his own horse. Together, they made for the mountains.

She was expecting Jesse to start giving her shit, but he was oddly quiet and reflective. He simply buttoned his jacket, lit a cigar, and started riding with her.

“You’re probably thinking this is your lucky day,” she said as they rode past the furthest farm.

“How do you mean?”

“More people to capture and make a bounty from.”

Jesse snorted.

“Not really,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d be grateful to get a few more meals from this, but I don’t really care for money.”

“Don’t really care for money?” Fareeha snorted. “You’re a bounty hunter.”

“I hunt bounties because it’s a good way to make honest money,” he said, blowing a ring of smoke. “And I hate to sound like a braggart, but I am a very good shot with my iron. The Lord gave me that talent, and I’m trying to do a little good in the world with it.”

“Did the Lord give you the disdain for money, too?”

“Nah, I got that all by myself,” Jesse said. “You got no reason to believe me, but I actually hate money. It turns good men into monsters, and bad men into worse. I’ve seen it work its way into the purest of hearts, and change it into something near unrecognizable.”

“Then why hunt bounties? You could just turn them in gratis.”

“Ha! If only! I might hate money, but the real shame of the thing is that everyone uses it; that means I gotta have it, too. I’ve never heard of a hotel or a saloon accepting good manners as payment.”

“And I sure as hell can’t see Madam Lacroix accepting that,” Fareeha laughed. “What led to this mysterious disdain of capital?”
“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t feel like sharing that story.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pried.”

“It’s fine, we’re just killing time until we get to the place those rustlers were set up.”

Fareeha slyly gave Jesse the eye. He was a bounty hunter who hated money, said he’d taken orders from a woman before, and was polite almost to the point of annoyance. He was quite the odd one.

Then again, Crease was full of oddballs. She knew that Jesse would immediately fit in.

They reached the bridge. Crossing it, the trees started thickening, the melting snow deepened. They turned off the main road, making their way to the base of the mountains. Fareeha drew her horse up and reached into her saddle bag, drawing a spy glass.

“The gully should be up that way, about a mile,” she said, scanning the area. “Trees are a little thick here, we should probably go on foot.”

“Fancy spy glass you got there,” Jesse said, pointing at it. “Is that army issued?”

“It is,” she said. “I dressed as a boy to fight in the war.”

“Dang. I didn’t know I’d be working with a veteran.”

“Did you fight?”

“No; I was young and dumb, full of piss and vinegar,” he said. “Did my own thing in and about Texas when it rolled around.”

Stranger and stranger. If he was Texan, he was oddly fine taking orders from not only a black person, but a woman to boot. But what did he mean, ‘did his own thing?’

“Best to keep things quiet. Let’s get going,” she said, getting off her horse. She quickly hitched it to a tree, and pulled her rifle out of its saddle bag. She was glad that she recently waterproofed her boots; even though the snow was melting, it was still deep enough in parts to creep up to the tops of her boots.

“You let me scout ahead,” Jesse said. He stubbed his cigar out. There was still plenty of it left; he ended up sticking it in his breast pocket. “It’s my fault those guys are taking shots at people, I’ll be the one to put an end to it.”

“Sure thing.”

“Besides, you might find it weird to have a stranger watching your back,” Jesse smiled.

“Just a bit,” Fareeha laughed. “Don’t you feel uncomfortable? I’m just as much a stranger to you as you are to me.”

“You’re a lawwoman; you didn’t get that position just by sitting around, twiddling your thumbs. That badge tells me you’re trustworthy.”

“Then thank you for trusting me.”

“Sure thing. Just don’t shoot me, okay?”

Fareeha laughed at that. Together, they walked into the forest growing on the mountain, Jesse
blazing a trail through the nearly melted snow.

The snow thinned out as they got higher on the mountain; it even broke way to show them budding grass and the leftover leaves from the fall. Fareeha knew she was good at moving quietly, but Jesse was just as skilled as she was. They had been walking for a while until Fareeha smelled something.

“Hold up,” she whispered.

Jesse dropped to a knee.

“You smell that, too?”

“Yea, it’s gotta be a fire,” she said. “I’m not seeing any smoke; someone must’ve just put it out.”

“That sounds about right.” Jesse sniffed the air. “Think I smell food, too. Must be a little past lunch time for them. You find a good spot, I’ll give them a warning to turn themselves in.”

Fareeha nodded. Walking in a crouch, she found an fallen tree that overlooked the gully. The gully itself was big, but there was only a small stream of water that ran through the bottom, leaving plenty of room to walk about. At the gully’s bottom was a small camp. Four men and their horses were there, sitting and eating what looked like beans and rabbits. A campfire was smoldering by them.

She looked back to Jesse and pointed to where the outlaws were. He nodded, and walked out. Fareeha thought he’d draw his gun, but he kept it holstered in the belt, although his hand hovered mere inches from the wooden butt.

“Hey there,” he called.

The four men scrambled to their feet. They were dressed in dirty clothes, no doubt having lived off the land for quite some time.

“Who’s there?” One yelled, picking up his rifle.

“Whoa, easy there,” Jesse said, holding his off-hand up. He made his way into the gully, sliding down the slope. “I just want to talk.”

“Bullshit, you ain’t here to talk.”

“Well, I want to,” he said. “Just, ease up on them guns. I get nervous when men start grabbing their irons.”

“Scared! Ha! We’ll give you something to be scared about!”

“Not scared, nervous,” Jesse said. “Oh never mind. Listen; your friends, the Bricket brothers? I caught ‘em, and brought ‘em in.”

The men glared at Jesse for that.

“We’ll get ‘em out,” the leader said.

“I’m sure you’ll try. Thing is, if you’re rustling cattle with ‘em, that makes you part of the bounty.”

“And what, you walk into here, and think you can take us back all by yourself?” The leader spat. The three others laughed.

“Not by myself, I got a partner.”
The mood grew tense as the men scanned the trees.

“Where are they at?”

“Don’t go looking for them, you won’t find ‘em in time,” he said. “Now, the bounty said ‘dead or alive.’ I’m giving you the same choice as I gave the brothers: throw down your guns, and I’ll bring you in alive.”

“You think you’re hot shit, telling us what to do?”

The four outlaws were holding their guns white knuckle tight. Fareeha brought her rifle up; something was going to go down.

“No one needs to die here today,” Jesse said.

“Oh, we won’t be the ones who die,” the leader said. He shouldered his rifle, but kept the barrel pointed at the ground. “I can promise you that.”

“Don’t you point that gun at me,” Jesse snapped.

The men laughed.

“Oh, you mean, like this—?”

The leader brought the rifle up as fast as he could. Jesse was faster. By the time the leader raised his rifle, Jesse had grabbed his revolver, pulled it from its holster, aimed it, and put two bullets into the man. If it wasn’t for the sound of gunfire, Fareeha would have sworn the gun had magically appeared in his hand.

The man’s body hit the ground, dead where he was. The three other men jumped back, eyes wide.

“Drop ‘em,” Jesse barked. “Don’t be like that fool there.”

Two of the outlaws immediately threw their guns down and reached for the sky.

“Last chance,” Jesse warned the third one. “I don’t want to put you down, but if that’s what you choose, I’m more than happy to help you along.”

The third man threw down his gun.

“Thank you,” Jesse said. “There some rope over there?”

The two stunned men nodded.

“Good.” Jesse holstered his gun, and walked over. “You three have a price on your head; you’re coming in with me.”

Jesse found some spare rope by the horses. While he was measuring out a length of it and cutting it with his knife, the third man reached for something behind his back.

Fareeha saw the glint of gunmetal, and put a bullet in him. The rifle roared, and the man collapsed, the bullet landing dead center of his heart. She pumped the lever, sliding a fresh bullet into the chamber.

“I knew your friend wasn’t gonna be very smart,” Jesse sighed. He never flinched; it was like he was expecting the man to try and gun him down. He turned to the two others. “Do you want to die here?”
“N-no sir, we don’t.”

“Then do what I tell you to. Understand?”

“Crystal!”

Jesse went to lashing their hands together, and gathering up their guns and supplies. With the men secured, Fareeha jogged down into the gully. The two men stared at her, but quickly looked at the ground, beet red that they were captured by a black woman.

“Mind giving me a hand with the bodies?” Jesse asked.

“Not at all.”

The dead men’s horses were brought up, and she helped Jesse drape them over the saddles, tying them in place.

“That man made a movement which made me fear for my life,” Jesse said as they worked. “I gave him a warning, but he didn’t listen.”

“No need to justify yourself,” Fareeha said. “That killing was lawful self-defense.”

With the bodies tied down to the horses, they scavenged the camp. The men didn’t have much; they gathered it all up, helped the captured men into their horses, double- and triple- checked their lashings, and led them back to their horses.

“Thank you for the help,” Fareeha said, climbing onto her horse.

“Not at all,” Jesse smiled, getting into the saddle. He took out his cigar and lit it again. “Still got a little daylight left. Let’s get back to town.”

They rode in, rope going from the horn of their saddles to the tied up men. They rode into Crease, and saw over twenty horses hitched in front of the saloon. Did a party come through town?

“Aw, fuck,” Jesse groaned.

Fareeha blinked. She suddenly realized she hadn’t Jesse swear. And cowboys were notorious for having filthy mouths!

“What is it?”

Jesse pointed to one of the horses. It was a blood-red roan.

“I know that horse,” he said. “That’s Ashe’s horse.”

“Who’s Ashe?”

“Elizabeth Caledonia Ashe,” Jesse sighed. “You might know her as ‘Calamity.’ She runs the Deadlock Gang.”

Hearing ‘Deadlock Gang,’ Fareeha’s head spun about.
“The Deadlock Gang?” She demanded. “They’re only supposed to be in the southwest!”

Jesse sighed. It was just like Ashe to never leave him alone.

“Yea, they’re supposed to,” he said.

His heart sank in his chest, but at the same time, it was almost a relief to see Ashe and the Gang. Part of him knew he’d never be able to outrun his past, no matter how he tried. Living by himself, making his own way in the world, it was like he was living in a dream, one that he knew he was about to wake up from. Seeing the Gang, it was like waking up to face the world; it was going to happen sooner or later.

“Then why the crap are they up in Wyoming territory?” Fareeha said.

He turned to the deputy, doing the best to watch his mouth. He couldn’t let any of his old habits slip out, he was trying to be better than that.

“Ah is probably here for me.”

Fareeha gave him a hard glare, trying to figure out what her options were.

“We need to get back to the sheriff’s office,” she said, spurring her horse on. “Both to drop these men off, and to see what’s going on. Follow me, we’ll take a back road.”

Jesse followed her, making sure the rope that held one of the rustlers was secured to the horn of his saddle. Fareeha led him through the town, taking streets that only held houses, not businesses. Sure enough, it was the back way through town. They quickly made their way to the rear of the sheriff’s office, and Fareeha jumped off her horse.

The back door opened, and a tall Mexican waved them in. The man wore a collar; he was a priest.

“Come on, Jack’s waiting.”

“Thanks, Gabriel.”

Jesse took a second to stub his cigar out, there wasn’t much left now, and helped Fareeha drag the two bound men off their horses, and into the office. There was a small crowd waiting there; a big man in dress clothes, the adorable blonde doctor, and Sheriff Morrison himself, looking as rough and delicious as ever with his busted nose.

“Thank God you came back quick,” Morrison said. “This town just got a whole lot smaller.”

“I can see,” Fareeha said, ushering the rustlers into the jail cell. Once they were in the cell, she made a beeline to the blonde doctor, who held her close.


“They’re dead,” Jesse said. “I gave ’em the same choice I gave you, and they thought cattle rustling was a fine hill to die on.”

That silenced the brothers. Realizing no one would come to help them, they practically folded into themselves. They stared at the ground, utterly dejected.

“What happened?” Fareeha asked.

“About an hour ago, this posse rolled into town,” the priest, Gabriel, said. “Stirred up a commotion.
They saw the no-gun sign, laughed at it, and rode on in. They’re the only ones in the saloon; hardly anyone else is in there with them."

The door to the office opened, and a woman stormed in. She was a dark-haired beauty, dressed like the prostitutes in the saloon, but held herself with more dignity that Jesse had ever seen. A small, thin, brown haired woman followed her, dressed like a man.

"Those ruffians need to go,” the dark-haired woman demanded, speaking with a graceful accent.

“Madam Lacroix, please, we’re working on a course of action,” the big man in dress clothes said. He spoke with an accent as well, most likely some European country.

"You’re the mayor, we need action now.”

“We can’t go jumpin’ into the fire, luv,” the brown haired woman said. She had an accent too; she was British. There sure were a lot of foreigners here. “We need a plan.”

“That’s what we’re working on now,” Morrison said. “How big is this posse?”

“They got twenty-five,” Jesse said. “Everyone’s got a pistol, but they got a good amount of long guns, twelve last I remember. They should also have four shotguns.”

All eyes were suddenly on him.

“And you know this how?” Morrison asked.

“Cus I used to ride with ‘em.” He rolled up his left sleeve, showing the tattoo on his forearm. It was a skull with wings. Two chains ran from the mouth; just below it was a lock. Above the skull was ‘Deadlock.’ Below was ‘Rebels.’

“That’s the Deadlock Gang in there?” Morrison growled.

“Yes sir, it is.”

“They’re only active in the southwest. That ink, you’re one of ‘em?”

Mind your manners, Jesse.

“Yes sir, I was.”

“You were an outlaw?” The doctor gasped from Fareeha’s embrace. They seemed pretty close.

“Yea, I was,” Jesse sighed. “But that life is behind me now. At least, I’m trying to put it behind me.”

“Then it looks like your old life still wants you back,” Madam Lacroix said, her voice as cold as ice.

“It sure seems that way, ma’am.”

“Any reason why they rode all the way out here for you?” She asked.

“We’ll worry about that later,” Morrison said. “Right now, we have to get this gang out of Crease.”

He pulled open a drawer at his desk, and tossed Fareeha a set of keys.

“Crack open the guns. We’ll need to deputize anyone who can hold a gun.”
“You sure that’s a good idea?” Jesse said. “Knowing Ashe, that just might be sending lambs to a slaughter.”

“We got plenty of people who are skilled with guns,” Morrison said. “You’re not the only one with a history.”

Fareeha grabbed an armful of guns. She handed them out to nearly everyone in the room, and Morrison handed out badges.

“Is a man of the cloth really gonna be taking up arms?” Jesse said, cocking his eyebrow at Gabriel, who went to cradling a shotgun in his arms.

“The Bible is clear: evil must be stopped at any cost, even if that cost appears to be monstrous.”

“They must’ve skipped that lesson when I was in Sunday school.”

“Ezekiel 25:17,” the priest said. “The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish, and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he, who in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother’s keeper, and the finder of lost children.’

‘And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger, those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon thee.’”

“Sounds like a cold-blooded thing to say to a man before you kill him,” Jesse said.

“Sounds like a priest is trying to justify killing a man,” Morrison snorted.

“Little from column A, little from column B,” Gabriel grinned.

“Where’s Ana?” Morrison asked.

“She’s still in the saloon,” the Brit said. “Wouldn’t leave her girls alone.”

“Mama is dedicated like that,” Gabriel laughed.

That got Fareeha to roll her eyes.

“Fareeha, sneak in the back, make sure everyone is armed,” Morrison said. “I’ll round up a few stragglers.”

The back doors opened, and the largest black woman Jesse had ever seen quietly walked in. She was the woman from the saloon this morning. Behind her was a tiny black girl who couldn’t be a day over fifteen.

*Manners, Jesse. A good man wouldn’t say those vile things you used to say.*

“Ah, Orisa, I was just going to look for you,” Morrison said.

“We’re doing something about this gang?” The big woman asked.

“We are. You’re a temporary deputy again.”

Orisa took the badge, and the gun.
“The rest of the town is hiding,” the little girl said. “No one is on the main street. We made sure of it.”

“Thank you, Efi,” Morrison said. “Fareeha, get going. We’ll give you five minutes to arm everyone up, then we’re walking in.”

Fareeha nodded, and ran out the back. Before she left, the doctor gave her a quick kiss when she thought no one was watching. Jesse did his best to be polite and not stare. He took the remains of his cigar and rolled it around in his fingers.

“What’s the plan?” He asked.

“We go in, and tell them to either disarm themselves, or leave,” Morrison said. “If they don’t like it, then we’ll bring ’em to the light.”

“Tall order,” Jesse snorted. “But let me do the talking. They’re here because of me.”

“Don’t escalate things,” Morrison warned. He checked his pocket watch. “That’s five minutes. Let’s go. Angela, stay here with Efi. If you hear gunfire, we’ll need your help to keep everyone alive.”

Aside from Angela and the little girl Efi, everyone in the building was armed. Morrison and Gabriel led them out of the building, the mayor walking with Madam Lacroix and Lena. Jesse brought up the rear. It was strange seeing the madam of the brothel carrying a rifle, but she had such a look of determination that Jesse was sure they were in safe hands.

They came to the saloon. Noise leaked to the outside; a piano playing at a very fast tempo, and scared women were singing. Of course, the Deadlock Gang was making a lot of noise, too. They talked, shouted, and laughed, filling the air. Two men were lounging on the veranda’s chairs. They saw the group, and sat up. One of them was Bob.

“Hey there, Bob,” Jesse said, stepping forward. A polite man would tip his hat, so Jesse tipped it.

Bob was as silent as ever. He stood up; Jesse could hear Lena cursing under her breath. Bob was always big, easily the biggest man Jesse had ever seen. He was as muscular as he was big, which was saying something. Bob had his usual bushy mustache, which bled into his lengthy side whiskers.

“How’s it going?”

Bob shrugged, adjusting his ubiquitous bowler hat. He pointed at Jesse.

“I’ve been better,” he admitted. “No offense, but I got a pretty damn good idea why you’re here. Ashe probably wants to talk to me, right?”

Bob nodded. Jesse sighed.

“Then let’s get this done with.”

Bob pounded the wall of the saloon with a fist that was more of an oversized ham hock than anything else. He easily made the wall rattle. Inside, the noise died. Bob walked in, and Jesse followed, the armed forces of the town behind him.

He had only been in the saloon once, but it was clear that the Deadlock Gang made themselves at home. Tables were pushed around, forming a rough ring. A handful of working girls were forced into the center, made to sing and dance while the piano player was forced to play, all thanks to a long gun in his side.
But having Bob knock on the wall made everyone look at the doorway. Bob walked to the head of
the circle, and sat down on a bench; it creaked under his weight. Sitting at the head of the little circle
with her bag full of dynamite was a Calamity.

She had found the time to re-bleach her hair white, and apply her favorite blood-red lipstick. Jesse
had to force himself to not feel anything, either in his heart or his loins. The Elizabeth he knew was
dead and gone; this was someone else who just looked like the woman he had loved.

“Well, well, well,” Ashe smiled, standing up. She had her usual outfit on; jeans, a dress shirt, black
vest, and her wide-brimmed black hat. She even wore the red tie he gave her all those years ago “As
I live and breathe, it’s Jesse McCree. You took some findin.’”

“Ashe.”

“Still calling me by my last name? Jesse, we know each other better than that.”

“Those days are long gone, Ashe. I told you that before.”

“That’s some private stuff you’re bringing up, Jesse,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “Now I’d love to
talk about it, but not in front of strangers.”

She pointed to the men and women behind him.

“Speaking of privacy, you broke the rules.”

“Ashe, I’m not part of the gang anymore,” Jesse sighed.

“Like Hell you’re not,” Ashe snapped. “You’re still wearing our ink, ain’t ya? That makes you one
of us. And you know the rules we keep: keep your word, respect each other’s territory, always
punish betrayal, and don’t work with the law.”

Ashe glared at both him, and Morrison.

“So why are you standing next to a lawman, wearing a tin badge?”

“Times change, Ashe. I’m trying to change with it.”

“You must’ve taken a knock on the head to go back on everything you’ve ever known,” she said.

“I like to think I’m seeing things clearly for once.”

“Ha! Seeing things clearly!” Ashe snorted. “If you were really seeing things straight, then why the
fuck did you run north?”

“I told you, I’m looking to make a new start,” Jesse groaned. “Ashe, why are you here?”

“You damn well know why I’m here. I’m here to get you back.”

“And I told you, I don’t want to go back. So why are you here?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Jesse,” she snarled.

“Then you’re not doing a good job of hearing me. Why are you here?”

Ashe glared at him.
“You don’t get to choose when you run away,” she said. “I’m here to take you back.”

“At last, you finally said it,” he said. “You never could handle people making their own choices. You always have to be the one making it for them.”

“None of this would’ve happened if you just listened to me, like you always did,” she said.

“And I told you, I can’t do that anymore. Ashe, please, this is going on for long enough. Just leave.”

“I’m only leaving with you.”

“We’re over, Ashe. I’m getting tired of repeating myself.”

Ashe glared at him with those marvelous eyes. A brave man wouldn’t shake in his boots. Jesse hoped he at least looked as brave as he wanted to feel.

“You promised yourself to me,” she snarled.

“I promised myself to Elizabeth. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Now that’s real private talk you’re bringing up,” Ashe snapped. “You don’t get to talk about that in front of strangers, let alone a lawman!”

“He’s just interested in keeping the peace.”

“And the rest of those people behind you?”

“They’re here to keep the peace as well. They’d like it if you followed the rules.”


“You brought guns into Crease,” Morrison said. “We have a city-wide ordinance; you either turn your guns in to me, or you get the hell out of town.”

That made everyone laugh. Everyone but Bob, of course; it was a chilling thing to hear a tongue-less man laugh. But he did smile.

“Is that right?” Ashe laughed. “You and what army, lawman?”

Fareeha had a few minutes to sneak into the saloon to hand out guns. Jesse was just starting to wonder if that was enough time to properly arm everyone else in the saloon. But he heard the metal-on-metal click of hammers being cocked. It echoed around the saloon, coming from the kitchen to the second floor. The men of the Deadlock Gang nervously shifted, seeing whores pulling out guns.

A door to the kitchen opened, and Jesse saw the one-eyed, salt-haired cook cradling a long gun in her arms, taking aim at Bob. He heard the floorboards creak behind him as the newly deputized citizens fanned out. In the corner of his eye, he saw the black woman Orisa squaring up with Bob. Bob was bigger, but the fact that there was a person who could give him pause seemed strange.

While the boys of the Gang were getting nervous, Ashe was getting excited.

“Jesse, oh, this is a surprise,” she breathed, a feral grin breaking across her face. It sent shivers down Jesse’s spine.

“Are you going to play by the rules?” Morrison asked. “Or do we have to get serious?”
“Why get serious when we can have some fun?”

Ashe grabbed her bag, and flipped it open. The mood grew tense as she dipped her hand in, but quickly came out carrying her favorite toy.

“Ashe,” Jesse snapped. “Don’t.”

Ashe held a bundle of bright red dynamite at head height.

“Don’t what, Jesse?” She grinned madly. “Don’t kick things up a notch?”

“You think holding some dynamite is enough to get us to stop?” Morrison asked. “You’ll never have time to light the fuse.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, lawman,” Ashe smiled toothily, “this ain’t regular dynamite. This is my own blend. More nitroglycerin, less stabilizing stuff. This is like my temper; wild and crazy.”

That made everyone shift. Everyone, but the Deadlock Gang and Jesse. They were used to Calamity. But for everyone else, the atmosphere suddenly got a lot heavier.

“I drop this, maybe it’ll blow up,” she laughed. “Maybe it won’t. You feeling lucky?”

Jesse’s mind was running wild. He had to get Ashe to leave, he wouldn’t go back to his old life. But he didn’t know what to do. He was trying to be a better man, but he didn’t know how to. But a good man would do something.

He paused. What would Morrison do?

That got his mind thinking right.

“What’ll it get you to leave for the time?” He asked.

“You comin’ back.”

“No, I don’t mean that, I mean leaving for a day or so,” he said. “What will it take to get everyone out of here, breathing, and in one piece?”

That took Ashe aback. But only for a second.

“A kiss,” she grinned. “For old time’s sake.”

Fuck.

“Come on, Jesse,” she smiled, “I know you’ve missed me.”

She was right. But he promised himself he’d never go back. A kiss might make him weak again. What would Morrison do?

“Fine,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “If it means everyone walking away from this, I’ll play your game.”

“You better not have gone soft on me,” Ashe chuckled. “I don’t like kissing a dead fish.”

Jesse could feel everyone’s eyes on him as he walked up to Ashe. She had that damnable lopsided grin on her lips that made his heart ache. He really did miss her.
No, he missed Elizabeth, not Ashe. Elizabeth got swept up in the Calamity standing before him.

He walked up to Ashe, who still held the bundle of dynamite in her hand. He gently took her waist, and pulled her close. When she was a few inches away from him, she pulled him in, hungrily kissing him.

It was like he was sucked back in time, when they were young punks getting in small trouble. Jesse pulled her tight, fiercely returning the kiss. It was all he could do to keep himself from being swept up.

*You’re better than this. You have to be. You don’t want to be this way anymore. You hated what you were with her.*

Jesse doubted himself.

Finally, Ashe broke off the kiss.

“I knew you missed this,” she smiled, her finger gingerly tracing his jaw. It almost undid him right then and there.

“Y-you done?” He croaked.

“No, I’m not. But we made a deal.” She nodded to the gang, and put the dynamite back in her bag. “Finish your drinks, we’re out of here.”

Jesse could hear everyone sigh in relief as the gang tilted their glasses back, finishing their beer or spirits. More than a few pawed at the whores as they filed out the door.

“I’m comin’ back for you, Jesse,” she sang, walking towards the door. Bob waited for her, and fell in line.

Before she left, Madam Lacroix stopped her.

“You haven’t paid your tab yet,” she said.

The atmosphere grew tense again as the two women glared at each other.

“You got some nerve demanding that,” Ashe spat.

“It’s nothing personal,” Madam Lacroix replied, her icy stare meeting Calamity’s raw fury. “It’s simply business.”

Ashe glared at her. Madam Lacroix glared back. Then Ashe laughed.

“Aah, you really do got some gall to demand that!” She said. “Bob.”

Bob stepped forward, reaching into a massive pocket. He pulled out a wad of money, and peeled back a few bills. He handed it over.

“Don’t get too comfortable with that,” Ashe said, grinning wide. “I’m comin’ back for that, too.”

With that, she left. Jesse heaved a sigh of relief as the gang got their horses, and rode off. He had stayed. He stuck to his guns. He was becoming a better man.

Everyone in the bar almost collapsed in relief as soon as the Gang rode away. Jesse saw the blonde doctor run into the saloon, making a bee-line to Fareeha. The two embraced, holding each other like
they had been away for years. It made Jesse blink in surprise.

He was pulled back to reality by chairs scrapping the floor. Morrison had set a chair in front of him.

“Sit down,” the sheriff said.

Jesse knew what was coming. He sat down opposite of Morrison.

“Talk.”

Jesse rummaged through his breast pocket for a fresh cigar. He found one, lit it, and started talking.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like Crease is gonna have a gunfight!
EDIT: Also, this is timely.
Trouble at High Noon

Chapter Summary

Ashe and the Deadlock Gang have their sights on our little town of Crease. But before the bullets start flying, Jesse some explaining to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m not sure where to begin,” Jesse said as he sat down opposite of Sheriff Morrison.

“How about you start with that crazy woman making you kiss her?” He replied.

Jesse’s shoulders dropped.

“I take it I can’t just say that that’s a history I don’t want to talk about, is it?”

“Damn straight it isn’t,” Morrison said evenly. “It’s fine to have a past you don’t want to talk about. It’s not fine when that past rides into town, disrespects our laws, and holds an entire building up with fucking stack of unstable dynamite.”

“I get it,” Jesse sighed. He hated talking about his past, especially to a saloon full of people. He was trying to get away from it, not relive it. “Still don’t know where to start, but I guess Ashe is as good as any place to start at. You ever had to cut someone out of your life? Someone you used to love, but don’t anymore?”

“We all have our fair share of breakups.”

“Well, your ex might mope about, get sad, go on a bender, or write some bad songs or poems,” Jesse said. “My ex goes on a nation-wide crime spree to get me back.”

“You mean you used to date that woman?” Fareeha demanded. Angela still held her hand as they sat down, each drinking a beer to try and calm down. The unusual affection was surprising.

Mind your manners, Jesse. You’re trying to be a good man.

“Yes ma’am, I did,” he said, ignoring how those two held hands. “Back when we were young and dumb. She was Elizabeth then, long before she became Calamity, or even Ashe.”

“You brought her into the Deadlock Gang?” The priest, Gabriel, asked.

“It’s the other way around; she brought me into the Gang,” he said. “I was one of the first to join. For a while, it was just Elizabeth, me, and Bob.”

“What’s the deal with Bob? He’s goddamn huge.”

It was strange to hear a priest take the Lord’s name in vain.

“You know, I’m not too sure myself,” he admitted. “Bob was there first. He was always there alongside Ashe. I tried asking Ashe a few times, but she told me Bob would have to be the one to tell
“And Bob never talked?”

“Kind of hard to talk when you don’t have a tongue.”

“How did he lose it?”

“Shit if I know,” he shrugged. “Me and the boys of the Gang used to come up with stories about it. Some said that a vengeful tribe of natives pulled it out when he was a boy. Some say he lost it in prison. We even joked that he was never born with it to begin with! We’d ask him about it, tell him our guesses, and he’d just grin. Sometimes, if the story was crazy enough, he’d laugh. Let me tell you, it’s damn creepy to hear a tongueless man laugh.

“Bob’s been there for Ashe, and Ashe is there for Bob. No idea why, that’s just how it’s always been. He was always the enforcer.”

“So that’s how it started?” Morrison asked. “A bunch of young punks knocking over banks and stealing everything that wasn’t tied down?”

“Not at first,” Jesse said. “Sure, we robbed a few places when we needed money, but it was mostly just making a home for us outcasts. People who came from nothing, had nothing, and wanted something.

“We’d rustle some cattle, rob some houses, beat up those who got in our way; I ain’t gonna lie, it was a hell of a time. We ran plenty a Texan roads. The robbing got worse as time went on, as we got more money.”

“Is that why you hate money?” Fareeha asked. “Elizabeth got too greedy, and turned into someone you fell out of love with?”

“That’s taking a very long story and making it quick,” he said. “She used to be…shit, I can’t describe it. She was a firecracker, plain old wild, and I loved that about her. But as she got more money, and got a taste for the finer things, she changed. We robbed more places, got in more gunfights, got more and more people coming after us, killed a whole lot of them in return…we were all crazy; the money and infamy made people crazier and crazier.

“I lasted longer than I should have. One day, I woke up hungover to high hell. I stumbled to the outhouse, pissed and puked, and took a look in one of Ashe’s mirrors she had set up there. And the person who looked back scared the hell outta me.

“That’s when I realized that if I kept up this living, I’d wind up dead. I was in a bad place, with bad people who celebrated my bad deeds, and with a woman who brought out the worst in me. I hated what I became, and I needed to change that.

“Ashe thought I was yanking her chain when I told her I was done. With her, the Gang, with everything. But I wanted to be a better man, so I left in the middle of the night. Even left a little note telling her I meant everything I said, and that I needed to become someone I actually liked, who liked me for what I was, who didn’t bring out the worst in me.

“So I rode around, looking for something. Eventually, the money I had ran out, so I hunted bounties to eat. That’s when I first found out Ashe was looking for me, moving Heaven and Earth to bring me back.

“I figured she’d never go north, so that’s where I went. I’ve spent just over a year on the trail, until I
And now Ashe is here, looking to take you back,” Morrison said, leaning back.

Jesse realized he was burning through his cigar faster than he expected.

Manners, Jesse.

“Yes sir, she has.”

Morrison grunted.

“Then what do we do?” The mayor asked. He was standing with the cook, with an arm wrapped around her. The black woman had her arms wrapped around him, too.

There seemed to be a lot of people who were pairing up with people he’d never expect. First Fareeha and Angela, now the black cook and the white mayor, Madam Lacroix even had that British woman at her waist. What next, was Sheriff Morrison boning the priest?

“We fight them,” Madam Lacroix said, steel in her voice as the British girl held her close. “We will not let them hurt Crease.”

“Yes, that’s what we have to do,” the mayor said, “but I meant what do we do with Mr. McCree here?”

“I’m thinking on that,” Morrison said. “By your own admission, you’re an outlaw; a former one, but an outlaw none-the-less. That means I got an incentive to lock you up, and ship you off to prison.”

“You can’t mean that, Jack,” Gabriel said. “He’s trying to change!”

“That leads me to the second point,” Morrison said, raising his hand. “You’ve helped me and my deputy with the cattle rustlers. You’ve proven yourself to be trustworthy, polite, and law abiding. What’s more, there’s not an open warrant for your arrest. There’s one warrant out for the Deadlock Gang, but not you personally. Seeing as you’re not an outlaw at the moment, I think we’ll be fine letting you stay around.”

“Is that how the law works ‘round here?” Jesse asked.

“It’s the spirit of the law,” Morrison grinned. “And I find that the spirit of the law is much better than the actual letter.”

Jesse realized he was holding his breath. He let it go.

“Thank you sir, I greatly appreciate that.”

“Besides, this ‘Calamity’ promised she’d be back. And something tells me she won’t wait for us to approach her, or otherwise play fair.”

“That’d be a good assumption. She’d come back with iron in her hands, and her trigger fingers itching.”

“That means we need you to help protect the town. I’m conscripting you; you’ll be part of the deputy force to stand guard.”

“I got no problem with that. I’d like to be the kind of man who helps out the weak. After all,” Jesse grinned at the priest, “it’s the word of God.”
“As written in Ezekiel,” Gabriel laughed.

“Then it’s settled,” Morrison said. “Everyone who has been deputized will keep their badges and guns. Jesse, any idea when the Calamity might come back?”

“No idea. Sanity had started leaving Ashe in the past few years; she might come back tomorrow, it might be a week from now. But I can tell you this: she loves her theatrics. She’ll be riding in at high noon.”

“Good work, son,” Morrison smiled.

Jesse faltered. Morrison was handsome, making his heart pound a little faster, but being called ‘son’? That just felt weird.

“This has been an eventful day,” Morrison said. “With the mayor’s permission, I’d like to assume temporary control of the town until the danger has passed.”

“As long as you promise to give it back when you’re done,” the big mayor grinned.

“Trust me, this is something I hate doing,” Morrison laughed. But he also looked to Madam Lacroix. “If you don’t mind…?”

“Just know who runs this town,” she smiled.

“It’s kind of hard to forget,” he said. Then he turned to the saloon at large. “As of right now, everyone who has been deputized will remain that way until the threat has been taken care of. Tomorrow, I’ll see if anyone else wants to volunteer. We all dig in, and we wait for the Deadlock Gang to come and play.”

The morning came, and with it, a few cramps from sleeping on a light pad.

Jesse sat up, cracking his neck and back. The sheriff’s office had a second floor with proper beds, but he insisted on sleeping in a cell. An open cell, but a cell none-the-less. Fareeha had given him a simple stuffed pad to sleep on and some rough but warm blankets, and it helped. But the pad was more than a little stiff; too soft to be the ground, but too stiff to be a proper bed. Honestly, he’d be better off if he just slept on the ground.

Jesse walked out of the open cell. There were four cells in the office; the only other occupied cell was the one that held the Bricket brothers and their accomplices. They slept on, tossing and turning.

He walked out of the office, crossing the street. The sun was still rising over the mountains, and Jesse took a second to look at the little town of Crease.

There were dozens of simple homes, but only a handful of true buildings. The saloon was the biggest, followed by the hotel, the sheriff’s office, city hall, the general store, and the church. Still, it was nice to see the sun rise over the developing town. It made him feel comfortable, like he could put down some roots here.

Who knew? After this Deadlock business was all over, maybe he would.

Jesse walked into the saloon. He thought it would be early, but there was Olivia, the Mexican
woman, waiting to greet patrons. Today, she wore a crème corset and dress with pink stitching and embroidery.

“Hola,” Olivia smiled. “You’re up early.”

“I guess it’s habit at this point,” Jesse said, taking his hat off as he walked inside. He did his best to keep his eyes on hers, instead of her full corset; it was a hard habit to break. “You open for breakfast?”

“Of course we are. Sometimes the cowboys who ride the trail come in extra early. They like to eat a big meal, and go to sleep for ten hours or so.”

“They’ve done it before?”

“Damn straight. They call it the eat-sleep-screw schedule,” Olivia laughed. “They eat, they sleep, then they come back to screw.”

Jesse felt his cheeks flush a little at that.

Be polite. They’re just earning a living like everyone else. Watch your tongue.

“Well, I can’t say I’m all for that schedule right now,” he said, “but breakfast sounds mighty nice.”

“Take a seat. Mama is firing up the stoves as we speak; she’ll be ready in a few.”

Manners. You’re making yourself better.

Jesse politely nodded, and walked past Olivia, looking for a table. Surprisingly, Fareeha was already there, sipping at a cup of coffee.

“You mind if you share your table?” He asked, walking over.

Fareeha looked up to him, surprised. It was clear that she didn’t expect anyone else to be up this early.

“Not at all,” she said.

“Thank you,” Jesse said, pulling out a chair. “You always get up this early?”

“Not if I can help it,” Fareeha laughed. “I’m big on duty. If I really have to get up when the sun rises, then I’m up with the sun. But if I have the chance to sleep in, you bet your ass I’d sleep in.”

“I can sympathize,” Jesse smiled. “At least about the trying to sleep in part. I’m an early bird; I usually wake with the sun.”

“Then you’re better than I,” Fareeha said.

“Thank you, but I don’t think that means much. Everyone has their own quirks, and we can’t help if it one’s quirks are stronger than others.”

“That’s a nice way to put it,” Fareeha said.

A working girl came up with a pot of coffee. Jesse held up his cup, and she filled it with that delicious black liquid, bending over just low enough to show off the valley of her breasts.

“We’re a little short on crème right now,” the woman said. “We haven’t got this morning’s shipment
in from the farms yet.”

“Not a problem, I can take it black,” Jesse said.

“Great. I’ll be back when Mama’s done cooking.”

She walked off, and Jesse realized that Fareeha was giving the woman a lingering look, her eyes gazing at her sauntering hips.

He saw her holding hands with Angela last night. The two had seemed so close, too close to be just friends.

*Mind your tongue. Make sure she knows you’re joshing her.*

“You getting the seven year itch?” He said, smiling so Fareeha would hopefully get his joke.

“The what now?”

“The seven year itch,” he said. “You know, when you’ve been with someone for so long, they kinda get boring to you?”

Fareeha laughed at that.

“No, nothing like that,” she said. “I mean, when I first got here, I was gazing at every curve and valley this place had to offer. But now? Now I can’t be bothered by it. I never thought I’d be one for monogamy.”

“Monogamy? What do you mean?”

“That’s…getting a little personal,” she said, a slight blush rising to her cheeks.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to press.”

“Thanks.”

Well, if they were talking about women and attractiveness, maybe he could swing something.

“What’s the deal with Jack?”

“That’s a bit of a change.”

“Just…I mean, I was just wondering what his deal was,” Jesse said, trying not to blush.

“What do you mean, ‘what his deal is?’” Fareeha asked, her eyebrow cocking.

“N-nothing,” Jesse said, turning away.

Fareeha gaped at that.

“You’re sweet on him!”

“I’m not sweet on anyone,” he snapped.

“Like hell you are,” she laughed. “Shit, you got a thing for the sheriff.”

“I respect him. He’s a good man.”
“Oh, that’s what you want, eh?”
Jesse couldn’t help but blush.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You want to know more about him, don’t you?”
That made Jesse look away.

“You do,” Fareeha gushed. “What made you ask me?”

Well, the cat was already out of the bag. Might as well get the most out of this.

“I saw you last night with the doctor, Angela,” he said. “You seemed…very open. You two were too close to be good friends. I figured…I mean, kindred souls like us…”

“Like us?” Fareeha said. “You said you were with that crazy Ashe chick.”

“I was,” he said. “But I’ve…you are with Angela, right?”

“Yea, we are. Sorry, but when you first asked, I guess I got a little defensive.”

“That’s fine, I’m a stranger here. I was just worried that I saw something and thought something different,” he sighed. “Well, if you’re with Angela, then…I mean, Ashe is the only woman I’ve ever been with long term, but I’ve had crushes.”

“On men?”

“And men and women, in equal measure,” he said. “I thought I was the only one.”

Fareeha laughed at that.

“The only one to like their own sex? I should tell you about some of the things I did back in the army,” she grinned. “The women there, Lord…”

“They let women into the Union army?” He asked, cocking his eyebrow.

“Not openly,” Fareeha said. “But there were plenty of black women like me who fought to free our cousins. Hidden, of course. We pretended to be men, but we found each other pretty quick.”

“And you did things with them?”

“Of course. First off, shit gets lonely out there, you know? All the fighting, you just want to feel something. Second, do you know what it’s like, to find someone like yourself where you least expect it?” She said. “I learned plenty of tricks that way.”

Jesse couldn’t help but blush again.

“Well, Angela is really pretty,” he mumbled, “and looks like she’d fill out a pair of jeans nicely.”

“Dear God, you have no idea,” Fareeha gushed, grinning lustfully. “The way she wears jeans… mmm, thicker than a bowl of oatmeal, I swear…”

Jesse threw a napkin at her face.

“Hey! What was that for?”
“To get you to wipe up all that drool,” he said.

Fareeha laughed at that.

“So, you got eyes for the sheriff, don’t ya?” she grinned.

“Yea, I guess I do,” he mumbled. “I was wondering if…you know…”

“He liked men, or was like you?”

“…Yea.”

“Sorry to say, but Jack is kinda a thing with Gabriel.”

“The priest?” Jesse stammered. “I saw ’em. It looked like they hated each other!”

“It’s better not to ask,” she sighed. “It’s just really complicated otherwise.”

Jesse didn’t know what to say.

“Sorry,” Fareeha shrugged. “But he’s not looking for anything else.”

A good man will look on the bright side, Jesse. That’s what Morrison would do.

“Well, I guess that’s good,” he choked out. “It didn’t sound like he wanted anything else.”

“You’re talking about the time he called you ‘son,’ aren’t you?” Fareeha grinned. It was like she could read his mind. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“It is, isn’t it?” Fareeha grinned as Jesse blushed again.

“I’m just glad nothing is really coming of it,” he said. “Being called ‘son’ was strange.”

“Strange’ as in good, or weird?”

“ Weird,” Jesse said. “Definitely weird. But if he keeps doing it, then ‘strange’ in a weird good way.”

“I’ll see if I can tell him to not call you that.”

“Thank you.”

“If only to keep things not awkward,” Fareeha grinned.

Jesse felt himself blushing again.

“Can…can you keep this talk between us?” He mumbled.

