Ebb and Flow

by nemvous

Summary

Josephine Davis was saved from a deranged father by none other than the Van der Linde gang in 1878, and this fic follows her life as she grows up alongside Arthur, and, as these things usually go, falls for him.

Purely self-indulgent.

Notes

I wrote this and continue to write this to the Southern Gothic playlist on Spotify. Give it a
listen while reading this if you want to get the full effect.
“I don’t understand why I gotta learn how to read.” Frustrated, Arthur slapped the book down on his lap and looked up at Hosea, his voice comparable to that of an unoiled wagon wheel. “It’s stupid. What? Am I gonna read a man to death?”

“Learning to read is one of the most important skills a man can possess,” Hosea said, adjusting his position in the back of the wagon. “Once you can read, you can write. And then that notebook I gave you will finally see some use. You’re nearly sixteen, Arthur. It seems stupid now, but one day you’ll be thanking me. Now, go on.”

Arthur scowled and looked down at the book in his lap. Fuck Oliver Twist, fuck reading. He didn’t need any goddamn books to take out a man who needed taking out. He huffed and picked it back up anyway, continuing from where he’d left off.

“... intent upon this innocent a-amus...ah...”

“Amusement,” Hosea filled in patiently.

“Amusement, Noah put his feet on the table-cloth; and pulled Oliver’s hair; and tw...twuh...”

“Twitched.”

“Twitched his ears, and expressed his opinion that he was a ‘sneak’...”

It continued on like that, Arthur’s squeaky voice reading Oliver Twist, while Hosea, Bessie, and occasionally Dutch would chip in and help him with words he hadn’t learned yet. It was an hour or so before Susan pulled the wagon in front of them to a stop near the bank of a river and climbed down. She walked to Dutch and looked up at him.

“We should look for a place stop at for the night,” she said, hand on her hip. “If we plan on gettin’ get these horses to the border, we best let them rest.”

“Best let us rest too,” Dutch agreed and looked at the rest of the group in the back of the wagon he
was driving. “Arthur, you and Miss Grimshaw go on ahead on the horses, try to find us a place to set up camp. The rest of us will wait here and guard the wagons.”

Relieved to stop reading, Arthur marked his place in the book and closed it. He hopped down and untied two of the horses from the back of the wagon, leading them to Susan. They mounted up and crossed the river, finding that it wouldn’t be too deep to cross with the wagons.

“How’s your reading going, Arthur?” Susan asked, chuckling when she glanced at the said boy and saw his pinched expression.

“I don’t know why Hosea’s wantin’ me to learn to read so bad. It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not. If you can’t read, how can you expect to read a bounty poster? Especially if it’s a bounty poster for you?”

Arthur scowled and didn’t answer. Susan let it be and rode with Arthur in silence. They got about a mile past the river when a voice cut through the silence. Birds fled from their trees with loud flaps of their wings, startling both Susan and Arthur.

“Repent, girl!” The sharp snap of a whip followed, and then, a high, piercing shriek.

Immediately, Susan steered her horse towards the noise, pulling out her revolver. Arthur copied her, yanking out his worn cattleman and kicking his horse to match her speed.

“Papa, I’m scared!” A young girl’s voice cried, laced with fear and pain.

“You’ve got the devil in you now, girl! Repent!” Another snap, another scream, and the two of them found a trail. They raced down it, and when they reached the small cabin, the sight Arthur saw out front made him feel ill.

The source of the noises came from a man and a young girl. The young girl, with hair as dark as the night, was nude, tied to a post by her wrists. Blood spilled down her back from lashes spread up and down her back, lashes from the whip the other figure was holding.
“Repent!” The man shouted, bringing the whip down on her again. Her body jerked violently and she screamed in pain.

Bile rose in Arthur’s throat and anger crashed through him like a storm. Before he could do anything, Susan raised her gun to the air and fired a shot, making all three of them jump.

“You bring that whip down on her one more time, and I’ll blow your goddamn brains out,” Susan growled when the man turned to her. His face was fat and red from exertion.

“This ain’t any of your goddamn business. Get out of here.” The man hissed back.

The girl began to weep, and rain began to fall, landing in fat droplets around them.

“That girl has the devil in her. I have to get it out.” The man turned and raised the whip to the girl again, and this time, Arthur was the one who reacted. He laid shot after shot into him until his body slumped into the mud. The girl screamed in terror and tried to free herself. The blood on her back ran off of her in pink rivers.

“Arthur! Give me your coat!” Susan called, now holstering her weapon and running to the girl and freeing her of her bonds.

Arthur dismounted his horse and ran to them, shucking off his jacket. The girl's thin arms wrapped themselves around Susan and Susan draped the jacket around her, covering up as much of her body as possible. They both noticed the dark blood between the girl's thighs, much darker than the blood on her back, and Arthur blinked in confusion when Susan’s expression turned to one of understanding.