“Of course. I’ve been there,” she said. “You take as much time as you need.”

“Does everyone know about your tastes?”

“A few, I think,” Fareeha said. “Madam Lacroix and Lena, most definitely.”

“What about your mother?”

Fareeha went quiet at that.
“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s…” She trailed off. “Shit, I’ll have to talk to mom.”

“She’s the cook, isn’t she?” Jesse asked. Fareeha nodded. “You two look so similar; glad I didn’t say anything.”

“Glad you didn’t assume anything,” Fareeha said.

“If she doesn’t know, you better tell her. Better it come from you than anyone else.”

“Jesus, you’re the second person to tell me that.”

“Who was the first? Angela?”

“No, Jack Morrison.”

Jesse paused at that. He suggested something that Morrison already did? Maybe he was becoming that better man he always wanted to be.

“Speaking of having it come from you instead of someone else, you better tell Jack what you think,” Fareeha said. “Just saying that you and him were on the same page made your face light up.”

Jesse was getting tired of blushing.

Fortunately, Olivia came to his rescue. She was carrying two plates of food, one of each of them.

“Here you go,” she smiled.

“Thanks, Olivia,” Fareeha said.

“You’re welcome,” the Spanish woman smiled. “This is Mama’s latest culinary creation.”

Jesse looked at the food. It was a bed of hash browns covered with scrambled eggs, and bacon on top. Finally, it was all dosed with sausage gravy.

“She calls it ‘a hot mess.’”

“Latest creation?” Fareeha laughed. “This was her specialty back in the army.”

“Sweet Jesus, this is good,” Jesse gushed.

“I’ll pass it on to Mama,” Olivia laughed. “And some fresh-made hot sauce, if it’s to your taste.”

Jesse picked up the bottle of hot sauce, and added it to the hot mess. It was so hot, so perfect, it made him want to cry.

Maybe this place could be home.

The sun was shining, and the weather was much warmer than it normally was. All of that led to the rest of the snow melting, and the streets become rivers of thick mud. It made walking down the street a challenge, and that was before Orisa was asked to carry wooden barrels across town. Grunting
against the thick mud that threatened to pull her boots from her feet, she set the latest barrel on the
doorstep of the sheriff’s office. She’d go barefoot, but that took her back to the plantation.

“Right there, Orisa,” Jack said. The veranda’s floorboards creaked as she set it down. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, wiping the sweat off her brow.

The night she ran from the plantation, Orisa swore that she’d never work for another white man as
long as she lived. But it was strange; now she was working with a white man. Jack was covered in
mud, and had his normal long-sleeved shirt off; he was working in jeans and an undershirt that were
soaked with mud and sweat, setting barrels up and moving them about. He was working just as hard,
if not harder, than she was.

She watched as he pushed the barrel around a little, getting it set up next to the others. There were
several lined up, making a stretch of cover on the building’s veranda.

“How does that look, Ana?” He asked.

“Good,” Ana said. She stood in the street, making sure the barrels were lined up properly. “It might
be a little tight, but it should give you cover.”

“Great,” Jack said. “Orisa, thank you. How much sand and gravel can these hold?”

“About fifty-five gallons.”

“Shit,” Jack spat. “I hope Madam Lacroix was able to get some cowboys to haul all that dirt and
gravel out here, otherwise we’ll have a hell of a time.”

Orisa looked up and down the street. Every building was having barrels placed in front of them.
Normally the barrels were used to collect rain water, or hold items in the general store. But Ana and
Jack decided to fill them all up with soil and stuff, making cover for the coming gunfight. Further
down the street, Jesse was helping Fareeha and Lena barricade the saloon.

“And you’re sure these can stop bullets?” Orisa asked.

“Once they’re filled with dirt they will. That was something we learned back in the army,” Jack said.

“And something I used all the time,” Ana said. She walked into the shade of the veranda, where a
water station was set up. She handed out cool cups of water to both her and Jack. “Bags filled with
dirt stopped bullets, and they also gave me a nice shooting surface.”

“I’m not too sure on the stopping bullet part,” Orisa said, downing her water, “it just seems too good
to be true.”

“It’ll be fine, trust me,” Ana smiled warmly as she refilled her cup.

“Alright, I’ll believe you, Mama,” Orisa smiled.

“That’s my girl,” Ana laughed.

Feet pounded on the veranda.

“Sheriff Morrison,” Efi said, running up. “Madam Lacroix was able to hire Mako and his cowboys;
they’re hauling wagons full of dirt to fill the barrels up.”

“That’s great news,” he smiled. “When will they be coming in?”
“Few hours.”

“We’re already coming up on noon,” Orisa said. “Will it be enough?”

“Na, this doesn’t feel like Ashe would be showing up today,” Jack said, looking down the road that ran into town. “It’s too close to noon, and I don’t see anyone coming.”

“Looks like we’ve got another day, then.”

“We best use it well,” Ana said. “Efi, go tell the cowboys to fill the saloon barrels up first.”

Efi nodded. She quickly hugged Orisa, who returned the hug with fervor, before running back off, her dress billowing behind her. Orisa turned to get more water, and saw Ana looking at Efi.

“This might be crossing a line,” Ana said, “and I apologize for it, but I’ve been dying to know; is she really your little sister?”

“As much as you’re the mother to a town full of whores,” Orisa smiled. “Blood doesn’t tie us together, but we’re sisters all the same.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you take her in?”

Orisa paused, but only for a second. The bad memories haunted her, but Mama had the right to know.

“Back at the plantation, her mother died soon after having her,” she said. “She got some kind of blood sickness; it took her in the night. She knew she was passing, and she was scared for Efi. I swore to her I’d protect Efi like she was my own as she was passing. I wasn’t going to wait for her to grow up, be whipped, sold, or…or pulled into some cracker’s bed, so I bundled her up the next night, and I ran.

“I ran and ran, until I somehow got into the North. We stayed at a few towns over the years, but I was so scared the slave hunters would find us. We kept moving, until we found our way here, and I realized that the war was over, and we were free.”

“I’m sorry about her mother,” Jack said. “But I’m glad you’re here with us now.”

“Yes, you do such amazing forge work,” Ana said.

“I’m good with a hammer, yes, but Efi has all the ideas.” Orisa shook her head. “Lord, I have no idea where she gets it from. She didn’t learn to write until we got here, and even then I didn’t know where she got it from!”

“She was always a good student,” Jack smiled.

Orisa stared at him.

“You taught her to read and write?!”

“I did; she asked me one day, and I said I would. I swear, that girl’s got a mind that makes a steel trap look like a rusted hunk of metal; she had to have picked up written English in under a week flat!”

“She never told me you taught her!”

“Efi thought you’d disapprove of having a white man teach the both of you,” he said. “She didn’t
want you to know until you were better.”

“Better as in what?”

“Better’ as in you knew this was a safe place,” he said. “Can’t say I blame her, or you. The life you lead, it must have left you bitter as hell. I wanted to help, but I knew better than to barge in and give you that help.”

“So you taught a black girl to read and write, just because she asked?”

“Well, she did ask nicely…” he said lamely.

“Jack,” Ana said with a grin, “are you an abolitionist?”

“I don’t like that word,” he grumbled. “Always felt like I was putting on airs if I called myself that, pretending to be something I wasn’t.”

“But you are.”

“If teaching a black girl to read and write is what an abolitionist does, well, I guess the boot fits then, don’t it?”

“You can’t forget about fighting the rebels to end slavery.”

“That, too,” he laughed.

Orisa had known Jack for years, but she never knew this about him.

“But why?” She asked, stunned.

“My father did plenty of things wrong, but I think he actually got this one thing right,” Jack said. “He taught us that we are all human, all brothers and sisters, and doing the worst to the Negros means we’d be fine do it to ourselves. Our neighbors were runaway slaves, and I saw their backs. They told me what they lived through, and I could only imagine it happening to my brother and sisters.

“And that made me mad. It made me mad as hell. So when the war came around, my brother and I were one of the first to volunteer.”

“I didn’t know you had sisters. Or a brother,” Orisa said.

“I did,” Jack said. “He didn’t make it.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. It happened a few years into the war. We were fighting rebels, and one of them got lucky. I held him as he died…and…”

Ana put a hand on Jack’s arm. He took it, struggling to keep a hold of his emotions.

“I like to think we made a real difference,” he said. “But I know there’s plenty of shit that’s getting in the way, plenty of things that are keeping your people from truly being free.”

Orisa was stunned. She never knew that Jack had a brother, or why he fought. They had lived so close to each other, but it never came up.

Then again, all of the signs were there. He was willing to look her in the eye, shake her hand without
hesitation, let her speak first, let her and Efi live with everyone. And there were other black families in Crease; he let them all live here, too. He even helped them raise their houses, just as he helped the white families. Why didn’t she notice it before?

Realization washed over her. It was because she had been too weary, always keeping an eye open around him. Orisa knew that looking at white men with suspicion was routine in the plantation, but she was bringing that life here with her. That filled her with shame, but it also made her mad.

She remembered the night she bundled Efi to her breast and ran from the plantation; her sister was just a day old, crying for any and all reason. Orisa swore then and there that she’d leave the plantation life behind, to give Efi something she didn’t; hope, and a better life.

Yet here she was, bringing a little bit of the plantation with her. And it made her cross-eyed mad. She had to leave the plantation life behind, and all of the habits she picked up from it. It was just as Father Reyes said; only God could judge. For everyone else, the only option was to love each other.

“Right, enough of this grim talk,” she said, clapping Jack on the back. “We still have work to do.”

“Yes, we do,” Ana said. “There are still some barrels in the general store. We need to stock them at the city hall, and get them all ready to be filled.”

The ladder creaked as Orisa carefully climbed it. Ever since their work to ready Crease was finished, Ana insisted on spending her days on the roof of the sheriff’s office, perched there with her rifle.

“How are you doing, Mama?” She asked, climbing onto the roof.

“Just fine,” Ana said. She had a little spot set up; she called it her blind. The roof on the sheriff’s office was mostly flat, but it had a little angle to help drain rainwater. However, it wasn’t so slanted that it would force everyone off it. It was a gradual slope, with a small wall that ran the perimeter. Ana was crouched behind that tiny façade-turned-wall, her rifle in her lap, her eyes, both the blind one and the remaining one, scanning the surrounding area.

The sun was high, nearing noon. It was a cool spring day with a nice breeze off the mountains, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The sun beat down on them, giving them a taste of the summer heat. Because of the unfiltered sun, it was hot, so hot that Orisa worried that Ana would be uncomfortable without water.

Ana wore a wide-brimmed straw hat to keep the sun off her, along with a large wool poncho. She sat on a half-filled bag of dirt, the kind of bag that was used to haul nearly fifty pounds of stuff. It had contoured to her body, giving her a nice seat.

“I brought water,” Orisa said, walking up to her.

“Stay low,” Ana said firmly. “They could be watching us.”

“Watching us?” Orisa said. Still, she dropped to a low crouch, staying about as high as the façade of the building was. “No one would be watching us.”

“We’re on one of the highest buildings in the area,” Ana said. “That draws attention. If the Deadlock Gang sees a woman standing on the roof, they know something is happening on that roof. We must
“You make it sound like they have eyes everywhere.”

“We’re hunting big game, dear,” Ana said. “If we assume the worst, we’ll get the best.”

Orisa nodded. She could see where Ana was coming from.

“Do you want more water?” She asked, holding up one of canteens she brought with her.

“Yes, please,” Ana sighed. “It is getting hot up here.”

“It is getting close to noon.”

“Yes, but it’s hot weather for the season.”

Orisa handed her a canteen, and Ana upended it, draining half of it in one go. While it was nice to have the sun shine, Orisa knew that staying out too long in the sun could cook a person, even if there was a nice breeze or cool weather. Too many bad memories from the plantation rushed back at her, but having Mama with her helped keep them at bay.

She took a second to scan the area. Crease, normally busy at this time, was shockingly empty as everyone readied themselves for a fight that may or may not be coming. Fareeha’s harmonica echoed across the empty streets; she played it to ease everyone’s nerves, but to Orisa, it only made her more nervous. Hearing it echo up and down the street made it seem like something big was about to go down.

“Are you sure you’re fine up here?” Orisa asked as Ana finished draining the canteen.

“I’ll be fine for a little while longer,” she said. “We have to keep an eye out for the Gang.”

“It doesn’t have to be you up here.”

“I’d feel better if it was,” Ana said. “Sorry, just a habit I picked up from the war.”

“That you had to be the one looking out for everyone?”

Ana held her hand up. Her eyes narrowed as she looked into the distance.

“They’re coming,” she said, pointing.

Orisa followed Ana’s finger. Sure enough, out near the furthest farm, a sizable dot was on the horizon. That meant a large group of horses was coming.

That meant the Deadlock Gang was coming back.

“Tell everyone,” Ana said, her voice hard. She racked her rifle’s lever, and pulled a knee up, giving her a stable shooting surface as she sat. The barrel of her rifle never extended past the façade of the building.

Orisa nodded, and ran back to the ladder. She waved her hand; down the street, she saw Gabriel in the church’s smaller clock tower. He saw her, and began ringing the bell, drowning out Fareeha’s harmonica. What little foot traffic there was in the street paused, then everyone ran for cover. The ringing bell could only mean one thing; trouble was coming.

She carefully made her way down the ladder, and to the sheriff’s veranda. Fareeha, Jack, and Jesse
were already there, crouched behind the barrels.

“Three days,” Jesse said. “Ashe must be feeling mighty generous.”

“You were expecting her back sooner?” Orisa asked. She pulled her pistol from her holster, checking it yet again.

“Tell the truth, I thought she’d be back the day after she left,” he said.

“I guess it’s a blessing that we had this long,” Jack said. “Everyone ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Fareeha said, sliding her harmonica into her breast pocket. She was the only one among them that had a long gun.

“Hey, Jack,” Jesse said, “how many cowboys was Madam Lacroix able to hire?”

“Eight,” he said.

“That few?”

“Most people don’t like the idea of throwing themselves into danger, damn the money.”

“Well, I guess I can’t blame ’em,” he sighed.

“Then it’s the four of us, the eight cowboys, Ana, Reinhardt, Lena, Madam Lacroix, and how many of her girls?”

“Three,” Fareeha said. “Olivia is with them in the saloon. Madam Lacroix is in the church tower.”

“Sure hope she’s a good shot,” Orisa said.

“You and me both.”

“What about Angela?”

“She’s holed up in her clinic,” Fareeha said. “She’s ready to help patch up as many people as she can. Once the bullets stop, that is.”

The wooden planks of the veranda pounded as Gabriel slid next to Jack, shotgun in hand.

“Everyone ready?” He asked.

“Think we are,” Jack said.

It was strange; normally those two were at each other’s throats within a few seconds of being near each other. But now, they were pressed next to each other, and they hardly batted an eye.

“Anyone want a prayer?” Gabriel asked.

“Think I’ll pass,” Jesse said. “Not too God fearing.”

“Same here,” Fareeha said.

“I’ll take a prayer,” Orisa said.

“Dear Lord, stand by us as we shield your tender flock,” Gabriel said, raising a hand. “Guard us from harm, and guide our hands as we do your work. Amen.”
Orisa crossed herself, and gripped her pistol tighter.

“Fareeha, will your mother shoot first?” Jack asked.

“No, she’ll wait until someone starts shooting.”

“Good. We still need to act as lawmen, not a gang that happens to have a badge.”

Jesse looked at Jack with a face full of respect and admiration. Orisa couldn’t understand it; the Deadlock Gang was out for blood. Why not strike first?

Thunder sounded as the Gang’s horses got closer. Finally, they were in Crease proper. Over twenty cowboys rode in on horses, along with a covered wagon. At the head was Ashe herself, wide hat set on her head. She pulled her blood red roan to a halt in the middle of the street.

“Jesse,” she hollered. “Time’s up, Jesse. Where are you?”

Jesse sighed, stuck a cigar in the corner of his mouth, and walked into the middle of the street.

“I’m here, Ashe,” he said.

“What will it take for you to call me Elizabeth like you always did?” Ashe spat, her blood-red-lipstick twisted in a sneer.

“I told you, Ashe. Those days are long gone.”

Speaking of long gone, where was that big man, Bob? Orisa peeked over the barrels, but couldn’t find him.

“Guess we better make news days then,” Ashe said, getting down off her horse. “Better days.”

“I’m afraid that ain’t gonna happen, not as things are.”

“So what, you’ll let this town get razed to the ground?” Ashe pressed. “Because that’s what’s gonna happen if you don’t come with me.”

“Well, I’m not too sure that’s gonna happen,” Jesse said, puffing away at his cigar.

“Then what? You’ll just stand there, looking as cool as you always do, and just hope we go away?” Ashe laughed.

“I was hoping you’d listen to reason.”

“You’re hoping I’d give up the Gang?”

“I’m hoping you’d let me give up the Gang.”

“Fat chance, Jesse.”

“Then I’m not sure what we have to talk about.”

Orisa realized that Jesse’s right hand was hovering at his gun, not touching it by the barest of margins.

“I ain’t leaving without you, Jesse,” Ashe said.

“And I ain’t going.”
The two glared at each other. Ashe broke the moment by checking a pocket watch.

“We got a minute ‘till high noon,” she said. “You’ve got until then to change your mind.”

“Ashe, please.”

“‘Ashe, please’ what?” She said, pulling her bag from her horse’s side. It was the same bag that held her dynamite. “‘Ashe, please don’t throw this bag into the middle of town?’”

“Ashe, don’t do this,” Jesse said, a hard tone in his voice.

“Come on, Jesse, it might explode, it might not,” she grinned. “You want to test your luck?”

“You’d blow me up?”

“I’d roll the dice,” she said. “You should know I like doing that. But to tell the truth, as volatile as this stuff is, I don’t know what’ll happen. And I made it.”

“Then why don’t you put it down?”

Ashe looked at her watch. She looked up, grinning.

“Poor choice of words,” she said.

Orisa felt her heart stop as Ashe heaved the bag into the air. She knew that every pair of eyes, or eye in MAMA’s case, was staring at that canvas bag as it sailed through the air, tumbling end over end. It flew past Jesse, towards the sheriff’s office.

Her heart felt like it would burst as the bag landed ten feet past them, almost on the veranda.

Orisa’s pulse pounded in her ears as she waited for the bag to explode. But as the tense seconds passed, nothing happened.

“Huh,” Ashe said. “Coulda swore that’d blow up…”

Jesse suddenly had his gun in his hand, shooting as he threw himself to the ground. Two men by Ashe screamed as they were shot; one managed to stay on his horse. By then, everyone was opening up. Horses screamed, breaking away. It was hard to tell who was shooting.

Orisa pressed herself against the wooden barrels. She could feel the barrels shudder as bullets hit them, but the wood, and the dirt they contained, held firm. No bullet touched her, but terror still pumped through her veins.

Fareeha and Jack were peeking out from behind the barrels, taking careful shots. Gabriel waited a second, then popped up, emptying both barrels of his shotgun into the Gang.

But the Gang wasn’t standing still. They were breaking off, running for cover behind some of the homes. The jumped their horses over a few small fences, then jumped off and hid behind the houses.

Her heart pounding in her breast, Orisa leaned out from the barrel. Ashe was almost sauntering to the nearest house, casually taking aim with her rifle as she sent bullets flying at the saloon as she walked along. She aimed at the white-haired woman, and squeezed the trigger. Her hands were shaking; the shots went wild. Ashe looked up, looking directly at Orisa.

Suddenly, her heart froze. Orisa didn’t think she could have moved even if she wanted to. Ashe smiled, bringing her rifle up, aiming right at her.
A man ran into her at full tilt. It was Jesse, tackling her to the ground. She fell backwards, behind the safety of the barrels. She couldn’t hear it, but she knew the bullet that Ashe sent her way had sailed over head.

“Move,” he spat. “You can’t stand still!”

He pressed himself against the barrels and cracked open the cylinder of his revolver, sliding fresh bullets into it.

With all the bullets flying around, the sound of gunfire making her deaf, Orisa realized that she didn’t have what it took to wear the tin badge, or to shoot to kill. She had a fresh respect for Jack and Fareeha. Still, she had to try and do her job. With shaking hands, she pulled herself up, and got ready to try and shoot again.

Bullets rained across the street, going up and down the avenue. A few men of the Deadlock Gang lay in the street, dead or dying. From the saloon, a man screamed, and a cowboy fell from the second floor, hitting the dirt hard. But try as she might, Orisa couldn’t pull the trigger.

“Bob!” Ashe hollered. “Do somethin’!”

The cover on the wagon was pulled down, and Orisa thought her heart would stop again. The big man Bob stood on the wagon, with the worst thing she could ever imagine.

“Gatling gun!!” Fareeha screamed.

The eight-barreled monstrosity was big, and shined like polished steel. A massive link of bullets ran from it, into the wagon. Bob started cranking the handle.

At first, it started firing slow, but soon, it was spitting out rounds faster than a locomotive could chug. Orisa pressed her hands against her ears, just to try and stop the gunfire from robbing her hearing. Someone pulled at her, getting her to move away from the barrels. It was Fareeha, staying as low as she could.

Together, they ran with Jack, Jesse, and Gabriel. The ran behind the office. Orisa spared a look behind her; the earth-filled barrels had proven proof against the Deadlock Gang’s guns, but the Gatling gun was a completely different beast.

The bullets tore up the barrels, spilling the dirt to the ground. And with the dirt gone, they offered no protection. In seconds, the barrels were cut down to splinters. If they hadn’t moved behind the office, they’d have been chewed to a pulp.

Orisa dove behind the wall of the sheriff’s office. Everyone pressed themselves against the ground as bullets passed through the wooden sides of the office. Then the sound lessened just a little. Bits of ground shot up as Bob wheeled the Gatling gun around, going towards the saloon.

Ana kept her rifle close to her cheek, looking for her next target. She had already picked off two shotgun wielding men and a man with a long gun; she was looking for her fourth. But by then, most of the outlaws were in cover; she’d have to take even more careful aim.

“Bob!” Ashe hollered. “Do somethin’!”
The cover on the wagon was pulled back, and Ana’s blood went cold.

“Gatling gun!!” She heard Fareeha bellow.

Somehow, Ashe and the Deadlock Gang got their hands on a Gatling gun.

Ana crouched behind the façade as the gun opened up. She could feel the building shake as bullets hit the building, and passed through it. Ana hoped her daughter was safe, but knew she had to wait for her chance to take out that damn Gatling gun. Eventually, Bob wheeled the gun around, going towards the saloon.

It was the moment Ana was waiting for. She popped up, setting her rifle on the edge of the façade, something she never normally do. Her barrel was sticking out for all to see. But she had to stop the Gatling gun.

Bob was a big man, and a big target. She set the iron sights on his heart, and pulled the trigger.

A spark erupted from Bob’s chest, pushing him back. Ana stared in shock; Bob had strapped a massive piece of iron to his chest under his shirt. It acted like armor, meaning her shot had only drawn his attention.

Bob wheeled the Gatling gun back to the sheriff’s office, only this time it was aiming up towards Ana and her blind. She ran in a dead sprint as bullets tore up the wooden roof, kicking up splinters. Ana ran to the ladder, almost sliding to it. The ladder tilted wildly, falling from the building. She held on with dear life. Eventually, it swung into the city hall building. Ana felt her breath leave her as she hit the side of the building, and the ladder slipped from her grip. She hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Fortunately, she landed in a big stretch of mud, which helped cushioned her fall, if only a little. Fighting the pain, she pushed herself up. She had to move, had to get away from that damn Gatling gun, and Bob.

Fareeha could only hear two things: Bob’s fucking massive Gatling gun, and Ashe’s wild laughter. Eventually, the Gatling gun stopped. But Ashe didn’t.

“You like that, Jesse?!” She madly screamed. “A lil’ somethin’ somethin’ we picked up ‘round Oklahoma!”

She was pressed into the dirt and mud, but was able to look up. Lying on top of Orisa was Jesse, to try and keep her safe. He got up, shaking his head to try and clear his head.

Then Orisa started screaming.

Fareeha blinked; they had moved behind the building as fast as they could, but it wasn’t fast enough. Orisa had been shot in the leg.

“Shit, hold on,” Gabriel said, pulling a rag out of his pocket. “Stay with us, chica. You’ll be fine.”

He pressed the rag against her leg to try and stop the bleeding. Orisa screamed and thrashed. Fareeha and Jack jumped in to help, and to hold Orisa still.
“Sounds like you like it!” Ashe laughed. “Got plenty more where that came from!”

Orisa was slowly getting a hold of her pain. She was pressing her lips together with enough force to turn them white; her nostrils were wide as she breathed deeply.

“What the fuck are we gonna do against a goddamn Gatling gun?” Gabriel hissed.

“I’m thinking,” Jack said.

“Why did she stop?” Fareeha asked.

“I think she made her point,” Jesse mumbled, cracking open his revolver to reload.

“Jesse,” Ashe yelled. “You ready to come back to where you belong?”

Jesse hissed. Fareeha could tell that he’d rather die that go back to Ashe and the Deadlock Gang.

“Orisa, hold on,” Jack said. “We’ll get you to Angela.”

“Jack, you think she’s out?” Fareeha asked, nodding towards Ashe.

“What the hell do you mean?” Jesse hissed.

“Those things burn through ammunition like crazy,” she said. “They’d go through two-hundred rounds a minute, easily.”

“That’s a lot of ammo,” Jack said.

“You want to bet on that, ese?” Gabriel said. He had tied the rag to Orisa’s leg, but still kept pressure on it.

Fareeha’s mind spun. What were they going to do?

Then she saw Ashe’s bag of dynamite lying on the ground, only a foot from the office’s veranda.

“I got an idea.”

“What’s that?”

“Jesse, I’m sorry, but you gotta be the bait.”

“Bait?” He sputtered. “Bait for what?”

Fareeha pointed at the bag.

“Think you can shoot that from the air?”

Jesse gave her a hard look.

“You crazy?”

“I’ve been told that before.”

“So the dynamite will blow up?” Jack said.

“I’ll toss it up in the air,” Fareeha replied. “Hopefully it’ll knock everyone off their feet.”
“That won’t work!”

“I don’t know, Jack,” Jesse said. “Knowing Ashe, there’s enough dynamite to put a dent in the world.”

Everyone paused, looking at each other. All but Orisa, who clutched at her leg.

“Jesse,” Ashe hollered, “I’m getting tired of waiting! Don’t make me come and get you!”

He stood up, holstering his gun.

“Wait for my signal,” he said. “Alright Ashe, I’m coming out. Don’t go cutting me down.”

He walked out, hands held high.

“Jesse,” Ashe smiled. “You finally came to your sense?”

“I finally realized that what goes around, comes around.”

“So you’ll ride with me? By my side, as you always have?”

“Ashe, things have changed,” he said. “I’m not sure we can go back to the way things were.”

“Jesse, I’m willing to overlook you running away,” Ashe grinned.

Fareeha braced herself. Jesse was slowly walking away from the bag of dynamite, drawing their attention. She had to wait until all eyes were on him.

“All you have to do is to take my money back, along with interest,” Ashe said. “That whore running the saloon looked like she has a lot of money. It’ll make up for the time we lost with your nonsense running.”

“It’ll be hard to argue with Bob and his Gatling gun.”

“That it will,” Ashe laughed.

“Well, Ashe, that’s a mighty fine deal,” he said. “Just stick to it. I hope it doesn’t get tossed up.”

Was that a sign? Was Jesse telling her it was safe to move? It didn’t matter; it was either now, or never. Fareeha reached out, and grabbed the bag.

Holding the straps, and spun it around a few times to get some momentum going. Then she stepped out into the street, and hurled into the air.

“Jesse!”

The bag arced, sailing high through the air. It was just starting to fall to the ground when Jesse jerked his gun.

The bag exploded with the wrath of God himself, knocking Fareeha off her feet like someone put a sledgehammer between her breasts. Fareeha felt her lungs almost bursting, then she was rolling around in the ground.

Her ears were ringing. She couldn’t hear anything. Life was moving so slowly. Her eyes swam as she tried to stagger to her feet. Fighting to get to her knees, she saw that every glass window in town was shattered by the stack of dynamite.
A hand grabbed her. She spun around, trying to throw the person off.

It was Jack. She blinked a handful of times, trying to clear her vision. Jack was trying to say something, but all she could hear was a high-pitched ringing.

Jack gently shook her.

“I can’t hear you.”

She couldn’t even hear herself talking. It was like her voice was being muffled by an endlessly ringing bell.

Jack nodded. Evidently his hearing was better off than hers was.

He pointed. The dynamite blast had knocked the entire Deadlock Gang off their feet. Many of the men were rolling around, clutching their heads, including Ashe.

It looked like the bag of dynamite was over the wagon when it was blown up. Fareeha could see Bob lying on the ground, trying to get to his feet. But despite his best efforts, he only managed to roll himself around on the ground.

Then Fareeha realized that people were leaving the buildings. She saw her mother dusting herself off, advancing with her rifle. Madam Lacroix was walking with her, rifle at her shoulder. The working girls who had volunteered were with her, forming their own little posse with Olivia at the head.

The Deadlock Gang was down, and the town had their backs. It was time to take them in.

She nodded, and stumbled towards the Gang. Jesse was lying on the ground, utterly out cold, his eyes glassy. Gabriel knelt next to him, trying to wake him. Looking down the street, Fareeha could see Angela running towards Orisa, her doctor bag in hand.

Jack grabbed her arm, pulling her along. Behind the barrels they used as cover, by their stash of ammo, was a giant bag filled with manacles. He grabbed a handful for himself, and some for her.

Some of the Deadlock Gang were getting to their feet, grabbing their guns. They looked up, and saw the men and women of Crease holding them dead to rights. Fareeha glared at them, daring them to make a move. Seeing an entire town of guns trained at them, the Deadlock Gang gave up, throwing their guns on the ground.

Jack tapped her shoulder, handing her a manacle. With her mother and everyone keeping the Gang at gunpoint, they went from man to man, locking them in irons. Eventually, they got to Ashe, who was coming around. She glared at Fareeha, but Fareeha just smiled as she slid the manacle on Ashe’s wrists.

They moved the gang to the jail, giving the Bricket brothers some company. When they finished, Fareeha collapsed. A hand patted her on the shoulder. She looked up; it was Jack again.

She still couldn’t hear him, but she could read it on his lips.

“You did good.”

She smiled. Yes, they saved Crease, didn’t they? Now all she needed to do was to get some rest. Being blown up was no joke.
'Bout time we had ourselves a good ol' fashioned gunfight! But with a big fight comes a big celebration. Also, need a few songs for a gunfight?
Trouble at High Noon

Chapter Summary

With the Deadlock Gang beaten, the city celebrates their survival. Jesse finds something he never thought he’d get, and the city becomes that much more like a home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jesse!!”

Normally, Jesse loved hearing Ashe scream his name. But this was different than the other times. The other times, they were in each other’s arms, naked as the day they were born, him deep inside her, both of them sharing a moment of pure ecstasy; now, Ashe was banging on the metal bars of the cell she was in.

“Let me out of this cell, Jesse!” She demanded.

“Ashe, we’ve been over this,” he sighed. He pressed the palm of his hands against his ears; they were still ringing from the dynamite. “It’s over. We stopped you. We’ll put out word that we caught you, and a paddy wagon will be sent to bring you and the Gang in.”

“Like hell! This isn’t over! Let me out of here, Jesse!”

“Now we’re just talking in circles,” he sighed.

Ashe continued to bang on the cell bars. Being the only woman didn’t give her the privilege to have a cell to herself; the entire Gang took up every single cell, pressing it to capacity. Jesse tried not to think of the men that were killed in the attack, the men he had spent years riding with, but it was hard not to notice who was gone. And he tried especially hard not to think that it was a little bit of a blessing that they hadn’t made it; the eight that had died meant there was a little more space for everyone.

The Bricket brothers and their accomplices had to share space with the Gang, leaving about five to a cell. Jesse felt a little sorry for the men who had to share with Bob; the big man took up most of the space. At the moment, Bob was lying down, still rattled from being blown up.

“Jesse, you turned your back on us!” She spat. “This demands blood, Jesse!”

“You got that blood when that bag of dynamite went off.”

“Oh, you think that is it?” She pressed. “Just wait ‘till I get out of here! I’ll show you what it really looks like for me to lose my temper!”

“If you ever get out of jail, I’ll be right here, Ashe.”

The door to the sheriff’s office opened. It was Morrison himself.

“Why the hell are you still here?” The sheriff asked.
“I’m watching the prisoners.”

“I’m no prisoner, Jesse!!”

“You’re in the cell, Ashe. That kinda limits what you are.”

“Jesse, you need to get to the saloon with us,” Jack said.

“Are you drunk?”

“Working on it,” Morrison grinned. “Come on, we got the Deadlock Gang, and you’re the man of the hour. Enjoy it.”

“Jesse, don’t you fucking dare leave me here alone!”

Now he had to get up and walk out. Ashe screamed bloody murder as he closed the door to the office. Not that it mattered; with the dynamite destroying all of the glass in town, and the Gatling gun putting dozens of holes in various buildings, Ashe’s hollering could be heard down the street.

“Thank you, sir,” Jesse sighed. “I guess I was looking for a reason to get out of there.”

“Not a problem. Like I said, you’re the man of the hour now.”

“It doesn’t feel right to celebrate after such a big gunfight,” Jesse said. “We lost several people in the attack. Between them and the Gang, the streets got plenty of blood today.”

“It is a terrible thing,” Jack admitted, “but in terms of battles, this wasn’t that bad. Not compared to fighting the Rebels in an open field, anyways. We’ll mourn them, but right now, we need to celebrate that we survived such a gunfight, and captured one of the worst gangs in the West! You need to take these small victories, Jesse. Take it from me.”

“Alright,” Jesse smiled, “I guess I will.”

Morrison held his hand out, and Jesse took it. He realized that Jack wasn’t shaking his hand, but giving him something. In the dying light of the day, and the lanterns of the saloon, he saw that it was a brass deputy badge.

“You don’t mean—“

“I do,” Jack said. “You proved you’re a good man, a trustworthy one. This Deadlock business showed me that I could use another deputy. Fareeha is a great help, don’t get me wrong, but she’s only one woman; she can’t be everywhere she’s needed. Having a third deputy should help out a lot.”

“T-thank you, but…”

“You gotta think on it, I know,” Jack smiled. He slapped Jesse’s back. “Take your time, son. It’s not like there’s anyone else who might take the job from you.”

“Right,” Jesse croaked. “I don’t mean to make things weird, but…could you not call me ‘son’?”

“Sorry, shouldn’t have assumed,” Morrison said. “Bit of a habit from home. I’ll mind my tongue.”

“Thank you.” Despite the awkwardness, Jesse couldn’t help but stare at the badge in his hand. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever think that he’d be lawman material. Jesse pocketed the badge as they walked to the saloon.
Like the rest of the town, the saloon was in bad shape. The glass was destroyed, of course, and there were enough bullet holes in the building to let a very generous breeze in, but that didn’t damper anything. In fact, it seemed to be making the party even more lively.

The entire town was celebrating. Even the men who were injured in the attack were there, not to mention Orisa, who was in a big, plush chair, her bandage-wrapped leg propped up on a bench. She had taken at least one bullet, and a handful of fragments, to the knee. Angela was next to her, making sure she didn’t go too overboard in her revelry; Fareeha was glued to the lovely doctor’s side.

Not that Orisa needed someone to keep an eye on her. Because she was so big, Orisa was easily making her way through her own bottle of whiskey, and didn’t look any worse for the wear. Efi was next to her as well, celebrating with bottles of crème soda, root beer, and sarsaparilla.

“Ah, the killjoy gets the other killjoy out of killjoy central,” Father Reyes cried, raising his glass of beer high.

“Shove it up your ass, you piss-poor excuse for a priest,” Morrison roared, walking over to the man. The two embraced for perhaps a moment too long. Jesse could tell there was some love despite all that hate they spat at each other.

Jesse sat down next to Orisa, Efi, Fareeha, and Angela.

“I’m sorry about your leg,” he said.

“I still have it,” Orisa said, pushing a bottle of beer into his hands. “I got that going for me.”

“Then thank you to our amazing doctor.”

“Oh, you’re welcome,” Angela beamed, her delicate face ruby red with drink. “It was nothing. Really. I’m just so happy I was able to help everyone.”

“That’s why you’re so lovely,” Fareeha drunkenly droned. Her arms were tightly wrapped around the blonde doctor, breaking only to grab another drink. “You’re just so helpful to everyone.”

The two women went to drunkenly nuzzling each other. Jesse looked away out of respect. Orisa was too busy drinking, while Efi was practically hanging off her older sister, glad she was still alive. He knew there were plenty of women here, even a few men. Maybe he should make a night of it.

He idly wondered where Madam Lacroix and Lena were at. Or Ana and Reinhardt, for that matter. He shrugged as he drank his beer; those were better questions for someone other than him.

But then he saw a chair and a guitar on the stage of the saloon. No one was playing it.

It had been forever since he had played guitar. But now he had a song in his head. He chugged the rest of his beer, and went to the stage. He took the guitar, and set it on his leg, striking a few cords just to see if it was tuned or not.

Humming a few bars, he was glad to see that it was tuned, and sounded pretty good to boot. Then he realized that the talk had died down. Damn near everyone was looking at him, waiting for him to play.

Well, he always did well with an audience. He strummed out the cords, and got to singing.
Early in the morning when the sun does rise
Layin' in the bed with bloodshot eyes

He could see plenty of men and women trading knowing looks. They’d all been in the same spot after a hard day of drinking.

Late in the evenin' when the sun sinks low
That's about time my rooster crows
I got women up and down this creek
And they keep me going and my engine clean
Run me ragged but I don't fret
Cause there ain't been one slow me down none yet

Get me drinkin' that moonshine
Get me higher than the grocery bill
Take my troubles to the highwall
Throw 'em in the river and get your fill
We been sniffing that cocaine
Ain't nothin' better when the wind cuts cold
Lord it's a mighty hard livin'
But a damn good feelin' to run these roads

That got a whoop from the crowd, specifically the women working the saloon. He grinned as he kept strumming the guitar, then launched into the next verse. He liked this place, this little Crease in the map. And he found himself liking the idea of wearing that brass badge.

Maybe he would stay here.

The night went on, and Jesse stayed on the stage, strumming out songs, both ones that he picked and also taking requests from the crowd. Eventually, Fareeha joined him on stage with her harmonica. They made a strange duo, but they made great music together. But it was getting late, and Angela didn’t want to share Fareeha with Jesse and the crowd, she wanted Fareeha all to herself.

So she whispered to Fareeha to follow her upstairs in a few minutes, while she scouted out an empty room. She’d never been up here before, but she knew there were rooms where Madam Lacroix and her girls entertained the men who bought them. There had to be an empty room she could drag Fareeha to.

Just thinking of taking Fareeha in a whorehouse got her even more hot and bothered.

She cautiously opened a door, and was struck dumb. On the bed were Ana and Reinhardt. Reinhardt was flat on his back, buck naked, and Ana was riding him like he was a prize stallion put to stud. Reinhardt, meanwhile, had both of his hands wrapped around her waist. One of Ana’s hands was pawing at her breast, while her other hand was holding onto Reinhardt’s, keeping her balance.
Angela quickly closed the door, her face burning. Neither of them noticed her, they were too caught
up in their own little world. She realized that this whole idea to find an empty room in a whorehouse
was just a really, really bad idea. She almost ran from the second floor, but ended up running into
Fareeha.

“Hey, where you going?” Her lover grinned, more than a little buzzed. “You told me to meet you up
here.”

“Did I?” Angela croaked. “I…uh, I meant, meet me up on the second floor of my clinic!”

“You want to leave, now? When everyone is looking at us?”

“No one would notice.”

“But my mom—“

“She’s fine!” Angela blurted. “Trust me! Come on, let’s get us back to my place!”

“Are you—?”

A kiss convinced Fareeha to not take another step into the hallway, and to start walking back to her
house. Angela wasn’t sure there was anything that could get the image of Ana and Reinhardt out of
her head, but damned if she wasn’t gonna try.

Jesse woke with the sun, as he usually did. His back cracked as he sat up. He had fallen asleep on a
bench; not exactly the place he thought he’d spend in a whorehouse. He cracked his neck, and
stretched a bit, his back popping.

There were plenty of painted ladies who wanted to give him their thanks, even a few cute cowboys,
but something about it all just felt… off.

He turned them all down, something he’d never, ever thought he’d do. Then again, he expected a
good man to not carouse his way through a town. Maybe he was becoming that man, the one he
always dreamed of becoming.

Looking around, he could tell that he was the only one that was up. He didn’t want to wake anyone
else up, so he got up, left the saloon, and walked to the sheriff’s office, rubbing his fingers. He had
played the guitar until his fingers ached, which was something he hadn’t done in quite some time. It
felt good.

The Gang were sleeping in their cells. All but one woman, who looked up at him as he walked in.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Jesse said.

Ashe sat on the floor of her cell, her knees drawn up to her chin. She looked like she had been crying
all night.

“Did you get any sleep?”

Ashe shook her head ‘no.’
“What’s going on?” He asked, pulling up a chair. Sitting next to her, he was able to keep his voice down. “You don’t want to go to jail, and think a few tears can change my mind?”

“That was our song,” Ashe mumbled.

That got Jesse to stop.

“The one you first played,” she said. “The one ‘bout runnin’ these roads? Sleeping in ‘till the night, sniffing cocaine, and drinking moonshine? That was our song.”

“Ashe…”

“‘Ashe’ what?” She snapped up from the ground. “We made that song together, don’t you remember? When we were still getting the Gang together. It was just you, me, and Bob.”

“Good old Bob,” Jesse chuckled.

“Why the fuck did you play that song? You only used to sing it to me.”

“I played it a few times for the Gang.”

“But it was always to me,” she pressed.

Jesse paused.

“Yea, I guess it was,” he mumbled.

“Why did you play it?”

“…It just, it just felt right, you know?”

Ashe turned away from him, snorting.

“I put my heart into that song,” she said. “You came up with the chords, but I got the words.”

“I never understood why you’d have me say that there were women lined up and down the creek we grew up on,” he said. “I mean, it was just the two of us.”

“Because there was no women who could really keep you tied down, not like I could,” she said. “I was the only one. The only one, Jesse, the only one who understood you, who knew you. And you only knew me.”

“Ashe, that was a long time ago.”

“Was it?” She pressed. “Why’d you have to go and ruin our song by playing it to others? You promised you’d only play it to me.”

Jesse sighed.

“Ashe…”

She looked at him with bloodshot eyes. She really hadn’t slept a wink.

“Ashe, I really loved you,” Jesse said. “For the longest time, you were the only one who really got me. We clicked, we understood each other—”

“We had each other’s backs,” she snapped.
“Yea...yea, we did.”

“It was a damn good feelin’ to run those roads, wasn’t it?” Ashe pressed.

“It was the best I’d ever felt. For a time, that is.”

“Then why, Jesse? Why throw it all away?” She asked. “Why throw me away?”

“You understood me, Elizabeth.” Jesse paused. He didn’t mean to use her first name, but hearing it, it made her stir. She looked like she did when they first met: young, wild, into him and him alone, and burning with passion. “You understood me better than I knew myself. But things change. We both made the Deadlock Gang, but you made it a real family. I don’t know how you did it, but you did. We all had each other, and for the longest time, it was great.

“But I wasn’t playing that things changed, Elizabeth. The Gang started taking its toll on you. There were times when we’d break into something, a bank or an office or even a badly manned garrison, and we’d turn the money down. Maybe we kept some, maybe we burned the rest, shit, we even threw it into the wind and let a town go wild trying to catch it all. We did it because we could, and fuck everyone who said we couldn’t. Lord, I miss those days.

“But then...but then, the money started poisoning you. You’d plan a heist for bigger banks, with more money, and more danger. You kept as much as you could. I killed too many men those days, Elizabeth. I really did. All for a few scraps of green paper.

“You let the money and the gold change you. And I changed with you. One morning, I woke up, and I didn’t even recognize myself. Do you know how scary that was? Not being able to recognize the man in the mirror?”

Ashe buried her face in her hands.

“I do,” she mumbled.

“Then you know why I had to leave. I had to change, I had to become a man I actually liked.”

“Is that why you’re not spitting and cursing at those colored—“

“Ashe,” Jesse snapped. “Mind your damn manners!”

Being called ‘Ashe’ hurt her more than him yelling at her, Jesse could see it on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

Jesse sighed.

“I hit my low point after the Rio Grande robbery,” he said. “When did you realize that you hated yourself?”

“When you left me all alone.”

Jesse’s temper froze.

“That’s why I had to get you back,” she said. “That’s why I wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. I love you, Jesse. I’ve told you that before, I’ll tell it to you again, and I’ll keep saying it even when you don’t want me to. You’re my everything. You’re my real family, not the bullshit family I was born into. When you left, shit, it felt like I was thrown into the Gulf of Mexico. I was drowning. I needed you.”
“But I couldn’t be with you, Elizabeth. You know that.”

“I did,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

*Be a good man, Jesse. Even if it’s to her.*

He handed her an unused kerchief. Elizabeth took it, and blew her nose.

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

“You’re welcome.”

“I never wanted to drive you away.”

“I know. But you did. You changed too much, Elizabeth, and I couldn’t go that way with you. Not anymore.”


“I can’t do that with the way you are now.”

That finally made Elizabeth cry.

“Was it the robberies?” She asked. “The banks we knocked off on our way up here?”

“That was part of it.”

“Was it the killings?”

“Another big part of it.”

“Then what made you stop loving me?”

“It’s the thing that made you Ashe, not Elizabeth.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ve been telling you what it was since I got here.”

“But I don’t get it! Was it one thing? Which thing was it? What drove us apart? Tell me!”

Jesse sighed.

“I’m sorry, Ashe, but you’ll have to figure it out yourself,” he said, getting up. “When you do, come talk to me.”

“I will,” she mumbled.

Jesse dragged the chair back to the desk he took it from. The sun was rising, and some of the Gang members were stirring.

“Morning, Bob.”

Bob cracked his neck, and rubbed his ears.

“Yea, I still got a ringin’ in mine,” Jesse sighed. “Well, better get you all breakfast. Don’t raise hell while I’m gone.”
The bed shook, waking Angela up.

“Up so soon?” She asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Someone’s knocking at the door,” Fareeha said, getting up. She slept in a simple nightgown, but was taking the time to put on a pair of pants. She squeezed into them and pulled a shirt on. “Be right back.”

Angela grabbed her, and got a quick kiss before Fareeha slipped away, giggling like a school girl. She rolled around, trying to go back to sleep. But the bed was so empty and cold without Fareeha. Sighing, she got up.

The door to the room opened, just as she was looking for something proper to wear.

“That was Jack,” Fareeha said. “Lena’s back with the paddy wagons to take the Deadlock Gang away.”

“So soon? I thought they weren’t going to be back for another week.”

“I guess hearing that we have the entire Deadlock Gang in our cell made the government move faster,” Fareeha grinned.

“Five weeks is fast?”

“For government work. It’s not just arranging wagons to take them away, it’s making sure they’ll be sent to the right jail. And considering they’re being sent back to Texas, that means transportation has to be arranged, the jail has to be contacted, messages sent to and from, protection arranged to prevent a breakout, and there’s only so much you can do by telegraph. Lena’s been gone for a long time; maybe they hired her to carry some messages herself.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Come on, let’s see them off.”

Angela decided to wear jeans. Putting on a dress would make her sit in front of a mirror to make sure the rest of her was presentable, and she didn’t want to miss the hand off. She pulled the jeans on, threw on a simple shirt, and made her way out with Fareeha. Nearly all of Crease was in the middle of town, outside the sheriff’s office. Even Orisa was there, despite her cane and heavy limp. Six paddy wagons were there, with massive iron locks on the outside, ready to take all of the Gang away.

Men and women cheered as the Gang was lead from the jail cells, to the waiting paddy wagons. Nearly a dozen Federal Marshalls were there, watching over them. The men of the Gang looked at them with scorn. But Ashe, she had her eyes glued to the ground. Angela actually felt bad for her; the woman seemed to change overnight from a loud, crazy firecracker to one who rarely talked. Even though she hadn’t known Ashe, Angela could tell that she was a shell of her former self.

Angela had tried to talk to Ashe before, making sure she was properly cared for, but Ashe hardly spoke more than five words to her since then.
She was defeated, broken, more so than Angela could have ever expected.

“Good work here, Morrison,” one Marshall said, shaking Jack’s hand.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “But my deputies deserve the credit, too.”

“Ah yes, the lovely Ms. Amari and Mr. McCree,” the Marshall said. He shook Jesse’s hand, but skipped over Fareeha, instead ogling her chest.

Angela saw red at that. Somehow, she kept her peace, but just barely.

“Thank you for the fine work.”

“Not at all, sir,” Fareeha said tightly.

“Thank you,” Jesse said, “but Fareeha deserves more praise than I. She was the lynchpin.”

“I see. Keep it up. I’d stay around, but we have to move this posse off.”

The wagons were loaded up, and began pulling away. The town gave a cheer as they were carted away.

Angela sighed, looking the town over. In the weeks since the gunfight with the Deadlock Gang took place, Madam Lacroix had funded the entire rebuilding efforts. Many buildings, such as the saloon and sheriff’s office, now had stone and brick walls. They looked more homey and inviting, as well as proof against most bullets.

“Dr. Ziegler!”

Angela turned around. People only called her ‘doctor’ when someone was hurt. Sure enough, Ana was being led to her, almost pushed along by Olivia and Anastasia.

“What’s the matter?”

“Mama is sick,” Olivia said.

“I’m not sick!” Ana said.

“She puked just a few minutes ago,” Anastasia said. “She barely made it outside.”

“It’s just something I ate that’s giving me grief.”

“Come, I’ll take a look at you,” Angela said.

“I’m not sick!”

“You might not be, but you’re the one cooking the food. If you are sick, you could get the whole town sick by spreading it through the food.”

Ana sighed, realizing she wasn’t going to win.

“Fareeha, I’ll meet you for breakfast,” she said.

Fareeha nodded, sparing only a parting look at her mother. Ana returned the favor.

Now it was time for Angela to sigh. The mother and daughter were supposed to talk after the Deadlock Gang was taken care of, but both had seemed to be putting it off for over a month.
“Thank you, I’ll check her out,” she told Olivia and Anastasia.

She walked Ana back to her clinic.

“I’m not sick,” Ana said, showing her stubbornness.

“I’m not saying you are. But we have to check.”

The lower floor of her clinic had several examining tables. Fortunately, nothing had happened over the night where people were waiting for her in the morning. Both she and Ana had the clinic to themselves. Sighing, Ana sat on one of the beds.

“How have you been feeling?” Angela asked, placing a wrist to Ana’s forehead. With her other hand, she took her pulse.

“Just a little queasiness in the stomach,” she said. “Feels like I might be losing my balance, but it passes quickly.”

“How often does it happen?”

“Mostly in the morning.”

“Well, you’re not running a temperature, and your pulse is nice and strong. Are you sleeping well?”

“Yes, but I’ve been feeling tired a lot.” Just saying the word ‘tired’ made Ana yawn.

“What about going to the bathroom? Any changes there?”

“I’ve…been going to the outhouse a lot,” she blushed. “I think I’ve been drinking a lot of water, though.”

“Hmm.” Angela paused. “You need to talk to Fareeha.”

Ana’s face fell at that.

“I’ve been avoiding her, haven’t I?”

“Yes, you have. Fareeha said you wanted to talk to her before, just before the Deadlock Gang showed up. You need to make good on that.”

Ana shifted in her seat.

“And you need to tell her about Reinhardt.”

That made Ana’s eyes open, and a blush to creep on her cheeks.

“How did you know?”

“I…”

She cautiously opened a door, and was struck dumb. On the bed were Ana and Reinhardt. Reinhardt was flat on his back, buck naked, and Ana was riding him like he was a prize stallion put to stud. Reinhardt, meanwhile, had both of his hands wrapped around her waist. One of Ana’s hands was pawing at her breast, while her other hand was holding onto Reinhardt’s, keeping her balance.
“…I was able to figure it out,” she said.

“Oh. I see.” Ana stopped and started, but eventually found the right words to continue. “Yes, I guess I’ll have to tell her about us.”

“Good,” Angela said.

“And I have to talk to her about you, too…”

“I think it would be better to talk about Reinhardt,” Angela said. “You should bring him, too.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Ana, how late is your cycle?”

“My cycle?” She cocked her eyebrow at that. “I’m not sure, I haven’t been keeping track of it too well. I have to be coming up on it, but things have been stressful. Between putting the town back together, working out menus with the farmers, and—“

She suddenly stopped, her eyes wide. It was a little unsettling, seeing so much of her glassy, dead eye, but Angela was used to it.

“Y-you…” Ana stammered. She suddenly realized she was clutching her belly. “You mean…?”

“Nausea, fatigue, going to the bathroom often, drinking plenty of water, the signs are all there,” Angela smiled.

“But, but I’m going on forty.”

“It’s not that unheard of for a woman to have children into her forties. Have there been any changes with your breasts?”

“They’re a little sore and sensitive.” Ana gasped, reality sinking in. “I’m… I’m going to…”

“Yes,” Angela smiled. “You are.”

Ana wrapped her in a hug, tears spilling from her eyes, even her dead one.

“Oh,” she stammered. “Oh God, this is…this is just…”

“You need to tell Fareeha, and I’m sure Reinhardt would love to know,” Angela smiled.

“I will, oh, I will!”

Ana let her go, and Angela handed her a spare kerchief. She dabbed her eyes and then blew her nose.

“I’ll tell Fareeha right now,” she said. “And I’ll bring Reinhardt.”

“No, let me bring Fareeha,” Angela said. “She’s probably going over paperwork with Jack, I’ll have to drag her away. You just bring Reinhardt.”

Ana nodded, a smile stretching from ear to ear.

“And no drinking, even occasionally.”

“Yes, of course!”
Ana sat at the table, waiting for Fareeha to arrive. She had picked a table in the corner of the saloon. It offered the most privacy.

“She’ll come,” Reinhardt said, taking her hand.

“I know,” Ana sighed, “but I’m worried I might…”

“You’re the most loving, kind person I know,” Reinhardt smiled. It was the kind of smile that made her feel strong. “You’ll do fine.”

Finally, Ana saw her daughter walk in. And sure enough, Angela was with her.

“Mother,” Fareeha said, walking over. She was dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat. The lovely brass star sat pinned on her chest, and a big smile was plastered on her face. Maybe it was because Angela was wearing jeans again. Ana had to admit that, unlike most white women, Angela was able to properly fill out a pair of pants.

“Fareeha,” she smiled. “I’m so glad you’re both here.”

“Where else would we eat?” Angela politely laughed.

“Yes, now that we have the best cook in the territory, where would you go?” Reinhardt smiled.

“Thank you for cooking, Mama,” Angela grinned again.

Ana blushed at that.

“Ah, not this again,” Fareeha said, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t worry about me,” Ana smiled. “Besides, I want to talk to you. The both of you.”

“About what?”

“About the both of you.”

That made both Fareeha come to a stop. A blush crept into Angela’s cheeks.

“Mother—“

“Please, I know about you two,” she said. “I’m your mother. I might be down an eye, but I’m not blind. When you didn’t come back home after Angela’s move-in dinner, that’s when I knew that all those looks and glances weren’t just looks and glances.”

“T—then, then what’s this about?” Fareeha asked. “I thought you’d be all fire and brimstone on me.”

Ana grinned.

“I had the most beautiful moment when you were born.”

“Oh God, not one of these stories,” Fareeha groaned.
“Yes, one of these stories,” she snapped. “This was before we moved to Pennsylvania. I was in Virginia then. I moved when I was becoming visibly pregnant with you. A single, pregnant black woman, by herself, in Virginia! Could you imagine? I only had one friend there; fortunately, she was a midwife. She helped me bring you into this world.

“She was the first to hold you. She slapped your back, got you breathing and crying, dried you off, and handed you to me. God, you were just so beautiful and precious…I was trying to bring you to my breast, but you were fussy, tossing and turning.

“My friend, she told me to run my finger along your cheek so you’d turn to me. So I did. I ran my finger along your cheek. And then, you stopped crying. You turned your head to me, looked me in the eyes, and…and you smiled. It was such a pure, wonderful smile, it cut me to the core.”

Reinhardt offered her his fresh kerchief. Ana dabbed at her eyes.

“The way you smiled, I swore a vow to God that I would do everything I could to get you to smile like that all the time,” she said. “There’ve been times when it was hard, but I always thought back to that moment, with you smiling, and it kept me strong.

“So when I saw you looking at Angela, I saw you smile at her like you did at me all those years ago. I saw you smile like you used to before the war. I know how happy that woman makes you, and I want you to have that happiness. I don’t like it that you’re with a woman, but when I see you smile at Angela, it brings me back to that moment I held you to my breast, and that vow, that pledge that I made, and I don’t care what I think or feel. Your happiness is the most important thing to me, more so than what I feel comfortable with.”

Fareeha was trying not to cry.

“So you better treat my girl right,” Ana said, turning her gaze to Angela.

“What?”

“You heard me,” she snapped. “If you break my girl’s heart, I will break you in half.”

“Wait, I thought this was about Fareeha!”

“It is. I never want her to be sad, or cry bitter tears. I know how happy she is with you, so you better take damn good care of her, and make sure she always smiles!”

“Mother!”

Reinhardt was the only one laughing, but Ana could see the humor in the situation. Angela was beyond flushed.

“Why is Reinhardt here?” Fareeha stammered. “This is a private talk!”

“I’m here because of your mother,” he said. “Like her, I don’t like seeing two women being together. But, I suppose that I’m not one to judge.”

“What do you mean?”

Reinhardt took Ana’s hand. In the open.

“Your mother wants you to be happy with the woman who makes you smile,” he said. “I can sympathize. I want to make your mother smile as much as I can. I know there are plenty of people
who would call me a pervert because of this, but I don’t care what they think.”

Fareeha glared at him.

“Fareeha, please,” Ana sighed. “Reinhardt and I both fell for each other. I want you to know that.”

“Really? Then when did you make it official?” She asked.

“When Angela moved into her new house, the night you didn’t come home.”

“What?!”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Ana laughed.

“It would have been quite a sight,” Reinhardt howled. “You’d have gotten an eye-full of an elected official!”

“Oh my God, I don’t need to know that!!”

Ana was laughing with Reinhardt, but Angela was blushing wildly. With his big laughter, it was easy to get swept up in it.

“God, aren’t we a pair of minorities,” Angela said, trying to regain her composure. “I mean, I’m with a woman, a woman that I love…Lord, I never thought I’d say that out loud. I love a woman. I love Fareeha. And I’m a white woman who loves a black woman! And you, Reinhardt, you’re with a black woman, too! Wait, isn’t there a law against interracial couples?”

“No in this town,” Reinhardt said. “Not as long as I have a say in it.”

“Oh, thank God,” she sighed. “Then look at us! We’re, like, super minorities!”

“We are, aren’t we?” Ana laughed. She took her daughter’s hand. “I’ll find a way to love you, no matter how I feel.”

Fareeha finally started crying.

“And…and I guess I have to stop thinking like I have to protect you,” her daughter said, tears rolling down her face. “I’d love for you to be happy, with the man who makes you happy.”

“Thank you, Fareeha,” she smiled. “Besides, there’s some news I have to tell everyone.”

“What’s that?” Reinhardt asked.

“I’m…well, Angela figured it out first, because she’s a doctor, but…” she couldn’t help but smile. “I’m going to have a baby.”

Both Fareeha and Reinhardt stared at her.

“Y-you what?!” Reinhardt demanded.

“I’m having a baby,” she smiled. “I’m pregnant.”

“And…and…” Reinhardt’s eyes got wet in record time. “It’s mine…?”

“Who’s else would it be?”

“Mein Gott!” He yelled. “Ich werde ein Vater sein??”
“Ja, das bist Du,” Angela smiled.

Ana didn’t speak German, but she didn’t need to understand him to know what he was saying.

Reinhardt wrapped her in a fierce hug, pulling her up and spinning her around, all while crying more than Ana ever saw a man cry.

“Ich bin ein vater!!” Reinhardt sobbed. He struggled, nearly choking as he changed back to English. His loud voice echoed in the saloon, drawing everyone’s attention. “Everyone! Everyone!! I’m going to be a father!”

That got the bar to stop dead in their tracks. Everyone from Jesse to Lena to Madam Lacroix to the serving girls stopped, staring at their mayor.

“Ana is with child! My child! Mein Gott!!”

He let her down, and collapsed into a chair that Angela pulled out for him.

“I’m a father…My God…”

“To the father to be!” Jesse yelled, raising his glass. The entire saloon cheered for the crying Reinhardt. Ana held him as he cried tears of joy.

“I’m going to be a sister?” Fareeha gasped.

“Yes, you are,” Ana smiled.

Fareeha was crying herself, clutching at Angela’s hands. She turned to Reinhardt, who looked back at her.

“I was going to tell you to stay away from my mom,” she said, “but seeing you now, God, you’re just so happy. You’re going to be a great father.”

“I’ll do my very best,” he promised. “I swear it before God himself!”

Madam Lacroix walked up, carrying a glass and a cold bottle.

“The finest whiskey for the father, and the freshest, coldest root beer for the mother,” she smiled.

“Thank you,” Ana said. Reinhardt was so busy crying, he could barely speak. They toasted, drinking deeply.

“I’ll have to make you an honest woman,” he croaked.

“W-what do you—?”

“Ana, please, be my bride,” he said, taking a knee.

“Mom, you better say yes,” Fareeha said, laughing through her tears.

“Of course!”

She wrapped him in a hug, kissing him deeply. The saloon cheered again.

Never in her life did she expect to be marrying a white man, or even announcing it to an entire town. But everyone was cheering for them, rooting them on, and Ana knew she picked the right place to
call her home.

Chapter End Notes

Another arc done! You didn't forget about that 'family' tag, did you?
The song Jesse sings at the beginning is [White House Road by Tyler Childers](https://link). Check it out, it's really good!
Orisa and Efi are the only blacksmiths in Crease, but that all changes when a new family arrives.
Meanwhile, Fareeha has to contend with some small-time trouble that's got everyone spooked.

Orisa took a step back from the forge and set the hammer down, rubbing her leg. Ever since the damn Deadlock Gang blew into town, and almost blew it up, it had been bothering her. If she didn’t walk or move, it was fine. A little tender, but fine. But when she did walk or move…it ached, and seemed to grow stiffer and stiffer each time she tried to move.

She told herself that she was lucky that she didn’t lose it, but sometimes it hurt so much, she was honestly beginning wondering if she would be better off losing it.

“Orisa?”

She turned around, trying to put on a strong face.

“I’m fine, Efi,” she smiled.

“No, you’re not,” her sister said.

Orisa wondered why she always tried to lie to Efi when her sister could always tell.

“I’m fine,” she sighed. “It’s just my knee.”

“Is the brace helping?”

“It is,” Orisa said, tapping the metal struts that ran along her leg. Efi had worked tirelessly to design the brace, and once she was finished, it was a simple matter for Orisa to beat some steel into shape.

The brace was two hinged pieces of metal, one for either side of her leg, with tough leather straps to hold it in place. The joint sat at her knee, helping her walk and move about. But the metal was stiff, and under any amount of weight, it didn’t glide very well. It make a creaking sound as she walked, and while Efi wanted the brace to help her walk, Orisa ended up limping regardless.

The limp further aggravated her busted, healed knee.

“It isn’t, is it?”

“It is,” Orisa insisted. “I can barely even walk without it. You’ve done a great job making it.”

“I’ve got a few more plans for new ones—“

“Efi, have you been giving enough time to our work?”
Efi shuffled her feet.

“I’ve got a bit of time left,” she mumbled.

“Efi, come here.” Orisa wrapped her sister in a hug. “I love you, you know that, right? But we can’t be spending all our time on this.” She tapped her brace. “We have work to do, and we need to get it done right, the first time. We can worry about my leg, and the brace, later.”

“But your leg might get worse.”

“I can deal with it,” she said. “I’m strong, okay? You need to stay focused on your work. Without you, I’m just bashing metal together. You’re the brains, you need to stay focused on that.”

Efi nodded.

“Come on, it’s getting close to lunch,” Orisa said. “What else do we have, we’ve only got some horseshoes to make, right?”

“And some wagon ties for Mr. Rutledge.”

“We can both do those in our sleep,” Orisa smiled. “Come on, let’s get some food.”

Orisa led Efi from their little blacksmithing house. It was one of the few buildings that Madam Lacroix didn’t finance. It filled Orisa with pride, to know they earned it with their own two hands. They walked to the saloon, her knee in silent agony, just as the lunch rush was hitting.

“Hola,” Olivia said. “Sorry, you’ll have to share a table. We’re getting slammed.”

“Oy! Orisa, Efi! Over here!” Lena waved at them. She was sharing a table with Father Reyes.

“Lena!” Efi ran to the Brit, who returned her hug.

“I think we can manage,” Orisa chuckled.

“Then have a seat,” Olivia smiled.

“Thank you,” Orisa said, taking a second to shake out her knee behind the cover of the podium. She walked over, and sat at the small table.

“How’s it going?” Lena asked.

“Just fine, thank you,” Orisa said.

“And your knee?” Father Reyes said.

“Well enough,” she said, taking a moment to stretch out her leg. Her knee cracked, like she was cracking a knuckle, and Orisa sighed in relief.

“Sure glad it’s doing well enough,” Lena said. “You gave us all quite a scare during that shootout.”

“And you know how much you scared me!” Efi said.

“I know, I know, but I couldn’t stand and do nothing when the Gang came into town,” she said. The memory of the gunfight, of the terror, and being paralyzed by it still had yet to go away. “But it’s not
something I’d ever do again.”


“That Gatling gun was no joke,” Father Reyes said, nodding in sympathy. “Good thing Jack seized it, and is holding onto it for safekeeping.”

“Sheriff Morrison with a Gatling gun?” Orisa laughed. “Between that gun and his glare, he’d conquer the whole West!”

“Can’t forget his deputies,” Father Reyes said. “Fareeha and Jesse are no slouches, either of them.”

“Sure glad they were able to put a stop to the Gang,” Lena said. “Nearly the entire town got shot up.”

A whore, no, a serving woman came by with plates full of food. Orisa chided herself; she shouldn’t judge the women who chose their profession. At least they had a choice.

“I’m just glad we were able to rebuild everything,” Father Reyes said. “We had plenty of families who had to sleep in the church as we fixed everything up.”

“Those poor people,” Lena said. “Sure makes me feel lucky that nothing happened to my place.”

“Lena, please, you live with Madam Lacroix,” Efi said.


“Everyone in Crease knows,” Efi sighed, as if she was explaining to a child why the sun rose.

“Then how do you know??”

“I’m a kid, I’m not blind or stupid,” Efi huffed.

Orisa laughed with Father Reyes at the completely unprepared Lena.

“H—h—how did you…? You didn’t…you’re not allowed in here at night, it’s adults only then!”

“What I think Efi means is that she doesn’t have to sneak in here to see how taken you are with Madam Lacroix,” Father Reyes grinned. “The way you act when she’s near paints a pretty damn clear sign.”

“You’re like when Angela looks at Fareeha,” Efi said. “Or when Mama looks at Mayor Reinhardt.”

“It’s not exactly subtle,” Father Reyes said, triumphantly taking a sip of black coffee.

“Yea, you’re not like Father Reyes and Sheriff Morrison.”

That made Father Reyes spit his coffee up.

“Ew!” Efi said, grabbing for a napkin to dab away the spit-out coffee.

“Y-you know about us?!?” Father Reyes demanded, red in the face.

“Efi knows just about everything,” Orisa said, howling with laughter.

“But how?”
“You’re always fighting,” Efi said, rolling her eyes. “Everyone knows that if boys are mean to you, that means they like you.”

“She’s way too damn smart for her own good,” he said.

“You don’t know the half of it!” Orisa said.

“Father Reyes, I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Efi said.

“Oh God, I don’t think I’m ready for this…”

“It’s not exactly about Sheriff Morrison,” Efi groaned. “But you’re a priest. The other priests I’ve seen has always told us that a man can’t lay with another man. Why do you?”

“¡Dios Mío! Not only is she smart, she’s way too blunt!” He cried.

“Did I say something wrong?” Efi said, worry lines creasing her face.

“People like to beat around the bush,” Orisa said, placing a reassuring hand on Efi’s shoulder. “Just coming out and talking about something rub people the wrong way.”

“Oh.” Efi’s face fell. “I’m sorry, Father Reyes.”

“It’s fine, I know you don’t mean any ill by it,” he said. “I just never thought I’d have to talk to a girl about a man’s choice in companions and how it relates to scripture.”

“Gotta say, I’m a bit curious, too,” Lena said. “The best excuse I know only works for women; after all, the words say that ‘a man shouldn’t lie with a man like he lies with a woman.’”

“Efi, please cover your ears,” Father Reyes said. “I need to do some adult talking with Lena.”

“But—“

“He asked you nicely,” Orisa said.

Efi huffed, but did what she was told. With her ears covered, Father Reyes turned to Lena.

“That’s because I don’t fuck Jack like a woman,” he grinned, “I fuck him like a man.”

“Oh, goddammit I should’ve seen that comin!’” Lena groaned.

“Don’t worry, neither does Jack! Or me, for that matter. He’s good at turning things around.”

Orisa blushed, doing her best to block out the illicit mental image. But Sheriff Morrison was strong, and very well defined. And Father Reyes did have that smoldering handsomeness…the two of them were opposites, but in her mind, seemed to attract each other in just the right way…

Jack could grab Gabriel and pull him close, their rigid manhoods pressing against each other, but Gabriel was better at wrestling. He could push Jack down, straddling him like he did during one of their fights, tearing his shirt off, exposing Jack’s broad chest, but Jack could surprise Gabriel, rolling him over to take control, their lips meeting, and…

Efi gently stepped on Orisa’s feet, trying to get her attention. It made her jump, and try to renew her efforts to ignore the tantalizing scene unfolding in her brain.

“It’s okay,” she said, tapping Efi’s shoulder. “You can listen.”
“That’s not fair,” her sister pouted. “You got to tell everyone but me.”

“No, he just told a very bad joke,” Orisa said.

“Then why couldn’t he tell me!”

“You can hear those jokes when you’re older.”

“Not that again,” Efi groaned. “I don’t want to wait until I’m older!”

“Ah, the burden of youth,” Father Reyes smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s not something you’d like to hear, anyways.”

“Then can you tell me why you’re not like the other priests?”

“That’s because he’s a bad priest,” Lena grinned.

“Hey, I’m a great priest,” Father Reyes protested. “I’m simply spreading the word of God. And that’s the word of love.”

“What do you mean?” Orisa asked.

“‘For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son,’” Father Reyes recited. “Jesus was given to us as an act of love. And his every moment on this planet came back to that one thing: love.

“He could have been born to a king, but he wasn’t; he was born to a carpenter. He could’ve been born in a castle, but he wasn’t; he was born in a manger. He could have had everything, but he didn’t; he had nothing. That was to show that God didn’t have a connection to the material, or the well-to-do, it was to show that he had a connection to what was real, the true emotions that drive mankind.

“And the entire time that Jesus was alive, he didn’t preach a ‘purity of the blood,’ or of riches and wealth; he preached love. Jesus Christ spent his time with sinners, whores, and leapers. He washed the feet of his disciples. The Son of God, on his knees, washing the feet of others! Take a step back, and just think about that.”

Orisa could all too well. The masters of the plantation would often force her or her cousins to wash their feet on hot summer days.

“Willingly washing one’s feet is an act of abasement. The Son of God was making himself humble, to make others comfortable. Need more proof? Where in the Bible does Jesus say ‘hate these kinds of people?’”

“I sure as hell can’t think of any,” Lena said.

“What about ‘kill them, for they are lesser than you?’” He said. “Or, ‘kill ‘em all, and let me sort them out?’ He doesn’t. Jesus preached that we must love our neighbors, that what we do to those less than us is how we reward ourselves.

“I became a priest because the priest in my hometown was a bastard,” he said. “He would speak out against the gringos who stole Texas from us, and that it must be brought back into Mexican hands, and that we must wash the soil with the blood of the men who took it from us.”

Hearing that made Orisa’s blood simmer. It reminded her too much of the sermons they told her at
the plantation.

“But I read the New Testament cover to cover, again and again, but I never, ever heard anything like
that,” he said. “All I saw was Jesus’ love for us. That’s when I decided to become a priest, so I can
show people the message of peace, and to hopefully make the world just a little better.”

“But the Bible says that a man can’t lie with a man,” Efi said. “What about that?”

“That’s from the Old Testament,” he smiled. “It has some pretty good rules and laws, but Jesus came
after them. They’re the last words we have from God; the way I see it, he’s changing what was
previously written. And since he’s the Son of God, I’d take his words over the words of men who
were simply inspired to write down words.”

“I’m so glad you’re our priest,” Orisa said. “I’ve never heard such devotion to the simple act of
love.”

“Thank you,” he beamed, finishing his breakfast. “I try my best to live up to it.”

“Then why do you fight Sheriff Morrison?” Efi asked.

“Because we’re only human, and sometimes we have to scratch a human itch,” he laughed. “Jack
and I grew up rough. We try our best, but sometimes, you just can’t hug it out.”

The doors to the saloon opened, and a loud voice echoed off the walls.

“Ahh, finally!” It was a man. “A good, square meal!”

“Papa, not so loud,” a girl pleaded.

Orisa turned around, as did a lot of people. A small family had walked in. The father was short, but
very muscular. Next to him were two women, one a year or so older than Efi, but younger than
Fareeha. The other woman had to be her mother, for they looked incredibly similar

All three family members had white skin that was just getting accustomed to the Western sun. But
the father and daughter were big and broad. Despite their clothing, Orisa could see their muscles.

“Hola,” Olivia smiled, welcoming them. “Table for there?”

“Papa,” the brunette daughter gasped, staring at Olivia’s full corset, “she’s barely wearing
anything…”

“Brigitte, it’s not nice to stare,” the mother said. Everyone in the family had accents; they were
clearly not American. “I’m so sorry, we just came to America.”

“Ah, new arrivals,” Olivia smiled. “That’s fine, we’re all close here in Crease. This way, we just got
a table cleared.”

The table next to them was cleared off, and Olivia set the family down next to them. For the most
part, the saloon went back to normal, each table returning to their conversations.

“I’m sorry,” Father Reyes said, turning around, “I couldn’t help but overhear; you’re new to
Crease?”

“That’s what this town is called?” The father said. He had an incredibly long and luxurious beard.
He wasn’t trying to yell, but his voice was simply loud, like how Mayor Reinhardt’s was.
“It is,” Reyes smiled. “Please to meet you, I’m Father Reyes, the town’s priest.”

“Ah, a priest,” the mother smiled. “That is so good. It has been a long time since we have taken mass.”

“Then I’m more than willing to help! If you’re free after eating, I can administer the Eucharist if you’d like.”

“That is so nice,” the father said. “I’m Torbjörn Lindholm. This is my wife Ingrid, and my daughter Brigitte.”

“Nice to meet you, Father,” Brigitte smiled.

“Likewise,” he said. “You’ll find we’re plenty friendly here.”

“Damn right,” Lena said, offering her hand to shake. “I’m Lena. Nice ta meet ya.”

“I’m Efi,” her sister said.

“And I’m Orisa.”

“Got a strong grip there,” Torbjörn said, shaking her hand.

It had been a very long time since Orisa had met a man who could test her grip.

“I could say the same about yours.”

“Of course you can say that! I’m a blacksmith!”

That got Orisa to stop. A blacksmith? She and Efi were already the town blacksmiths. Did this man plan to steal their business?

“Orisa and I are blacksmiths, too!” Efi said.

“You look a little small to know your way around a forge,” Torbjörn said.

“Well, I’m not strong like Orisa, but I plan things out.”

“You must’ve been doing that your entire life,” Brigitte said.

“I have! As long as I can remember!”

“Me, too!” Brigitte beamed. “And I thought girls don’t normally work in forges.”

“I don’t think many girls do; you’re the first girl smith I’ve seen! Aside from my sister, that is.”

Orisa tried not to glare, but she could tell that she was giving Torbjörn a hard look. He returned it in kind.

“So, you’re the town’s blacksmith, eh?” He said.

“Yes, I am,” she tensely replied.

“Well, you must be drowning in work.”

“Not at all,” she snapped. “Things are good here.”
“I didn’t see your shop riding into town.”

“We’re down the street.”

“That’s not a forge,” Torbjörn huffed.

“Excuse me?”

“You should see what a real forge looks like,” he said. “Back in Sweden, we’d have giant buildings set up for forge work. We’d have three or four running at all times!”

“If you’re such a big blacksmith in Sweden, why come here?” Orisa pressed.

“Because America is a land of opportunity, and I can make a bigger legacy here than back home.”

Orisa and Torbjörn glared at each other. Meanwhile, Brigitte was chatting away with Efi, and Father Reyes talking with Ingrid. But Lena picked up on the talk.

“Right,” the Brit said, verbally stepping in-between them, “we’re here to eat, not get into some kind of blacksmith face off. Come on Orisa, he’s just passing through.”

“Now I’m not so sure,” Torbjörn said. “My daughter seems to have taken a liking with this place.”

Orisa did her best not to hiss. If this man thinks he could set up shop here and steal her business, he had another thing coming.

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Jack pulled Gabriel closer to him. His jaw was still sore, his lip still busted from their last fight, but it didn’t stop him from pulling at the priest’s belt.

Gabriel pushed him against the wall. He could feel the Latino’s body against his, and it only made his heart beat faster. Gabriel wasn’t burly, but he had a surprising amount of strength in his limbs; Jack ran his hands over his shoulders for the umpteenth time, not just for this morning, but of all the days they’d been more-or-less together.

Part of him was shocked that he was doing this with a priest, but thinking of that particular blasphemy only inflamed him and his aching manhood more.

Gabriel pushed him about. Somehow, they made it up the stairs to his room above his office and the jail cells. Maybe today he’d be the one to handcuff Gabriel. He still had some fight left in him.

The door downstairs crashed open.

“Hey, Sheriff!” It was Lena. “Sheriff Morrison! Sheriff?”

“Shit,” he gasped. He went from unbuckling his belt to trying to get it re-buckled as fast as he could.

“What the fuck,” Gabriel gasped. “Why now?”

“I don’t know,” Jack said, roughly stuffing his shirt back into his pants, as well as trying to get his erection hidden as best he could.
“Sheriff?” Lena called.

“Down in a second,” he shouted. Then he turned to Gabriel. “What a goddamn mood killer.”

“Hey, Lord’s name and all that.”

“Oh, you’re a piece of goddamn work.”

Gabriel pulled him close, getting one last kiss. And Jack was trying to calm himself and his dick down.

“Go get ‘em,” Gabriel grinned. “I’ll take the back.”

“You, take it? And I don’t have to beg? Well, ain’t that a first.”

“Shut up, ese,” Gabriel laughed.

Grinning, Jack left his room, taking a brief second to try and compose himself. His erection still wasn’t going away, so he tried to hide it by adjusting his pants so it pointed straight up. Hopefully his belt would hide some of it. Then he untucked the front of his pants, so the long tail draped over his crotch. There, better.

He walked down the stairs, messing up his hair before he came into view. Lena was at his desk, trying to catch her breath.

“’Bout time you showed up,” the Brit gasped.

“What is it, Lena?”

“Look, I know you just had a real rough fight with Father Reyes,” she said, “but we got trouble.”

Jack groaned. He was hoping for an easy fix, something where he’d bark out a few orders, or even outsource to his deputies, and be able to get back upstairs before Gabriel left. But this sounded hard, like it would take real work.

At least it started sapping his erection. He was getting tired of walking around as hard as he was.

“What is it?” He asked, pulling out his chair.

“I wouldn’t sit if I were you,” Lena said. “The Anderson’s kid got shot. You know, the farming family on the outskirts of town?”

“Aw, fuck,” he spat. That finally killed his mood. “Well, guess it was only a matter of time until we got another asshole outlaw around here. Take me to them.”

“Fareeha and Jesse are already there,” Lena said, walking out the front door with him. “And Angela. She’s treating Anderson Junior.”

“That’s good.”

Jack climbed on his horse, and Lena got on her precious Emily. She led him out of the town, riding fast.

“Give me the details,” he said as they galloped along.

“Well, I was about to ride out to make a run to Denver. Got a full pack of stuff to deliver,” Lena said.
She patted the full saddle bags on either side of Emily’s flanks. Jack might’ve been riding as fast as he could, but he could tell that Emily could easily outpace his horse. “I got to the edge of Crease, and Ma Anderson stopped me, along with her two girls. Turns out they had a few last minute letters to send off. Well, I stopped, chatted a bit, but then we heard gunshots.

“Minute later, Pa Anderson ran back, screaming bloody murder. He said his son got shot, and he needed a doctor. No one ‘round here gets shot, what with their guns in your care, so that only meant that someone else had shot him, most likely an outlaw. So I ran back with Emily and got Angela. Turns out she was talking with Fareeha and Jesse. I told ‘em what happened, and they rode out. I stopped by to get you.”

A handful of seconds later, they hit the Anderson farm. The Andersons had a tall, two story house that just got a fresh coat of whitewash. Anderson the elder was especially proud of that; he had special ordered dozens of gallons last year, and spent a good amount of time to get it just right.

Outside the house were horses; Jack recognized Fareeha’s horse. Angela didn’t have a horse; she must’ve rode with Fareeha.

Sure enough, he saw Angela’s blonde hair on the porch. She was kneeling down, undoubtedly working on the poor boy who was shot. Fareeha stood on the porch, scanning the yard. Looking around, he saw Jesse on his horse, trotting around the Anderson’s property, simultaneously patrolling the edges and scanning it for threats to chase.

Jack rode up to the porch, jumping off his horse. The Andersons, the mother, father, and two daughters, were clinging to each other on the far end behind Fareeha, crying. Fareeha, meanwhile, held her rifle held tight in her arms, ready to be brought up at any second.

Angela kneeling by Anderson Junior. Her eyes were focused as she worked to save the boy’s life. She had her sleeves rolled up, which was good, considering her hands were awash in his blood. Anderson Junior’s head lolled about. He was crying, but also biting down on a leather strap, doing his best to stay quiet and failing. Next to him was a small bottle of liquor; it might help take the edge off, but not enough for his liking.

“Jack,” Fareeha said as he walked up. She nodded politely, but her voice was all business.

“Fareeha,” he said, walking up to her. “I saw Jesse on patrol.”

“Yes sir. He’s making sure the robber bastards don’t come back.”

“Robbers did this? Not outlaws?”

“The Andersons are simple farmers, they don’t have much,” she snorted. “Outlaws are men who love burning the system down. These were robbers, cowards who only want money and pick off the easy targets.”

Jack smiled; he taught Fareeha well. She knew more than enough about soldiering, but he was able to teach her everything she needed to know about the law. After all, he had a year to get her caught up on life in Wyoming territory.

“What do we know?”

“Bunch of punk-ass bitches who think they’re bigger than they are,” she snorted. “Junior filled me in before Angela went to work on him. They rode up on him a few months ago, gave him some threats, and he was young enough to fall for them. He gave them some money to keep them away from his family, and next thing you know, they think they’re the next James-Younger Gang.”
Jack couldn’t help but snort at that.

“So, they boss around a young kid who doesn’t know better, and when he wised up enough and cuts off their flow of money, they threaten him in front of his dad,” Fareeha sighed. “And when the dad don’t play ball, they actually followed through on their threat; who’d have thunk? And here we are.”

“Angela, how’s the boy doing?”

“Rough,” the doctor groaned. “The bullet punched through his lung. I’m doing the best I can, but he might lose it.”

That got Junior to really struggle.

“Will that kill him?”

“If he’s lucky, no,” she said, taking a second to mop the sweat off her brow. “If he’s not lucky… well, let’s just say I think he’ll be very lucky.”

“Good work,” Jack says. “Fareeha, if Angela needs a hand moving him to her clinic, you help her. I’ll be checking the perimeter with Jesse. Lena, you got your gun before you left; you’re with Fareeha. If something comes for the Andersons, you have my permission to put them in the ground.”

“With pleasure,” the Brit grinned.

Jack walked over to the still shocked family, giving Anderson Senior a firm clap on the shoulder.

“We’ll get the assholes who shot your son.”

“Thank you, Sheriff,” he said, tears in his eyes.

“You’re welcome.”

He climbed back on his horse, and rode out to Jesse, who was still patrolling the area by the house.

“Got anything?”

“No sir, nothing,” he sighed, gripping the reins in his offhand. Unlike Fareeha, Jesse preferred his trusty revolver instead of a rifle. Jack always thought he was foolish for passing up a long gun, but Jesse was an artist with his revolver, no matter what distance it was. “Some crops are trampled, so I can only assume this gang of bitches beat a damn quick path outta Dodge.”

“We’ll have to follow them soon,” Jack said. “I mean no disrespect, but as a former outlaw, what’s your take on this group of punks?”

“Going off what the Andersons told me, they’re just out to get some money,” Jesse said. “They’re going after someone who’s vulnerable, on the outskirts of town; they’re either cowards or they’re practicing their craft.”