The girl's hair plastered to her skull and he could see her quivering. She sobbed and cried loudly, face pressed tightly against Susan’s bosom and neck. Susan removed her shawl and laid it over the girl's head.

“Take care of that man’s body and bring the others back here, Arthur,” Susan said, though Arthur could barely hear her. His heart hammered in his chest. He had never seen anything like that. “Arthur!”

Arthur snapped to attention then, now noticing that Susan had helped the girl up and was leading her
towards the house.

As quick as he could, Arthur dragged the man into the woods, listening to the wet squelch of the mud below him and the cries of the girl inside of the house. His adolescent mind didn’t quite grasp the situation, but he knew it couldn’t have been good. That poor girl.

Once the man's body was taken care of, Arthur mounted his horse and raced to the river. Upon finding the wagons and explaining what had happened, Hosea climbed into the first wagon and they rode as quickly as possible to the cabin.

When they arrived, there was smoke in the chimney and the small pool of blood where the girl had been tied up had washed away. They parked the wagons, tied up the horses, then proceeded into the cabin.

The first thing Arthur noticed was the cabin was filthy. It stank of dirt and rotted meat, and when he looked around, was covered in dust and littered with religious symbols. Dutch walked over to Susan and the girl, who was laying on a small bedroll on the floor, her chest and back wrapped with cloth and bandages. She wore a pair of bloomers and was tucked up close to Susan, eyes wide and terrified. Susan looked up at Dutch, her expression hard for Arthur to read.

“What-” Dutch started before Susan cut him off.

“Arthur and I found her tied naked to a post outside. Her father was whipping her.” Dutch blinked and Arthur looked to Hosea, his expression open with both anguish and anger. Bessie, who stood next to him, covered her mouth with a soft gasp.

“She’s having her first menstrual period. She says her father tied her up and lashed her because it was a sign from the devil.” The girl trembled in Susan’s arms and Susan gently shushed her and smoothed her hand down her hair.

Everyone in the room seemed to understand what that meant, except for Arthur. He saw Dutch’s expression soften and he shifted, kneeling down in front of the two. The girl lifted her gaze and looked at Dutch. Her big hazel eyes were ringed with red from crying.

“How old are you, my dear?” Dutch asked, his voice soft and calm.
“E-eleven,” her voice trembled as she spoke.

“Jesus,” Hosea breathed under his breath and pulled Bessie close to him.

“And what’s your name?” Dutch continued.

“I tried, she wouldn’t —” Susan started, but stopped when the girl cut her off.

“Josephine,” she said, and then she was moving, shifting towards Dutch and reaching out for him. “Josephine Davis.” Her trembling arms circled him and Dutch held her.

“Well, Miss Josephine. My friends and I will keep you safe, okay? You don’t have to worry anymore.” She nodded softly and tucked her face against his neck. “We’re headed west. Have you ever been west?” When she shook her head, Dutch smiled. “It’s beautiful, I think you’ll enjoy it very much.”

Later, after Josephine had fallen asleep and everyone had settled in for the night, Arthur sat by Dutch in front of the fire. He had the journal Hosea had given him sat on his lap, open to a page as he tried crudely to write out his thoughts. He sighed in frustration after a while and looked to Dutch, who was reclined back reading.

“What’s a… What’s a menstrual period?” Arthur blurted out, making Dutch flick his eyes up. His expression changed into slight amusement.

“Women, they bleed, once a month.” He said, sitting up a bit. “The first one, it means she’s a woman.”

Arthur’s face crinkled up and he looked towards the small girl curled up in her bedroll against Susan. “She don’t look like a woman.”

“Well, she’s not. Not really. She’s still just a child. But that first bleed means she can have children, and that’s a woman’s milestone. It happens around this age. Your voice changing? She’s going through what you are, just in different ways.”
Arthur scrunched his face up and he looked up at the cross mounted above the fireplace.

“Why would her father hurt her over that?”

“Who knows,” Dutch sighed. “There are wretched men in this world, boy. But you were good to take this one out today. He probably would have killed her, had you and Miss Grimshaw not come around.”

With that, Dutch returned to his book and Arthur looked over at the girl again, huddled in the covers tucked against Susan. His own father came to mind, and he scowled. He’d been arrested when Arthur was around the same age as Josephine and killed not long after. He shook his head and looked away.

He looked down and picked up the pencil. Rather than writing, his eyes strayed over to the girl again. She shifted under the thin blanket and her face poked out, dark hair falling over her freckled cheeks, expression now soft from the peace of sleep. He began to draw her, a lump of covers with a face. He could almost laugh at how bad it looked, but he didn’t. He wrote her name in block letters under the crude little drawing, before closing up his journal and settling onto his back to sleep.

ジョン・ジョン

Josephine dreamt that night of sunshine, of her mother, and a stag. She was in a field, her mothers presence a warmth at her side. The soft sounds of her singing made Josephine’s body sway with the blades of grass around them. Suddenly, a stag stepped out of the treeline, approaching them slowly. Her mother continued to sing, the sound seemingly drawing the stag closer to them. When the stag was close enough to touch, her mother reached out, touching it gently and stopped singing. When Josephine looked at her mother, a smile tilted her lips upwards before she dissolved, her body slowly slipping away and catching the wind. Josephine wanted to cry out, but a soft puff of air against her hair turned her attention back to the stag. The stag looked at her, its eyes dark and soft. It blinked slowly, then closed its eyes and bowed its head, pressing its forehead right up against her own.

Josephine woke up with a start, sucking in a sharp breath. The woman from yesterday, Susan was gone. When she looked around, she noticed that only the boy still remained, sleeping soundly in his bedroll. The sun was barely up, but Josephine could hear the birds chirping outside. Slowly, she sat up, and the pain from her lashings ran down her spine like a shock.
It wasn’t the first time her father had disciplined her, but he had never hit her *that* hard. When she’d noticed the blood between her legs, she’d screamed and run to him, afraid that she was bleeding to death. But she’d never been educated on womanhood, not after her mother died, and she hadn’t known. But her father, her father knew. He called it the curse of the devil, with his mind sick from grief because of her mother’s death.

Josephine’s lip quivered and she struggled to stand up. Her father was dead. Part of her hurt, knowing that. She loved him, even if he had a sickness of the mind and sometimes had a very heavy hand.

Josephine stepped past the boy on the floor and made her way towards the front door. Before she could open it though, it was pulled open from the outside, and Dutch stopped.

“Oh, Miss Josephine, you’re awake.” He said in that gentle tone. Now that she had calmed, she could see his eyes were a deep, rich brown. He was dressed nice for being a traveler, and his hair was slicked back. “How are you feeling, my dear?”

“I have to go,” Josephine said, face pinching slightly.

“Go? Go where?” He asked, confused.

“Go,” she reiterated, and his eyebrows shot up, eyes following hers to the outhouse a ways away.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Go ahead. Do you want me to grab you some shoes or, oh.” Josephine didn’t respond and stepped off of the deck and into the mud, uncaring. It squelched beneath her toes as she made her way over to relieve herself. When she was done, she looked between her legs and the blood was still there. The blood that sent her father into madness, the blood that meant she was a woman, according to Susan. The blood that meant she could bear children, and the blood that would follow her for the rest of her life.

Josephine shifted uncomfortably and stood up, adjusting the nightgown Susan had slipped her into the night before. When she stepped out into the light, she looked to her left, as if her eyes were pulled there, and she saw a hand sticking out of the grass.

Curiosity pulled her towards it, and she gazed down upon her father. His face was turning an ugly color, a bloody hole tearing through a part of his face. Her arms dropped to her sides and she looked down at him, now seeing the small creatures feeding off of him. A few moments later, footsteps
approached her and she was pulled away by soft hands.

“Don’t look at that, child. You don’t need to see that.” Josephine looked up and saw the other woman, Bessie, guiding her towards the house.

As they walked into the house, the boy, Arthur, walked out, carrying a bedroll. Bessie ushered her into the back room where Josephine’s things were kept.

“Where are your clothes, Josephine? We’ll be leaving soon.”

“West. We’re going west, right?” Josephine asked, walking over to the trunk her clothing was kept in.

“Yes, west,” Bessie smiled and set the bandages for Josephine’s back down on the bed. “Pick something out, something comfortable. It’ll be a long day.”

Josephine opened the trunk and picked out a soft blue dress, one of her favorites. It was loose and comfortable and was tied with a large, dark blue ribbon around the waist. She grabbed stockings and bloomers, setting them down with the dress.

“Come here, child. Let’s change your bandages.”

Josephine listened without complaint, stepping close to Bessie and turning her back to her. Bessie unbuttoned her nightgown and let it fall, carefully unwrapping the bandages, which stuck to her skin from the dried blood. Josephine’s eyes filled with tears from the pain but she kept quiet while Bessie cleaned and changed the dressings.

Bessie helped her get dressed, and as Josephine pulled on her boots, the older woman grabbed the few items of clothing she had and took them out to the wagon.

A short time later, after the house was completely picked through, Josephine was set in the back of one of the wagons with Bessie and Arthur. Bessie had wrapped her in one of the quilts they had taken from the house, one her mother made. Dutch and Susan sent the two wagons into motion and Josephine twisted around, watching as the home she’d grown to associate with Hell be swallowed up by the trees.
I don't really have a plan for where this is going, but I'm having a lot of fun writing it. Enjoy!

“You’re holdin’ it wrong,” Arthur grumbled, his voice hushed as he crouched next to Josephine.

“I don’t want to kill it,” the girl said, eyes narrowed down at the hare Arthur was helping to hold in her hands.

“You have to, Jo. This is for our dinner tonight.” He adjusted her grip on its neck and the rabbit struggled for a second before relaxing.

It was Hosea who suggested Arthur take Josephine out hunting. She was thirteen now, and it’d been two years since they picked her up. While they got along fine, Josephine was stubborn as a mule. Arthur finally understood what it was like to be in Hosea and Dutch’s shoes, even though he was barely seventeen himself.