“No idea which one it is?”

“Not now, no,” he sighed. “I’ll have to get a look at them, or hear ‘em talk to get a better feel on it. Sorry Jack, wish I could help you out more.”

“You’re doing plenty, Jesse,” he said. “I hate going into things blind, so anything to get a read is appreciated.”
“Think we’ll need to deputize anyone?”

“Not for this. We just need to track these bastards down.”

Orisa ground her teeth. It had been a few days, and Torbjörn and his family were already setting up shop by the river. They were far from Orisa and her house, but she could see them unpacking their things from their massive wagon.

“Brigitte is so cool,” Efi grinned. “She’s so dedicated to blacksmithing! And she’s strong, she can do so much work by herself.”

“You can do more work than her.”

“But not like her,” Efi said. “I’m not good with a hammer.”

“You’re still growing, you can get better.”

“But I’ll never be like you.”

“Efi, it’s fine,” Orisa smiled, wrapping an arm around her sister. “We all have our strengths, and we have to play to them.”

“I guess you’re right,” Efi said.

“Of course I’m right.”

That pulled a laugh from Efi.

“Let’s go over and see what they’re doing.”

Orisa did her best not to scowl.

“We have our work to do, and they have theirs.”

“But I want to be a good neighbor,” Efi said. “Everyone here was so helpful to us when we first arrived, I want to help Brigitte feel welcome.”

That got Orisa to stop. A good neighbor. That’s what she wanted to be, that’s what Father Reyes was always preaching.

That’s what made Crease so different from the plantation.

“Yes,” she made herself say, “let’s go talk.”

“We should bring some water,” her sister smiled. “They must be thirsty!”

The day was getting very warm. They filled up a few canteens with fresh, clean water, and began walking over. Orisa wasn’t looking forward to seeing Torbjörn and his smug face. But, a good neighbor would try to bury the hatchet.

They walked to the Lindholms, who were busy unloading things from their wagon. Torbjörn and his daughter were doing most of the work, but were really struggling with a massive piece of metal.
It had what looked like a small anvil at about waist height, and a strange bent-arm that hung over it. There was a sizable gap between the anvil and the bent-arm. A big bar went from the bent-arm to the rear of the device, where it was connected to a wheel at the bottom. A big bar ran the length of the device, like it was to be stepped on.

“Do you need a hand?” Orisa asked.

Torbjörn looked over, and locked eyes with her.

“We’ve got it,” he said.

“Yes please,” Brigitte gasped.

Torbjörn scowled, but the big piece of metal was clearly heavy. Orisa stepped in, relieving Brigitte. The young woman stepped away, and gratefully took a canteen of water from Efi. Orisa began lifting, and her bad knee immediately flared up, but she’d never give Torbjörn the satisfaction of seeing her hurt or slowed down.

“Oof!” She grunted. “What is this thing?”

“Something called a power hammer,” Torbjörn said. Together, they were able to lift it, and slowly bring it to the ground. “It’s going to be the most essential part of a blacksmith’s tools.”

“What’s wrong with a hammer and anvil?”

“It’s too slow. You spend most of your time wailing away at one thing when you could be making more.”

“A hammer and anvil isn’t this heavy.”

“Bah! Just wait ‘till you see this thing work.”

“Doesn’t look like it would work,” Orisa said, giving it an exaggerated look over. She knelt down to covertly rub some life back into her knee.

“That’s because it’s not hooked up,” Torbjörn said defensively. “It needs power to work; I’ll have to build a water wheel to get it up and running.”

“A what?”

“A big wheel with paddles on it,” he said. “The river turns it, and it lets me use the power hammer.”

“You know what would be easier to use?” Orisa grinned.

“A damn hammer and anvil, I know,” he huffed. “Yes, a power hammer requires a lot of set up; it has a very high initial cost. But when it’s running, it’s most certainly worth the trouble.”

“I’m not too sure.”

“Just you wait, you’ll see,” he grumbled.

Orisa stood up, a grin on her face. Torbjörn brought this all the way with him? It was a waste of time and money, she could tell.

“Aah! Gustavo, get back here!”
A blur ran up to Orisa, followed by Brigitte. It was a cat, pawing at her leg.

“Gustavo, you’ll give me a heart attack,” Brigitte gasped. “I was afraid you’d run away!”

“Oh my God, he’s so cute!” Efi gushed.

Gustavo the cat had shiny gray fur and emerald eyes. He looked up at Orisa with curious intent.

“Aw, he’s sweet,” Orisa smiled, reaching down to scratch his ears. Gustavo purred at that.

“He’s friendly,” Brigitte smiled, scooping the cat up. “I found him on the ship from Sweden. He was a half-starved kitty then.”

“You should have seen her.” That was Ingrid, the mother, walking up. “Brigitte stayed up all night feeding him milk. She was with him every step of the way.”

“You must love cats,” Orisa said.

“I do!” Brigitte smiled. She scratched Gustavo’s chin, making him purr in contentment.

“Well, if Gustavo isn’t gonna run away, we need to get back to work,” Torbjörn said. “We need to make a quick water wheel to get this forge up and running. Nothing fancy, once we build a proper house and workshop, then we can go for broke.”

“We should get back to work, too,” Orisa said.

“Orisa, can’t I play with Brigitte a little more?” Efi pleaded.

That made Orisa pause. There were a few children Efi’s age in Crease, but her sister was always more interested in the various projects they had. Orisa was getting scared that Efi might not know how to make friends.

Hearing her want to play with a girl that was around her age was a bit of a shock, but a pleasant one.

“You can, but only when they’re done for the day,” she said. “They’re new, and have a lot of work to do.”

“No, Brigitte, it’s fine,” Ingrid said. “You can play with your new friend.”

“You’re sure, Mama?”

“Positive,” Ingrid smiled.

“Come on,” Efi smiled. “I can show you around town! Oh, maybe we can show Gustavo off to Mama! Not your Mama, but Mama Ana, she’s the cook at the saloon. You’ll love her, everyone does!”

The two girls ran off, Gustavo sitting snugly in Brigitte’s arms.

“Thank you for letting them play together,” Orisa said.

“No need to thank me,” Ingrid said. “I want Brigitte to have more friends here than she did back in Sweden; she rarely left the forge. I was starting to wonder if she knew how to talk to other people.”

“That sounds like Efi.”
“Then this must be God’s hand at work,” Ingrid smiled. “Seeing those two get along so well, so fast, it’s a beautiful thing. It’s like they’re long-lost, unrelated sisters!”

“Yes, no girl should be chained to a forge when she should be playing,” Torbjörn said. “But that just means that I have more work to do.”

*Be a good neighbor, Orisa thought. Be better than what you were, just like what Father Reyes preached.*

“Would you mind if I help?” She asked. “I can give you a hand with the bigger things.”

“That’d be lovely!” Ingrid said.

Torbjörn didn’t seem too thrilled. He looked how Orisa felt. But it did feel good to be offering the help. It took Orisa back to when they first made their way to Crease, how everyone from Sheriff Morrison to Father Reyes to Madam Lacroix herself helped them get set up.

She could pay that forward.

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The plains stretched out for endless miles, the tall grass rustling in the wind. There were only a few rolling hills that stood out, but having seen the mountains to their back, they were hardly more than small bumps.

Off into the distance, almost directly behind them, Fareeha could see Mr. Rutledge’s cattle herd. They were so far away they were practically dots on the horizon, but they were there, along with a cloud of dust that hovered around them from the cowboys working to contain them.

Finally, she could see the forests that populated the mountains. The river that ran through Crease did an excellent job cutting the areas apart; cross the river, and you’d be in forests and mountains. Cross it the other way, and you’ll be in plains and gentle, rolling hills.

It was all very pretty, a landscape she never grew tired of seeing, or the feeling of the wind against her back. But she was working, which took some of the fun out of it.

“See anything?” Jack asked.

“Not a goddamn thing,” she sighed.

“Shit,” he groaned. “These punks beat a real quick path. First they outrun me and Jesse, now they’re getting away from us.”

“They sure know how to run,” Fareeha said. She swung her leg over her horse and jumped to the ground. The tracks in the dirt and mud that they were following were very well defined. Looking at the deep hoof marks, she counted for a total of four horses that were running from the law.

“How old are those tracks?”

Fareeha prodded at the dried mud. It crumbled easily.

“Over a day, I’d hazard a guess.”
“Those poor horses,” Jack said, shaking his head. “Well, they’ve sure got the fear of God in ‘em. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone other than Lena and Emily run that fast. And they shot the poor kid up three days ago; if they keep this up, these bastards might run all the way to Utah by the end of the month.”

“That’ll be something to see,” Fareeha said, climbing back on her horse. “What do we do now?”

Jack stood up in his saddle, scanning the horizon. Fareeha took a few seconds to check her rifle.

“We can’t go too far,” he said, sitting back down. “We’re getting too far away from Crease as it is. And a town without a sheriff isn’t much of a town.”

“So we let ‘em go?”

“We can’t chase them, but we put the word out,” Jack said. “Olivia is a damn good artist, we’ll get her to make some sketches and I’ll write up an order for a judge. Lena’s gonna be making another ride to Denver soon, so in about a week, these kids will have wanted posters going up in the area.”

“It’s not much.”

“It’s the best we can do.”

“I know, but I was hoping to haul these punks in after what they did to Anderson Junior.”

“Yea, I know,” Jack said. “I’d love to throw the book at ‘em too. But we have to be realistic. We’re not bounty hunters, we’re just the law. And these assholes haven’t done enough to warrant us whipping up a posse to chase ‘em down.”

Fareeha grinned at that. Part of her would love to get a team together and go hunting for bad guys.

Together, they wheeled their horses around, and began riding back to Crease. It was the late morning when they turned around, and almost nightfall by the time they got back. By then, Fareeha was completely worn out, as was her horse.

“Lord, I’m hungry,” Jack groaned as they hitched their horses to the rail outside their office.

“Tell me about it. I could eat a horse,” Fareeha said. Then she realized what she said. “Metaphorically, I meant.”

“Oh, I got that,” Jack laughed.

Fareeha patted her horse’s flank as she drank from the hitch’s trough.

“Come on, first round’s on me,” Jack said.

Now that she could get behind. They walked into the saloon, which was filling up with the dinner crowd.

“Fareeha! Over here!”

Smiling, she walked over to Angela. She sat with Reinhardt and her mother, who was becoming visibly pregnant.

“Come, Sheriff, sit with us,” Reinhardt said in his jovial, booming voice.

“Thank you,” he smiled, pulling up a chair.
“Mother, how are you doing?” Fareeha asked, sitting next to Angela.

“Getting the feeling for being pregnant again,” she smiled, giving Fareeha a quick kiss. “Madam Lacroix is nice enough to give me the time off that I need. Normally I’d be in the kitchen, on my feet, but I just needed this break.”

“That’s good of her,” Jack said.

“Scuse me, coming through.” Everyone backed up as Olivia brought a tray of food to the table. “Here you go, Mama. All you need for you and the little bundle of joy.”

“Thank you, Olivia,” she smiled.

“De nada,” Olivia beamed. “Sorry everyone, you’ll have to wait. I only got an order for Mama.”

“That’s fine, we just got here,” Fareeha said.

“Anything else?” Olivia asked Ana. “I can bring you some cold water.”

“Yes, please,” her mother said. “A big pitcher of it.”

“No problem.” Olivia paused. “Mama, I’ve been meaning to ask…I don’t want this to come off the wrong way, but…but did you want to get pregnant?”

“Not right away!” Ana laughed. “This came as a surprise. A lovely surprise, yes, but it was still a shock.”

“I see,” Olivia said. “I should’ve offered to help track your cycle.”

“Track her cycle?” Angela asked. “You’d do that for Ana?”

“Sure, I do it for every girl working here,” she said. “Even myself! Ever wonder why there’s not a whole pack of bastards running around? That’s because of me.”

“Keeping a whore house free of babies sounds like magic,” Jack laughed.

“Ha! Please, it’s easy,” Olivia smiled. “I’m good at picking things up. Attitudes, tells, bluffs, and even when that time of month rolls around. I help Madam Lacroix keep the girls on rotation, so nothing too scary happens. Besides, we’re all getting fairly synced up ‘round here, it’s pretty easy.”

“Thank you for offering. I think I’ll take you up on that when this baby is born,” Ana said. “Waking up with this bundle of joy kicking around is more than enough of a reminder that childbirth is for the young. I won’t be planning on having any more after this.”

“Having babies might be for the young, but not for all of us!” Olivia said, walking off.

“Have you had any luck finding the robbers?” Angela asked.

“No, they’re running hard and they’re running long,” Fareeha said. “They’re way out past the boundaries of Crease.”

“We can’t have robbers running from our laws,” Reinhardt grumbled.

“Yes, we can’t, but there’s not much else we can do,” Jack said. “Tomorrow, I’ll start working on making wanted posters with Olivia. Then we’ll get Lena to take the orders to Denver. They’ll be branded robbers, with a price on their heads. That should keep ‘em out of the way, or even make
them turn themselves in. If they want the money, they could donate their bounties to their families.”

“Speaking of families, how is the boy doing?” Ana asked.

“Anderson Junior is coming along fine,” Angela smiled. “He’s as healthy as a horse, gunshot aside. His lung is fine, he won’t need to lose it, and he’s bouncing back much better than I thought he would.”

“The family must be relieved.”

“You have no idea.”

“Then let’s try something,” Jack said. “I can start teaching people what to do when people show up at their door, demanding money for safety. That can help the next group who finds themselves under the gun.”

“I like that idea,” Reinhardt smiled. “Education is important! And learning how to deal with robbers is a great boon.”

Olivia came back with the water, as well as more plates of food. The talking only grew as everyone dug in.

A loud pounding woke Fareeha up. She was sleeping heavily, her head buried in Angela’s shoulder, their limbs tangled together. Blinking off the sleep, she tried to pull herself out of bed.

“Coming,” she groggily cried. What time was it? Whatever time it was, the sun was nowhere near rising; the moon was still high in the sky.

“Who is it?” Angela groaned.

“I don’t know. Stay here.”

Fareeha stumbled through the dark house, adjusting her sleeping gown. The front door was pounded on again.

“Hold on! I’m coming!”

She stubbed her toe as she made her way to the stairs. Finally, she was at the front door. The mysterious knocker had a torch in his hand.

“Jesse? What the hell are you doing up?” She asked.

“Those robber kids are back,” he said. “They just shot up the Anderson house.”

Word that the robbers returned to the Anderson’s home was the talk of the town; but not to Orisa.
She ate breakfast in the saloon, hearing people whispering about what happened. Fareeha and Jesse had stayed up all night watching over the house. The robbers had shot it up, but fortunately, no one was hurt; yet.

Sheriff Morrison was talking with Mayor Reinhardt about their next step in getting rid of the robbers. But Orisa was dreading something else. Ever since she woke up, she had heard the kiss of metal-on-metal.

That meant that Torbjörn had finally set up his precious power hammer.

It was not very loud, but Orisa was acutely aware of it. It had begun in the morning, and hadn’t stopped yet. It was pounding away at whatever project he had in mind for almost an hour. That made her stomach twist into knots.

What was he building out there?

She picked at her food, then realized she had barely eaten anything. The anxiety was getting to her, but she would be damned if she wasted any food. She forced herself to finish her meal, and walk outside. Efi was quick to rise so she could play with Brigitte, before they were both dragged off to their respective works.

Walking out of the saloon, Orisa saw Torbjörn and his wife, Ingrid, by the little plot of land they claimed as their own down by the river. A large wheel had been built, and set in the river. The strong current pushed it, turning a long shaft. That shaft went to the power hammer, which was making the noise.

The sight of it made Orisa stop. Just as Torbjörn had said, she could see that it was worth the trouble of lugging it along and setting it up. The hammer that did the actual hitting was the rotating arm on the top of the machine; it was rising and falling like a piston on a train, hitting the hot forged metal with the same amount of force that she hit it with. But it never got tired, it never took a break, or stopped to catch its breath like she did.

It just worked and worked and worked…

The sight of the power hammer in action blinded her. She didn’t see Mr. Rutledge or his rancher friend Jamie Fawkes until she was mere feet from them.

Torbjörn was working the power hammer. With a pair of tongs, he took a piece of metal from his wife, red hot from a simple forge, and set it on the power hammer. He stood on the bar at the bottom, and the hammer went to work, hitting it over and over again. He moved the metal this way and that, and before long, he took it off, and dipped it in water.

“Another perfect horseshoe,” he smiled, holding it up.

Just as he said, it was a perfectly formed horseshoe. Orisa was stunned; he made a horseshoe in half the time she could, without wearing his arms out.

“Amazing,” Mr. Rutledge said, taking the warm piece of metal.

“Damn amazing,” Jamie said. “You just made enough shoes for two horses, right in front of us!”

Orisa looked down. Sure enough, there were other horseshoes on the ground, more than she could make in half a day.

“That’s the beauty of a mechanized forge,” Torbjörn smiled. “We can shoe all of your horses in a
matter of days, and for a lower price than what you were paying.”

“I think you’ve just earned yourself a contract,” Mr. Rutledge said, extending his hand. Torbjörn shook it.

Orisa suddenly regretted eating all that food; she was suddenly feeling sick to her stomach. Making horseshoes for Mr. Rutledge had been her job, and it had paid her more than well enough.

“Before I go back and draw up the contract,” Mr. Rutledge said, “I have another question.”

Jamie stepped forward, handing a twisted piece of metal to Torbjörn.

“One of my wagons ruined another tie,” Mr. Rutledge said. “We use this on the chuck wagon. How much would it cost to fix?”

“This is supposed to keep the suspension in place?” Torbjörn said, looking the piece over. “Can’t be done.”

That made Mr. Rutledge pause.

“What do you mean, ‘it can’t be done?’” He asked.

“This is a very, very strange tie,” Torbjörn said. “That means it’s a non-standard part. I don’t deal with non-standard parts. If you want me to make a tie, I’ll have to examine the wagon, come up with the closest approximation to pre-existing forms, then create the parts, and then I’ll have to practically re-build the wagon.”

“That’s insane!”

“That’s the beauty of standardized parts,” he said. “Once it breaks, it’s a simple matter of making the same part that broke, and bam! It can be fixed in an hour.”

“You want me to have you re-build all of my wagons?” Mr. Rutledge sputtered. “No! They’re all working, I’m not doing that!”

“But they’re not standardized, they’re randomly made.”

“And they still work! You’re trying to gouge me!”

“Standardized, replaceable parts are the future,” Torbjörn said, his voice rising at the slight. He pointed to his power hammer. “Standardized, replaceable parts made that power hammer. Standardized, replaceable parts made those horseshoes, all of them, in under an hour! If you let me standardize your wagons, they can be fixed in no time at all.”

“And how much time would it take to ‘standardize’ all of them?” Mr. Rutledge sneered.

“I’ll have to examine the wagons and see what work needs to be done. But if each is individualized, it can take days.”

“Days?! I’m not stopping my business for days—!”

The two quickly began yelling at each other; Torbjörn about the benefits of his precious standardized, replaceable parts, and Mr. Rutledge about the downtime and impending bill to get them to Torbjörn’s insane standards.

Orisa smiled. She knew what had to be done, Mr. Rutledge’s wagons had busted ties before. She
walked up to Jamie.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Can I see that part?”

“Yea, please, take it,” he sighed. “This tosser is just flippin’ mad.”

She took the part, and could see where it broke. She ran back to her house, ignoring the pain in her knee. Both she and Efi kept the forge hot, should the need arise. And right now, the need had most certainly arose.

Orisa pumped the bellows, and the coals roared to life. She looked at the tie, picked a piece of iron that was the appropriate length, and pushed it into the coals. Her heart beat in her chest, strong and even, as she worked the billows. Soon, the rod was red-hot.

Putting on her gloves and grabbing her tongs, she pulled it from the coals, and brought it over to her anvil. She hefted her trusty hammer up, brought it down.

Using the busted tie as a template, she began forming the new tie. Soon she was drenched with sweat, but she couldn’t stop herself even if she wanted to. She moved back and forth between the anvil and the forge, heating and beating the tie to shape. Soon, it was identical to the broken wagon tie, minus the part that was broken.

She plunged the replacement tie in water, making it cool enough to handle, and ran back. Fortunately, Torbjörn and Mr. Rutledge were still fighting.

“Excuse me, Mr. Rutledge?” She said, walking up.

Both men turned on her; Mr. Rutledge with agitation, and Torbjörn from anger.

“I couldn’t help but overhear you talking with Torbjörn,” she said. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you broke another wagon tie. I just finished a replacement part for it.”

She held up the new tie. Mr. Rutledge took it, looking it over.

“It might be finished, but if you’d like, I can heat treat it so it can last a little longer,” she grinned. “The usual rates would apply.”

“Now this,” Mr. Rutledge said, shaking the tie as if to prove a point, “this is the good work I expect to see in a blacksmith.”

Torbjörn bristled at that.

“But it’s not a standard part!” He sputtered. “You’ll have to make a new one to form every time it breaks! It’s just not worth the time!”

“I think it’s worth the time of this blacksmith,” Mr. Rutledge said. He handed the tie back to her. “Give it the heat treatment. Take as much time as you need, I’d like this to last.”

“With pleasure,” she smiled. Torbjörn glared at her with a burning fury.

“I’ll have to re-think this horseshoe contract,” he said. “I’ll let you know when I’m back. And Orisa, name your price; I’ll gladly pay for the good work you always do.”

“I’ll let you know what it is when you return.”

Mr. Rutledge nodded, then walked away, Jamie following him.
Orisa tried to hide her smile, but couldn’t. So she walked back to her house, a spring in her step that made her busted knee feel as good as new.

She could feel Torbjörn’s piercing glare on her back, but she didn’t care. It looked like there was one job that even the power hammer couldn’t do; she still had a way of making her living.

Chapter End Notes

Orisa and Torbjörn sure are at each other’s throats. Is this town big enough for the both of ‘em?
Efi ran through the mostly empty streets of Crease in the early morning light. Word of the attack on the Andersons had scared the town; everyone was getting scared to go out. Everyone was wondering what was in store for the town. Was it another attack like when the Deadlock Gang arrived? Or are these young punks just like all the others who had their chance to make their mark, and failed?

Efi thought the entire thing was ridiculous. The Deadlock Gang was over twenty strong, and Sheriff Morrison said these robbers were only four, barely more than a posse. Everyone was just getting in over themselves.

Then again, the Deadlock Gang had left quite an impression…

She ran to Mayor Reinhardt’s house, and knocked on the back door.

“Ah, Efi,” Mama Ana said, opening the door. “Right on time.”

“Thanks for letting me come over, Mama,” she said, giving Ana a big hug.

“It’s not a problem,” she said, returning it with gusto. She led Efi into the kitchen.

“And how is the baby?”

“Oof, a lot more trouble than my Fareeha, that’s for sure,” Mama said, patting her large belly. She had to be halfway through her pregnancy. “I’m just glad Madam Lacroix is letting me start later and later. This is truly Reinhardt’s child.”

“Yes, the Wilhelms are famous for their lively spirits,” Reinhardt said, already sitting at the kitchen table.

“Good morning, Mr. Mayor!”

“Please, you can call me Reinhardt, little one,” he smiled. “I like to be accessible to the citizens of Crease.”

“Then good morning, Mr. Reinhardt!”

“I suppose that’s the best we can do,” he said with a smile. “How is your sister?”

“Oriasa is fine,” Efi sighed. “But she’s still mad at the Lindholms.”

“That’s understandable,” Mama said, sitting down next to her husband. “Losing Mr. Rutledge’s contract is quite a blow, especially for someone trying to establish their business.”
“I just want them to stop hating each other.”

There was another knock at the door, and Efi leapt to her feet, running to answer it.

“Brigitte!”

“Efi!” The Swedish girl wrapped her in another hug. She held a bag full of metal, and it clinked as it moved about. “I’m sorry, but it’s getting a little harder to sneak away.”

“Your papa is still hopping mad at Orisa?”

“Yes, he is. He still doesn’t want me to have anything to do with her,” Brigitte sighed. She walked in, and stood up a little straighter seeing Reinhardt. “Good morning, Mr. Mayor.”

“Ach, all this professional courtesy,” he groaned.

“Dear, you should have known you’d get this when you became mayor,” Mama laughed, setting a hand on her husband’s shoulder.

“Yes, but I didn’t think I’d be ‘Mr. Mayor’ by everyone…”

“Papa taught me to respect our elders, and those in power,” Brigitte said.

“Then you better get used to it, Mr. Mayor,” Mama laughed.

“Not you, too!” Reinhardt tried to sound mad, but he could only laugh. Efi and Brigitte giggled as the two of them kissed.

“Well, I better get up and see how my city is behaving itself,” Reinhardt said, getting up. “This Anderson business is scaring people.”

“I thought those robbers ran away,” Brigitte said.

“They did,” Reinhardt said, “but Jesse thinks they decided they could become truly great robbers. They must’ve found something that resembles guts, and came back. Now everyone is scared of another Deadlock shootout. I have to calm them.”

“You’ll do great, dear,” Mama said. “I know you will.”

“With those words, how can I fail?” He smiled. Reinhardt bowed to his wife before he left. Mama blew him a kiss, and he made a show of catching it before he closed the door.

“Well, I better get you two some breakfast,” Mama said, getting up.

“Mrs. Mayor, you don’t have to,” Brigitte protested.

“When has that stopped Mama?” Efi laughed.

“She’s right, you know,” Mama said. “I like spoiling you. But if it makes you feel better, Brigitte, I had already made enough breakfast for me, Reinhardt, and you two.”

She opened the door to a cast iron stove, and pulled out two plates full of food. The smell of sour dough biscuits, gravy, bacon, and eggs filled the room.

“Thank you, Mama,” both girls smiled.
“You two are very welcome,” Ana beamed. “I do have to get to work at the saloon. I might not be able to do much, but I can still manage the day to day things. You two know the rules; when you’re finished playing together, dishes in the sink, and close the door behind you.”

The two girls nodded.

“Thank you for letting us play here.”

“No one should be denied playing with their friends,” Ana said. “Take care.”

She closed the door, and Efi was almost bouncing in her seat.

“Did you bring them?” She asked, eating as she talked.

“Of course,” Brigitte said. She opened the bag, and pulled out a variety of gears, sprockets, and a metal bar to hold them in place. Each gear had a metal rod sticking up from it, so it can be set into the bar and turned by hand. “These are the standardized gears my Papa is so proud of.”

“God, look at them,” Efi said, holding up each gear. “How did you make them?”

“We have a jig that cuts the teeth. Here, let me show you how they work.”

Brigitte loaded a medium gear onto the metal bar, then a much bigger one right next to it. The two touched; now when one moved, the other moved, too.

“Papa calls this gear ratios,” she said. “It’s based on the teeth that the gears have. You take the gear that’s moving, and match it to the gear that’s being turned. This big one has thirty-six teeth, while the small one has twenty-eight. So, it’s a 36:28 gear ratio.”

“Then how does it move?”

“The teeth ease into each other. See?” Brigitte moved the big gear, and the smaller one turned.

“It looked like the smaller gear moved more than the big one.”

“That’s because it did! Papa taught me that to see how far the gear that’s moving will travel would be to divide the ratio.”

“So thirty-six divided by twenty-eight is…” Efi thought, “One and a half? No, one and a two.”

“It’s scary how you can do all that in your head, and do it so fast,” Brigitte said. “I need paper and pencil and a minute.”

“I think it’s scary how you can pick up those hammers and just hit metal all day long.”

“Not as well as your sister, of course,” Brigitte laughed. “Here, try it.”

Efi began turning the big gear, feeling the slight resistance in her hands.

“What happens if we change it, get a big gear to move a small gear?

“Try it,” Brigitte said, handing her more gears. Efi pulled the gears out, and put the biggest gear in, connected to the smallest.

“Wow, that’s a lot harder.”
“That’s because it has less teeth than the big one. The big one has fifty-two teeth, and the small one has twelve.”

“So a ratio of…four and three?”

“It sounds right. See how hard it is? That’s because when you move the big gear once around, the small one moves over four times. That’s if you want to really go somewhere.”

“So the closest to a ratio of one, the easier it will be.”

“And it will take you the least distance.”

“I get it,” Efi smiled. “And the bigger the number, the harder it is, but the more power there is.”

“Absolutely!”

“And the gears change direction when you move it?”

“Yup. For each gear, the direction changes. See how you moved that gear left, but the small one moved right? If we add another gear, like this, now the third gear is going left again.”

“Wow! This is so cool!”

“Isn’t it?” Brigitte said. “We use gears like this all the time. In wagons, in the power hammer, even in trains! But we haven’t seen those in some time.”

“Trains don’t come out to Crease,” Efi said.

“Darn. I was hoping to work on them one day.”

“These move so smooth,” Efi said, spinning the gears. “Are they really metal?”

“Yup, they are. But the teeth make it easy for it to move.”

Inspiration hit Efi.

“Orisa’s knee brace!”

“What about it?”

“I can use these!” She said. “Her brace helps her walk, but it’s so stiff. She’s always fighting it.”

“What happened to your sister’s knee, anyways?”

“She got shot fighting off the Deadlock Gang,” Efi said, her chest puffing out.

“Wow! I mean, it’s terrible that she got shot, but fighting off a gang? Wow!”

“Uh-huh! She’s so brave! But her knee needs a brace so she can walk. And the metal pieces stick, rub together. Can I use some gears to make a new one?”

“How would that help?”

“We put a small gear at her knee, and a big gear to be driven by her leg,” Efi said. “That gives it resistance, so she can put some weight on it. But it will also move, letting her move about without jamming!”
“That’s incredible, I’d never have thought about that,” Brigitte gasped. “And because it moves, it
helps her walk. But it doesn’t help too much, so she can still push off it!”

Efi was dying to try it out.

“How soon do you think we can test build one?” She asked.

“I don’t know, Papa wants me to help him as much as he can,” Brigitte said, her enthusiasm dying.
“I don’t know how many gears I can get. And we’ll have to build a new mounting for it.”

“Can you help me, please?” Efi asked. “I want my sister to walk better.”

“But we can’t use her forge, she doesn’t like Papa as well.”

Efi’s face fell.

“It would be so much easier if they worked together,” she said, “but they hate each other.”

Now it was Brigitte’s turn to have a revelation.

“I got it!”


“How we can get them to stop hating each other!”

“What? How?”

“First, we’ll need to make this new brace,” Brigitte said. “Can you design it?”

“Can I? I’ve designed everything we’ve ever made!”

“Then I can make whatever you design. It'll take a few days, but I think I should be able to use a
small anvil to try a few things out.”

“Then what happens?”

Brigitte told Efi. A massive grin broke across her face.

“Let’s do it!”

Dinner at the Anderson’s house was tense. Given what was going to happen, it was easy to
sympathize. Angela sat at the table, eating next to Fareeha. They both sat opposite of Anderson
Senior. His wife and daughters had left with Jack and Jesse earlier in the day.

“Don’t worry,” Angela told the fretting man, doing her best to smile. “We’re sure this plan would
work.”

“I sure hope so,” Anderson Senior said. “Sheriff Morrison and Deputy McCree rode off just as the
sun set.”

“Don’t forget that I’m here,” Fareeha said.
“And I’m thankful, Deputy Amari. But you didn’t even bring your horse; the two of you rode in with the Sheriff and McCree. It doesn’t even look like you’re actually here.”

“That’s the plan,” Fareeha said.

“I sure hope it works out.”

“Don’t worry, Jack and Jesse rode away with your wife and daughters; even if things go sideways, they’ll be fine.”

“If things go sideways, what will happen to you?”

“That’s where I come in,” Angela smiled. “Well, me and my doctor’s bag.”

“And what happens if something happens to you?”

“That’s what I told her,” Fareeha said, “but she wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Everyone is in on this plan; it’s not just you and me.”

“Don’t worry, this is a good plan that Fareeha came up with,” Angela said. “But it needs someone to lure the robbers in. Having a doctor on hand during a gunfight is always nice, so why not have her lure the robbers here?”

“You’re that happy being the bait, the goat tether for these wolves?”

“Let’s be fair to wolves,” Fareeha said. “They respect the territory of other predators. These boys are dogs that have rabies. It’s better to put them down right now, before they get worse.”

“And I want to do my part to keep this town safe,” Angela said. “It’s been good to me, and I want the best for it.”

Anderson Senior nodded. He heard the conviction in her voice, and knew he wouldn’t talk her out of it.

“Then thank you, the both of you, for helping,” he said. “And how is my son doing?”

“He’s doing much better. If he keeps improving, he can go home in a few days.”

“Thank Christ,” Anderson Senior sighed. “Can I get you any more food or drinks?”

“Oh, I’m full,” Fareeha said, pushing her plate away. “But I’ll take more water.”

“The same for me, please,” Angela said.

Anderson Senior refilled their cups, and bussed the dishes.

“The sun is setting,” Fareeha said. “You said these assholes come early in the night?”

“Yes ma’am, they do.”

“Then let’s get ready. You better get to your room. You know what to do if the shooting starts, right?”

“Yea, I do,” Anderson Senior said. “Stay down and wait for the all-clear.”

“Exactly,” Fareeha said.
He nodded, and walked off.

“This is a good plan,” Angela said.

“I know it is,” Fareeha said. “But he’s right; you’re the goat tether. I don’t like leaving you out for those bastards.”

“But I got the best woman in the West looking after me,” she said, stealing a kiss.

Fareeha did her best to not giggle. She was on the job, and couldn’t afford to look like some blushing schoolgirl. But she wanted to; looking at her, Angela knew she wanted nothing more than to blush and giggle, and even kiss her back.

The two lit a few lamps, retired to the sofa, and waited. Angela pulled out a book, and started reading. Fareeha took out an eye patch and set it on her right eye.

“What’s that for?”

“An old trick from the army,” she grinned. “If you put an eye patch on, after a few minutes, it helps you see in the dark.”

“I feel even safer,” Angela said, stealing another kiss.

“You know I have to work, right?” Fareeha croaked.

“Oh, I know,” Angela grinned. “Think of that as a prelude for when you finish this mess.”

That made Fareeha blush something awful. Angela went to reading, sitting as demurely as possible to further tease her Fareeha, who went to checking and double checking her rifle.

Fareeha stayed away from the windows. At first, she gently tapped her foot, then she went to fiddling with her rifle, then she folded her arms and closed her eyes.

“You’re not sleeping, are you?” Angela asked, peeking over the pages of her book.

“Just waiting,” Fareeha said. “Mother would say I’m meditating.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t know. I always pictured meditation as something glamorous. This is just me measuring my breath, and killing time.”

“Well, I think you look glamorous,” Angela grinned.

That got Fareeha to blush and squirm.

They waited. Fareeha was the picture of calm, but Angela’s heart was picking up. Shouldn’t the robbers show up by now? Soon she was the one who was nervously tapping her foot.

Suddenly, she heard horses riding in.

“Is that them?” Angela asked.

“Anderson!” A voice from outside hollered. “Anderson, git out here!”

“Sure is,” Fareeha said, getting to her feet. “Remember the plan.”
Angela nodded, and ran to the door. Fareeha, meanwhile, quietly made her way upstairs. Angela opened the door, taking a lantern with her. Outside were the robbers. Just as they suspected, it was four boys who could barely be considered men.

“Dr. Ziegler?” The lead boy said, clearly taken aback. He was trying to grow a mustache, but was having trouble.

“In the flesh,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“You ain’t supposed to be here.”

“I’m here to help, just as a doctor would do.”

“We want Anderson.”

“You can talk to me.”

The lead boy snorted.

“What, you want to pay us for safety now?”

“Is that what your deal is?”

“Damn right it is,” he said, puffing his chest out. “Junior paid us to stay away from the farm. When he couldn’t pay us, we talked to his pappy, but he didn’t want to pay us. So we shot Junior, to show him we meant business.”

“All this for a few dollars more?”


“You could have taken jobs around town. Joined Mr. Rutledge, seen America.”

“We want what’s ours, and we want it now, not later,” the boy spat.

Angela shook her head.

“Then I’m sorry, but there’s not much I can help you with.” She turned to look at the other boys. They were nervous, but had a look on them. They were hungry. They had tasted money; stolen, easily earned money, and they wanted more.

Fareeha was right; they were like dogs who had just gotten rabies. They had to be stopped for the good of everyone.

“You sure you wanna go down that route?” The leader said. “We got some money, and we like it. But we really had a taste for women, women we don’t want to pay for. Right now, you fit the bill.”

Angela couldn’t help but sneer.

“Is that how you threatened the Andersons?” She demanded.

“Their girls are looking good. Hell, even Mrs. Anderson still got some figure left to her.”

As tempted as she was to simply throw these boys to the law, Angela knew she had to give them the chance to surrender.
“This is your last chance,” she said. “Surrender, and you’ll get a better sentence.”

The boys laughed.

“We don’t see any law here.”

“Not now you don’t.”

“The law’ll take too long to get here,” the boy grinned, getting off his horse. “We can have a lot of fun with you ‘till then.”

Angela tossed the lantern. It sailed over the railing, into the little pit that Jesse dug in the early morning. The lantern shattered, igniting the dozens of kerosene soaked rags that were in the little pit.

It blossomed into a fireball. The boy’s horses reared, spooked. The fire blazed, briefly turning the night into day.

“Bitch,” the lead boy spat, pulling his gun. “What the fuck was that about?”

But he was screwing his eyes shut. The fireball had killed his night vision; Angela could see him trying to blink away the brilliant effect of the fire as he aimed at her. She dropped to her knees and crawled into the house, just as the bullets started flying.

Just as she hoped, the shots went wide, hitting the house, but so far flying over her head. Wood splintered as the house was shot up again. They boys were hooting and hollering, no doubt having the time of their lives.

That was, until Angela heard the sharp crack of Fareeha’s rifle. One boy screamed, falling to the ground.

“Mac?” One gasped.

Fareeha shot again, and the second boy’s horse reared as the boy fell, dragging the reins with him.

“Shit! Long gun! Get out of here!” The leader yelled, getting back onto his horse.

Him and the remaining boy turned and bolted. They rode out into the darkness of the planes. In the distance, Angela could see two lanterns light themselves.

Jack and Jesse had carried the Anderson women back to town, but had dropped them off and looped back as the sun set. They had spent the night waiting for the boys to return, and to cut off their escape.

“Drop it!”

Angela was barely able to hear Jesse scream that in the distance. The staccato cracks of pistols was faint, but louder than his shout. That lead to more shots, and one boy screamed. The stairs pounded as Fareeha ran down, the eye patch flipped up.

“Are you okay?”

Angela pulled her in tight, kissing her deeply.

“I am now,” she grinned.

“Good,” Fareeha grinned. “Jack and Jesse should have the other two wrapped up.”
“And I should check on the boys that were shot,” Angela said. “I told you this was a good plan.”

“Lure them in, and round ’em up,” Fareeha laughed. “We used that a few times back in the war. Glad to know it still works.”

Angela grabbed her bag, and went to the boys. They were rolling in the dirt, crying and sobbing, clutching at their arms or legs.

“Nice shooting,” Angela said.

“I learned from the best,” Fareeha smiled.

“You boys will have some nice scars from this,” Angela said, opening her bag. “That is, if you let me work. If you don’t let me work, then you’d best hope nothing gets worse.”

“Hey, Anderson,” Fareeha yelled. “It’s all good!”

The boys thrashed and screamed as she went to work closing the bullet wounds. From the distance, horses rode up.

“Good hunting, Jack?” Fareeha asked.

“Damn good hunting,” the sheriff said. He and Jesse led two horses back. One boy sat on the horse, while the other’s body was draped across the saddle, tied in place. From the house, Anderson Senior walked out.

“I-is it over?” He asked.

“Over and done for,” Jesse said. “These punks won’t be hurting anyone.”

Anderson looked at the dead body draped across the horse.

“We gave him a chance,” Jesse said. “He didn’t take it.”

Anderson nodded.

“I can’t say I’m glad that a boy is dead, but he threatened my daughters.”

“As long as I’m sheriff, no one threatens anyone,” Jack said.

“I can see. Thank you all, so very much.”

“All in a day’s work,” Jesse said, tipping his hat with a charming smile. “Now, if Dr. Ziegler is done, let’s get these punks into jail, and hit the hay. It’s too late to be up and about.”

Angela traded a look with Fareeha. They both knew there wouldn’t be much rest for them tonight.

Orisa pulled herself up, shaking off the heavy sleep that kept insisting that she lay back down. It was the morning, and she had work to do. She had to put that damn knee brace back on.

Groaning, she pulled on a shirt and jeans and was about to slide the brace on when there was a knock at her door.
“Come in, Efi.”

Efi opened the door, doing her best to hide a grin.

“Good morning,” she smiled. Orisa saw a bag behind her back.

“And a good morning to you, too,” she said. “What do you have?”

“My latest creation.”

“For me?”

“That course!”

Orisa couldn’t help but smile.

“You know I love seeing what you make,” she said.

Efi handed it over. It was a bag from the general store. Orisa opened it, and pulled out a new metal leg brace.

“Freshly made,” Efi said. “Should be better than the one you have.”

The new brace had small gears mounted to it, just at the knee joint.

“This looks fancy.”

“Try it!”

Efi was bouncing on the balls of her feet. Orisa had seen her that way plenty of times; all when she had made something, and wanted to see how it did.

Grinning, she slid the new brace into place, and tightened the leather straps. Orisa stood up, and nearly pitched forward. She was so used to the brace fighting her movements, she had to put more muscle behind simple things like walking. But this brace smoothly moved; it moved so well, it threw her balance off.

“This is something.”

She started walking, pacing up and down her room. Orisa kept an eye on the brace. As her leg moved, the gears spun in near silence. Her old brace would creak and jam, but this one never so much as hiccupped.

Orisa bent her knees, sitting on her haunches. It took a little effort to correct her balance, but the brace let her move, never jamming, but gave her enough support to move about without aggravating her knee.

“Efi, this is amazing.”

“How does it feel?”

“It’s like I’m not wearing the brace at all. It’s like I was never shot.”

“Yes!” Efi was jumping. “I’m so glad it worked!”

Orisa was about to wrap her sister in a hug, but Efi beat her to the punch by jumping into her arms.
“Thank you, so much for this,” Orisa said. “But where did you get these gears?”

“That’s the next part of this present.”

“There’s a second part?”

“There is! But we have to go to the saloon.”

“Well, we have to go there to eat, might as well see what you have planned,” Orisa grinned.

She followed Efi out of their house. Her little sister was almost running to the saloon, her long dress billowing behind her. Walking with the new brace took a few steps to adjust to, but soon, she was keeping pace with Efi.

The saloon was slowly filling with patrons, but Olivia was there to greet them.

“Oh, here they are,” the Mexican woman smiled. “Mama is here for you.”