“I don’t want to!”

“You have to, dammit. It ain’t that bad. It won’t even feel it, I promise. As long as you do it right, as I showed you, it’ll be dead in a second.”

As Josephine looked down at the hare in her hands, Arthur looked at her face. She wasn’t exactly… striking. Her hair was dark and long. Usually, it fell wildly down her back and shoulders, but today it was braided neatly thanks to Bessie. Her face was an awkward mix of too thin but still plump with the fat of childhood, and her lips were too full for the thinness of her face. Freckles spilled over her face, drawing the eye to them rather than her features.

Her arms suddenly jerked and Arthur heard the telltale crunch of the rabbit's neck as it was broken. Almost immediately, tears welled up in her eyes and she looked away, dropping the rabbit on the ground.
Arthur patted her shoulder reassuringly. “It’s okay, it’s dead, see? Didn’t even feel it.” He remembered the first time he killed something, too. He’d wept over the deer his father made him shoot when he’d settled in for sleep. When he first killed a man, he woke up crying from nightmares.

“It’s ugly, and it's bad. But it’s necessary.” He stood up and whistled for Boadicea, his new young mare. He strung the rabbit on his saddle and turned to look at Josephine. She wiped her eyes and sniffled. “Don’t be sad. It died so we can live. It’s nature. Animals hunt each other in the wild so they can live. It’s just the cycle of things.”

“I’ve never… killed nothin’ before.” She said and stood up. Arthur noticed with a smile that her boots were off. Susan tried and failed time and time again to keep the girl from wandering without shoes. But she almost found a way to get around without them.

“I know, but it was a good, clean death. A death that won’t be in vain.” Arthur patted Boadicea’s neck. “I’ll go catch a few more. Will you keep Boadicea company here?”

“Yeah,” Josephine sniffled again and stood up. She reached into her satchel and offered the mare a carrot.

“Use this if you have to, remember how I showed you,” Arthur said, handing her his spare cattleman. She took it and looked down at it, an unreadable emotion in her eyes. She was naïve still, despite how far they’d come. Arthur ruffled her hair, then turned and headed off.

With his back to her, he didn’t see the way Josephine’s face turned bright red as she hid against Boadicea’s neck.

When Arthur returned nearly an hour later with two hares and a wild turkey, he found Boadicea laying in the grass with Josephine leaned up against her, a book resting on her knees. He immediately recognized it to be Oliver Twist.

“… to come further down. ‘Oh, you little wretch!’” Arthur couldn’t help but smile when Josephine changed her tone of voice for a higher, more tinny effect. “Screamed Charlotte: squeezing Oliver with her utmost force, which was about equal to that of a mod… uh… Modr…”

“Moderately,” Arthur filled in, and with a gasp, the book was slapped closed and Josephine had the cattleman pointed at Arthur. Boadicea stood up behind her and approached Arthur.
“Woah there, killer. It’s just me.” Josephine pursed her lips and set the gun down. “You’re gonna smell like horse, kid. Miss Grimshaw ain’t gonna be happy.”

“I’m not a kid.” She grumbled, handing Arthur his gun after he’d tied the game up to the saddle.

“In my book, you are,” Arthur said and helped her settle up on Boadicea.

“W-well in my book, you’re a big… You’re a shithead.”

Now that made Arthur laugh. He had trouble climbing up into the saddle, unable to haul himself up through his laughter. Josephine’s face burned bright red and she crossed her arms over her chest.

“That’s a new one, miss.” Arthur guffawed, giving himself one big mighty pull and hauling himself up into the saddle.

An arm dotted in small moles and freckles secured itself around Arthur’s waist and he kicked Boadicea into motion and led them out of the woods.

“How’s your reading going?”

“Fine, I like it. Hosea’s a good teacher.” Josephine responded, her unused boots tucked up between her legs and against Arthur’s back.

“He is. How about your sewing? Heard Miss Grimshaw grumbling about lost needles the other day.”

Josephine made a sound of disgust and shook her head. “It’s horrible, I hate sewing. I poke my fingers all the time and Miss Grimshaw gets mad at me when I get blood on the cloth. Sometimes I,” Josephine giggled impishly and Arthur glanced back to see her biting her lip to hold back a grin. “I lose the needles on purpose, so I don’t have to sew.”

“Atta girl,” Arthur grinned and chuckled.
They made it back to camp in no time, a camp which had more or less become their permanent settlement until the heat from the law cooled off and they could cross the border into Oregon safely.

That night, Miss Grimshaw made a stew for dinner using the rabbits Arthur and Josephine killed. Arthur watched amused as she ate, meticulously picking the meat out and giving the pieces to the others at camp. Everyone seemed to understand her particular aversion to the meat; it was hard to eat the meat of something she’d killed herself. They let it slide, but Arthur knew she’d have to get used to it one way or another.

As everyone settled in for the night and Arthur was sketching a picture of Josephine holding the rabbit in his journal, he heard the girl weeping softly in her tent, which was only a few feet away from his own. Arthur got off of his cot and headed out, walking quietly to her tent. When he peeled back the flap, Josephine was curled up on her side, wrapped tightly in her quilt. She gasped sharply when she noticed him and covered her face, red burning from her neck to the tips of her ears.

“Hey, I heard you cryin’.” He said, entering the tent and settling down on the ground by her bedroll. “Is it ‘cause of the rabbit?”

She sniffled and nodded her head. “I-it’s dead, because of me. A-and I keep… I can’t stop imagining the way it felt and the way it sounded when I…”

“I know,” Arthur said softly. “It’s dead because of you, sure, but all of us: you, me, Dutch, Hosea, Miss Bessie, Miss Grimshaw, we’re all alive with food in our bellies because of you. But you know what? I cried when I first killed an animal, too.”

“You did?” She peeked her eyes out from under the quilt and regarded him. “I can’t imagine you crying.”

Arthur chuckled and shook his head. “Hell yeah, I cried. But it gets easier over time. It gets easier because it’s for our survival.”

Josephine sniffled again and slowly, Arthur watched as her body language relaxed.

“Let’s do some reading,” Arthur suggested and picked up Oliver Twist. He lit the kerosene lamp on the ground by her bedroll and shifted, opening the book and laying it on his lap.
Arthur began to read to her quietly, barely making it past a few pages before he noticed she had fallen asleep. He blew out the lamp and set down the book, making his way back to his tent to sleep for the rest of the night.

A week later, they’d crossed the border into Oregon in a daring escape with the law hot on their tail. They’d lost one of the wagons; not the supply wagon, thank Christ, but the loss had taken a toll on everyone. By the time they’d found an area to camp in, Josephine’s thighs were marred with sores from riding on the back of Arthur’s horse, and her back protested with every movement she made.

At the very least, they’d put up camp beneath a thick canopy of trees near a lake, where the heat didn’t feel so stifling. Dutch, Hosea and Miss Grimshaw had left for the nearest town to set up arrangements, or so they said. Josephine knew they planned on robbing someone blind. A fact which, at first, she didn’t like. But she had quickly grown accustomed to their way of life and had managed to procure a little conning skill herself, a skill that Hosea was mighty proud of.

Josephine sat next to Bessie, a needle and thread in one hand and a shirt of Dutch’s in the other. She was trying to mend a hole that had torn in the side, but all she was managing to do was prick her fingers.

“Sheesh, child.” Bessie chuckled, taking the shirt from Josephine. “Pretty soon the shirt won’t be white anymore, but red from all your stabbin’. Go on, Jo, find something else to do. I’ll tell Miss Grimshaw you did a lovely job patchin’ this up.”

The wink Bessie gave her made Josephine giggle. They both knew Miss Grimshaw would keel over and die before Josephine was able to patch, mend, or sew something well.

She left Bessie and looked around, searching for something, anything to do. Arthur wasn’t in camp, but he had to be somewhere. He hadn’t gone with the others to town, so she knew he was wandering around somewhere.

Josephine had grown quite sweet on Arthur, something that she both detested and didn’t understand because of her age. He was handsome and kind and patient, and according to Dutch, it was just something that happened when kids got older.
When she found him, he was resting up against a tree, that journal of his propped up against his knees while he scribbled something in it.

“What are you doing?” Josephine asked, shifting her weight from foot to foot as his eyes flicked up to her.

“Writin’, drawin’. Nothin’ very entertaining.”

“Can I see?”

Josephine approached him and he showed her what he had been drawing. It was a picture of the lake that stretched out in front of them. She had never seen what Arthur did in his journal, and she had no idea he could draw so well. He snapped the journal closed and Josephine stood straight, her feet bare in the grass.

Up close, she noticed the sweat on Arthur’s face as he wiped it away with the bandana tied around his neck. He sighed and stood up.

“Let’s go swimming,” he said and began to make his way down towards the shore. Josephine trailed after him like a lost puppy until grass turned into rocks and rocks turned into small pebbles, wet from the waves of the lake.

“I can’t swim,” Josephine said, backing away from the water just slightly as Arthur stripped down to his drawers and undershirt.

“I’ll teach you, then. It ain’t that hard.” He offered his hand to Josephine as he stepped into the water and she shook her head.

“No, I —” Her mother had died in the water. She remembered their trip to the pond, her and her parents. Josephine had been sitting up in the grass, just barely four years old when her mother dove under the surface of the pond, and didn’t come back up. Her father screamed, shouted, dove in after her and pulled her body out. She remembered crying, begging for her mama to wake up, who laid still and dead in the grass. “It’s how my mama died,” she whispered.

Immediately, Arthur’s expression softened. “In the water?”
“Yeah,” Josephine said and wrapped her arms around herself. “I don’t want it to happen to me.”