“And the…other people?” Efi asked.

“Showed up a minute before you.”

“Come on, Orisa. We’re eating breakfast with Mama.”

Orisa always got a chuckle from that. Ana was the best cook in the territory, and took her role as adopted mother for the entire town with relish. Orisa wished Ana was her real flesh and blood mother, she never knew who gave birth to her.

Ana sat at a table, leaning back to get the weight of her large belly off of her feet.

But also sitting at the table was Torbjörn, Ingrid, and Brigitte. Orisa locked eyes with Torbjörn; she tried not to spit.

“Orisa, please,” Efi said, taking her hand. “Just hear us out.”

“I can do that,” she forced herself to say. “I can be a good neighbor.”

Efi led them to the table. Orisa sat far away from Torbjörn.

“I see that’s where some of my gears went,” he said, pointing to her knee.

“What do you mean, ‘your gears?’”

“Just that. I made those gears,” he said. “And they went missing. Did you steal them?”

“I’ve never stolen a thing in my life!”

“Papa, please,” Brigitte said. “I was the one who stole them.”

“You did?” He sputtered. “Why?”

“I was showing them to Efi,” Brigitte said. “Then, she came up with the idea to use it to make Orisa’s knee brace better.”

“The gears allow enough resistance to provide the right amount of stiffness, and it prevents it from jamming,” Efi said.
“You see the benefits of standardized parts?” Torbjörn grinned.

“Papa, that’s not all,” Brigitte said. “I came up with an idea, too.”

“To give more of our things away to rival blacksmiths?”

“Dear,” Ingrid said, shocked at the tone her husband was taking.

“Yes, we need to keep this civil,” Mama said. “Torbjörn, please.”

Tensely, he nodded.

“I won’t be giving anything up, Papa,” Brigitte said. “I think we should go into business together!”

Orisa wasn’t the only one taken aback. Torbjörn and Ingrid were equally puzzled.

“Work together?” He sputtered. “She’s a rival!”

“But she’s not just a blacksmith,” Brigitte said. “She’s a fabricator. She can make specialized parts in no time at all. She can do things you can’t; she made that wagon tie in the blink of an eye! But you can do things she can’t. You make horseshoes on a moment’s notice.”

That cut at Orisa’s pride. It wasn’t that Torbjörn could make horseshoes so fast, it was because she knew she couldn’t compete with him.

“She can make anything, but can’t make it as fast as we do,” Brigitte continued. “And we can make things faster than she can, but we can’t change what we make. We both need each other! If we work together, we’ll make everything better!”

“Is that why you were sneaking out to see that Efi girl every day?” Torbjörn pressed.

“Dear, I told you, we have to let Brigitte be a girl,” Ingrid said.

“No, Momma, he’s right. I was sneaking out to see Efi,” Brigitte admitted. “Remember Mr. Rutledge? How he had those wagon ties? We couldn’t make it; Orisa did. If we work together, we don’t have to butt heads.”

“It makes us all better!” Efi said.

“Exactly. Papa, please, we need a fabricator.”

Torbjörn looked at his daughter, then to Orisa.

“And if I say yes,” he said, “what happens to our business?”

Mama raised her hand. Olivia walked over, carrying a roll of paper. She opened it; it was a sketch for a sign. The design was a lion’s head, and two words: L.E.O. Blacksmiths.

“That’s a wonderful drawing,” Orisa said.

“Thank you,” Olivia smiled warmly.

“You just expect us to throw our business away?” Torbjörn asked.

“Not throw it away, just change it,” Brigitte said.

“That’s what L.E.O. stands for,” Efi said. “Lindholm, Efi, and Orisa!”
“You just want another cat, don’t you?” Ingrid asked.

Brigitte meekly smiled and shrugged.

“If we work together, we become better together,” Efi said.

Orisa knew Efi was right. Having seen the power hammer in action, she had the sinking feeling that blacksmithing by hand would mostly go away.

“And the prices?” Torbjörn asked.

“We’ll cut them up so everyone gets their fair share,” Brigitte said.

Torbjörn looked at the drawing, then at Orisa. She returned the favor. Brigitte and Efi had a point; going into business together made more sense than trying to match a machine that never grew tired.

“No point trying to match someone who can make a wagon tie in no time at all,” Torbjörn sighed.

“And I can’t make all those damned horseshoes,” Orisa said.

Orisa promised herself that she’d never work for another white man for as long as she lived. But she wouldn’t be working under Torbjörn, she’d be his equal. Hell, her name was on the sign!

Swallowing her pride, she held her hand out.

“No point in making a fuss about blacksmithing talents,” he said. “Better to work together than apart.”

Torbjörn shook her hand.

“Yes,” Orisa said. “If Brigitte and Efi are long-lost sisters, then we’ll be like estranged siblings.”

Torbjörn laughed at that.

“Right then, where shall we put the office?”

Chapter End Notes

A quick little arc, but a completed arc nonetheless! What's next for the quaint little town of Crease and our westward Overwatch?
Winter was arriving in force. It was almost Thanksgiving, but the winds off the mountains had recently dropped just over a foot of snow onto Crease. Having been raised in Switzerland, Angela was perfectly fine with the cold weather and heaps of snow. Fareeha, however, was not.

Thankfully, Angela’s house and clinic was sturdily built. The newly improved stone walls kept the wind out, while the massive wooden stoves in the kitchen and bedroom warmed damn near the entire house. But most importantly, the bed they shared was big, comfortable, and covered with heavy down blankets. That only encouraged Fareeha to stay snuggled up with Angela for as long as it was absolutely possible.

The winds of winter howled against the windows, gently waking Fareeha up. Angela had twisted and turned, pulling some of the blankets off them. Fareeha wiggled and wormed her way further into the blankets, wrapping her arms around the hot Angela.

“I thought you would’ve gotten used to the cold by now,” Angela giggled.

“You’re awake?”

“I’m always awake when I feel you touch me,” Angela smiled. “I’m surprised you’re awake.”

“The winter woke me up,” Fareeha sighed.

“You’re always talking about your time in the army,” Angela said. “Wasn’t it colder in the war?”

“Much colder,” Fareeha said, setting her chin in the crook of Angela’s neck.

“Then aren’t you used to this?”

“Just because I lived through something doesn’t mean I liked it,” she said. “Or that I got used to it.”

“I suppose that’s a fair point. But how did you survive the winters in the war?”

“Same as what we’re doing now,” Fareeha said. “Remember, I wasn’t the only woman to hide her gender in the war; there was a whole platoon of us. The men let us stick together when it came to bedding, so when it got colder, we all huddled up under a few of the blankets we had.”

“Did the men do the same?”

“Not at first,” Fareeha laughed. “God, you should’ve seen them. They were so scared that they’d catch the gay, they’d sleep as far apart from each other as they could. A tent could hold five men if
they didn’t mind their space, but of course they minded it like someone was watching.”

“‘They’d catch the gay?’” Angela laughed. “You can’t be serious, they thought that was possible?”

“Damn right. They had to be the biggest, toughest man around. It was funny watching them shiver and shake, and try to lie that it was nothing,” Fareeha laughed. “But when we woke up, well rested and somewhat warm, oh the looks they gave us!”

“Did they finally give up?”

“Eventually. A giant snowstorm passed through our camp, and that was finally enough to get them to pile in together and share their body heat. A few men thought they could tough it out; by the time we dug them out, they were more ice than man. A few didn’t make it.”

Fareeha was so close to Angela, she could feel the laughter building in her breast.

“I shouldn’t laugh,” Angela stammered. “I really shouldn’t. Men died; I should be crying.”

“Don’t weep for the stupid, you’ll be crying all day,” Fareeha grinned.

That got Angela to finally laugh.

“God, they thought they could ‘tough out’ a snowstorm?” She laughed.

“Stupid, right?”

“Well, I guess we won’t have to worry about them passing that train of thought along now, wouldn’t we?”

“Damn, that’s harsh,” Fareeha laughed.

“But I’m not wrong, am I?”

“As long as you’re fine with not being right.”

“More than fine,” Angela said, pulling Fareeha tight. That accidentally pulled the blanket off Fareeha, making her quickly fix it to keep the heat in.

“God, how can you be so fine with not being right?”

“Part of growing up in Switzerland, I guess,” Angela smiled. “It got very snowy where I was. We grew used to the cold.”

“Then how did you beat it? How did you stay warm?”

“The orphanage I grew up in was big, drafty, and cold,” she said. “Just like you, we learned from an early age that if we all slept together, we’d stay nice and warm. When we were young enough, we’d all sleep together, boys and girls. I barely remember those days…”

“That must’ve lasted long.”

“Of course not! Not in a Christian orphanage!” Angela laughed. “The nuns were quick to separate us by sex. I only remember a few blurs of sharing a bed with…oh, was it eight girls and ten boys?”

“Sounds scandalous,” Fareeha grinned.
“Oh stop it, we were five! Were we five? Yes, it had to be that age, because I was definitely seven when the nuns put us in our dormitories. From then on, I spent my nights with other girls. When it got cold, we all climbed into one bed to keep warm.”

“And the nuns let you?”

“Well, a few checked on us to make sure nothing happened.”

“We can’t let the gay go around, can we?” Fareeha laughed.

“Yes we can’t!” Angela chuckled. “Those were the night. We’d stay up chatting, gossiping, laughing, and giggling, then when there was a knock at the door, we’d all go quiet as the nun checked on us.”

There was a knocking at the front door. Angela and Fareeha went dead quiet.

“Was it just like that?” Fareeha whispered.

“Yes,” Angela mumbled. She spoke so softly, Fareeha barely heard her.

There was another knock; this one was more forceful, louder than the first. Suddenly, Fareeha felt like a girl, caught doing something she shouldn’t be doing.

“It has to be important,” Angela said, sitting up and letting the cold air into the bed. Fareeha flinched as it hit her skin.

Despite being a shock to her system, the cold helped wake Fareeha up. She wasn’t a girl, she was a woman grown, nearly twenty years old. She was a veteran of the war! She wasn’t going to let this get to her.

“Dr. Ziegler!”

“That’s Reinhardt,” Fareeha said, sitting up herself. She didn’t get up because she wanted to, but because if it was the mayor, that meant she was needed.

“Yes, it is.”

What could be so important to have them knocking so late at night? Realization suddenly hit her. No one called Angela ‘Dr. Ziegler’ unless they needed a doctor.

“Do you think…?”

“Only one way to find out,” Angela said, grabbing a robe.

Fareeha took a second to rummage for some presentable clothes. She was only wearing her nightgown; she stumbled in the dark to her dresser, finding a pair of warm pants and a robe. By the time she pulled on the leggings, Angela had struck a match and lit a lantern.

“Dr. Ziegler!!”

“Coming!” She yelled back, donning her own robe. Fareeha led her down the stairs, where she opened the door.

Reinhardt was standing on their porch, with an arm around Ana. Her mother was clutching her large belly, her legs shaking. They were both wearing their sleepwear and robes, with only a blanket draped over Ana’s shoulders. Their boots were barely laced.
“Come in,” Angela said.

“Thank you,” Ana smiled, breathing heavily. “I’m sorry for waking you two, but…”

She tapped her belly.

“I…I guess it’s time to be a big sister,” Fareeha said. She tried to sound brave; but it was clear that she was painfully nervous.

“You’ll do fine,” her mother promised.

“Ana, this way,” Angela said, taking charge. “There’s plenty of cots for you to choose from. Reinhardt, you can keep her company. Fareeha, please put more wood on the fire.”

Fareeha nodded, running to the fireplace. Most of the fire had burned out as the night passed along. She added a few twigs and dried bark pieces from a nearby pile, and using a set of billows, she coaxed some life from the smoldering ashes. Soon the kindling caught, and she added a few logs from their pile of dried firewood. She pumped the billows again; soon the fire was roaring.

Her mother was groaning as a contraction hit her. Reinhardt sat by her, holding her hand. Angela felt her temperature, then her pulse.

“Fareeha, if you could, pull some bedding out.”

“On it.”

She ran back with an arm full of blankets and pillows.

“Oh, thank you,” her mother sighed.

Together, they punched up some pillows, and Fareeha propped her mother up until she was comfortable. Reinhardt draped a few blankets over her, and Angela blew into her hands to warm them. The fire was going, and the room was slowly heating up, but not fast enough for anyone’s liking.

“When did this begin?” Angela asked.

“Maybe half an hour ago,” Ana said.

“It took us some time to get through the snow,” Reinhardt said.

“With the last storm, I can’t blame you,” Angela smiled. “Well, the contractions are still far apart; try to get comfortable, we might be here a while.”

Fareeha went to the kitchen. The massive cast iron stove was warm to the touch; the fire they made in it had burned out just like the fireplace, but she was able to bring it back to life with a handful of kindling, a few logs, and the trusty billows. Once the stove was warming up, Fareeha put some water on for tea. Her heart was pounding; she didn’t know what to expect or what to do. The water boiled, she steeped the tea, and passed out mugs to everyone.

The night passed slowly, with her waiting with Reinhardt, and Angela tracking the time between contractions with a pocket watch.

As the sun began rising, Angela made the call.

“Right, it’s getting to be time,” she said. “The contractions are getting very close. Fareeha, could you
heat up some water and bring me my tray of tools? We'll need warm water and fresh linen. Ana, would you like Reinhardt to stay, or do you want some privacy?"

“He can stay,” Ana gasped, taking his hand.

Fareeha went to the kitchen, while Reinhardt stayed with his wife.

“That’s it, get ready. Ana, you’ve done this before, but do you need some help? Some coaching?”

“Yes, please,” Fareeha could hear her mother say, “it’s been a very long time.”

“Then breathe. In, out, as short or as long as you’re comfortable with.”

Fareeha found a pot, and filled it with some water they had boiled beforehand to purify. She brought Angela her tools when there was a knock at the door.

“I got it,” she said, running to the front.

She opened it, and saw that almost the entire saloon on their porch. Olivia, Lena, and Madam Lacroix were at the head of the group, but Jack and Gabriel were right behind them, along with Anastasia and every whore in town, bundled up for the cold.

“We heard that Mama’s here,” Olivia said. “Is she…?”

Ana groaned, loudly.

“I think that’s our answer, luv,” Lena chuckled tensely.

“You alright, kid?” Jack asked.

“I’ll be fine, I guess,” Fareeha said.

“You sure?” Gabriel asked.

“No, but…there’s not a lot for me to do.”

“Fareeha?” Angela called. “We’ll need some linen soon.”

“Sorry, I have to get back. We can’t have the entire saloon in here,” she said, closing the door. She ran to the closet where they kept the clean linen, and ran back.

“That’s it, breathe,” Angela said.

Her mother sat on the table, legs spread. Sweat dotted her brow as she screamed and cursed. Reinhardt held her hand.

“And push,” Angela said. “Breathe, push. That’s it! Fareeha…”

She handed the linen to Angela. She couldn’t bring herself to look, but stood by her mother, taking her other hand. Ana clamped down on it, and Fareeha had to bit her tongue to keep from crying out. Childbirth gave her mother a grip to surpass Orisa’s.

Suddenly, there was a shrill cry.

“Oh, there we go,” Angela cooed. “Reinhardt? Would you like to cut the umbilical cord?”

Fareeha suddenly realized that she had never seen Reinhardt so quiet before. With shaking hands, he
walked up, taking the knife from the tray of tools.

“It’s fine,” Angela smiled, holding the screaming newborn. “Right there. Might have to put a little force behind it.”

“Yes, that…?”

“Yes, you have a son,” Angela smiled.

“A son,” he croaked. “Ana, we have a son…!”

Angela stood up, holding the newborn in a bundle of linen. She passed him off to his mother.

“Oh God,” Ana cried weakly, taking the bundle of joy with shaking hands. “A boy? Oh God, I knew it, I just knew it.”

Fareeha was crying, but not nearly as hard as Reinhardt was.

“I’m finally a sister?” She stammered. “A big sister?”

“Yes,” Ana said. “Look, look at your brother.”

He was big for a baby, much larger than normal. Her baby brother was pudgy, and had a full head of black hair. And he was crying so loud, she thought he was a toddler instead of a new born. His skin was just as dark as her mother’s, much darker than Fareeha would have thought being related to Reinhardt.

“Have you thought of a name?” Angela asked, cleaning her hands on a towel.

“God, why can’t I think of it?” Reinhardt sobbed. He was crying freely, his beard covered with tears and snot. “We thought so hard…”

“I want him to have one of my father’s names,” Ana gasped.


“Our little Siggy,” Ana laughed, baring a breast. Fareeha politely looked away as her brother latched on, silencing his cries. With a free hand, Ana pulled Fareeha close. “We’re still a family. We just got bigger.”

Fareeha wrapped her mother in a hug, along with Reinhardt. She couldn’t stop crying, and Reinhardt was absolutely beside himself.

“Should I tell the crowd?” Angela smiled.

“No,” Fareeha said, wiping her nose with the back of her hand, “I’ll do it.”

She walked to the door, taking a second to blow her nose on a cheap kerchief. She opened the door; the crowd had grown since she had last seen. She saw Jesse waiting with Jack and Gabriel, the Lindholms were there, as well as Orisa and Efi.

“I have a brother,” Fareeha smiled. “A little baby brother, and he’s perfect!”
Gabriel lit a candle in the vestibule of his little church. It was built as tough as it could be made against the frontier winter, but even with the new stone walls it was still a little cold. He shivered, pulling his jacket tighter.

The door opened, and Jack walked in.

“Here to finally take confession?” Gabriel grinned.

“Shut up, you stupid bastard,” Jack laughed. “Just coming to see if you needed a hand with the baptism.”

“It’s still a few days away, Jack.”

“Yes, but…but damn, this is just something,” he chuckled. “It’s not my kid, but it really feels like this is effecting all of us.”

“Damn right it is. Your boss just had a son! That counts for something.”

“I guess it does,” Jack said. “That, and I need something to make myself useful. Things are still pretty quiet, but with Thanksgiving coming up, I really need something else to do.”

“What, you don’t have a place to spend the festive holiday?” Gabriel asked.

“I got too many places to be,” Jack grinned. “Reinhardt and Ana obviously invited me over with Angela and Fareeha, but Madam Lacroix and Lena are having a big shindig at the saloon with all the girls and dozens of people. Efi, Orisa, and the Lindholms are having something, too. It’s actually a little surprising to see them getting along so well.”

“Getting along? Orisa and Torbjörn fight nearly every fucking day.”

“Yes, but about trite shit,” Jack said. “I think they just like getting in each other’s way, trying to show each other up.”

“What about Jesse? That cute little deputy of yours got any plans?”

“If you’re trying to make me jealous, it’s not working.”

“Damn, thought I had something there,” Gabriel grumbled. “But seriously, where’s he spending gluttony day?”

“He’ll be with Madam Lacroix and Lena. Ever since they found out he’s damn good at the guitar, they try to get him to play as often as they can.”

“It’s good he’s got a place to go.”

“Absolutely. So, I figured I’d drop by here, try to be useful, and maybe get some advice.”

“There’s something I’m good at,” Gabriel smiled.

The door opened, and a gust of wind blew in. Gabriel shivered as Reinhardt closed the door and undid his jacket.

“Hey, it’s the big men of the hour,” Gabriel laughed. “How’s it going, mayor? Finally find time to get away?”
“Hardly,” Reinhardt said. As he undid his big jacket, Gabriel saw that he had bundled his infant son up and carried him in a sling next to his breast. The little guy was sleeping, with a giant wool hat covering his head. “Ana needed the peace.”

“I’ve heard him crying all the way from my office,” Jack said. “Looks like he’s got your lungs.”

“Yes, it looks like it!” Reinhardt beamed.

“And how’s the wife?”

“She needs as much rest as she can get,” he said. “Siggy here is very big. Ten and a half pounds, and twenty-three inches long!”

“That’s a big baby,” Gabriel whistled.

“Yes, and it’s taken its toll on Ana. So I’m doing all that I can to help her recover. She’s with her daughter right now, venting and sleeping.”

“I can’t even imagine what she’s going through,” Jack said. “No wonder she hasn’t worked this week.”

“Please, Madam Lacroix isn’t that cruel,” Reinhardt smiled. “She’s giving Ana as much time off as she wants. But the good news is there are a long list of women who’d like to babysit.”

“You sure you’d let them? You aren’t afraid that your son would be raised by whores?” Gabriel laughed.

“Ha! This town was built by whores! This is their world, and men like us simply live in it,” Reinhardt laughed. Siggy yawned, fussing about. Reinhardt bounced on the balls of his feet to help calm his sleeping son. “Have either of you thought about our proposal?”

“You mean for Thanksgiving?” Gabriel asked. “I’ve been thinking on it.”

“You got invited, too?” Jack asked.

“Yes, just a few days ago.”

“Then why don’t we both go?” He asked. “It’ll be mostly couples anyways.”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you two about that,” Reinhardt said.

“About couples?” Jack asked, his eyebrows raising. “Don’t tell me you want to play matchmaker now.”

“I don’t need to play at it, I know about you and Gabriel.”

Gabriel grew quiet at that. Did Reinhardt really know?

“You…you know about us?” Jack asked.

“Jack, the entire town knows,” Reinhardt sighed. “All the fighting, then the laughing and joking once it’s over? No one is that good a friend. Besides, there have been some scandalous rumors about what goes on in the rectory after a few of those fights.”

Gabriel couldn’t help but blush. But Jack’s face grew hard.
“So what is it you want to talk about?” Jack asked. “Nothing that would jeopardize my job?”

“I’ll tell you what I told Angela and Fareeha,” Reinhardt said. “I’ve had time to think on this, and I can’t accept seeing two people of the same gender together; not now at least. It sends chills down my spine, yes? I just think…well, I can’t approve of it.”

“I can hear a ‘but’ coming,” Gabriel said.

“My father always said, ‘everything that comes before the word ‘but’ is horseshit,’” Reinhardt said. “That’s why I like to use ‘however.’”

“So you don’t like gays; where’s the however?”

“It’s about Ana and I,” he said. “I don’t approve of gays; however, when it comes to strange marriages I’m not that different myself. While marriage between a Negro and a non-Negro isn’t a crime in Crease, I know all too well that many territories and states have laws against it.

“To many people, I’m just like you; a crime, a perversion. Something to be outlawed, spit at, scorned, even jailed or worse. So if I hate you for loving a man, I should hate myself for loving a black woman, and having a child with her.”

“What’s that about people in glass houses?” Jack laughed.

“Exactly. I’d be throwing a very big stone if I spoke against you two,” Reinhardt smiled. “The same goes with Fareeha and Angela. They are a wonderful couple, very loving, and I have to find a way to accept that. Us ‘perversions’ have to stick together, no? But what I really wanted to talk to you two about was about Siggy.”

“You need a babysitter?” Gabriel asked. “Don’t you have a town full of women beating down your door for that honor?”

“No. Well, yes, we do, but I need a Godfather.”

“And you want it to be one of us?”

“No. I want it to be both of you.”

That stopped Gabriel. Jack was equally stunned.

“I tried thinking who I’d pick,” Reinhardt said. “Jack, you’re one of the most honorable, courageous men I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. Men like you are the cornerstone of our world. And Gabriel, despite your gruff appearance, you’re easily the wisest, kindest men that I’ve ever seen. Ever since I arrived here, you’ve preached nothing but love and caring for our fellow neighbors.

“I couldn’t choose which of you I’d like to have be Siggy’s Godfather; I was talking it over with Fareeha when she asked me why I couldn’t have you both? And I couldn’t think of a reason to say no.”

Jack was choking up. Gabriel wasn’t far behind him.

“I’d be honored to help raise your son,” Jack said.

“And I’ll love him like he was my own flesh and blood,” Gabriel said.

“Fareeha was right,” Reinhardt smiled. “The two of you would be the perfect pair of Godfathers.”
He pulled Siggy from his little sling. Siggy was still in swaddling clothes to help keep the worst of the winter out. Jack took him, and cradled him in his arms.

“Lord, this really is a big baby,” he chuckled. Gabriel could see the tears dotting his eyes. He walked up, fawning over the boy.

“He’s gonna be a great man, just like his father,” Gabriel said.

“If you help raise him, then he will be better than I.”

“Guess I know where we’re gonna spend out Thanksgiving,” Jack said.

Thanksgiving dinner was in full swing. Jesse sat on stage, strumming out songs while the men and woman of Crease ate, drank, and laughed. Amélie desperately wanted Mama to be there cooking. But Mama not only had her own dinner with her family, she was still in desperate need of time off. Siggy was truly big; Amélie couldn’t imagine giving birth to such a child, or forcing Ana to work after such an ordeal. She idly played with a small box next to her empty plate of food.

“Don’t go zoning out at your own party,” Lena said, giving her a nudge. The two sat next to each other at the head of their table.

“Hardly,” Amélie smiled.

Ever since the Deadlock Gang had blown into town and shot up the old place, she had paid to have the walls upgraded to brick and stone. It had taken time, but it made the place that much warmer for the winter.

Before the upgrade, during the winter months people would still keep their coats on, even if it was filled with dozens of people like it now was. But with thick stone walls and the new, massive fireplace, it was almost sweltering. Her girls were showing skin like it was the summer, the men were undoing more than the top buttons of their shirts, and the women of Crease were wearing light and breezy dresses. Amélie should have upgraded the walls much sooner.

“Then why are you gettin’ all misty-eyed?” Her Lena asked.

“I’m just amazed at how far I’ve come,” Amélie said, sipping a glass of wine. “And how this place has grown.”

“Ya mean Crease, or the saloon?”

“Both. When I had this place built, it was only two stories, and Crease wasn’t even a waypoint. Now it’s three stories tall, and Crease has grown into a true town, with a mayor, sheriff, and doctor. The territory has put us on the map.”

Amélie looked out at the crowd. Everyone was eating, drinking, and laughing. It was a truly joyful time.

“And we can only grow,” she said. “I still need a bank and a railroad, but Crease is a far cry from the watering hole it was before.”

“Sounds like you found something to be thankful for.”
“I’m always thankful for this,” Amélie said. “I still remember waking up starving and cold, with only a blanket, tent, and dress to my name. This is one of the things I’m most thankful for.”

“Just one of?” Lena asked. “What could be more important than this?”

“You.”

That made her Lena stop.

“I’ve woken up before wanting things,” Amélie said. “I wanted food, I wanted money, I wanted power, I wanted the world. And I worked to get those things. But as I’ve gotten more of what I wanted, I realized it doesn’t want me back. Food can only be eaten, money just sits there, power feels warm at first but it quickly fizzles out, and the world doesn’t give a damn who I am.

“But when I met you, and when I got to know you, you’re the only thing that I want that wants me back. And I’ve realized just how much that makes me want to wake up every morning.”

“Y-You’re not just sayin’ that, are ya?” Her Lena blushed.

“Of course not, my love,” Amélie smiled. She opened the small box she had, revealing a small leather collar, no thicker than her pinky. A tiny golden locket sat at the middle, holding it together. “I had this made after…well, I think you know what made me make this. You’re mine, and I want you to be mine forever.”

“I can be yours?” Lena mumbled, her eyes watering.

“Was I not clear, my Lena?”

“N-no, you were, but…” She stammered. “I never thought I’d find someone like you. I mean, you’re French and I’m English!”

That made Amélie laugh.

“No one is perfect; if you were, you’d be French,” she smiled. “Let us be thankful for serendipity, that you found my town.”

Her Lena beamed, tears wetting her eyes as she undid the top button of her shirt and presented her neck. Amélie undid the collar, and set it on her Lena’s neck. It was a dark leather, very supple, but also very unobtrusive. To the lay person, it only seemed like a fashionable choker, something one of her girls might wear. But to her and her Lena, they knew the significance. Once Lena re-buttoned her shirt, the collar was almost invisible.

“You are mine, but I am also yours,” Amélie smiled, feeling her own eyes getting wet as she took Lena’s hands.

“C-can I…?”

“You never have to ask.”

Lena hesitantly leaned forward, kissing her. It made Amélie’s heart melt.

The door to the saloon opened, and a gust of cold wind blew in, drawing everyone’s attention. Three men walked in, pulling off their jackets.

“Ah, thank God it’s warm,” a big man sighed. He had an accent much like her Lena’s; it was British, but more formal and posh.
He was a big man, as tall as Mayor Reinhardt. Amélie wondered just how many big men there were in the world, and why they all seemed to be drawn to Crease. As he pulled off his hat and scarf, she saw that he was black. Not as black as Orisa, but very nearly such a shade. He had a carefully trimmed beard that ran along his chin, and a small pair of glasses on his nose. In the warm saloon, they fogged up; the big man took them off to clean. His jacket and his clothes were very fine; it was clear that he had some money, and came from a good background.

The two other men were of a more normal size. They were cowboys, with rough but warm clothes. Amélie had to guess they were the big man’s drivers.

She excused herself from her Lena, gathered up her dress, and walked over.

“Hello,” she smiled. “Welcome to Crease. You picked a nice night to arrive.”

“More of a very fortuitous one,” the black man smiled. “We thought we would be here a day or two ago, but there were very big snow drifts on the way in.”

“Yes, the winter is truly in swing now,” she said. “I am Madam Lacroix, and welcome to my saloon. We are having Thanksgiving dinner; please, join us. We don’t like people to go hungry here.”

“My thanks,” the man smiled. “And I’m sure my drivers are just as appreciative as I am.”

“Oh, we are,” one cowboy said, stomping his feet to get some feeling back into them.

“We saw a sign outside of town,” the man said. “It says we have to turn our weapons into the sheriff. He wouldn’t be here, would he?”

“Unfortunately, he isn’t. But this is a time of celebration; I know he wouldn’t mind if you waited until tomorrow.”

“My thanks. None of us would care much to go back out into the cold.”

“That is perfectly understandable! Please, make yourselves at home,” she said, welcoming them in. “With the holiday here, there is no charge for food. We are all family here and now.”

“Then again, my thanks,” the man said, bowing his head politely.

“You are very welcome. I have to say, we don’t get many men who have retained drivers. What brings you into Crease, Mister…?”

“Winston. Harold Winston,” he said. “I’m a lawyer. I was sent here to examine the city of Crease for my employer, the Watchpoint Financial Institution.”

“Financial Institution?” Amélie’s ears perked up at that. “You mean, you work for a bank?”

“Yes,” Winston smiled. “It is my belief as well as the belief of my employers that the American Frontier is untapped potential. Word has spread about this tiny town, this little ‘crease’ in the map, and my superiors were surprised that there was not a bank already established here. I am here to measure the value and possible prosperity of this town, and to see if it would behoove them to open a branch.”
Everyone say hi to Siggy, and that 'family' tag up in the description!
And uh-oh. Someone mentioned a bank around Amélie. She might've put a ring collar on it, but she's still getting mighty thirsty.
Winston is tasked to measure Crease and see if building a bank would benefit the lofty Watchpoint Financial Institute. However, a certain blacksmith seems to have woven a spell over him, threatening his impartiality. Meanwhile, Angela, Fareeha, Ana, and Reinhardt adjust to their new life as a strange, mixed family.

Angela woke with a start. Sigismund was crying.

“I swear, that boy can wake the dead,” she sighed.

“Looks like he gets that from his father,” Fareeha groaned, trying to roll out of bed. “He sure as hell didn’t get that from my side of the family.”

“No, you got him last time,” Angela said, pressing a hand against Fareeha’s shoulder. “Let me.”

“He’s my brother,” she said stubbornly.

“And I told you, I’ll take care of him this time,” Angela said. “Go back to sleep.”

“But—“

“No buts,” Angela said, disentangling herself from the bed, the sheets, and a very clingy Fareeha. She got up, and walked over to the small crib that was set up in their room. Fortunately, there was enough moonlight to see. The last thing she wanted to do was to stub her toes in the dark.

The stove in their room must be running low on wood; the winter chill was creeping back into the house. Knowing the fire would smolder out, Angela and Fareeha had bundled Siggy up tightly in his crib, with a big down sheet folded all around him to help keep him warm.

But now that he was awake, he was pushing and throwing the blanket off him, making quite a racket. Angela quickly added a few logs to the stove, then went to the crib.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” Angela said, picking the big baby up. “I’m here. It’s fine.”

Angela reached to the nearby stove. Before they both went to bed, both she and Fareeha had boiled a pot of water, and put a few bottles of milk in the boiling bath. They only had two bottles of mother’s milk left, but the rest were the best quality milk they could get from the farmers. Over the course of the night, the stove had burned through the wood, and while the boiled water had cooled, it left the bottles of milk still plenty warm.

“Stop struggling,” Angela chuckled as she tried to hold Sigismund in one arm. Try as she might to hold him, Siggy was trying to wiggle his way free. And it was hard to hold such a big, struggling
baby.

When she finally had a firm grip on Siggy, Angela brought the bottle to bear. He immediately quieted as he latched on to the bottle of mother’s milk, and began hungrily sucking at it. Soon, half the bottle was gone.

“No wonder your parents needed some time off,” Angela chuckled. “Especially your poor mother. Dear God, she must feel like a cow every time you get hungry!”

Angela pulled up the nearby rocking chair, and settled in for the long haul. She made sure she was nearby the other bottles, as Sigismund was quickly draining the current one.

“That’s it,” she cooed. “It’s fine.”

Clearing her throat, she began singing an old lullaby she learned back in the orphanage in Switzerland.

\begin{verbatim}
Dr Guggug uf em düüre
sideli fädeli rum rum rum
Dr Guggug uf em düüre Ast
Wenn's rägnet wird är
sideli fädeli rum rum rum
Wenn's rägnet wird är nass
\end{verbatim}

By then, Sigismund had finished the bottle. Angela quickly, seamlessly, reached for another, and was able to replace it with barely a cry from little Siggy. She kept sing, cooing as she fed the big baby.

\begin{verbatim}
Da chunnt e liebe Sunne
sideli fädeli rum rum rum
Da chunnt e liebe Sunneschyn
Und macht das Vögeli wieder
sideli fädeli rum rum rum
Und macht das Vögeli wieder fyn
\end{verbatim}

By then, little Sigismund had finished the second bottle, and had drifted back off to sleep. Angela pulled him back up into her arms, patting his back. She was quickly rewarded with a very large burp, which made her giggle. The little boy had quite the appetite. Once again, she felt a little bad for Ana.

She bundled Siggy back up, then put him back in his crib, this time lying him flat on his tummy. As she laid the little boy to rest and readjusted the covers, she realized that Fareeha was sitting on the bed, watching her. Then she realized that Fareeha was crying.

“What is it?” She asked, turning to her love.

Fareeha’s face was wet with tears. She was pressing her mouth into a pillow, doing her best silence herself.
“What is it?” Angela pressed. Was Fareeha in pain? Was something wrong?

“I thought I loved you before,” Fareeha croaked. “But…but I’ve never loved you as much as I love you right now.”

That made Angela stop.

“W-what do you mean, ‘right now?’” She was able to choke out.

“Just…just seeing you, like this, taking care of my brother,” Fareeha stammered, her voice thick with emotions. “God, it's…”

Angela rushed over to the edge of the bed, and took Fareeha in her arms. Fareeha pulled her tight.

“I’ve never realized how much I love you until now.”

Hearing that made Angela’s heart flutter.

“I came to America to find a new life,” she said. “And to eventually make a family for myself. I just never would have thought I’d find one so soon.”

“And I never thought I’d find such a beautiful, amazing person on a train,” Fareeha laughed. “I never, ever want this to change, or to let you go.”

“Then don’t. I don’t ever want to be without you.”

“Good.” Fareeha had her head buried deep in her neck. “I don’t give a damn what anyone says about us, I’ll never want anyone but you.”

Angela felt the tears coming. But she was also getting a little cold.

“There’s no one for me but you,” she said. “No one, but a nice warm bed.”

Fareeha laughed. Picking up on the hint, she pulled back the covers, and they both climbed back in. Once they were snuggled in, Angela pulled Fareeha in tight, nestling as close as possible to the woman she loved. Fareeha was only too willing to hold her close.

“I have to say, this is a most impressive saloon,” Harold said as he ate his breakfast.

“Why, thank you,” Amélie smiled, sitting opposite him. Harold was dressed in well-worn, but presentable, dress clothes; it was dress attire for a lawyer, but just casual enough for a good day’s work. Amélie, meanwhile, was dressed in her usual affair; a corset and dress. However, she did wear a heavy shawl about her shoulders to keep the worst of the winter at bay, should she have to walk outside.

“You’re very welcome,” Harold said. “I have lived in America for a few years, and most men tell me the saloon is the central hub of the town. I had a hard time understanding why, most are barely passable pits of booze and gambling. But seeing a place like this, I can finally understand why so many people gather here.”

“I try to keep it as clean as possible,” Amélie smiled. She demurely ate a crepe while Harold had his
fill of eggs, sausage, and potatoes. Ana was still taking her time to be with her son. “Like you said, the saloon is the central hub of the town. If the saloon is ratty, what does that say about the town?”

“Exactly,” Harold said, finishing his food. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small notebook and pen. “The hotel was very welcoming, too.”

“Then again, thank you, Mr. Winston.”

“Please, just call me Winston,” he said, raising his hand.

“Not the very formal type, no?”

“No, not like that,” he chuckled. “Back in boarding school, there were several ‘Harolds’ in my class. To prevent confusion, we called each other by our last names. Being called ‘Winston’ became a habit; even my mother picked up on it!”

“Then you’re very welcome, Winston.”

“Do you have a hand in the hotel as well as the saloon?” He asked.

“If there’s one thing you should know about Crease, Winston, is that I own nearly all of it,” Amélie smiled proudly.

“You own the entire town?”

“Just about. I’ve even given out loans to help families build their houses and farms here.”

“How did you come into that?”

“When I first arrived here, Crease was nothing. Just a watering hole for Mr. Rutledge’s cattle and his cowboys. I was the very first woman, as you could probably imagine. I provided a service to the cowboys, and I earned my money. The saloon was the first building I built. That was all it needed; from there, people started arriving.

“At first, it was more cowboys looking for a living with Mr. Rutledge. Then it was families passing through, traveling further west. Then it was families looking to start a new life here. The saloon quickly became small, so I had the hotel built. Then the general store. By the time I had the church built, I realized this was becoming a true town.

“To make it a town, I had the mayor’s and sheriff’s office built, and I had my courier send letters to the territory to petition them for recognition, and they obliged. We had our first election, and with Reinhardt elected, we became a true town.”

“Forgive me, but where is the mayor? I was hoping to talk to him.”

“If anything, I should ask for your forgiveness; Reinhardt and his wife Ana just had their first son a little over a few weeks ago. They’re still adjusting to his new life; if it isn’t a very pressing matter, you’ll have to grant him some space.”

“Oh, not at all,” Winston smiled. “When I meet him, I should give him my belated congratulations. If you don’t mind, would you be willing to answer a question?”

“Of course.”

“You seem quite attached to this town,” Winston said. “Why are you not the mayor?”
“At first, I thought I would be the mayor, but then I found out I’d have to give up the ownership of the saloon,” she said. “One cannot be a business owner as well as the mayor. One might be tempted to double-deal, non? I had to think on it, but a…a very, very close friend of mine helped me realize that I could not bear to part with my saloon. I’ve come to treasure each girl who works for me, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything, even the position of mayor.”

“Then thank you for abiding by the laws and not trying to do anything illegal,” Winston laughed. “Is there any other major structure of the town that you own?”

“Several; like I said, I’ve helped many families build their homes here. Actually, that reminds me. Olivia?”

Olivia walked over from her usual spot at the head of the saloon.

“Need anything?” She asked.

“Yes, I do,” Amélie said. “With Ana and Reinhardt welcoming little Sigismund into the world, I’ve come to realize that Crease is growing in unexpected ways; namely children. The families here are putting down roots and raising their own children, which puts us in an interesting position.

“I’ve thought about it, and in the past few months I’ve had my Lena take a few trips to Denver to some orders in. This town needs ways to accommodate the children who are growing up here; specifically, we need a school.”

“So now you’re building a school?” Olivia smiled. “Did any schoolmarm blow into town?”

“Non, but I was hoping you’d be the first.”

That got Olivia to stop.

“Y-you want me to be a school teacher?” She stammered.

“Of course,” Amélie said. “Olivia, dear, you’re great help, but your true talents are wasted working here; simply gathering secrets or maintaining a feel for the town is ill-suited for you. You’re one of the smartest women in the town, and I want to put that to good use: I want you to be a teacher, to help give your curiosity to the next generation, and raise better children.”

“I’ve never been a teacher,” she stammered.

“But you’ve taught so many people. How many of my girls did you help teach to read? And not just English, but Spanish, too?”

“That was easy! It’s just language, nothing special.”

“Then what about math?”

“But—“

“Or history?”

“I’m just curious…”

“That’s why my Lena is putting in an order for books on her next trip,” Amélie said. “History, math, geography, dozens and dozens of books. You have a great head on your shoulders, Olivia; I’d like you to put it to good use.”
“But what about Angela? She’s much more educated than I am.”

“I’m sure that Angela would love to help with some lessons, but she’s the town’s doctor; those duties come first. I need a woman to be dedicated to teaching. And I know that woman is you.”

Olivia was beyond flustered.

“I take it this is a new development?” Winston chuckled.

“I suppose I have a flair for the dramatics,” Amélie grinned. “Olivia, please, think this over. But know that there would be no better teacher than you.”

“S-sure thing,” she stammered, walking away.

“Will you be building the school regardless of her choice?”

“I will. But she’ll be the teacher.”

“You won’t be forcing her, would you?”

“Of course not! I hate pressing any kind of choice onto anyone,” she said. “Not even becoming an… ahem… painted lady. But I know Olivia. She was one of the first women to work for me, and the longest serving. Right now, she’s wasting away. This is to help her flourish, and it will benefit the town.”

“I see,” Winston said, jotting down a quick note. “Then may we take a walk around the town?”

“Absolutely,” Amélie said, getting up. “Actually, there’s a new building that’s being finished as we speak. We should stop there first.”

“I saw something being worked on,” he said. Winston got to his feet, and grabbed his heavy winter jacket. “That isn’t another house, is it?”

“There’s a house attached to it, but it is the new blacksmith building I wanted to show you,” Amélie said. She put on her shawl and was about to grab her own jacket, but Winston grabbed it first, and held it up, letting her slide her arms in unencumbered. She nodded her thanks.

“A new blacksmith? Does that mean there was an old one?”

“Yes, Orisa and her sister Efi were the town’s first blacksmiths,” she said, walking out of the saloon. There was a light snow that fell on Thanksgiving night, but it was hardly much. The main street of Crease had the existing snow trampled down by horses and wagons, making small walkways. Slush that was made was easy to avoid. “Then the Lindholms moved in, and they got at each other’s throats. Fortunately, Efi and Brigitte realized they could do more as a business than against each other, and talked everyone into working together.”