“It won’t happen, I won’t let it.” Josephine flicked her eyes up to Arthur and saw him smile softly. “I’m real sorry about your mama. I lost mine too.”

Josephine frowned and stayed quiet. Arthur let her be and walked out until the water was at his waist before dipping under the surface and swimming farther out. Josephine sat down in the rocks, letting the water lap over her bare toes. She listened and watched Arthur swim around until the sun beating down on her back became too hot and she stood. She shed her dress until she stood in her chemise and bloomers, the bloomers being something Miss Grimshaw insisted she wore, as she had a tendency to sit with her legs crossed.

“Arthur!” She called, and Arthur turned his head to look at her. “I wanna swim.”

And so, she learned to swim. Arthur held her in the water and showed her how to keep herself up, how to tread water, and showed her a basic stroke that wouldn’t tire her out too much. Once he was confident she could keep herself afloat, he’d grabbed her by the waist and heaved her out of the water, throwing her a ways away.

Josephine screeched, limbs flailing as she soared through the air, then hit the water with an indignant splash. “Not fair!” She shouted when she resurfaced, whipping her hand down on the water and splashing Arthur.

Arthur laughed at her and splashed her back, and they spent the better part of an hour like that; swimming, splashing and horsing around in the lake.

“What a great idea!” They heard an unfamiliar female voice shout, making them both stop and turn their heads towards it.

That’s when Josephine saw the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen come racing down the bank. Her long hair bounced out behind her and the dress she wore flowed through the wind like water.

The woman stripped down to her chemise, which was much more shapely and low necked than Josephine’s own, and with a quick glance to the side, she saw Arthur was red from his neck to his ears. She rid herself of her boots and her socks, then entered the water with a dreamy sigh.
Josephine could see Dutch approaching the water now, a look of amusement on his face.

“Arthur! Come on out, son. We have to speak about a few things.” He called, making Arthur head for the shore quickly.

The beautiful woman approached Josephine, and Josephine flushed. Up close, she was even more beautiful. Her full lips were painted with a light layer of rouge, and her skin was like porcelain, smooth and even all the way down to her neck.

“You must be Miss Josephine.” The woman said to Josephine when the water reached her waist. She sank down to her neck before standing up again.

Josephine nodded her head and her eyes wandered against their will, down to her bust, to the gentle curve of her waist. It made a pang of jealousy run through her. Her own body was still a tangle of awkward limbs. She had the beginnings of a shapely figure, but her chest was still rather flat, her breasts barely big enough to be seen through clothes.

“Dutch speaks fondly of you. I’m Annabelle.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss,” Josephine said politely, bowing her head just a bit.

“Would you mind if I joined you, Josephine? The game you were playing with that boy looked like fun. What was it?”

“Marco Polo,” Josephine said, and at the woman’s curious look, she continued. “I cover my eyes and say, Marco. The person I’m after has to say Polo, and I have to try to find them without looking. Would you like to play with me?”

“Why, that sounds like fun! I’d love to.” Josephine relaxed and grinned. She covered her eyes and listened to the sound of Annabelle swimming away.

“Marco!”
A giggle and Annabelle answered. “Polo!”

Josephine turned towards the source of the sound and waded towards it. “Marco!”

A splash and Annabelle called Polo again.

It continued like that for a while, until Josephine began to feel tired from the strain of swimming. Annabelle joined her up on the bank and they reclined in the grass, letting the sun dry their underclothes.

“How old are you, Josephine?” Annabelle asked as she sat behind Josephine, gently using her fingers to untangle the knots in her dark hair as it dried.

“Thirteen,” Josephine answered, picking at the grass and tying pieces together.

“So young,” she said fondly. “Wherever is your mother?”

“She’s in heaven,” Josephine said. Even though she didn’t really believe there was a god, she believed her mother was there, in heaven.

“Oh, dear,” Annabelle said quietly, stroking her head softly. “And your father?”

At that question, Josephine reached behind herself and unbuttoned the top few buttons of her chemise. She let it slip down her shoulders and covered her chest, exposing her scarred back. The lash marks striped her back, the scars now a light pink against her skin. She heard Annabelle gasp at the sight. It made her feel ugly and weird under her gaze, but she looked back at the woman from over her shoulder.

“Arthur and Dutch saved me from him.” Annabelle had her hand covering her mouth and she saw tears glistening at the corners of her eyes. “Please don’t cry. They don’t hurt anymore.”

Annabelle shook her head and sucked in a big breath. Josephine looked forward as she buttoned her chemise back up for her and leaned forward to kiss her shoulder.
“You’re so strong, Josephine.” She smoothed her hand down her back and played gently with her hair.

“Will you be staying with us, Miss Annabelle?”

“Yes. Yes, I think I will be.”
The soft spot for Arthur in Josephine’s chest only seemed to grow softer and softer as time went on. When she reached the age of fifteen, she realized that Arthur didn’t look at her in the same ways he looked at the women in towns, with their curvy figures and busts that practically spilled from their dresses. She wished desperately that he would, but the fact that Arthur looked upon her like a sister weighed heavily in her heart.