“Smart girls.”

“You haven’t seen Efi; you wouldn’t know half of it!”

They walked close to the river. The new building was almost completed, with only parts of the roof needing to be finished. The new building was two stories tall, with an attached house. There was a great water wheel in the river that was always turning; fortunately, the winter wasn’t so cold that it froze the entire river solid, although Torbjörn had to frequently break up a few drifting ice patches.

And the new sign sat on the balcony of the second floor. It was designed by the artistic Olivia to be a
giant lion. Ingrid had taken the giant sign and burned the drawing into the wood, along with the lettering.

**L.E.O. Blacksmithing**

“L.E.O.?” Winston asked.

“Lindholm, Efi, and Orisa,” Amélie smiled. “Torbjörn’s daughter, Brigitte, loves cats.”

“And lions are just big cats,” he laughed.

There were big double-doors that lead to the workshop. Winston opened it, and the heat spiked. Torbjörn was looking over a new order, standing in front of his precious power hammer.

“Ah, Madam Lacroix,” he said, looking up. “This is a surprise. Can I help you?”

“Just showing Winston around,” she said, undoing her jacket. “He’s here on behalf of the Watchpoint Financial Institution.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Winston smiled, offering a hand. Torbjörn took it, giving it a firm shake. From the lack of reaction on Winston, he was able to meet Torbjörn’s ‘gentle’ grip.

“Likewise,” Torbjörn said. “So, you’re the big bean counter.”

Amélie paled at the blacksmith’s brusqueness. Fortunately, Winston only laughed.

“Yes, I am,” he said.

“And how are you liking this little place?”

“There’s great potential here. I can see that some things are already growing.”

“Got that right. Now that I got my forge here properly set up, we can handle damn near everything.”

“Such as?” Winston asked, pulling his notebook out.

“Well, we worked out a big contract with Mr. Rutledge just recently,” Torbjörn said. “We’ll be doing all of his blacksmithing. Horse shoes, nails, studs, even wagon parts, we’ll all be supplying him, although he *still* doesn’t want me standardizing his damn wagons. And then there’s Madam Lacroix’s order for nails so she can build her school. Lord, the nails this town goes through…”

“And you’ll be supplying everything?”

“Of course.”

“And what about your needs? Who is providing coal and raw materials?”

“We met a small company of coal miners on our way here,” Torbjörn said. “Had to pay Lena, that’s our courier, a pretty penny running all of the messages back and forth. But we got a deal worked with them. They used to provide Orisa and Efi all the coal they needed, now they’ll be delivering for us as well. And since we’ve got a deal with them, they kicked us over to some iron miners a few dozen miles away, so we’ve got our supply chain pretty well covered.”

“Most excellent news.”

The doors burst open and Brigitte and Efi, the two little whirlwinds, ran in.
“Papa! Is the forge free?”

“Brigitte, please, you can’t burst in running and yelling,” her father said.

“Sorry,” Brigitte said, coming to a stop.

“Sorry, papa,” Efi said, right behind Brigitte.

“Now, what is it?”

“I was wondering if the forge was free,” Efi said. “I got another idea to help make nails.”

“You can play with the forge for a little bit, but we have our orders to get to.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Brigitte smiled. “Who is this?”

“My name is Winston,” he smiled. “I work for a bank.”

“Oh, you’re the bean counter everyone’s talking about.”

Amélie thought that would cause a commotion, but it only made Winston laugh again.

“I see you get your frankness from your father,” he roared.

“Brigitte, Father Reyes said people don’t like being confronted,” Efi said. “Remember, we have to play nice.”

“I’m sorry,” Brigitte mumbled. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

“None taken.”

The door opened again, and Orisa walked in.

“Efi, this idea is great,” she began, “but we might not have the time—”

Orisa came to a quick halt seeing Winston. Winston looked up, and seeing Orisa, stopped his note taking.

“But Papa just told us we have a little time,” Brigitte said.

“And if I’m right, we can really speed up the demand for nails!” Efi said.

“Uh, great…” Orisa stammered.

“Come on, let’s get to the forge, we only have a little time.”

“I can show you around the workshop more, if you’d like,” Torbjörn said.

“Wh—oh, yes, please,” Winston stammered. “H-hello, my name is Winston.”

“Orisa,” the large woman stammered.

“Come on, I only have a little free time,” Torbjörn said, dragging Winston’s attention back.

“I have to go,” he said, stammering.

“I-I have work,” Orisa said.
Winston nodded, letting himself get pulled away by Torbjörn. Orisa turned around to walk out the door, but ended up walking into a wall. Blushing, she made it through the second time.

Amélie looked at Winston, then Orisa. Finally, hey eyes met with Efi. The two locked gazes; they were the only two to truly pay any attention to what just happened.

Amélie grinned. She had an ‘in’ with Winston, to get her bank made.

Efi grinned. She had an ‘in’ with getting her sister some company.

Ana opened the door to the kitchen, quickly closing it. The cold had mostly peaked in the days after Thanksgiving, but she was still feeling extremely sensitive to the wind. She used to have thicker skin about it, but given the heavy mass she was carrying on her chest, she didn’t want to leave herself exposed for even a second.

“Hey, Mama’s back,” Anastasia called. Word of Olivia’s new offer from Madam Lacroix spread fast, almost as fast as the mysterious Winston and the bank he worked for. Now that Olivia was going to be a schoolmarm, Anastasia was Madam Lacroix’s new second-hand woman.

Hearing Anastatia, all of the cooks and plenty of the serving woman descended on her. Ana undid her jacket, revealing her big Siggy bundled up for the cold, tight against her chest in a sling.

“Oh, isn’t he just the cutest thing?” Anastasia squealed.

Siggy giggled as he was showered with attention and affection.

“He’s got too much of his father in him,” Ana sighed. “He’s such a big boy, I was afraid my back would give out.”

“When you were bringing him into the world?”

“Oh no, not just then,” she laughed. “It was before, during, and after!”

She undid the sling and handed him off to Anastasia.

“Oof! I can see what you mean,” she said, bouncing Siggy as she held him in her arms. The other serving women gathered around, fawning over her son. Looking up at the strange new woman, Sigismund laughed and cooed.

“But he’s not scared of strange new faces!”

“Reinhardt says that’s his blood showing through,” Ana said, taking a second to crack her back. “Lord, childbirth truly is for the young.”

“You won’t be having any more children?”

“Sweet God, no, not after this child! If I had another, I might split in two!”

That got the women to laugh.

“He really is a big baby!”
“And having one big baby is enough,” Ana said, “no matter how beautiful and perfect he is.”

“Mama, are you sure you want to come back?” Anastasia asked. “Madam Lacroix would give you as much time off as you need.”

“Thank you, but this was never work for me,” Ana beamed, grabbing her apron. “The time off was what I needed, but I just love this place, and want to give my absolute best for it.”

“You really are a mama,” Anastasia laughed, wrapping her in a tight hug.

One of the serving women brought a simple wooden chair to her. It was a present from Madam Lacroix, a simple chair to hold Siggy so she could keep him nearby, and still be able to work. She took Siggy back, and set him in the chair. There was a little latch; she undid it, and the chair folded back so he was almost lying down. She placed a pacifier in his mouth, and he went to enthusiastically sucking at it.

“Right, no more spoiling my son,” she said. “We have breakfast to make.”

“Yes, Mama!”

Ana chuckled at that. She missed having her team of cooks and women to help her. She had spent the last few days planning the week’s menu, and was anxious to put it to practice.

She directed men and women to shred potatoes, dice carrots, and to prepare a simple dry rub. She was tasting the rub when there was a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Winston gently poked his head in.

“Excuse me for dropping in,” he said in his gentle, smooth accent, “but I was hoping to watch you cook.”

“Are you looking to learn?” Ana asked.

“No, I’m afraid I might burn the water,” Winston laughed. “I’d like to watch the kitchen operate, so I can further gauge the saloon and hotel.”

“Most certainly. But I will have to ask you to mind where you stand, space is a little tight in here.”

“I can see.” Winston walked in, and saw Siggy. “Aww, who’s this?”

“That is Sigismund, my son,” she beamed.

“That is a good, strong name,” Winston smiled. He gently poked at Siggy’s belly, playing with him. Siggy laughed, and grabbed Winston’s finger. Winston gently tried to pry his finger away, but Siggy held on. “And that is a very strong grip for a newborn.”

“Yet another thing he got from his father.”

“And that is Reinhardt, yes? I’ll have to talk with him later today.”

“More gauging the town?” Ana asked, seasoning the shredded potatoes.

“Exactly. The Watchpoint Financial Institution demands the best, and I’m too happy to oblige them. And I want to give you my belated congratulations, too.”
“Ah, a man dedicated to his duty,” Ana smiled. “An excellent, admirable trait. And thank you!”

Winston smiled, finally freeing his finger from Siggy’s clutches. He pulled out a small pencil and gave it to her boy, letting him fiddle and play with it.

He pulled out his notebook and began taking notes with a second pencil as Ana worked, directing cooks to heating skillets and began making hash browns. Then it was preparing eggs as the orders came in, and cooking the chunked carrots. Soon they were putting out breakfasts that the town ran on.

Whenever she had free time, she’d check on Siggy, making sure he was fine. Fortunately, he wasn’t a very fussy baby once he was fed. He mostly sat, looking at his mom, went at his pacifier, or fiddled with the pencil Winston gave him.

“Is this what you’d expect at any hotel or saloon?” Ana asked as they worked through the peak rush.

“I cannot say,” Winston said. “My opinions are property of Watchpoint; until they make their official statement, I have to keep them private.”

“You are dedicated to your job.”

“Watchpoint has been good to me; it only deserves my absolute best in return.”

The door opened, and Orisa walked in, carrying a box.

“Mama,” she said. Then she saw Winston, and blushed. “Uh, Mama, I got uh, got a request from Mr. Rutledge and his cowboys. They…”

“Yes?”

“They’d like some food to go,” she stammered. Winston had his face buried in his notebook, turning away from Orisa. “They say some cattle got out, and it might be some time until they get ‘em back.”

“Ah, food for the trail. I take it the chuck wagon doesn’t have much?”

“N-no, not a whole lot.”

“He knows the price?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good. There’s some extra food we have; we can have that ready in maybe forty-five minutes.”

“I need to go,” Winston croaked. “Have to…have to, uh, see if the Mayor is free.”

He quickly walked past Orisa, making sure not to look at her.

“He’s such a strange man,” she mumbled.

“He’s dedicated to his job,” Ana said. “Set the box down, you don’t need to wait for us. Speaking of, why are you the one bringing this to me? Isn’t Lena usually talking with Mr. Rutledge?”

“Lena wanted me to,” Orisa said. “Something about the new man being here.”

“Ah, I see,” Ana smiled.
“See what?”

Orisa might not notice what Lena and Madam Lacroix were doing, but Ana did. It was clear that Orisa was smitten by Winston, and he seemed just as taken by her. If Lena could see it, then Ana could help out by playing matchmaker.

“Oh nothing, dear. Just a little joke from a half-blind woman,” Ana said, tapping at her dead eye.
“We’ll let you know when the food is ready.”

Reinhardt sighed. Having over two weeks to himself, his precious Ana, his perfect son, and his lovely step-daughter was the most wonderful dream. They had spent the cold winter days together, as a family should be. Fareeha and Angela would visit every day, even bringing Jack and Gabriel over. Those visits from both couples helped keep their spirits high. Ana would cook, not only to feed them all but to help her recover from childbirth, and he took care of damn near everything else.

All the dirty diapers, all the cleaning, tending to the fire, making sure the firewood was chopped and dry, and of course, giving Ana all the massages she could ever want, from the tips of her toes to the nape of her neck.

His son was big, and had done a true number on Ana. But with his loving hand, she bounced back as quick as he’d ever suspect.

Reinhardt was certain that he had seen Heaven, and it was just them, their house, as well as many visits from Angela and Fareeha, as well as Jack and Gabriel.

But it seemed that everything had to end, because he found himself sitting back at his mayor’s desk, buried in work. What he wouldn’t give to be holding Siggy, bouncing his son as he held him close, or even tossing him in the air, or even to by lying on the sofa, his little face against his chest, eyes closed as he slept.

There was a knock at the door, drawing Reinhardt from his fantasy of a perfect day.

“Yes?”

“I hate to interrupt you, but I’d like to talk,” Winston said, gently opening the door.

“Not at all, not at all,” he said. “Please, come in.”

Winston walked in, undoing his jacket. Reinhardt got up to take it from him, and place it on a nearby coat rack.

“Thank you,” the black Brit smiled.

“You are welcome,” Reinhardt smiled, going back to his seat. “Please, sit. How can I help you?”

“First, I had the pleasure of meeting your wife and new son,” he said, extending his hand. “I want to give you my belated congratulations.”

“Why, thank you,” Reinhardt smiled, giving it a firm shake. “You picked a good time to visit Crease.”
“So I’m told,” Winston said. He pulled his notebook out. “You do know why I’m here, yes?”

“Of course. Madam Lacroix is over the moon at the idea that a bank might be coming.”

“That remains to be seen,” he said. “I still have to complete my survey of the town. I hope you can understand that I cannot be forthcoming about any details until a decision is made.”

“Of course. You’ve been hard at work these past few days. How may I be of assistance?”

“Please forgive me for being rude, but there are a few tough questions I’m required to ask. I’ve noticed that this town is quite diverse,” Winston said. “Are there any…laws to suggest otherwise?”

“Not at all,” Reinhardt said. “Before I was elected mayor, this town was a hodgepodge of people and families. We have a sizable Latino population, African population, hell, white Anglo-Saxons like myself might actually be a minority!”

“Then if you don’t mind me pressing, how does it finally feel to be outnumbered?” Winston asked, a grin on his lips.

“Strange!” Reinhardt laughed. “But it is something I’ve gotten used to. Mr. Rutledge’s cowboys were here first, and hired whomever was good on a horse; he couldn’t afford to be picky about the color of the hands he hired. Then when Madam Lacroix came and started giving folks a reason to travel here or to even stay, plenty of women of all backgrounds arrived. And when Lena found her way here, she spread word far and wide that there was a good place to set up shop. Cast a wide enough net, and you’ll be surprised what you find.”

“I can understand that,” Winston said. “And this is something the city values?”

“Of course. If we didn’t value anything like this, we wouldn’t have a town.”

“And how do you take it?”

“I can’t upset my constituents. They voted for me because they thought I’d be the best man for the job, so doing my job as best I can trumps any thoughts or feelings I may have to the contrary. Although lately, my mind has been changing.”

“Because of your wife?”

“Because of her, and my family,” he smiled. “My son and step-daughter Fareeha are teaching me much.”

“Fareeha seems quite the formidable woman.”

“She is. You know she fought in the Civil War, yes?”

“Oh yes. She has quite the stories.”

There was another knock at the door. Orisa popped her head in. She was carrying a tray of food.

“Excuse me, Mayor Reinhardt—“

She trailed off, seeing Winston there.

“Uh…”

Winston blushed and looked away, going back to scribbling intently in his notebook.
“Uh, Mama wanted you to make sure you…uh, you ate…”

“My word, is it really noon already?” Winston said loudly, pulling out his pocket watch. “Thank you, Orisa.”

“She…she gave me food for all three of us…”

“T-thank you, but I have to take my lunch elsewhere,” Winston stammered, getting to his feet. “I have to, uh, meet with…uh, with Dr. Ziegler.”

He went to the door, politely letting Orisa in before walking out. She was carrying a tray of food; Reinhardt took it, and set it on the table.

“Well, if Winston doesn’t want to eat, then we have all this wonderful food for ourselves, no?”

“I guess not,” Orisa mumbled, watching Winston make his way down the stairs.

Angela sat with Fareeha, eating their dinner. They were at their home in the clinic, enjoying the silence.

“I love my brother,” Fareeha said, “I really do.”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming up,” Angela giggled.

“Reinhardt had a saying about that,” Fareeha grinned, then stopped. “No, he’s not Reinhardt. I guess I really have to think of him like a new father.”

“Do you find it weird, to have a father after all this time?”

“I really do!” Fareeha said. “My mother raised me all by herself. There have been a few men who hung around, but no one really stuck. God, to actually have a father…I mean, it was strange seeing him with her, but seeing the love they have, I was thinking…maybe he would be a good father for me, as well as Siggy.”

“You’ve seen him dotting on Sigismund; he loves being a father.”

Fareeha paused, looking at her food.

“I should do something for him,” she mumbled. “Something to show him that…I really do see him as a father. Something special, you know?”

“Is this something you need to do by yourself, or do you need my help with it?”

Fareeha paused, thinking.

“If you want to tell him you see him as a father, you should just tell him,” Angela said, placing a hand on her lover’s arm.

“I should,” Fareeha stammered. “But…I’m a grown woman. Part of me thinks this is just immature.”

“It’s never immature. It’s changing with the times.”
“I guess you’re right,” Fareeha said, taking her hand. Then she smiled. “I got it.”

“Got what?”

“That thing to show him what he means to me. He’s German, right? Can you teach me German?”

“You want to learn German?” Angela asked, her eyes lighting up.

“Yes. That way, I can talk to both him and you!”

“I’d love to teach you!” She said, leaning in for a kiss. Fareeha pulled her in for a much longer kiss.

“Can we start tomorrow?” She asked.

“Of course! Now, what was this about your brother?”

“Right,” Fareeha chuckled. “Reinhardt always says that anything that comes before the word ‘but’ is horseshit. So: I love my brother; however, good Lord is he loud!”

“He is, isn’t he?” Angela giggled. “Some of the nights we’re with him, I just want to stuff my ears with bee’s wax!”

“You’re not the only one!”

There was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it,” Fareeha said, getting up. She walked over, and opened it up. “Ah, Mr. Winston. This is a surprise.”

“Please, just Winston,” he smiled. “Is Dr. Ziegler in?”

“Please, just Angela,” the good doctor said from the table.

“Then is Angela in?” Winston laughed. “I’d like to talk to her.”

“Of course.” Fareeha let him in, taking his jacket. Winston stomped off the worst of the snow, and wiped his feed on the course horsehair rug on the porch, ridding nearly all of the snow from his boots.

“How can we help?” Angela asked. “Would you like some dinner?”

“Not now, thank you,” he said, sitting down. “I’ve been examining the town for a few days now; I’d like to talk to you to get a doctor’s perspective.”

“Ah, more measuring the town, yes?”

“That’s exactly it,” Winston said, opening a pocket notebook. “Now, how often do people get injured here?”

“Not very often. We have a few lowlifes that try to make trouble, but even when the Deadlock Gang blew into town, not many people were thankfully hurt or killed. All thanks to our sheriff and lovely deputy, that is.”

Fareeha blushed and smiled at that.

“The Deadlock Gang?” Winston gaped. “Don’t they only operate in the southwest?”
“Not anymore,” Fareeha grinned. “They rode up here trying to cause trouble last year. So we dug our heels in, took some shots, and caught them all. They should be in prison right now.”

“I had heard that the Deadlock Gang was caught, but this was the town they were captured in?” Winston said, clearly impressed. He took a long stretch of notes. “Then this town is very safe.”

“As safe as our fearless sheriff and fearsome deputies can make it,” Angela said, giving Fareeha’s thigh a squeeze under the table.

“Then what are the most common injuries?”

“Mostly broken bones from the cowboys. Torn muscles in the farmers, or blisters. A lot of my clients are the women from the saloon, but thankfully no one has had a pregnancy scare; Olivia is good at tracking everyone’s cycles.”

“Ah, so not a lot of bastards running around, then.”

“Not in the literal sense,” Fareeha smiled. “The cowboys do make trouble every so often.”

“But they obey the city ordinance on guns?”

“Of course. Madam Lacroix doesn’t let ‘em in if they’ve got their irons on ‘em.”

“So a very law abiding town, then,” he said, taking notes.

There was another knock at the door.

“My, I certainly am popular now,” Angela said. “No, Fareeha; you got the door for Winston, I can get it this time.”

She walked over, and pulled the door open.

“Oh, Orisa. This is a surprise.”

“I’m sorry to bother you, Angela,” she said. “My knee has been acting up a bit, and everyone is demanding I go to you. Something about getting some—“

Orisa trailed off as she saw Winston sitting at the table. He turned around, and his face flushed.

“Something about what?” Angela asked.

“Oh! Uh, getting some…some…oh, what was it, you can rub it on your skin…?” Orisa stammered.

“Some ointment? A balm?”

“Yes! A balm!”

“I’ve made a few new batches that should help relieve the worst of it. Is your new brace not working?”

“N-no, it’s working, just…I get a bit sore.”

“Come on in.”

“T-thank you very much,” Winston said, bolting to his feet, his face flushed. “I should be going.”

“But you just got here,” Fareeha said.
“This has been quite illuminating! Thank you!"

Winston made a run for the door, barely pulling his coat on as he left.

“My, what a strange man,” Angela said, watching him as he made his way through a deep snowdrift.

“He’s been doing that all week,” Orisa mumbled. “He leaves whenever I show up.”

Fareeha chuckled.

“Then maybe you should talk to him.”

“More advice from people?” Orisa sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“A few days ago, Efi, Lena, and Madam Lacroix tried to get me to take a food order from Mr. Rutledge to Mama; Winston was there, and he ran away. Then yesterday, Mama made me take lunch to Mayor Reinhardt, who had Winston in his office; he ran then, too. Now this.”

Angela locked eyes with Fareeha. They knew what everyone was trying to do.

“Yes, you need to talk to him,” Angela grinned. “Someplace he can’t run away.”

Winston sat at the writing table in his hotel room. He had conducted a very thorough interview with nearly everyone of major importance of the town, and had an excellent idea of the level of prosperity of Crease. Not bad for three days of work.

That is, when he could work. There had been times when Orisa had surprised him, popping up in meetings, passing by, handing out food, or trying to make herself useful, and he had to make as quick a getaway as he possibly could.

Fortunately, he had yet to see her today, allowing him to work in peace.

He shook his head, trying to get the image of the woman blacksmith out of his head. He had a job to do, and he was going to do it as best as he could, ignoring whatever distractions that presented themselves to him.

There was a knock at the door. He set his notebook, and his official report to the Watchpoint Financial Institution, to the side.

There was another knock.

“Coming,” he said. He opened the door, and came eye-to-eye with the same blacksmith he had done his best at avoiding.

Orisa stood tall, just as tall as him. She was built like a blacksmith, with firm muscles from her arms to her legs. But she was still a woman, with generous breasts and hips. Not as generous a chest as Deputy Amari, or as curvy hips as Dr. Ziegler, but it was clear that she was most certainly a woman.

And her face…it was just so striking. Broad nose, full lips, and eyes that—
Winston shook his head. He still had his job to do.

“Y-yes…?” He stammered.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” she said with that American Southern accent that made him want to melt. No, it wasn’t just an American Southern accent, it was a mixture of a true Sub-Saharan dialect and American Southern. It must belay her heritage.

“W-what? No, I…I just have somewhere I need to go…”

Orisa didn’t move.

“Yes, you have,” she pressed. “Why?”

“I have work,” he croaked. “I can’t be bothered.”

“So why avoid me? Can’t you work and talk?”

“W-why?”

“I’m not stupid; everyone in this town has been trying to push me to you, and you’ve turned me down every time,” Orisa demanded. “You show up, give me…you gave me this look, and then you spend all your time running away! Why?”

Dammit, why did she have to box him in here?

“Because I have a job that I have to attend to,” he stammered.

“So a job is more important than talking?”

“I can’t talk to you,” Winston stammered.

“Why not? I’m a blacksmith, don’t you want to know what I have to say about the town? You’ve been asking everyone.”

Orisa was weaving a spell over him. A spell born of her eyes, of her lips, of her arms, of her breasts, of everything that made her Orisa. Winston found himself caught up in the spell, unable to even think of lying.

“I have to be impartial,” he muttered. “The Watchpoint Financial Institute depends on it.”

“What do you mean, ‘impartial?’”

“They want me to determine if this town is worth the effort of building a branch, keeping it stocked, and protected from outlaws,” he said. “If they don’t have a suitable return of investment, my employment could come to an end.”

“Is it that important?”

“Yes. They paid for my education, brought me to America,” he mumbled. “They gave me everything. They brought me here, to this town.”

Orisa stared at him, clearly incredulous.

“So your job is more important than even talking to me,” she snorted.
“I can’t talk to you, because if I talk with you, it’ll sway my mind,” he said. “And I’ll tell them to build a bank, two banks, a dozen banks here, anything to get me to stay here.”

That got Orisa to stop. Winston blushed. Where were these words coming from?

“W-what do…?”

“When I first saw you, I was struck dumb,” he confessed. “You looked right through me, cut me to the core. I had to get to know you, I want to talk to you. But…but my job comes first. I knew that if I started talking, I’d find a reason to stay here, one that would ruin my reputation as an impartial lawyer.

“I’ve been to dozens of cities, both in Britain and in America. I’ve seen hundreds of people, and you’re the only one who truly took my breath away. I thought I knew what my life was; one day, it was going in one direction, a direction I knew and wanted. But then, I met you. That very next day, I suddenly realized that my life was going in another direction. You changed that, just by looking at me.”

Orisa was staring at him open mouthed.

“I want to talk to you. I want to get to know you, but I can’t. Not until I submit my recommendation to Watchpoint. Only then would I be able to stay true to my job.”

“You’d…you’d do anything to talk to me?”

“Yes,” Winston said, the truth spilling from him. “You’re the most beautiful, interesting woman I’ve even seen. But…my job is my life. Everything I have, I owe to Watchpoint. Please, can you understand? Can you understand that this job is everything I love?”

“Yes, I can,” Orisa said. “Blacksmithing…I feel the same way about blacksmithing. It gave me everything. It gave me my sister, and this home.”

“Then can you understand that some things can’t get in the way?”

Orisa nodded.

“But you…you want to talk to me?”

“I want to spend all the time I have to get to know you.”

That made Orisa smile. It almost undid him then and there.

“Then I can wait,” she said. “I want to know who you are, too.”

“Thank you,” Winston sighed. “I’ll have to take this report back to Denver to properly file it.”

“Better talk to Lena, then. She can help guide you through the snow.”

“We had such a hard time making our way through this, I can’t imagine getting any more snow.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Orisa snapped.

“Please, that’s just a superstition,” Winston laughed.

Chapter End Notes
It's not superstition if it ends up being right, right?
Winston finishes his report, and has to deliver it to Denver. Fareeha and Jesse come with him to keep the stagecoach safe on it's trip back.

Of course it had to snow.

It had taken Winston nearly a week of work to properly gauge Crease, to see if it deserved a Watchpoint bank. A week of everyone, namely Madam Lacroix and Mayor Reinhardt, helping him assess the value of the town. Everyone was polite and helpful, which helped Winston complete his assessment in record time.

Winston said that all that was left was to take his report back to Denver, deliver it to his superiors, and wait and see.

But of course, it had to snow, and it snowed a lot. There was easily a foot of new accumulation on the ground, and while it made everything very pretty, Winston knew that it would make travel that much more difficult.

His two drivers knew this, too. They sat at the saloon, eating their breakfast, clearly not relishing the return trip. It would be a while until they had food like this again; they were savoring it.

Then again, the food in Crease was so good, Winston doubted they’d ever have food quite like this. They were probably loading up on it.

The door opened, and Winston couldn’t help but shiver a little as the cold air brushed over him. The American Frontier knew how to be quite harsh.

He looked up, and saw the three lawbringers walk in. Jack was the most at ease with the cold; he wore a simple jacket, while Fareeha was bundled up in her own heavy jacket, along with a very big scarf wrapped around her neck. But Jesse seemed to be dying despite being bundled up just as much, if not more so, than Fareeha.

“Come on, southern boy, we’ll make a native out of you yet,” Jack laughed as Jesse stomped his feet to try and get some warmth back in them. “Ah, and there’s the man we’re looking for. Mind if we sit down?”

“Not at all,” Winston said. “As you Americans are fond of saying, this is a free nation.”

“All thanks to the Thirteenth Amendment,” Fareeha said, sitting down.

“Too true!” Winston laughed. “How can I help you?”

“It’s not so much what you can do with us,” Jack said. “More of what we can do for you.”
“You’re offering your services for our trip back?” Winston asked, arching his eyebrow.

“That we are,” Jesse said. He talked evenly, but he had his hands stuffed in his armpits to try and get them warm. He eyed the fireplace several paces away, clearly doing his best to not run over to the massive fire.

Jesse contained. “Just before you showed up, we had a few reports of outlaws in the hills and mountains between here and Denver. It sounds like you got lucky that you didn’t run into them on the way in. Stagecoaches are often popular targets, and since you have a bank’s name written on the side of yours, well, it might be too good to pass up.”

“You’re sure that outlaws will try to attack us?”

“I would,” Jesse said. What did he mean by that?

“What Jesse means is that while you got lucky traveling here,” Fareeha said, “we can’t count on you getting lucky on your way back.”

“A very prudent assumption. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome,” Jack smiled. “If you wouldn’t mind, my deputies will be traveling with you. I’ll have to stay here and hold down the fort.”

“Why, thank you for the help. My drivers would appreciate the extra hands.”

The doors to the saloon opened again, and two more people walked in, dressed for the winter. Winston looked up; it was Dr. Ziegler and Lena.

“Are we too late?” Dr. Ziegler asked. She was carrying a big leather bag with her, while Lena had a canvas bag.

“Too late for what, breakfast?” Fareeha asked.

“No, we’re going with you.”

“Angela, we could be running into outlaws,” Fareeha said.

“All the more reason to have a doctor with you,” she said. “If anyone gets shot, it is important go get medical help as soon as possible.”

“This could be dangerous—“

“And I want to help it be less dangerous,” she said. “Please, I can’t stand thinking that something happened to you, that I could have done something.”

Fareeha glared at her. It was clear she didn’t want to put the good doctor in any kind of trouble

“A doctor would be a good thing to have,” Jesse admitted.

“Yes,” Fareeha said, relenting, “it would be.”

“And you’ll also need a trailblazer,” Lena said. “Me and Emily are good at that.”

“You do realize that blazing a trail in possibly outlaw infested area is quite dangerous, yes?” Winston asked.
“’Course I do. But I like playing with fire,” Lena smiled. “’Sides, I got some things to deliver in Denver. Two birds, one stone, that whole thing, yea?”

“Do the two of you have extra food to bring with?” Jack asked.

“Yes, it’s waiting at the general store,” Angela said.

“Good. Then you leave whenever Winston is ready to.”

“Just…give me another hour or so,” he said. “Just enough time to relish the heat before we go out into the cold.”

“Amen to that,” Jesse grumbled.

Bundled up, Winston steeled himself. He pushed the door open, leaving the warm hotel behind. He walked with his drivers to the stable where their stagecoach was at. Seeing it filled him with a sense of pride. It was painted a brilliant royal blue, with golden lettering; the colors of the Watchpoint Financial Institution. The horses were ready, attended to by the hotel workers as well as the two deputies.

Winston gave the hotel workers a generous tip for going out in such cold.

“You ready?” Fareeha asked, adjusting her jacket. She stood by her horse, ready to go.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

From the hotel came Angela and Lena. Angela wore a very nice jacket made of supple leather and warm fur. A plush scarf was wrapped around her neck, and she carried her doctor bag. Lena had a worn jacket on, but it must be quite warm, because she didn’t seem bothered by the cold.

“Right, no point standing around,” Lena said. She went to her horse, Emily, and draped two full saddle bags across her. “Ready, Emily?”

The chestnut-red horse snorted, pawing at the ground.

“Yea, you’re ready girl,” Lena laughed. “Come on then, let’s get going.”

She climbed on her horse. Winston opened the stagecoach door for Angela, who stepped aboard. From the back of the stable, Jesse came out with both his horse and Fareeha’s. Winston spied the guns at their hips, and in Fareeha’s case, the rifle that hung on the side of her horse. His drivers climbed aboard; one of them took his shotgun back from Fareeha.

“Next stop, Denver,” Lena said cheerfully, leading the way out of town.

“How can that woman be so cheerful in this cold?” Winston grumbled, closing the door to the stagecoach.

“Lena doesn’t get discouraged,” Angela laughed. She pulled out a muff hand warmer, and settled in for the long haul.

“That must be nice,” Winston said, looking out of the stagecoach. The drivers urged the horses on,
and they began moving. The coach was a little stiff in the cold, but was still comfortable. Outside, Fareeha and Jesse fell in besides the coach.

As they rode through the town, Winston saw the blacksmithing building. And standing on the small veranda was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

His breath caught as he saw Orisa. The big woman waved at him, and he hesitantly waved back.

The moment over, the coach rode on through the snow, following the road out of town.

“Looking forward to coming back?” Angela smiled.

Winston jumped. For a fleeting second, he forgot where he was, what he was doing, or even that he wasn’t alone.

“M-my opinion is property of the Watchpoint Financial Institution,” he stammered. “Until they make their decision on to any possible business dealings, I have to refrain from answering.”

“That’s a long way of saying ‘yes,’” Angela laughed.

Winston couldn’t help but blush. He knew it was cold, but the stagecoach suddenly seemed that much warmer.

The wind swept down through the mountains and the hills. Fareeha adjusted her jacket’s collar, making sure it was properly buttoned up, which it was. The wind made her doubt it for a second.

“How are you doing?”

She looked over. Angela was looking at her from the stagecoach. Just seeing her lover made Fareeha feel stronger. That, and it helped that Angela looked just so beyond adorable all bundled up in a lovely jacket and scarf. Fareeha decided this was a good time to practice her new language.

“Okay, I guess,” she said in hesitant German.

That got Angela to smile. Suddenly, the cold didn’t seem that bad.

“And you’re warm?” Angela said, speaking slow so she could make out everything. She also spoke in simple sentences, much to Fareeha’s pleasure. “It’s been a day, we can’t get too cold.”

“I am okay,” Fareeha said, riding closer to the stagecoach. “I was colder in the Army.”

“You’re not just being tough?” Angela giggled.

“Not at all.”

“You’re a bad liar,” she smiled. Fareeha laughed.

“And you? Keeping warm?”

“Warm and bored,” she said, holding up a book. “I do need more books in Denver.”

“We will go buying,” Fareeha said, struggling to find the right words. Despite Angela’s lessons, she
still had much to learn. She took a second to mentally switch back to English. “What about you, Winston?”

“Making due as best I can,” the big man sighed. “But I am taking the time to catch up on my own reading.”

“No more working on that report for Watchpoint?”

“That is sealed, and has to remain sealed until it is delivered to my superiors,” he said.

“You’d get along great with Jack,” Angela said. “He’s just as straight a shooter as you.”

“Straight only when it comes to shooting,” Fareeha chuckled.

“Sorry?” Winston asked.

“Nothing.”

Angela tried not to laugh.

“I better check on everyone,” Fareeha said, urging her horse on. She rode up to the drivers. She thought Angela was bundled up; the two men were wrapped in at least three snow-and-frost covered blankets that were on top of their heavy jackets. Their faces were barely showing. “How you guys doing?”

“We’ll be fine once this damn wind dies down,” the driver grumbled.

“Amen,” the man riding shotgun said.

“You need a break, you call for it,” she said. “No shame taking some time to warm up in this winter.”

She rode on ahead to Lena and Jesse, who were a few yards ahead of them.

“How are you holding up?”

“Bit cold, but not too bad,” Lena said. “Emily’s doing great, though.” She patted her precious horse’s flank lovingly.

“Great,” Fareeha said. “And the trailblazing?”

“Going just great.” Lena said. “I’m keeping an eye on any really bad drifts, but we’ll have to start climbing some hills and mountains soon. There should be a few paths we can take.”

“You’ve been doing a great job so far, we’ll be through this in no time.”

“Thanks, luv.”

“You need a break, you call for it, okay?”

Lena gave her a big thumbs-up, and a bigger grin.

“How you doing, Texas boy?”

“Wondering who’s bright fucking idea it was to come north,” Jesse grumbled. He was bundled up, his hat pulled as low to his face as he could make it. It was rare that Jesse swore, but to the southern
boy, the cold was a time for rare slips of the tongue.

“Wasn’t that your idea?”

“And I’m kicking myself real bad for it,” he hissed.

“Aw, cheer up,” Fareeha laughed, playfully hitting his shoulder. “If you need a break, we can always take one and start a fire.”

“That just means more time in this frozen wasteland. I’d rather get this done and over with.”

“It’s not that bad. Besides, you have to say this looks amazing.”

Jesse looked up. The rolling hills were covered in snow, along with the trees and the mountains in the distance. Many trees had lost their leaves, but there were dozens and dozens of green fir trees. The snow was deep, but light, sticking to any surface it could. The air finally stilled, with non-migratory birds chirping and singing in the cold air.

Fareeha wished she knew how to paint. The wilderness was beyond beautiful.

“Yea, I guess you got a point there,” Jesse said. “This really is something.”

“Times like these I really love America,” Lena smiled.

They rode on for a few minutes, just letting the silence hang. It was peaceful.

“Maybe this whole ‘north’ thing isn’t that bad,” he said.

“I think you’re onto something,” Fareeha said. She paused. “You’re keeping an eye out, right?”

“Never stopped.”

“It’s just…maybe I’m getting paranoid, but I’m surprised we haven’t seen anything yet.”

“You’re paranoid,” Jesse said. His arms finally came out of his gloves, and he stuck a cigar in his mouth, then he procured a match. “But that doesn’t mean you’re wrong.”

“You remember the maps that Jack had, right? Were there any spots that an outlaw might be hiding in?”

“Saw a few that jumped out at me,” he said, puffing away. “We should be coming up on the first crop soon.”

“’Soon’ as in today, or within a day?”

“Have to say within a day.”

“Thanks, Jesse,” Lena said. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Just one of the services I provide, darlin,’” he grinned.

“Damn, now I had to go and ruin the mood,” Fareeha sighed. “All this talk of bandits sucked the fun out of this.”

“Wish I had a guitar. I could pick out a few songs.”

“That’s the problem with guitars: they’re big,” Fareeha grinned. She reached into her pocket and
pulled out her harmonica. “But this is small.”

She played a few cords, just to warm up, then began a song. The harmonica echoed off the trees, filling the air with music. Jesse laughed, and joined in, singing.

_God rest you merry, gentlemen,_

_Let nothing you dismay,_

_Remember Christ our Savior_

_Was born on Christmas Day_

Lena pulled alongside Fareeha, smiling and singing with them. From the stagecoach, Fareeha could hear Angela and Winston singing as well.

_To save us all from Satan's power_

_When we were gone astray._

_O tidings of comfort and joy,_

_Comfort and joy,_

_O tidings of comfort and joy!_

“Didn’t think you were religious, luv,” Lena said as Fareeha came to the end of the song.

“I’m not, but it is a beautiful song. That, and we need to get in the mood for Christmas, don’t we?”

“I reckon it’s time,” Jesse smiled. He began a new song, and Fareeha quickly stepped in. Soon, everyone was singing, even the drivers.

_We three kings of orient are_

_Bearing gifts we traverse afar_

_Field and fountain_

_Moor and mountain_

_Following yonder star_

Their third day on the trail, the third day of the quiet sounds of winter. Angela wondered if this was going to be a boring trip or not. Fareeha helped pass the time with her harmonica, and Jesse’s singing was truly a joy, but it was still a boring trip. They had to be two, maybe three days from Denver; they were through the worst of the mountains, with only rolling hills as far as the eye could see. Lena had truly picked a good path for them.

She pulled up one of the blinds on the stagecoach window, and leaned over to talk to her love.

“Fareeha—“
She was silenced with a quick hand-slash.

“Something might be coming.” Fareeha whispered.

Something was coming? There wasn’t anything coming. The only thing she heard was the trotting of the horses, and the crunch of the stagecoach wheels as they made their way through the snow. There was nothing else.

Her stomach nervously churned. Where were the birds? They used to hear birds all the time.

“It’s the quiet, isn’t it?” She whispered.

Fareeha nodded.

“Jesse saw some smoke about an hour back,” she whispered back. “Campfire size. It went out a little bit ago.”

“Is it…? Could it be…?”

“Best assume it is. Now quiet, the drivers and Lena already know.”

Angela leaned back into the coach. She turned to Winston, who was shifting visibly. Even he could tell something was wrong.

“They think something might be coming,” Angela whispered.

“I figured as much,” he mumbled. “It got too quiet.”

There was a tapping at the side of the coach. Fareeha was passing her one of her revolvers.

“Just in case,” she said.

Angela hesitantly took the gun.

“If the worst comes to pass, point it at center mass, and gently pull the trigger. Just be careful, it doesn’t have much trigger pull.”

“Much what?”

“Much weight behind the trigger. It’s easy to shoot.”

Angela looked at the revolver. She never knew that a gun could weigh so much, let alone a gun designed to be held in one’s hand.

“Keep it safe,” Fareeha smiled. “That got me through the war.”

She nodded, trying to smile back.

Angela thought that time was dragging by before; now it seemed to be going by even slower. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and for once, the cold didn’t seem to bother her. Angela was dimly aware that was adrenaline, her body getting ready for fight or flight.

The silence was pervasive, taking over everything. The squeaking and creaking of the wagon only accentuated the silence of the forests. Angela looked out the window. They were driving through a particularly dense patch of woods.
Fareeha pulled her rifle out, and slowly worked the lever.

They drove on, making their way through the deep snow drifts. Angela was amazed that nothing had happened to the stagecoach yet.

A sharp crack rang out, making Angela jump. Wood splintered as the bullet hit the stagecoach.

“Contact,” Fareeha yelled, wheeling her horse around and bringing her rifle up. “Nine o’clock!”

From the thick woods came a stream of men on horses. Angela’s breath caught in her throat. There had to be at least ten, all wearing gray coats. They were yelling and screaming, shooting revolvers and long guns as they galloped along.

“Get the fuck outta here!” Someone yelled. The driver lashed the horses, and the stagecoach was roughly jerked along as they began picking up speed.

“Get down,” Winston said, pushing Angela down towards the floor of the stagecoach. The wood cracked and splintered as bullets hit the coach. Angela yelped, throwing herself at the ground. It was just like when the Deadlock Gang blew into town.

Gunshots rang out, both from the approaching bandits but also from the stagecoach. The shotgun up front exploded, and Angela could hear Jesse picking his shots, and Fareeha was letting lose with her rifle.

She peaked up. One of the bandits had fallen from his horse, undoubtedly shot.

“Come on, get moving!” Fareeha yelled.

“This is a stagecoach, not a race horse,” the driver protested. But she could hear the horses being whipped, and felt the coach surge along.

“Lena, get to the front,” Jesse yelled. Angela looked over, and saw the reformed outlaw opening his revolver’s cylinder to stuff more bullets in. “Keep an eye out for any rocks or bumps.”

“I’m on it,” the Brit yelled back.

Bullets hit the back of the stagecoach, and Angela heard someone scream. She clutched Fareeha’s revolver to her chest.

“Shotgun’s down,” the driver yelled. “Someone get on it!”

“Jesse!”

Fareeha yelled in pain. Angela’s heart caught in her throat.

“Shit, Fareeha!” Jesse shouted. “Get up here!”

Ignoring the flying bullets, she looked up. Fareeha was almost lying on her horse, but was staying in place. Blood dripped down her right arm, and she held both the reins and her rifle in her other hand.

Jesse rode his horse next to her. He held the shotgun in his hand, and quickly emptied both barrels. Two screams from the outlaws tore through the air. Angela pressed her hands against her ears to try and block everything out.

Jesse pulled Fareeha closer to the stagecoach, then broke open the shotgun’s breech, stuffing shells in.
“I’m okay,” Fareeha hissed. She was not okay. “I’m okay, just...just help me up.”

Jesse helped raise her up in the saddle. She tried to turn around, but it was too much; she hissed in pain. Still, her lover pulled her other revolver out.

“Lena, where we going?” Jesse hollered, unloading the shotgun again. “Lena?”

“Aw crap,” the Brit yelped. “Hold on, it’ll get rough!”

Jesse threw an arm around Fareeha, then the stagecoach left the ground. Angela floated for a split second before she was slammed into the seat.

“Fuck!!” Someone yelled. Maybe it was the driver, or the man on shotgun. “This is a gorram riverbed!”

“It’s the only thing we got right now,” Lena yelled back. “Follow me!”

The stagecoach shook, rattled, and rolled. Angela reached for Winston, who pulled her close. Together, they were thrown about on the inside of the coach. Angela hit her head, and saw stars.

She wondered if the stagecoach would break.

All the while, the outlaws kept shooting at them. Wood splintered as they shot wildly, and daylight began showing through the bullet holes.

There was a final rough hit; the stagecoach’s bottom slammed against something hard, and at first Angela’s rear was driven into the hard bench, then she was flying, her entire body hitting the ceiling of the wagon before falling back down.

But somehow, the stagecoach kept on rolling. Angela thought that maybe there was something to the whole “God” thing.

“Fuck, these are persistent assholes,” she heard Jesse grunt.

“Fareeha?” She called. “Fareeha, are you there?”

“I’m here,” Fareeha gasped.

Blinking back the stars in her eyes, Angela looked out the window. Fareeha was there, being propped up by Jesse, looking deathly pale.

“Hold on,” she said, grabbing the stagecoach’s windowsill. “I’ll get you soon. Driver, stop! Fareeha’s been shot!”

“We still got fuckers on our tail,” he yelled back.

“Not for long,” Jesse grunted. He grabbed Fareeha’s revolver, and kept shooting.

There was a slam against the stagecoach, making Angela yell. Against the other side of the coach, a gray-coated outlaw had jumped from his horse, onto the stagecoach itself.

He held a revolver in his hands, leveled directly at Winston.

“Stop the damn coach, you filthy—“

A revolver exploded inside of the stagecoach. The bullet hit the man just below the nose, blowing his
face, and most of his head, off. He toppled backwards like a marionette with its strings cut. He fell into the snow, flipping over a few times, turning both the snow and his gray jacket red with blood.

Angela was shaking, staring at the window. A man used to be there.

“Angela,” Winston said. “Angela, it’s okay.”

He placed his hands on hers. Suddenly, she realized that she had Fareeha’s other revolver in her hands; she was the one who shot the man.

“Angela.”

She dropped the revolver. Her hands were shaking.

“Got a few more,” Jesse said. “They’re backing off.”

“Keep going,” Fareeha gasped. “Need to…need to put distance between us.”

“You’re bleeding bad.”

“We can’t stop near them!”

Jesse hissed.

“Lena, keep going,” he yelled. “We can’t stop, not now.”

“You sure?” The Brit asked.

“Just a few more minutes!”

Angela was shaking something awful.

“Angela, thank you,” Winston said. “You saved my life.”

“But—“

“No buts, you rescued me.”

She nodded.

“It…it had to be done,” she mumbled.

“It’s going to be okay,” Winston said. “Can you take a few deep breaths for me?”

Her mind started clicking back into gear. She was in shock. She started taking deep breaths; it helped calm her. But she could still see the man being shot, his blood and brains leaving the back of his head.

“I’m okay,” she stammered, trying to convince herself. “Just…God, that was frightening.”

“Are you sure?”

“Getting better,” she lied. “Fareeha? Fareeha, are you okay?”

“No, I’m not,” Fareeha gasped, lolling about in the saddle. “I’m really hurt.”

“Just a little longer, I’ll help you.”
She had to help Fareeha. That helped her focus, helped her keep the terrible image out of her head. The stagecoach rolled on, putting more and more distance between them and the outlaws. Angela rummaged through the stagecoach; in their flight, nearly everything was thrown about. She pushed aside blankets and books, and found her bag.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Lena called for a stop.

“Whoa, ease up there,” the Brit yelled. “Think this is good.”

The stagecoach was slowly stopped as the driver eased the horses down. Angela jumped out just as they were coming in for a stop, her bag in her hands. They had stopped on the top of a big hill, giving them a commanding view of the area. Jesse was helping Fareeha off her horse.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, helping her down.

“I wasn’t going to let you get hurt,” Fareeha hissed.

“I would’ve been fine.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” she gasped. “He had you dead to rights.”

That made Jesse pause.

“Thank you,” he said. “We’re going down now, nice and easy.”

“I’ve helped people who got shot,” she groaned, pulling off her jacket with one hand.

“Then you know what comes next,” he said, acting as her second hand.

Angela threw a spare blanket on the snow covered ground, and Fareeha was set down on top of it.

“Lena, Winston, I’ll need your eyes,” Jesse said, taking charge. “You two get on top of the stagecoach and yell if anyone comes after us. Fareeha, give me your rifle.”

She passed it off without complaint.

“Who else got shot?”

“I did,” one of the drivers mumbled. He jumped off the stagecoach, and fell into the snow. Jesse helped him over.

Angela looked the man over. He was bleeding slightly. She pulled at the frozen blankets, practically tearing them off before she was finally able to undo his jacket. She only saw superficial wounds on his chest.

“What shot you?”

“Must’ve been a shotgun, it tore everything up.”

“Then you must have a very sturdy jacket, or you bundled yourself up with just enough layers to block most of the shot,” she said. “You’ll be fine.”

“What? Just ‘fine?’ It felt like I got hit with an anvil.”

“Getting shot does that to you,” Fareeha groaned, trying to laugh. She had finally shrugged out of her jacket, and was undoing her shirt so Angela could work.
“She’s worse than you,” Angela said. “Please, sit down. I’ll be there soon.”

She knelt next to Fareeha, opened her bag, and looked her lover over. She had taken a shot to the right side of her nearly naked chest, by her shoulder. Blood bubbled out freely. Blood that could have easily come from the man she killed…

Angela shook her head. Fareeha was hurt, she had to help. She pulled out a bottle of whiskey; Fareeha knew what was coming. Her chocolate lover downed nearly all of the cheap drink, struggling not to cough against the strong liquor. Then Angela stuck a strap of leather in her mouth, and got to work cleaning the wound with some of the remaining whiskey. Fareeha thrashed.

“Lena, Winston, see anything?” Jesse asked.

“Nothing,” they replied.

“Well, that’s good.”

Fareeha bit deep into the leather strap as Angela worked. The terrible image that played in her head dulled as she went to work, her doctoral instincts taking over, making everything second nature. Angela didn’t want to pull the bullet out, but it had lodged itself in one of Fareeha’s ribs, and was right in front of her. She didn’t want her love to get lead poisoning, so she pulled it out, and got to sealing the wound.

Fareeha started wheezing and coughing; Angela realized that the bullet had pierced her pleural cavity. Air was leaking in, collapsing her lung. She reached into her bag, and pulled out a knife with a shallow blade.

“This is going to hurt, and I’m so sorry.”

She sunk the blade into Fareeha’s side. Her love bit into the strap, but the pressure was relieved, and she gasped in pain, now able to fully draw her breath.

“There, that’s it,” Angela said, babbling as she worked to sew up the gunshot, and her own knife wound. “We’re okay, we’re okay, we’re okay.”

With everything sealed up, she used the rest of the little whiskey bottle to wash out the wounds. Fareeha hissed, but went back to biting the strap. Angela wrapped her shoulder in fresh linen, and tied it in place.

“There, all done,” she said. “Just lay there, you’ll need to get your strength back.”

“Thank you,” Fareeha gasped, pulling the leather strap out of her mouth.

Angela leaned down and kissed her.

“You’re my hero,” she smiled. “And I’ll make sure that my hero never dies.”

She got up, and went over to the man who was shot. He saw her kiss Angela, but after a few seconds of hesitation, let her examine him. She pulled some buckshot out of his chest, but there wasn’t much else she could do. She pulled out another bottle of whiskey; he took a nip to help with the pain.

“This was something,” Jesse sighed, leaning against the stagecoach. “Fareeha, how many did you get?”
“Three, I think,” Fareeha mumbled, the whiskey and adrenaline let-down slurring her words.

“I… I killed one,” Angela said.

“That’s good work you did, doc,” Jesse said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Thank you.”

Angela nodded, going back to Fareeha to check on her.

“Well, I got four,” Jesse said. “That’s gotta be half of ‘em, easy.”

“I’m not seeing anything,” Lena called from the top of the stagecoach.

“Then one of you stay up there,” Jesse said. “We’ll be camping out here tonight to get our shit back in order. We’ll each have to take watch, those assholes might come back looking to get even. Winston, can I get your hand in checking and fixing up the stagecoach? After this stunt, I don’t want the damn thing to fall apart on us.”

Chapter End Notes

Been a while since we've had a gunfight, hasn't it?
Stagecoach

Chapter Summary

The party draws closer to Denver.
For Jesse, he knows that Fareeha took a bullet for him; that won't stand.
For Angela, she worries about her lover and her patient.
For Fareeha, an opportunity seems to pass her by, but another one opens.
And for Winston, he waits for a chance of a lifetime to pass down to him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fareeha’s head lolled about as the stagecoach rolled on. She hissed, but couldn’t do much else but lean against Angela.

“It’s okay,” Angela said, holding her hand. Winston sat opposite them, face full of worry. “Just a little while longer.”

Fareeha nodded. Angela had been telling her that for the past day and a half. She just hoped her chocolate love could hold herself together; it was clear that she was in a rough spot. Sweat dotted her brow, and she had spent the last day shaking. Even when she was covered with some of the spare blankets, she shivered. Yet when Angela felt her forehead, she was burning up.

“Hey, we’re almost here!” Lena called.

Angela leaned out the stagecoach’s window, followed shortly after by Winston. In the distance, she saw smoke rising from the ground. It was smokestacks and chimneys rising from a city.

“We there,” she said. “We’re at Denver.”

“About…about damn time,” Fareeha chuckled.

“Finally made it,” Jesse said. He and Lena were the only ones riding outside of the stagecoach. He sat on his horse, the reins of Fareeha’s horse wrapped around the horn of his saddle. Lena and Emily rode out in front, blazing a trail.

“And not a moment too soon,” Winston sighed.

Angela was glad that the stagecoach was built tough; otherwise, it might have broken apart during their run from the outlaws, or on the final leg of their trip.

“We’re getting there, won’t be long,” Angela promised.

“Good, this trip might…kill me,” Fareeha laughed, stammering despite herself.

Angela checked the bandages. Fareeha’s shoulder was still bleeding, but the blood was a deep red color; it was healthy, but it was clear that she was sick.

As she checked Fareeha and her wounds again and again, they pulled into Denver. As they entered
the city limits, Winston directed them to a hotel.

“Turn left, that’s the place.”

“Thank you, Winston,” Angela said. “I hope they have rooms available.”

“They’ll have rooms,” he promised. “This is a hotel that mostly serves Watchpoint members. Bankers, lawyers, cashiers, this caters to them.”

“Then we can’t be taking up their time and space.”

“You’ve done the Watchpoint a great service,” he smiled. “You’ve protected it’s members and its assets; not to mention, you saved my life. The least we can do is to put you up.”

“Then thank you, so much.”

The driver pulled up to the front of the hotel. Angela got out, and Jesse jumped down from his horse. Together, they helped Fareeha out of the stagecoach. The beautiful deputy swayed as she was carried to the hotel. Winston walked into, holding the door open. Lena followed with Angela’s doctor bag. Fareeha sighed as they entered the warm building.

“Ah, Winston,” the hotel attendant smiled. “We were wondering when you’d be returning.”

“Yes, it seems like forever,” he said. “I’ll need rooms for these lawmen. They escorted me back from the frontier town of Crease, and saved me from outlaws.”

“If they saved you, then they’re friends of Watchpoint,” they said. “This way.”

The attendant lead them up the stairs to the second floor.

“Step here,” Angela said. “And another.”

“Come on Fareeha,” Jesse grunted, taking the brunt of her weight. “You got this.”

“Cold…” Fareeha mumbled. “Cold…let me in, so…”

She was sweating heavily now, and shaking like a leaf in a gale. Angela’s heart broke; Fareeha was delirious. Finally, they came to a room with two large down beds. She and Jesse set Fareeha down, who sighed in contentment as she felt the soft bed give way to her. Lena set her bag down on a nearby nightstand.

“Do you need anything else?” The attendant asked.

“Yes,” Angela said. “I’m her doctor. I’ll need warm water, clean linen to change her bandages, and some hot soup.”

“Cold whiskey if you got it,” Jesse said. “Something tells me she’ll need a little something to help with the edge.”

The attendant nodded, and went to put the order in.

“How’s our girl?” Jesse asked.

“Not good,” Angela said, mopping Fareeha’s brow. “Her shoulder is patched up, but she lost a lot of blood, and it looks like a sickness took a hold.”
“Dammit,” Jesse hissed. “You need my help?”

“Not now. I have some things in my bag to help. I might need you to get some supplies for me later, but that’s for later.”

Jesse paused as Angela worked on getting Fareeha’s jacket off. He helped hold her up, letting Angela get the jacket off. Fareeha was incoherently babbling.

“You hang in there,” he told the delirious Fareeha. “You saved my life, and I owe you for that.”

“I’d like to stay,” Winston said, “but I have to deliver my report to the local branch.”

“No need to apologize,” Angela said, grabbing her bag. “I’ll have to take some time to check Fareeha.”

“Any idea how long it’ll take to get word ‘bout this possible bank back in Crease?” Lena asked.

“At least a week,” Winston said. “I have to give my report to the branch here, but there are other branches in America. They’ll be contacting each other over telegraph, but it will still take time.”

“I’d like to get to the sheriff’s office,” Jesse said. “We have to put the word out on whatever is left of these outlaws.”

“And I need a stiff drink or three,” Lena mumbled. “Christ, this has been a shitty trip.”

There was a knock at the door, and Lena opened it. A hotel worker was at the door, pushing a cart.

“Warm water, fresh linen, and some fine whiskey for the pain,” the desk attendant said, pushing a cart. “We’re making some soup, should be ready in about half an hour.”

“Thank you,” Angela said. “You all can go, I can handle this from here.”

Everyone nodded, and left. Once the door was closed, she began peeling back Fareeha’s shirt to examine the stitches. Angela wet a towel and set it on Fareeha’s forehead as she went to work.

Jesse saw the sheriff’s office. He got off his horse, hitched it, and walked inside. Unlike Jack’s office in Crease, this was a much larger building. There were over a dozen lawmen he could see. A small part of him rebelled at the idea of being so close to the law. It looked like the outlaw part of him still had a little kick.

*Don’t you dare say anything, Jesse. You’re becoming a better man. Fareeha said you were.*

“Can I help you?” An older gentleman said. He had a full, bushy beard that was graying with his hair.

“Yes, you can,” he said, showing his badge. “The name’s McCree, Jesse McCree. I’m a deputy from Crease.”

“McCree? Yes, Jack Morrison wrote us about you. Congrats on the job; I’m Sheriff Hall. What brings you here to Denver?”
“Thank you, sir,” Jesse said. “I’m here because a gentleman working with a bank needed to be escorted back to Denver.”

“That’s right, there are some outlaws in the mountains ‘tween here and Crease. I take it Morrison got our letters?”

“He did, sir. That’s why we’re here. We escorted the man here, and on our way, we got ambushed by said outlaws.”

“Shit, is everyone alright?” Hall asked.

“My partner took a bullet for me; I hope she’ll be fine.”

Hearing ‘she,’ Hall paused.

“Then what’s this about?”

“Between the two of us, we killed maybe seven or eight of them,” Jesse said. “But there’s gotta be at least a few still kicking. I was hoping we could round up a posse, ride in the hills and see if we can clean them out.”

“Those men, were they rough dressed in old Confederate gear?”

“I did see a few gray jackets on ‘em.”

“Fuck, think that means you got the Hughes Gang. If you took out half of ‘em, we might as well try to put the boot in on ‘em,” Hall said. “Couldn’t come at a better time, too. What with the holidays coming up, I got plenty of men here looking for a little action.”

Hall turned around and gave a loud whistle.

“Got a deputy from Crease here,” he yelled. “He ran into the Hughes Gang, put over half of ‘em in the ground. We need at least seven men to go ride down the rest.”

Men jumped up, volunteering. The old man turned to Jesse.

“Get your shit together, McCree,” he grinned. “We’ll be riding out at first light.”

One more night to enjoy true warmth. Guess it served him right for jumping at the opportunity to finish his work.

Lena tilted her beer back. Now that it was winter, she could get a truly cold pint of bitter. She tilted the glass up higher, letting the amber liquid slide down her throat. She hadn’t eaten proper all day; she could feel the alcohol hitting her system as soon as it touched her stomach. It felt warm and relaxing, just the thing to unknot her muscles and stomach.

She had been stressed ever since the gunfight with the outlaws. Emily had run so fast, she actually had to slow the chestnut red mare down so she wouldn’t leave everyone in the dust. But the bullets…the men had been screaming for them and their blood. It was hard to feel relaxed when she could still feel the bullets flying through the air.
Lena knew she couldn’t rely on finding solace in the bottom of a bottle, but right now, it was all she had. She didn’t have Madam Lacroix to make her feel better, and she could still feel the stress of the gunfight whenever she looked at Fareeha. She was still shaking, seeing Fareeha lying out in the snow, turning it red with blood…

“Well, look at what the wind blew in.”

She looked up. A man had slid on up to her.

“Don’t think I’ve seen you around here,” he grinned.

“Listen, I’m gonna try and say this as kind as I can, but I’ve had a real shitty past few days,” Lena said. “I’m here to drink, not to make nice and find a bloke, ya feel me?”

“Whore,” the man hissed, walking away.

“Ya got the wrong kinda woman there, luv,” she called after the man as he stalked away. Now she remembered why she liked Crease; the men there knew their manners.

“I’m sorry about that.”

Lena looked up from her drink. A red-haired woman slid up next to her. “That guy’s been hitting on anything that moves for the past few hours. He’s got some money, but isn’t looking to part with it.”

“Guess he’s used to getting shot down then,” she laughed.

“Doesn’t know when to stop,” the redhead smiled. “I kinda admire that. Then again, if he keeps asking everyone, I guess sooner or later he’ll find that one woman who says ‘yes.’”

“Feel right sorry for that girl,” Lena mumbled.

“Same here!” The redhead laughed. Then she saw that Lena had finished her beer. “Can I get you another one?”

Lena looked at the woman. She was a beauty, with green eyes to go with her red hair. And she had such a wonderfully full chest.

“Thanks,” she smiled, “but I’ve had a rough coupla days, so I’d have to pass.”

“Not looking to make a night of it?”

“I’m really not.”

“Well, you got a look in your eyes that tells me you need it,” the redhead said. “Next one is on me, no strings attached.”

“I don’t mean any hard feelings.”

“None taken. Right now, I’m just looking to help.”

“Thanks,” Lena said. The woman ordered her another beer, and took her leave. Then Lena realized she was rubbing her collar.

She looked back at the red-haired woman as she was walking away. Now that she thought about it, she had only been with Madam Lacroix ever since she found Crease. She’d never been this monogamous before. Hell, before she found Crease, she’d jump from bed to bed of any woman
she’d find. Was this what her mother was telling her about, finally settling down?

Her thumb played over the fine leather collar. She smiled; if settling down with Madam Lacroix felt this good, she could live this way.

Sunlight shined on Fareeha’s eyes. She tried rolling away, but her shoulder reminded her that she shouldn’t be moving. She stopped. She was finally feeling warm.

Looking over, she saw that Angela was sleeping next to her, holding her tightly. No wonder she was warm, she had the hottest thing next to her.

Feeling her move, Angela looked up through her disheveled blonde hair.

“Are you awake?” She asked.

“I’m not sure,” Fareeha said. She was tired, but knew she had been lying down forever. She decided to put some effort in, and spoke more German. “I think I went to heaven.”

Angela smiled. Hearing her love speak her tongue told her that she would be fine.

“Well, I can tell you that you’re not in heaven,” Angela smiled.

“Then maybe heaven came to me.”

Angela blushed at that, and buried her head into her good shoulder.

“How are you feeling?”

“Rough,” Fareeha groaned. “Real rough, and hungry.”

“Are you feeling cold?”

“No, why?”

“You said you were freezing,” Angela said. “But you were sweating and shivering. You were delirious. I got a few more blankets to help you stay warm, but it wasn’t helping. So I’ve been in bed with you, trying to warm you up.”

Fareeha let Angela pull her closer.

“How are you feeling better?”

“I am now,” Fareeha smiled. “God. How long was I out?”

“Almost a week. I’ve been feeding you soup.”

“Can we get more food? I’m starving.”

“We should stick with soup, make sure you keep everything down.”

“I like that.”
“I’ll have to get up to get it.”

“I’ll…” Fareeha struggled with the words. Giving up, she switched to English. “I’ll manage.”

Angela left the bed, and Fareeha immediately regretted it. The bed felt so much colder without her. She didn’t say anything, but Angela must be reading her mind, because she left in a hurry, and came back with two massive jars filled with soup. The jars were hot, wrapped in hand towels so they could be handled.

“Chicken noodle,” she smiled as she crawled back in. “Good for the body and soul.”

“Lord, that smells delicious,” Fareeha said, slowly sitting up.

“Easy, we have to start small,” Angela chided, handing her a spoon.

Fareeha punched her pillow up so she could sit upright. Angela gave her a deep spoon, and she laid into the soup.

“Winston says the cooks here are first rate,” she smiled.

“They’re good,” Fareeha said. “Almost half as good as my mom’s cooking.”

“It’s not fair comparing their cooking to your mother’s.”

“I guess not,” Fareeha laughed. “Still, this is amazing soup.”

“Just slow down. We have to make sure you can hold everything.”

“With you here, I think I can do anything.”

Angela blushed at that.

“Flatterer,” she chuckled.

“Doesn’t make it any less true,” Fareeha said. “It’s…God, here we are in Denver, and I’m stuck in bed. I was hoping to get you a Christmas present here.”

“We can still go together.”

“But I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“And what if I wanted to surprise you?”

“I guess that depends on the surprise.”

Angela got up, but Fareeha tried to pull her back in. Giggling, she pulled away from Fareeha’s grasp, and walked across the room. There was an armoire across from the bed, nothing fancy, and Angela opened it up. She pulled out a very long leather duster.

“This is my surprise to you,” she smiled.

“What the…” Fareeha set the soup down. “When did you get that?”

“Just a few days ago,” she beamed. “I had Lena put an order in for it months ago. It was ready when we got here.”

“Is that why you wanted to go to Denver?”
“Well, that and to be a doctor should the worst happen.”

Her curiosity piqued, Fareeha got up from the bed, her shoulder giving her grief along with the cold. The duster was made from a very fine leather; before she could touch it, Fareeha knew it would be supple. And it was very supple, but it was also very sturdy to the touch. Leather never did very well in the rain, but feeling the duster, Fareeha could tell that it was conditioned to be as water resistant as it could be. It was the kind of jacket that could be used in all sorts of weather, not just to look good and put away when it rained a little.

“It’s heavy,” she said, taking it from Angela.

“I may have gone a little overboard with what I wanted,” she said, a grin at her lips.

Opening it up, Fareeha could see why it was so heavy. The leather was top quality, yes, but it was also lined with soft, thick wool.

“I know how much you hate the cold, so I wanted the best for you.”

She put it on. It came down to her calves, and was fitted to her exact size. Almost immediately, the cold left her bones. This put her old jackets to absolute shame.

“It’s got a really light color.”

“The tanner says it’s their vegetable tan,” Angela said. “It’ll caramelize, darken into a beautiful deep color as it ages. Is it warm?”

Fareeha opened the jacket, and pulled Angela into her. The duster didn’t have much extra room, but she was able to get it mostly around Angela.

“Ah, it is warm,” she sighed. “Perfect for you.”

“Now I want it to be winter all the time so I can wear this.”

“Oh! That’s the best part.” Angela pulled the coat open, pointing to the inside edge of the jacket. There were big, heavy buttons running down the inside edge.

“The wool lining is removable,” Angela smiled. “So when the summer comes around, you can still wear it.”

“God, you’re something,” Fareeha said, pulling her love close. “I wanted to get you something when I was here, too.”

“You being here is enough.”

“What did I do to deserve you?”

“You’re beautiful and perfect, that’s why you deserve me.”

The cold bit into Jesse, but he was able to ignore it, if only because of the simmering rage in his breast. Fareeha took a bullet that was meant for him; that couldn’t stand.
“This the place?” Sheriff Hall asked, slowing his horse down as they made their way through the snow.

“Yup, this is it,” Jesse said, drawing his horse to a stop. “This is the riverbed we ran through.”

“Shit son,” a deputy said, “if a stagecoach made its way through this at a dead gallop and didn’t break apart…wait, I had something for this.”

Jesse snorted. This posse of lawmen were all trying to look like big men, with the most quips and the best retorts. It took him back to his Deadlock days.

“Hey boss, think I found another spot where someone dropped dead.”

“Damn, another one?”

“I told you, my partner and I got about seven of ‘em,” Jesse said.

“Yea, you two sure went hard as a motherfucker,” Sheriff Hall said. “Wrap it up. We got tracks going back to the woods.”

Jesse urged his horse on. It was a good thing there wasn’t any snow for the past few days; it made tracking these assholes easier.

They rode through the woods, nice and easy. But now that they were in enemy territory, Jesse kept his hand floating just an inch above his revolver. No sense in letting the outlaws get the drop on him.

“I see smoke,” someone said up the line.

Jesse looked up. He was so caught up in spotting and ambush, he forgot to look up. He saw smoke rising from somewhere close to them, perhaps a little under a mile.

“Form up,” he said. “They might have a warm welcoming for us.”

They rode on, crushing through the snow. Finally, they came to a rough looking cabin. Someone was there; there was a fresh fire and smoke rising from the chimney. Hall rode up.

“This is Sheriff Hall,” he hollered. “Come on out with your hands up and guns down. This little outlaw thing you got is over.”

Jesse waited for something to happen. Then he saw fresh graves next to the house, clear of snow. There were eight. Looks like one of the guys who got winged fell under the weather, literally.

“I’m not playing,” Hall bellowed. “Come on out, or we’re coming in.”

Jesse heard movement in the cabin. It was a rough cabin, slapped together with whatever was around. It looked like they had used a mixture of clay and pitch to seal the wooden logs in place, but it wasn’t uniform. Sections were done in clay, others in pitch, and the wooden logs seemed misshapen, taken from whatever was around.

It was a shit hole.

“Last chance,” Hall hollered.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot,” a man shouted. The uneven door was kicked, then kicked again. It was such an ill-fitting door it got stuck and needed a little extra incentive to swing open.
A man tossed out some guns, then stepped out, hands in the air. He was wearing a grey Confederate jacket.

“Finally seeing sense?” Hall asked.

“I just don’t want to end up in the frozen ground,” the man mumbled.

“Good choice. How many of you are there?”

“Come on, Matt. Get.”

Another man reluctantly left the cabin. He looked at the posse, but his eyes locked on Jesse. He glared at him.

“That’s the fucker that killed my brother,” the man, Matt, spat. He pointed at Jesse.

“Your brother was an outlaw,” Jesse said.

“My brother was a patriot! The Hughes Gang is part of Major Kuhn’s Company, we both fought in the War of Northern Aggression!”

“And yet, you’re here in the north,” Jesse sighed. “Funny how that works out.”

“The South has lost its spine, but we’ll find a way to get it back. Major Kuhn has a plan.”

“By robbing people in the hills and mountains of the Wyoming territory?” Hall snorted. “You got some fucked up priorities.”

“All we need is some money, then we get some guns,” the man ranted. “Then we’ll take back what was ours, just you see.”

“This is nice, but I don’t got time to deal with this shit,” Hall said. “Get ‘em.”

Jesse and two other deputies got off their horses and walked over. He pulled out iron manacles and got to securing the two men.

“Anyone else here?”

“That fucker and his colored bitch killed the rest of them,” Matt spat.

“Hey now, mind your manners,” Jesse said. “No need to be uncivil about this.”

“Fuck you, you filthy—“

Jesse backhanded the man.

“Sorry, my hand slipped,” he said. “Of course, if you had better manners, maybe that wouldn’t happen.”

“Matt, you shit for brains simpleton,” the first man spat. “Just shut the fuck up.”

“Shut up, Dale!”

“Better listen to your friend.”

“The Major won’t stand for this,” Matt yelled.
“Don’t tell me you think you got a company hidden out here.”

“Not here,” Matt grinned. “But all over. We’re getting our money. Then we’ll get the South to rise up.”

“I bet,” Jesse sighed. “You got any horses we can lash you to?”

“You sure you’re okay to be up and about?” Jesse asked.

“I’m not too sure, but I was getting tired of lying on my back,” Fareeha said.

“Bet you’re plenty warm with that fancy new duster of yours though, right?”

“Isn’t it the greatest?” Fareeha gushed, running her fingers over the lapel.

They were walking down the streets of Denver. The weather was still very cold, but Fareeha was just fine in her brand new duster. She could still tell that Jesse was keeping an eye on her, should she stumble and fall. She didn’t feel that weak, but she sure as hell wasn’t feeling good yet.

“Yea, that duster is making me hella jealous,” Jesse smiled. “You got a good woman there.”

“I do,” Fareeha smiled. “I’m also lucky to have such a great partner take care of me when I got that hole put in my shoulder.”

“You’re making me blush,” Jesse laughed.

“I’m being serious, Jesse. You’re a good friend, and a better man. I’m lucky to have you as a partner.”

That got Jesse to choke up.

“T-that means the world to me,” he said. “Thank you.”

Fareeha wrapped her good arm around Jesse, giving him a quick hug.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “And thanks for coming out with me. I could use another pair of eyes; I gotta get a present for Angela, and I have to get it right.

“And you want my male eyes to help you with it?”

“You’ve also got a good eye for jewelry.”

“You’re saying that ‘cus I was an outlaw, wasn’t I?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Spying her grin, Jesse chuckled.

“Allright partner. My roguish senses are telling me we’re near a real nice spot that has the juiciest offerings.”

“Jesse, there’s a sign that says ‘jewelry’ right there,” Fareeha said, pointing.
“Like I said, my roguish senses are tingling.”

Fareeha rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help but chuckle. He opened the door for her, which was a great help. Fareeha might be on her feet, but her shoulder still hurt. Even now, she could only really set her hand in her pocket; lifting so much as a pocket watch made her grimace.

The shop owner turned to the door, and his eyes opened for Jesse, but narrowed for Fareeha. He looked her over, no doubt trying to make sense of her.

Fareeha tried not to groan. Of course the black woman would draw attention in a fancy jewelry store. But she was wearing a truly remarkable jacket, which meant she had money. That, and she had pinned her deputy badge to the lapel.

She must be driving the poor man crazy trying to figure her out.

“Uh…can I help you?” He asked.

“Yes sir, you may,” Jesse said cheerfully. “We need to look at wedding rings, specifically for a lady.”

Again, the jeweler looked between Jesse and Fareeha. She could practically hear the gears spinning in his head, trying to comprehend what was going on.

“You do sell rings here, right?” Jesse asked as the man paused.

“Oh, uh, yes…right this way,” he stammered, gesturing for them to follow him.

“You know,” Fareeha whispered, “he probably thinks we’re together.”

“All part of the fun,” he grinned. “Right, darlin?”

Jesse said those last words louder. That made the jeweler stumble, nearly knocking a wooden display stand over.

“Whoa there,” Jesse said, catching the display. “Nearly lost that there.”

“Y-yes, thank you,” he stammered. “Uh, rings are…they’re right here.”

Fareeha tried not to laugh. Jesse was screwing with the man, making him more and more uncomfortable.

“Here is one of our selections,” he said, leading them to a display case.

“Thank you kindly,” Jesse said, tipping his hat. The man scuttled off. “See anything you like, or what Angela might like?”

Fareeha looked the rings over. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the shop owner whispering something to two big men, no doubt his security team. They slowly ambled around, flanking her.

“Guess they don’t get too many Negroes in this store,” Fareeha grumbled.

“Don’t worry about them, they’ll get what’s comin’ to them,” Jesse said. “Well?”

Fareeha looked the rings over. There were over two dozen. How would she know which one to pick?
“Er, maybe that one?”

“Excuse me, my good sir,” Jesse said, “may my companion and I examine these rings?”

“Y-y-yes, go right ahead,” he said from across the store.

“Thank you again,” he grinned. Jesse gently opened the glass display, and pulled out the ring in question. It was a simple gold band.

“I’m not sure,” Fareeha mumbled.

“Better give it a test drive.”

Jesse got down on one knee, and held the ring up.

“Will you marry me?”

The jeweler dropped a box, and the two guards gaped at them. Fareeha really had to bite her tongue. The looks on their face were priceless!

But the ring…it just wasn’t Angela. It was thin, but too simple, something she might wear, but not the dainty Angela.

“No,” she said. “Not at all.”

“Alright then, plenty more to see,” Jesse said. He got off his knee and put the ring back. Fareeha spied the jeweler gaping, going absolutely pale, and clutching at his chest at the stunt that Jesse pulled off.

“Maybe that one?” She said, going back to the rings. “No, that one there.”

Jesse took the ring, got back down on a knee, and lifted the ring up.

“Will you marry me?”

This ring was much more dainty. It wasn’t just a single band, but rather many different small bands of both gold and white gold that were pressed into bigger bands that were flowing together. It was woven like a wave, rising and falling against the other bands of woven gold.

It was simple, but also elegant.

“Maybe,” she said. “How about that one?”

“Third time, eh?” Jesse said. “Will you marry me?”

The third ring was stunning. Made from fine wires, it wove together a sizable ruby, flanked by two diamonds.

It was also very, very gaudy.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Has to be the second one.”

“Good, that third one was way too much,” Jesse said, getting to his feet. “Excuse me, sir?”

The shocked jeweler stepped up, still clutching his heart.

“My friend and I think this might be the one,” he smiled. “Would you mind ringing us up?”
Driven to stunned silence, he could only nod and walk to the register. The two guards followed Fareeha.

The jeweler placed the ring in a simple box, and poked and prodded at the register; it rang with a ding, and put up three numbers. He tried to read the dollar amount, but could only stammer. Fareeha pulled out her wallet, and paid the man what numbers popped up on the mechanical register said. It was hard to do that with one hand, let alone her off-hand, but she made due.

“Thank you, sir,” Jesse smiled. He took the ring box, tipping his hat again.

They were about to leave when one of the guards put a heavy hand on Fareeha’s shoulder. Fortunately, it was her good shoulder.

“Hold it,” he said. “Open your jacket.”

Fareeha went from nearly laughing to nearly screaming. She moved out west to get away from this shit. They had kept a close eye on her, she hadn’t stolen anything! Still, she opened her jacket; she had to be the good Negro.

The guard looked her over, and ran his hands over her pockets. He spied her gun.

“I’m a deputy,” she snapped. “Look at the badge.”

The man didn’t seem very convinced.

“If you think her badge is fake,” Jesse said, presenting his own badge, “then you must think mine is fake, too.”

The guard sighed, and let them go. Fareeha waited until they were outside.

“Fuckers,” she spat. “I didn’t even touch anything.”

“I told you, they’ll get their comeuppance,” Jesse said.

“Fucking doubt it.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

Jesse reached into his pocket, and pulled out a gold ring. It was the first one that Fareeha had pointed out, the simple band of gold.

“What—?!”

“Not so loud,” he grinned. “I thought it was a ring that would be better for you, so I lifted it. Back in my Deadlock days, we called that a ‘Kansas City Shuffle.’”

“A Kansas City what now?”

“A Kansas City Shuffle. It means the conned man, the mark, has to be too smart for their own good. See, the mark has to know they’re part of a con game, and they have to think they know how to beat the con artist, but they’re wrong as to what they think the game is. They think the left hand will rip them off, but it’s the right hand that’s doing the cheating.”

“Ah, they thought the black woman would be the one to steal something, but it’s the white man who stole it instead.”
“Bingo,” he grinned. “They’re right to think there’s a con, they’re just wrong about how it’s going down.”

“And that’s their comeuppance, right?” Fareeha grinned.

“Hey, it’s not my fault they didn’t suspect me,” Jesse laughed. “If they weren’t such bigots, they should’ve called me out on it. Think of this as my wedding gift to you.”

Fareeha took the ring.

“Thank you, Jesse,” she laughed. With his help, she sliding the ring on her finger.

“Is it a good size?”

“Actually, it is.”

“Good. Got a few more in case that didn’t pan out.” He held out his hand; there were six more rings in his palm.

“Jesse!!”

“What? I’m an outlaw at heart,” he grinned. “I can’t help it if my fingers get sticky from time to time.”

Ana scrubbed the pots and pans of the latest meal. The lunch rush had died down, so she had a little time to clean up before having to focus on making dinner.

“How are we doing?” She asked.

“Not a lot of people trickling in,” Anastasia said. Now that Olivia had become Crease’s only teacher, schoolmarm she called herself, Anastasia had stepped up to fill her old position as Madam Lacroix’s second in command. And she was filling it quite well.

“Good. If we can handle a few stragglers, I’d better start on dinner.”

“Let the busboys get the dishes, you have to do some prep work, don’t you Mama?”

“I know, but cleaning up after myself is a habit,” Ana sighed. “Back in the Army, we didn’t have any fancy busboys. We had to do it all ourselves.”

“You’re too good, Mama,” Anastasia smiled. “You gotta be more selfish.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Ana laughed. “But I have to be a good role model. Can’t be the town’s Mama if I’m passing off my duties.”

“What would we do without you?” Anastasia stepped in for a quick hug. Ana returned it. She missed this, being able to help mentor girls as they grew into very capable women. Maybe she was more cut out to be a mother than anything else.

Well, she had her work cut out for her. Her precious Siggy would be quite the handful growing up, she just knew it.
“They’re back!” Someone yelled.

That caught Ana’s attention. Was that her Fareeha?

“The bank came back!” It was another working girl who brought the news. The girl ran into the kitchen, utterly out of breath. “Their stagecoach is coming back!”

Ana ditched the pot she was cleaning, and ran outside. It had been over a month since the stagecoach had left. She had to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s without her precious daughter.

She wasn’t the only one running out. Madam Lacroix was already standing on the veranda, her girls joining her. Across the street her husband was running out of the mayor’s office, carrying their son with him as he ran over.

“Did you hear?” Reinhardt asked.

“Just now,” she replied. “Is that them?”

In the distance, getting larger all the time, was a stagecoach and two riders. The stagecoach was a brilliant blue, the same color of the stagecoach her daughter left with. But where was Fareeha? She only saw two riders accompanying the coach, not the three that had left.

“Is that…?”

Her heart froze in her chest. As the stagecoach got closer, she could see Fareeha’s horse, a red dun, hitched to the front of the coach; her daughter wasn’t riding it. The two riders were Jesse and Lena.

Her heart caught in her throat. No, it couldn’t be…

The stagecoach came to a stop in front of the saloon as Ana pushed her way to the front of the crowd. Her daughter had to be safe, she had to be okay! She just had to be!!

The door opened, and a woman stepped out, wearing an amazing long leather duster. It took Ana a second to realize that that woman was her daughter, with her right hand in her pocket.

“Mom,” she smiled. “Sorry, I got—“

She never finished. Ana jumped through the snow and wrapped her in a fierce hug.

“Ow ow ow! Mom, gentle please!”

Ana let go. Fareeha was wincing in pain.

“What happened?” She pressed.

“We ran into outlaws on our way to Denver,” Fareeha hissed, rubbing her shoulder. “They styled themselves as Confederate hold-outs. My luck ran out, and I got shot.”

“Oh God!”

“Don’t worry, I was there,” Angela said, climbing out. “I’d never let a thing happen to Fareeha.”

Tears sprung to Ana’s eyes, even her dead one. She wrapped Angela in a hug.

“God, oh God, what did I ever do to have such a wonderful woman fall for my daughter?”
“Not just a wonderful woman,” Fareeha smiled. She and Angela held up their left hands. Two golden bands were on their fingers. “Have to talk to Father Reyes and make it church official—“

Fareeha squawked as Ana pulled her close again.

“Mom! My shoulder—!”

“I never thought…” She cried. “Lord, I just had a son, but now I have another daughter!!”

“Ana, please, you’re hurting our daughter,” Reinhardt chuckled. “Well, I guess it would be daughters now, wouldn’t it?”

Ana finally let go, much to her Fareeha’s relief.

“Angela, I knew you were good for my Fareeha,” she cried.

“I… I think… thank you,” she stammered.

“Cat have your tongue?” Reinhardt chuckled.

“N-no, it’s… I know we’ve called you ‘Mama’ before, but I never had a real mother,” she blushed.

“You do, now and forever,” Ana cried. She was so swept up, she missed seeing Winston leave the stagecoach. Madam Lacroix wasted no time grilling him.

“You came back,” she said. “And with my Lena. Does this mean—?”

“Yes, it does,” he smiled. “I gave Crease a glowing review, and my superiors agreed with me. On behalf of the Watchpoint Financial Institution, I can gladly tell you that we will be building a new branch in this town.”

Madam Lacroix heaved a sigh of relief, pulling her Lena in closer to her. Lena giggled.

“The first shipment of supplies for the building should be arriving within half a month. And when it is completed, I shall be running the first bank of Crease.”

“And what about those outlaws you ran into?” Jack asked. Ana blinked; she was so swept up, she had missed seeing damn near the entire town gather around the stagecoach.

“Fareeha and I mostly took care of ‘em,” Jesse said. “When we got into Denver, I linked up with Sheriff Hall, and we hunted ‘em down. Bunch of failed Confederate types, they gave up without much of a fight. Should be smooth sailing from there to here.”