Annabelle told her often how beautiful she was. Her once chubby cheeks had thinned out, and her too full lips had settled elegantly. Annabelle often gushed over her, wishing she had freckles like Josephine’s, which had faded, but only slightly. The older woman, who now acted as more of a mother figure in Josephine’s life, would tell her these things as she brushed her hair and doted on her. She spoke often of Josephine being a blossoming rose, something that Josephine didn’t understand, and said it wouldn’t be long before the boys in the towns they visited would take notice.

They had been driven south this time, while Dutch chased a lead that he said would bring them a whole lot of money. Hosea and Bessie had been married and decided to stay in Oregon, where they hoped to clean up their acts and live peacefully.

When they arrived in the south, they set up camp, and it was where Josephine had learned from Arthur how to properly shoot. Not just a cattleman, but a rifle too. Her shoulder had been bruised for weeks until she’d gotten used to the kickback on it.

With their settlement, Arthur seemed to disappear more and more. At first, Josephine thought it was under Dutch’s orders, but when Dutch started asking after him too, she realized it must be something else entirely.

The day Josephine met Mary Gillis, was coincidentally the day she also took her first life.
“Arthur! Before you go runnin’ off again, we’re low on supplies. Take the wagon into town and bring back what I have on this list.” Susan said, making Josephine look up from where she was seated while Annabelle braided her hair.

“Yes, ma’am,” Arthur responded, though he seemed distracted; miles and miles away.

Susan gave him the list and a money clip. “Take Josephine with you too.”

Josephine’s lips curled into a soft frown. She hadn’t liked being around Arthur recently. The feelings in her chest made her feel awkward and strange, and Arthur wasn’t as fun as he used to be. He was nineteen now, she knew he was an adult and had responsibilities. But he was… he was different now.

Josephine stood when Annabelle finished braiding her hair and pulled it to rest over her shoulder. She went to her tent to pull on her stockings, boots, gunbelt, and satchel while Arthur prepared the wagon. As she passed by Annabelle, the woman stood up and stopped her.

“Josephine, while you’re in town, would you mind buying me a few new sets of stockings? All of mine are torn to bits.” Annabelle asked, grabbing a small wad of folded cash out from her bust. Josephine let out a laugh at the sight and Annabelle joined her, slipping the money into Josephine’s satchel.

“I wouldn’t mind. What color do you want?” Annabelle tapped her chin in thought.

“White, of course. Beyond that, I’ll let you choose.”

Josephine’s eyebrows lifted and she gave Annabelle a look.

“Choose, silly! I’ll love whatever you pick out for me.”

Annabelle patted her hair, then ushered her towards the wagon. Arthur was already seated atop of it,
looking over the list. Josephine hefted herself into the seat next to him. She looked at him as he adjusted his hat and used the inside of it to itch his forehead.

“You’ll need to go huntin’ soon,” Arthur said, folding the paper and tucking it into the breast pocket of his shirt.

“Me?” Hunting was something she’d gotten used to. Killing the animal didn’t hurt nearly as bad anymore, but she was still working on the process of skinning and gutting without feeling ill.

“You,” Arthur chuckled, picking up the reigns and guiding the horses out of camp and towards the main road.

“You’ll come with me, right?”

“Can’t. I’ve been busy.”

“You’re always busy now,” she sighed, missing the way Arthur glanced at her. “Besides, I can’t possibly go by myself. I don’t have a horse.”

“You got legs, you can walk.” It was meant to be in jest, but Josephine looked away and crossed her arms over her chest. It didn’t take much for Arthur to realize that hurt her, and he sighed. “You wanna drive?”

“Not really, no,” Josephine said moodily and kept her gaze defiantly turned away.

“Guess the horses are gonna take us wherever they please, today,” Arthur said, hanging the reigns on the small hook in front of them. Josephine whipped her head quickly towards him when the horses began to veer off slightly. Her eyes widened and she grabbed for the reigns.

“Arthur!” She whined indignantly and steered the horses back onto the path. Arthur merely grinned at her. He’d been doing a lot of that lately, smiling, grinning. He seemed… happier, for whatever reason.

“Your hair’s gettin’ long.” Arthur pointed out after a few minutes of silence. With a quick glance
over, Josephine realized he had been staring and her face flushed red.

“Of course it is. It’s hair, it grows.” Josephine answered smartly and Arthur snorted.

“Jeezus,” he whistled and shook his head. “You sure have gotten smart. Now I know what Dutch and Hosea had to put up with when I was your age.”

Josephine’s face flushed bright red from both anger and embarrassment.

“How’s your shootin’ going?” He asked when the town began to come into view. “You been practicin’ as I showed you?”

“I ain’t good with the rifle yet, it’s heavy. But I can shoot almost all the bottles I set up with my revolver.”