“Shit, ese, glad we got you here,” Gabriel smiled.

“Yes, damn good work,” Jack said, giving Jesse a firm handshake. “Fareeha is fine, the outlaws are taken care of, and we got ourselves a bank. This calls for a drink.”

“Yes, it does,” Madam Lacroix said. “A round on the house, to celebrate our good fortunes!”

Ana was following everyone in when she saw Orisa hesitantly approach.

“Is… is he…?” She asked, looking towards Winston. “Will he stay here…?”

“I think you should ask the man yourself,” Ana smiled. “After all, he’ll be working here.”
Fareeha woke with the sun. Now that it was summer, the heat was in full effect. But that was fine; she could take the heat. Besides, it just meant that waking up would be all the better.

She pulled back the thin, woven blanket from the bed, trying not to disturb Angela. But, just as she knew, she was already up.

“Good—“

Angela silenced her with a kiss.

“—Morning,” she finished.

“It’s always a good morning with you here,” Angela smiled.

“It’s always a good morning to have you with me,” Fareeha said. “That, and seeing you in that skimpy thing.”

Angela giggled, pulling at the sheer nightgown. It was a birthday present to help her deal with the night heat, and Angela was putting it to very good use.

“It’s just the perfect thing to wear in this heat,” she smiled. “And I love the look you get in your eyes when you see me.”

Fareeha pulled her in, stealing another kiss.

“Then let’s get up and get this day started right.”

Fareeha got up, and a dull pain flared in her shoulder.

“Is your arm better?” Angela asked, worry starting to crease her brow.

“Fine,” Fareeha said, rubbing her shoulder with the palm of her hand. “It’s just sore.”

“Let me know when it’s not just sore.”

With the dull pain fading, for now, Fareeha put on some simple khakis and a button down shirt along with her gun belt. Angela put on a nice green dress. Before they went for breakfast, Fareeha grabbed her duster. With the winter over, she had removed the wool lining. As they left the clinic, the wind caught the duster, and she couldn’t help but grin.

“You love that, don’t you?” Angela smiled.

“Of course I do. You gave it to me.”

Together, they went to the saloon.

“Morning,” Anastasia said, standing at the front of the saloon. “You’re here bright and early.”

“Can’t miss Mama’s breakfast, can we?” Angela smiled.

“Oy! Chicas! Over here!”
“Looks like we’re late to the party,” Fareeha said. Olivia was waving them over to a very full table. “Well, if it isn’t the newly minted schoolmarm.”

Olivia couldn’t help but tip her head back and laugh. Reinhardt, Efi, Brigitte, Orisa, Winston, Jesse, Lena, and Madam Lacroix were at the table as well.

“Stop it, please,” Olivia gasped. “You’ll kill me if you keep that up.”

Olivia no longer wore the customary corset and dress like all the other whores did, but rather a true, full dress and frock. Her hair, normally wavy and kept past her shoulders, was done up in a fishtailed French braid.

“You’re looking good today,” Fareeha said, pulling out a chair. “Did Madam Lacroix teach you how to do another braid?”

“She did! You like it?” Olivia said, showing off the elegant braid.

“I love it,” Angela said. “You might have to teach me.”

“Ay ay ay, another student,” Olivia laughed. “I have plenty of those these days.”

“Are they giving you gray hairs yet?” Lena smiled.

“Not yet. Fortunately, the girls are the best. I teach them some of the braids and hair styles I learned during my whoring days, and they help keep the boys in line.”

“You don’t actually call it that, do you?” Angela asked. “I mean, you’re…”

“You don’t call your whoring days your whoring days, do you?” Fareeha asked, far more bluntly than Angela.

“Only if they ask,” she said. “I’ve found that it’s better to be honest and straight forward. Kids respect you more that way.”

“Man, that’s just like my Deadlock days,” Jesse said. “Give respect, and you’ll get it returned to you.”

“Kids are just like a gang,” Olivia grinned. “Only more vicious.”

A few woman came out with massive trays filled with food. Ana was one of the waiters.

“Hey mom,” Fareeha smiled.


Reinhardt pulled her in for a slightly longer than normal kiss.

“And my love to all my other children,” she laughed, handing out plates of food.

“Gracias, Mama,” Olivia laughed.

“Yea, thanks Mama,” Jesse laughed.

“Thanks, Mama,” Brigitte and Efi said together.
“God, if this couldn’t get any weirder,” Fareeha sighed.

“Let it be,” Ana laughed. “Lord, I’m so glad we came here. This place has just been…”

Her eyes were tearing up. No further words were necessary.

“Yes, it’s been good to all of us,” Reinhardt said. “Especially my step-daughters.”

That made both Angela and Fareeha blush.

“Yes, this is finally feeling like home,” Angela said.

“Hopefully a very profitable one,” Madam Lacroix said. “Is it?”

“It is,” Winston said. “I can’t give exact details, but building a bank here is proving to be a very prudent investment.”

“Speaking of banks,” Fareeha said, “Winston, who do you have at the bank?”

“Just a few tellers.”

“No one on horses?”

“No. Why?”

“Because we got six horses outside the bank,” Fareeha said, looking out of the window. “Only two guys are still on horses, rest are in the bank.”

The good mood slowly evaporated. Jesse looked out the window.

“Yea, those two are on look-out,” he said.

“Are—are they robbing the bank?” Brigitte gasped.

“Looks like it,” Fareeha said. “Everyone, away from the windows. Jesse…”

She pulled her revolver out, but Jesse already had his in hand.

“S-should I get the sheriff?” Efi asked. “I could run across the street.”

“No, that’ll spook the look-outs. Besides, bullets might start flying soon,” Jesse said. “Just get in the back of the saloon.”

Everyone moved away from the windows, while Fareeha and Jesse moved towards them. They pressed their backs to the stone walls, one on either side of the window.

“How do you want to play it?” Fareeha asked.

“Well, if they’re carrying money bags, I guess we have to shoot them, right?”

“Any signs of a visible robbery we’d have to try and stop,” Fareeha hissed. “Fuck. I do not need to get shot again.”

The door to the bank opened. Sure enough, four men had bags filled with money.

“Guess that’s it,” Jesse said. “You stay at the window. I’ll go out the door.”
Jesse ducked under the window and made his way to the door. The men had secured the bags to their saddle bags, and were looking to make a quick get-away.

“You boys robbing the bank?” Jesse yelled, peaking out of the saloon.

The men cursed and spat, and pulled out their revolvers. Bullets flew, hitting the stone walls.

“Thought so,” Jesse said, ducking into cover.

Fareeha popped up and started shooting. Bullets broke the glass window, and one man fell, screaming. She ducked behind the walls and the robbers turned their attention to her. She heard the bullets hit the stone, but it would take much more than that to get through a solid foot of bricks and rocks.

Jesse leaned out, taking careful shots. Fareeha stuffed more bullets into her revolver's cylinder, and leaned out again. The men were trying to run; she dimly realized they were wearing gray coats.

She aimed at the lead man, and let lose. Her aim was off; she didn’t hit the man, but she hit his horse. The poor animal reared, throwing the man to the ground, and landed on top of him.

“Get the Major!”

From across the street, she saw Jack lean out from his office, rifle in hand. He picked his shots carefully, hitting a second man.

“Get out of here! Major, we’ll come back for you!”

The remaining outlaws galloped away. Fortunately, the man who’s horse fell on him had most of the bags. The others belonged to a man who was shot; the outlaws only got away with their lives.

“I got you covered,” Jack hollered. “Secure that man.”

Fareeha got up, and ran out with Jesse. Jack might be covering them with his rifle, but Fareeha kept her revolver drawn. The last thing she needed was a new tunnel dug into her body, to say nothing of the amazing duster she had.

The two men that were shot were dead, but the third man was thrashing, trying to get out from under his injured horse. Seeing them approach, the man cursed and tried to pull his gun out.

“There’s two ways this is going down,” Jesse snapped, aiming at the man. “Only one of ‘em ends with you still breathing.”

The man looked at the two deputies.

“Fuck.”

He threw his gun away, but was glaring at Fareeha.

“Taken in by a dirty—”

“You keep a civil tongue in your mouth,” Jesse spat.

Fareeha looked up; Jack was walking over, his rifle still held tight against his shoulder. His face still bore the signs of his latest fight with Gabriel; his lip was cut and eye was turning black and blue, but he was perfectly alert.
“This is a hell of a wake-up call,” he said. “Now, who are you?”

“Oh, you have no fucking idea what kind of shit you’re in,” the man laughed. Like Jesse, he had a thick Southern accent. “My name is Major Nickolas Kuhn, and you’re in for a world of hurt.”

“That name supposed to mean something?” Jesse snorted.

“It should. I’m the Major Nickolas Kuhn.”

“Aw, crap,” Jack spat.

“You get it now?” The man laughed.

Fareeha looked at the man, more specifically the gray coat he wore. Then she remembered the reports of outlaw activity that recently came through, or the men she and Jesse had killed back in the winter.

“This was such a good day, too,” she said.

“Hold on now,” Jesse said. “That coat; are you a rebel?”

“Damn straight I am. You getting the picture now?”

Fareeha traded looks with Jack and Jesse.

“Fareeha, go get Mayor Reinhardt and Madam Lacroix,” Jack said. “We got the leader of a renegade Confederate company.”

“And my men will come for me,” Major Nickolas Kuhn swore. “This whole town will get blown away.”

Chapter End Notes

Big chapter, but I didn't know where to cut it off at. Sorry not sorry.
Unwanted Attention

Chapter Summary

A group of renegade Confederate soldiers are still fighting a war that had long ended. With their Major captured, they will undoubtedly turn their attention to Crease. Fareeha comes up with an idea, and she can only hope it works out.

Author's Note:

This, and the rest of this arc, will have to unfortunately come with a content warning: there will be a several uses of an ethnic slur, the N-word.

Sadly, there’s no easy way to explain this. I hate using the “I’m black, so I can say it” excuse, which means I’ll have to explain my decision to use it, hence the reason this spills over the chapter note section.

As a person of color, I do not like hearing the N-word, and I personally don’t like others using it. I’ll tolerate its use in music if the artist is also of color, mostly because I don’t want to get into an ugly, drag-out argument over the use of the N-word whenever someone puts some Kendrick Lamar on. While I will tolerate it’s use there, it is my personal belief that other people of color should not use it. It is an ugly, offensive word born of hatred and scorn, meant to rob people of color of their humanity. By using that word, it is saying ‘you are not a person, you are a piece of property.’

The only time I’ll willingly use it is if there’s a really good joke to make with it. As a great example, Blazing Saddles. While it uses the N-word, it mocks the people who using it as being immature and simple-minded; by using it, they degrade themselves instead of the intended victims. Blazing Saddles subverts the intended use of the N-word, and it’s goddamn hysterical because of it.

So why use in here, now? If you couldn’t tell by this fic, I like Westerns. They’re fun, exciting, have great visuals, they capture a certain kind of energy that I liked growing up, and still like to this day. However, the Wild West came at a time of great divide in the country, namely after the Civil War and during the Reconstruction era. Despite the defeat of the Confederacy there was still abundant, and many times blatant, racism. As much as I hate to use the N-word, I feel that not using would be committing an even greater sin: historical revisionism.

Hate is America’s original sin. Hate lead to slavery. Hate led to white supremacy and eventually white nationalism. I believe that glossing over such hate would be (no pun intended) whitewashing history at best, and attempting to bend it to a revisionist rewriting at worst. We can’t shy away from was done during the time period this fic takes place. Especially today, we can see the lengths some groups will go to in order to bend history to fit their political agenda.

Being American, I’m very familiar with the arguments, attempts, and lengths those groups will go to in order to bend history to a particular ideology. For example, when several groups want to fly the Confederate battle-flag, they attempt to justify/mask their racist dog-whistling as ‘Southern pride,’ often saying “It’s about heritage, not hate!”

(Ignoring the fact that Alexander H. Stephens, the Vice President of the Confederate States of America, stated that segregation is the cornerstone of the Confederacy in a speech that became
known as the Cornerstone Speech: “[I]ts foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition.”

While not as overt as the previously mentioned example, groups often use the insidious term “the War of Northern Aggression” instead of “the Civil War” to try and re-cast the war in a more friendly, pro-Confederate light. While very complex, the quick and dirty cause of the American Civil War was that Southern states said they had a right to secede from the Union, the Northern states said they did not, and a war broke out. Calling it “the War of Northern Aggression” paints the attempted secession as a noble, if lost, cause; it attempts to show the North as a tyrannical dictator and drum up support for their efforts.

(Side note, the Southern states attempted to secede because they wanted to keep slaves. Slavery might not have been the actual, declared, ‘written down on a sheet of paper’ official reason for the secession, but it is very much the reason the Confederacy was made. See the above on the Cornerstone Speech.)

And then, there’s the even more poisonous, constantly-repeated euphemism often used when talk of immigration or voter’s rights comes up: “It’s about state’s rights!”

(Oh boy, this is a rant that’s got a lot to unpack. tl;dr: when politicians, mostly Republicans, say they want to ‘secure jobs in America,’ they mean cracking down on immigration/banning Mexicans. No one cares about Canadians illegally entering America, and they don’t want to build a wall along the northern border states, do they? Looping this around to the Civil War, some people say the war wasn’t fought over slavery, but state’s right. I believe this is correct; the Confederacy fought for the state’s rights to own slaves. See above.)

Because of these efforts to twist history to a political bend, I feel that ignoring the racial divide at the time of the Wild West is a greater sin than simply not using the N-word. We must be aware of our past, as it informs who we are and how everything relates to us. Glossing over it pushes a certain narrative, either saying that such things never existed or that while they happened, they were outliers; a non-issue. It is my personal belief that is to be avoided at all costs.

Things were not good for minorities in the end of the 19th century, and no amount of romanticizing the past can cover that up. Saying otherwise pushes a kind of American Exceptionalism that says America is always right, all the time. It is becoming clearer every day, especially in this era, that such thinking is false. It disrespects those who came before us, those who had to live in such an intolerant time, and I believe that it is a special disservice to those who died from racial violence such as lynching.

Up to this point, I’ve felt like I was dancing around a very delicate topic. The way things are going in my fic, I’ve felt that I was pushing a slight form of romantic revisionist history, or adhering too much to the Politically Correct History trope, again by omission. I’ve tried to make it as believable/justified as I can, and I’d like to think I’ve done an okay job so far.

For example, Jack Morrison is okay with black people because he’s an abolitionist and fought in the Civil War specifically to end slavery. Orisa is inherently distrustful of some of the white settlers/characters because of her life as a slave. Reinhardt is able to square away his dislike of same-sex couples because of his, illegal at the time, mixed-marriage with Ana. (Anti-miscegenation laws made it illegal for people of different races to marry. They were legal, on the books, and enforced until 1967. Nineteen-sixty-frigging-seven!) When leaving Crease, Fareeha experiences racial prejudice/profiling, things like that.
However, some things can’t simply be written away or reduced to background details; they have to be faced.

Hatred is part of America; it’s undeniable. To claim otherwise is to try and gloss over some of the most egregious acts of cruelty in human history. As stated before, I feel that to continue to try and avoid the subject of hate would be to partake in such whitewashing/revisionism by omission. And as I said before, I believe this has to be avoided at all costs.

Therefore, for the next arc of my fic, there will be multiple uses of the N-word, as well as racist pseudo-science that was used to justify slavery. It is part of American history, and while it should always be remembered, we must *never* celebrate it.

Apologies for the overly-long author’s note, but I really, really, really hate the “I can say the N-word because I’m black” excuse.

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Major Kuhn sat in the jail cell, a shit-eating grin plastered over his face. Angela examined him while Fareeha kept a very close watch on him, should the rebel try anything stupid. Jack, Jesse, Reinhardt, and Madam Lacroix were in the office as well. Reinhardt had an uneasy look on his face, but everyone else had a look of grim determination.

“Well, you will be sore for quite some time,” Angela said, wrapping his leg in a bandage. “But your leg isn’t broken. Be glad.”

“I am, sugar,” Kuhn leered.

“That’s enough,” Fareeha snapped. “Angela, get back. We’re locking this piece of slime up.”

“Enjoy this while you can,” he laughed. “It’s the last time you’ll get a white man locked up in jail, nigger.”

Jesse glared at the man, but Jack put a hand on his arm. Angela glared at him as well, and quickly left the cell. Fareeha put a little extra ‘oomph’ into closing the cell door.

“Don’t let him goad you,” Jack said. “Fareeha, that goes double for you.”

“Sir,” she nodded stiffly.

“Now, ‘Major,’” Jack said, pulling up a chair to the closed cell, “why the fuck are you in Wyoming territory?”

“The War of Northern Aggression was a terrible loss,” he said. “But it gives us an opportunity. The South was destroyed by men who were traitors in heart–”

“We gonna have time to get some food before we get to the point of this shit?” Jack snapped.

“–But we will purge those assholes, and leave only a pure Confederate state!” Kuhn said, ignoring Jack’s interruption. “We will begin the war again, and this time, we will win! But wars need guns and money, things we have little of.”

“And men,” Jesse said. “You got enough of those?”
“I only have a company, but once we get enough guns, when we have a true armory, those
downtrodden patriots will join us,” Kuhn said. “Once we have enough money, then we can make
our move, buy our weapons to re-take our land. Then we can restore the South to its true glory, and
put everyone back in their God-given places.”

He said that with a glare to Fareeha. Rage boiled in her heart, but Jack had a point; she couldn’t let
this asshole goad her. She coldly looked on.

“Put me in my place?” She said tightly. “My place is here.”

“I mean we’ll send you back to where you came, dumb nigger bitch,” he spat.

Fareeha couldn’t help herself. She cocked her eyebrow, and did her best to keep a straight face.

“You’ll send me back to Pennsylvania?”

Reinhardt snorted, trying not to laugh.

“No,” Kuhn spat. “We’ll send you back to where you were born.”

“That’s Virginia.”

“No! Back to where your mother came from!”

“That’s Pennsylvania again.”

Jesse turned away, trying to hide his grin.

“No, where her mother came from!”

“Why would I want to go to Cleveland?”

Jesse and Reinhardt broke down laughing. Angela was beside herself.

“You know what I fucking mean!” Kuhn spat, red in the face.

“I really don’t. You’re being very confusing.”

Even Jack was laughing at that. Kuhn glared at Fareeha, burning bright red.

“You rob anyone you can in the Wyoming territory, just so you can get money to begin a second
Civil War,” Madam Lacroix said, shaking her head. “You are quite the misguided soul.”

“It is every American’s destiny to rule the lands!”

“American? But you’re German,” Angela said.

“Yes, Nickolas Kuhn is a very German name,” Reinhardt said.

“I’m as American as they come,” he raged. “I was born here!”

“But surely your mother taught you her language,” Angela said, switching to German.

“What?”

“We want to know if you speak German,” Reinhardt said, “it is practically in your name.”
“We’re in America, you bastards! Speak our language!”

Angela and Reinhardt traded looks.

“Do you not know your heritage?” Fareeha said. Her German was not on the same level as Angela and Reinhardt’s, but after many months of hard work, it was more than conversational.

“Speak American, dammit!”

“Speak American?” Jack said, cocking his eyebrow. “No wonder the South lost.”

“We will rise again!”

“Yea, you’re doing a good job proving it,” Jesse said, rolling his eyes.

“You’re a mockery of the white race by working with that nigger,” Kuhn spat.

“And you sure know how to bite the hand that feeds you.”

“Like hell, traitor.”

“Considering we’re the ones who are literally going to feed you, I think I’m right on the money,” Jesse said.

Kuhn glared at him. It was clear that he did most of his living off the land; he was very thin.

The sound of a horse rose in the distance. Someone was racing down the street.

“This town is gonna burn!!”

Something smashed, and with a great roar, flames licked the front door of the office.

“Crap! Get shovels, we gotta put this out,” Jack said, running for the back door.

“Angela, stay here,” Fareeha said. “Madam Lacroix, Reinhardt, please, stay back.”

She ran with Jack and Jesse, grabbing shovels from the back of the office. The veranda was on fire; someone threw a cocktail of burning kerosene at it. Fareeha sunk the blade of her shovel into the ground and began throwing dirt and mud onto the fire. With Jack and Jesse, the fire began to dim.

“Shit, get shovels!” That was Father Reyes. “You two, with me.”

Father Reyes ran from the church with two men in tow, each carrying a shovel. They threw dirt at the fire, and with their help, it was soon extinguished, but not without charring a huge part of the veranda.

“That’s not fucking good,” Jack gasped.

“Who the hell was that?” Gabriel asked.

“Something tells me that’s a taste of what’s to come,” Jesse said. “That’s gotta be a rebel making a point.”

“Then why not attack right now?” Fareeha asked.

“If he’s got soldiers, they could be spread out over the area,” Jesse said. “Maybe they’re not ready. They could be mobilizing right now.”
“They must be,” Fareeha said. Realization hit her. “Wait. Remember when we ran into that group in the winter? They said they were part of Kuhn’s company; they must be spread out to rob as many people as they can.”

“That means they’re mobilizing as we speak. We better do something,” Jack said, moping the sweat off his brow. “Inside, now.”

Gabriel joined them as they walked back inside. Angela, Reinhardt, and Madam Lacroix stood by uneasily. Kuhn was smiling again.

“Looks like you ran into Kent,” he grinned.

“And Kent is…?” Gabriel asked.

“My right hand man. He’ll lead the charge to bust me out. Him, and my men. All fifty-two of them.”

That sucked any remaining humor out of the room.

“Yea, fifty-two,” he grinned. “Can your puny-ass nigger loving town handle that?”

“Tell me,” Madam Lacroix said, “how long have you been out in the wilderness, fighting a war that has long ended?”

“We’ve been in this territory for five years,” Kuhn replied with pride.

“Five years?” Fareeha whistled. “That’s a long time.”

“A damn long time,” Jesse said. “Hold on now, I know that tone. You got a plan in mind, Fareeha?”

“I think I got something,” she grinned. “But I’ll need you to take one for the team.”

“Long as I don’t get shot, I got no problem with that.”

“First you work with a nigger woman, now you’re taking orders from that nigger woman?” Kuhn shook his head. “You’re worse than a traitor, boy; you’re a Notherner. When my men break me out, we’ll string you up just like we would a slave. We’ll lynch you alongside every single nigger we find.”

“That’s fucking it,” Jack hissed, getting up. “Jesse, grab a few rags. I’m sick of this bastard running his mouth.”

Jesse grabbed a few kerchiefs as Jack opened the cell. Kuhn was ready for a fight; his fists were balled, and he jumped to his feet.

But he forgot that his leg was still very heavily bruised. Once he put weight on it, it thrashed in a spasm, and he nearly toppled over, grabbing the cell bars to catch his fall. That let Jack get a good gut shot it, doubling the man over. He pinned Kuhn to the ground, while Jesse shoved a balled-up kerchief into his mouth, and tied it in place with another one.

Once he was done, they cuffed Kuhn’s arms behind his back so he couldn’t undo the gag.

“Much better,” Jack sighed, closing the cell. “Fareeha, you said you had a plan?”

“I do, but it’s pretty crazy. I’m not sure it’ll work.”

“Then I hope it’s crazy enough to work.”
“Yes, any plan to rid my town of these bastards is a good plan,” Madam Lacroix said.

“Well, the thing is,” Fareeha said, “I’ll need borrow your girls, your saloon, and your Lena.”

Winston looked out the window of the hotel; he sat at an empty chair in the lobby, along with a few tables and other chairs. He sighed. Confederate rebels had tried to rob the bank, and they’d most likely be back to rescue whomever got caught. Things were going to get very complicated, and they weren’t going to get better for a while.

“Mr. Winston, are we in trouble?” Efi asked.

“Yes, but nothing that Jack, Jesse, and Fareeha could handle,” he said.

“Good,” Efi said. She sat at one of the tables in the lobby, along with the beautiful Orisa. Winston never thought he’d prefer a woman to wear trousers, and yet here he was.

“What do you think we should do?” Orisa asked.

“There’s nothing much we can do,” Winston said. “Not until our lawbringers come up with plan. But Jack’s a smart man, and Fareeha and Jesse are both very shrewd, we shouldn’t have to wait too long.”

“Then how long do we wait?” Efi asked.

“As long as it takes,” Orisa said, smiling as best she could. “We have to trust everyone. They’ve helped us all before.”

“I just don’t want you to get shot again.”

“Once was more than enough,” Orisa chuckled, patting her knee. She was shot? Winston didn’t know that. He looked at her knee, and realized for the first time that she wore a brace.

Brigitte ran into the hotel. Seeing Efi, she made a bee-line for her.

“Efi, do you know what’s going on?” She asked. “Papa got word from one of the cowboys, and got real quiet. He won’t say anything.”

“Efi, why don’t you go with Brigitte?” Orisa said. “You can fill her in, and wait for Jack to come up with a plan.”

“But I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“I won’t be alone,” Orisa said, looking at Winston. He could feel his heart swell at that.

Efi nodded, but she was still tense. She ran out with her unrelated long-lost sister Brigitte. Orisa sighed.

“This is too much,” she said.

“Do you mean the town being targeted for outlaws, or Confederate troopers?”
“Both,” Orisa said. “Did you have to report to your bosses about the chance of the town being attacked?”

“I did,” Winston replied. He got tired of looking the window, waiting for the sheriff, and took a seat at the hotel room’s table, right by Orisa, the very spot that Efi left. “There’s always a chance of a robbery. I have to factor that in, and the law enforcement’s reaction.”

“Like a good reaction?”

“Or a bad one,” Winston said. “If a bank is several blocks from the sheriff’s office, that is a mark against it. But if they’re right by each other, like they are in Crease, it’s a bonus. We have to make sure no one steals our money.”

“I can understand that,” Orisa smiled.

“But this? This was something I never thought we’d face.”

“Same here,” Orisa said. “I thought this would be a good town to raise Efi in, not some thrill-seeking town full of gunfights.”

“One gunfight is more than enough,” Winston laughed. “And I had that on my trip back to Denver!” Orisa laughed with him.

“I don’t mean to eavesdrop,” he said, “but Efi said you had gotten shot. Did…I mean, were you?”

“Yes, I was,” she said. “You know about the Deadlock Gang?”

“I have, even before I came to Crease.”

“Then you know they blew in, trying to take Jesse back. But he wanted to leave, to change, so it lead to a gunfight. I was deputized, and tried to help out.”

She gestured to her knee, specifically the brace. Winston had never seen anything like it. Sitting on top of her jeans, it had metal gears that sat at, as well as above and below her knee. Leather straps held it in place.

“Angela said a bullet likely ricocheted off something, maybe splintered, and hit me in the knee,” she said. “She was able to stitch me up, but it’s been a bother ever since.”

“I’ve never seen you limp.”

“That’s because Efi and Brigitte made me that brace,” she smiled. “My old one used to jam, and was far too stiff. But this, it makes me feel like I almost never got shot.”

“You’re lucky to have such a smart sister.”

“I am. I almost wish she was my actual blood sister.”

“She isn’t?”

“No, Efi was the daughter of a woman back at the plantation,” Orisa said. “Back when…when we were slaves.”

Winston stared. He never knew.
“She died giving birth to Efi,” she said. “And I promised to give her a better life. When she was a few days old, I gathered up all I could, stole a little more, and ran. Eventually, we ended up here about.”

“Lord. I knew you were a strong woman, but…” Winston shook his head. “I never would have thought.”

“That’s not much of a surprise, is it?”

“It is a surprise, but I just think that makes you all the more incredible.”

Orisa blushed, looking away.

“Well, Crease might have more gunfights that you’d like,” she said, “but do you like it here?”

“Of course I do.”

“No hesitation there,” Orisa smiled.

“That’s because you’re here,” Winston said.

“I-I am…?”

“I told you before, you’re the most interesting woman I’ve ever met,” Winston said. “I want to know more about you, to know everything about you. I feel that I can be myself near you.”

“You don’t want to know much about me,” Orisa mumbled. “I just told you, I was raised on a plantation. So much evil happened there…”

“I don’t want to know about your history, I just want to know what makes you you,” Winston said. He took her hand. “I want to know what makes Orisa interesting.”

Orisa blushed.

“There’s not much to me,” she said.

“Try me,” Winston said.

Orisa smiled. She leaned in, and kissed Winston. It felt like he was going to fly away.

“Well,” she said, breaking the kiss, “there’s a very handsome man I can’t seem to get enough of.”

Kent sat in his saddle, looking at the little town that caught the Major. It had taken all night pulling all the men back from their ambush spots, but it was worth it. Now they had all fifty-two of them. It should have been sixty-two, but they couldn’t find Matt and his group. They found the old cabin out in the wilds, along with eight graves, but Dale and Matt were nowhere to be found. Kent assumed the worst; it probably meant no one was around to bury them.

He shook his head. He couldn’t be focusing on some missing men; the Major had to be saved, and there was a town that needed to be razed to the ground. They were a small force, but more than enough for this small frontier town.
“See that town?” He said, yelling to be heard by all the men.

They sat on their horses, rolls and belongings stuffed into saddle bags. They were good men, rough men, true Southern men, the kind that could swing a battle in their favor.

“See that? Major Kuhn is in there. They think they can hold him. They think they can turn him over to their sick Northern friends.”

The men grumbled at that. They were angry.

“But they’re not ready for us,” Kent grinned. “We’re gonna storm that town. There’s only one sheriff there, one deputy, and one nigger woman who thinks she can do a man’s job.”

That got them to laugh.

“Yea, not much going for them,” Kent laughed. “We’re gonna ride in, stop at the sheriff’s office. And I’m gonna tell him what he’s gonna do. If he doesn’t do what we want, then we’ll do to this town what the Northerners did to Atlanta.”

More than a few men spat at that. They were Georgians, and they were sore about how their town was turned almost completely to cinders.

“They call this town ‘Crease,’” Kent said. “When we’re done with it, they’ll call it ‘shit hole,’ ‘cus that’s all it’s gonna be good for.”

With that, he led the charge into town. The men charged with him, hooting and hollering. As they got closer, they passed farms and houses, and the sign that told them they couldn’t have their guns.

Kent laughed. What a fucking joke these Northerners were.

The town looked empty. It seemed they knew they were coming. Kent saw the saloon, and the burnt veranda of the sheriff’s office. He was surprised; he put a lot of kerosene in that jar he threw. He thought more of the building would be burned down.

As they thundered into town, a man walked out of the sheriff’s office. He wore a cowboy hat and a red serape, and he held his hands above his head.

“Surrendering already?” Kent asked, coming to a stop.

“Not a fan of getting shot,” the man said in a familiar accent. Kent blinked; he didn’t know there was another Southern man here. “My friend got shot, and she didn’t really care for it.”

That got Kent to snort.

“Where’s Kuhn?”

“Not here.”

“Bullshit,” Kent spat. “Show me.”

The man nodded, and Kent got off his horse.

“Stay ready,” he ordered, following the man up the burnt stairs.

“I hate to be rude,” the man said. “What’s your name?”
“Kent. First Lieutenant.”

“Shit, that’s fancy,” he said. “Name’s McCree. Deputy.”

“Didn’t know I’d find another Southern man up here, let alone as a deputy.”

“Life’s full of surprises, ain’t it?” McCree laughed.

McCree opened the door, and Kent stormed in.

“Sir, we’re here to get you—“

No one was there. The cells were empty.

“Where are you hiding him?” Kent pressed.

“Not too sure,” McCree said, scratching his head. “They don’t really tell me anything.”

“They don’t tell you anything?” Kent snorted.

“Not really. Guess they don’t really trust a good Southern man,” he shrugged. “But hey, the pay is good. Keeps me fed and flush with bullets.”

“Is this what the North really is? Finding ways to keep the good, God-fearing white men out of power?”

“No idea, this is the first town I really settled down in. Have to put up with a lot of crap, but isn’t that what it’s like everywhere?”

Kent looked at McCree. He knew the type of man McCree was. Adrift, abandoned, kept ignorant of what was truly owed to him.

“Not everywhere,” Kent said.

“Really? Well, that’s something.”

“You honestly don’t know what it’s supposed to be like for us?”

“Like who?”

“Us. The white man,” Kent said. “Your accent, you from Texas?”

“Yes sir, I am,” McCree said.

“What did you do during the War?”

“I was a snot-nose punk,” he chuckled. “Did my own thing, drifting from place to place.”

“Then you wouldn’t know what we were fighting for.”

“Not really. What was it?”

Kent smiled. Jesse was a Southern man. Once he knew what they were fighting for, what was owed to him, he’d join them. It had been some time since they’d taken on some new blood, but men like Jesse was needed.

“We fought for the rights of the white man,” he said. “It is our destiny to rule this great nation. We
are the builders of the greatest country on the Earth; it is our duty, our manifest destiny, that we rule over this land from sea to sea.

“But the North is ashamed of the greatness thrust upon us. They want us to actually play nice with the niggers! Do you know why we clapped ‘em in chains, made them work for us?”

“You know, I never put much thought into it.”

Kent smiled. McCree was kept ignorant, but he could help him! He could teach him, make him realize the greatness that was within him.

“It’s because they’re monsters and savages,” Kent said. “Their kind can’t comprehend civilization. It’s science, their skulls are different. Look here.”

He took off his hat and pointed to his head.

“White men have a curve to our skulls here, a bump,” he said, pointing to the top of his head. “It’s science, phrenology, and the experts say this bump on our heads is what makes the white man so superior. It gives us the ability to reason, to think abstractly, to build things that are bigger and better than ourselves. Can you feel it on your own head?”

“All that from a bump?” McCree said. He took his own hat off, and started rubbing his head.

“Yes, right there. You mind?”

“Please, show me.”

Kent gently took McCree’s hand, and showed him where a bump was on his skull.

“That bump right there is what made the white man found this country,” he said. “We’re the only race on this planet that has that. Everyone else has a flat spot, if not a divot. We’re the only ones who can create civilization, we have to be the bearers of that mighty task, and bring it to those who physically can’t comprehend it.

“The niggers have to be shackled and whipped so they could know the work it takes to make such great civilizations. We have to teach them the hard work that we do is what makes this world great. We have to drag them into the light; it is our destiny! The Northerners saw the greatness that awaited us, but they failed. It scared them.

“They succumbed to the evils of man, and saw mercy and shame where they should be feeling pride. They thought the niggers should be free, but we know what will happen with them! We let them be free, they’ll just lounge around all day eating, sleeping, dicing, and drinking, just like they did back in Africa. You haven’t heard of an African civilization that’s like ours, have you?”

“Can’t say I have, but I haven’t been over there before,” McCree said.

“You don’t have to go, because there is none! They haven’t built a city like this one, let alone like Savannah! They can’t do it, they have to be shown. That’s what our goal is: to bring the South back to life, and to retake our destiny!”

“That’s some mighty big expectations on your shoulders.”

“It is, but we’ll bear it. It is our duty to our blood, after all,” Kent said. “And we always need more men. I can show you more, teach you more, and I know you’d be a great fit as a guardian of our civilization.”
“You want me to join your group?”

“Of course. Any man who sees the truth in our cause is welcome to join.”

“Wow. That’s a mighty fine offer.”

Kent smiled.

“But the smartest person I’ve ever known is a little fifteen-year-old black girl,” McCree said. “Seriously, you should see some of the things Efi comes up with, it’ll blow your mind. And she’s learning more and more every day. Honestly, I can’t figure out how she does it.”

Kent’s smile faltered.

“And my best friend just so happens to be black. She even took a bullet for me,” he continued. “So I guess the whole bunk about ‘bumps on our heads’ is just that: bunk.”

“I told you what your destiny is, and you spit on it?” Kent demanded.

“I think it’s a lot of well-polished horseshit that you got sold,” McCree smiled. “But it’s horseshit nonetheless. So thanks, but no thanks. I’m happy where I am.”

“The North has poisoned you.”

“I believe I’m seeing things plenty clear.”

“You’re just ashamed of your blood,” Kent sneered. “Where’s Kuhn?”

“Oh him? He’s gone.”

“What?”

“The sheriff and my deputy friend loaded him up on a wagon and rode out last night, not too long after your little firebombing.”

“What, you think you can get him to Denver?”

“We know we can,” McCree smiled.

“But if you’re taking him in a wagon, you can’t be moving that fast,” Kent said. “And if you’ve only got a day’s head start, we can catch up with you in just over a day.”

“You could. But I’m here to keep you here,” McCree said. “I was to stay here and get you to go into a Southern rant and slow you down. Honestly, I’m surprised it took so little effort.”

“You? Keep me here?” Kent laughed. He pulled out a pocket watch from his gray uniform. “We’ve been talking for just under an hour! You think that hour is really gonna mean much when we hit the trail?”

“Oh, I’m not here to keep you from riding out,” McCree smiled. “I’m here to keep you from keeping an eye on your men.”

“An eye on my men?” That’s fucking nonsense,” Kent sputtered. “When we get the Major, we’ll come back for you. We can’t let a traitor sully the white race.”

“Good luck.”
Kent stormed out of the office.

“Let’s go,” he said, climbing onto his horse. “We’ve got a day—“

He trailed off. Only four of his men were on their horses, looking very embarrassed. The rest of the horses were hitched.

“Where the fuck is everyone?” He spat.

“Uh, Lieutenant…”

“What?!“

“They’re…uh, well, they’re at the saloon.”

“…What?”

“Some whores came out a minute after you went in,” the man continued. “Really, really, really pretty whores. Lord, they were something, their breasts were almost popping out…”

“Get on with it!”

“Ah! Well, they, uh, they came with beer and whiskey. Said there was a special for men in uniform, which we all have.”

If looks could kill, Kent would have struck the man down where he was.

“And you didn’t think to stop them?” He roared.

“W-we tried! We did! But…I mean, the whores were really, really pretty…”

Kent jumped off his horse and stormed up to the saloon. He was so focused on getting the Major back, he had mentally tuned out the raucous noise coming from the saloon. Men were laughing and cheering, women were giggling and singing, and a piano was belting out songs.

He knocked the doors open, and came to a dead stop.

His men, soldiers of the proud Confederate States of America, were carousing with whores. Men were knocking back beer, whiskey, wine, if it was a liquid, they were drinking it. There had to be easily twenty barely-clothed whores, each hanging off at least one of his soldiers. His men were blushing and leering at them, staring at the valleys of flesh that were busting out of their corsets, and were being led up to rooms almost by the dozen.

Those men who weren’t paying for a whore were at green-felt covered tables, playing cards, shooting dice, but always drinking.

“What the fuck is going on here?!!”

He was barely heard over the noise.

“Ah, Lieutenant!” A voice slurred. One of his soldiers staggered towards him. “J-just the man! Come, let’s take a few shots!”

“The Major is captured,” Kent ranted, grabbing the man by the lapels. “We need to leave!”

“But we’ve been fighting for over five years,” the soldier slurred. “Come on, we need this.”
“I was gone not even an hour! How the crap did things get this way?”

“Soldier’s special,” the man hiccupped. “A nickel gets you a draft of beer, a dime gets you a shot a whiskey! And it’s good whiskey, too.”

He held up a glass. Kent was about to smash it, but the familiar burning smell passed his nose. Lord, that smelled like great whiskey. And it had been a long time…

Kent shook his head.

“We have a job to do. Get the men.”

“But most of ‘em are with whores. Oh Lord, I hope I’m next, I’ve only had my left and right hands for the past five some odd years…”

Kent looked out at the scene of barely restrained debauchery. His men were in no condition to ride; half of them were barely able to stagger around. More than a few were already passed out.

“Ah, another soldier,” a gentle, accented voice said.

Kent looked over. A tall, dark haired beauty of a woman was sauntering up to him. She wore a purple and black corset and dress, with a velvet-smooth French accent to her voice.

“You look thirsty,” she said in that lovely accent. “May I interest you in a drink? I have a special for soldiers.”

“Listen, whore—“

“Please, my name is Madam Lacroix.”

“Then listen, Madam, we need to leave.”

“But your soldiers need some time off,” she smiled.

Kent hissed. He couldn’t leave, not until everyone was sober enough to ride.

“Stay, please,” she said. “My girls can keep you company.”

“I’d take her up on it.” Kent spun around. McCree had walked in, grinning from ear to ear and chomping a cigar. He was the only man to take off his hat as he walked indoors. “Not much you can do now.”

Realization washed over Kent.

“You planned this,” he hissed.

“Me? Oh no,” Madam Lacroix smiled. “I just love a man in uniform.”

She ran a hand over Kent’s arm, but he shrugged her off. Every minute they spent here, Kuhn was getting further and further away from them, and closer to Denver, closer to being taken in by fucking Northerners. But he was stuck in this crappy little town for the day, or at least until his men sobered up.

He might as well relax, too…

Kent shook his head.
“I’m getting a hotel room,” he snapped. “Cut my men off.”

“I’m sorry, but money talks. And they seem to have a lot of it.”

“Then…! You need…I…Argh!”

Kent stormed out. He was so angry, he couldn’t even form coherent sentences.

“I had to listen to that asshole prattle on for almost an hour about ‘bumps on the head’ and ‘blood and destiny.’ But I think that seeing his face right there was worth the price of admission,” Jesse laughed.

“I think it is, too,” Amélie smiled.

“Excuse me, Madam Lacroix,” Anastasia said, walking up. “We’ve gone through three bottles of the good whiskey, and a barrel of beer.”

“In under an hour? These soldiers are very thirsty,” she said. “Swap out the good whiskey for the worst kind. They’re probably too drunk to notice.”

“Ugh, hangover whiskey,” Jesse winced. “I almost feel sorry for these boys.”

“Almost?” Madam Lacroix said, rising her eyebrow.

“Just almost,” Jesse grinned. He turned to Anastasia. “How’s Mama doing?”

“She’s fine,” Anastasia replied. “She’s safe in the kitchen; no one’s going to go back there to see who’s cooking. They don’t suspect a thing.”

“And what about the rest of the town?” He asked. “Efi, Olivia, Orisa, Winston, Father Gabriel, all of the other black and Mexican families?”

“Jesse, these men are far too drunk to go wandering around town to see if we’re hiding anyone even a little bit black,” Madam Lacroix said. “Fareeha came up with a good plan. As long as these bastards are in my saloon, they’re trapped like flies in a spider’s web; Crease will be fine. Oh, and Anastasia, make sure the residents can order whatever food they want; I’ll cover the cost.”

“Sure thing, Madam Lacroix.”

“And raise the price on the drinks for the ‘soldiers,’” she told her right-hand.

“How much?”

“However much the girls think they can get away with. We need to hold these Confederate bastards back for at least a day, but we should also try to bankrupt them, too.”

“You’re giving them a guaranteed hangover, and changing them more for it?” Jesse laughed. “You’re evil. Remind me to never piss you off.”

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