“You’ll learn with the rifle. Once you get stronger, it’s easier to handle.” Arthur reached over and took her cattleman from the holster. Josephine glanced over and watched him inspect it. It was Arthur’s old one, one he’d given her when he had the money to buy himself a new one. It was worn and clearly seen a lot, but it worked. Dutch hadn’t taken her on any jobs that posed much danger yet, so it worked for what she used it for, which was killing game and bottles.

“You’re takin’ good care of it. I don’t see no rust.” He put it back in her holster and leaned on the bench.

“Of course I take good care of it. It was yours.” Her face flushed immediately at her own comment and she frowned deeply. “And you never shut your mouth about me cleanin’ it. I clean it outta fear now, ‘cause I’m afraid you’ll barrel around the corner and yell at me.”

Arthur laughed at that and took the reigns from her, slowing the horses as they entered the town. Josephine fiddled with her hands on her lap until they reached the general store. Arthur stopped the horses and they hopped down. As she was heading inside, Arthur stopped her and handed her the list and the money.

“You can take care of this, right? I gotta go do somethin’.” Josephine furrowed her brows and took the money and list from him.
“Sure, but where —”

“Thanks, I’ll be back soon.” And then he was walking across the street.

Josephine frowned and turned into the general store. She gave the list to the clerk, a man who she was familiar with from their trips to the store, and he helped her pick out what they needed and load it into the wagon. As she lifted up the last crate of canned vegetables, she straightened up and saw Arthur walking towards her with his hand intertwined with a woman’s.

Josephine’s insides sank and her stomach rose up into her throat. The way that Arthur was smiling, all proud and open. It was suddenly so clear why Arthur had been away so much. He wasn’t in any kind of trouble. He was in love.

The woman was beautiful, a fact she couldn’t ignore, not with her eyes locked on her. Her hair was dark and pulled back elegantly, and her brown eyes were big and soft like a doe. Her lips were full, and a beauty mark sat high on her cheek. She wasn’t dressed like most of the women Arthur used to have eyes for. The neckline of her dress wasn’t open or exposed, and she was covered modestly. Very quickly Josephine realized this woman wasn’t like them, she came from a wealthy family, she came from money.

“Josephine,” Arthur called as they approached. Josephine blinked softly and let out a breath, eyes shifting from the woman to Arthur. “This is Mary Gillis.” My woman, Josephine heard what went unspoken. “She wanted to meet you.”

_She_ wanted to meet her. Arthur must have not had any intention of introducing her to Josephine.

“Arthur speaks of you often,” Mary said, and oh, even her voice was beautiful and soft. She let go of Arthur and extended her hand to Josephine. “He always has such nice things to say.” Josephine took it. If it wasn’t obvious she didn’t live a life like them before, her hands were a dead giveaway. They were soft and clean, free of calluses from working and handling guns and riding horses. Mary’s other hand clasped around Josephine’s hand, trapping it in a warm, soft grip.

“Its—” Josephine cleared her throat and pulled her hand away. “It’s nice to meet you, Mary.”

“Oh, you’re so pretty,” Mary gushed, and Josephine grew more uncomfortable than she already was. Her eyes flicked to Arthur like a scared animal, but his eyes were set on Mary. “I just know you’d
clean up wonderfully. Maybe, you and I, we could spend a day together soon. Arthur says all of you just bathe in rivers or lakes when you get dirty and can’t take a bath in town. We could—”

“I ah, I have to go. I have to go get something for Annabelle. She wants,” Josephine shook her head and took a step back. “I have to go. I’ll be back.”

With that, Josephine turned around and walked off, missing the way Arthur and Mary stared after her in equal states of confusion. She walked towards the street and nearly tripped over herself when she missed the step down from the porch to the mud below. She caught herself and shook her head, embarrassment and jealousy raging through her and eating away at her insides. Goddamn him, goddamn her. Arthur was hiding her away from them all, like a little secret. He hadn’t planned to tell any of them about her, no doubt.

Angry tears slid down her cheeks and she wiped them away hastily.

“Hey, pretty girl,” a slurred male voice said to her right once she’d crossed the street and walked down the line of shops a ways away. “I bet I know why you’re cryin’.”

“Piss off,” she hissed.

“Don’t be like that, now. Come on, I can dry those tears right up for ya.” He reached out with surprising strength and yanked her by her braid to him. Fear rose in her throat like bile as the man pulled her against his chest. Josephine looked towards where Mary and Arthur were. He was leaned up against the wagon speaking to her, lost in his own little bubble.

Josephine opened her mouth to shout for him, but his hand clamped down over her mouth, pressing her chin up so she couldn’t bite him as he backed into an alley.

“Shh, shh now. I’ve got you,” his rancid breath washed against her cheek and ear and tears slipped down her cheeks freely now, her legs kicking feebly against him as he shoved them further into the alley, then forced her down into the mud on her back. At her muffled screams, the tears, and her thrashing, his lips curled into a grin. “Oh, oh I see. You ain’t never had a man between your legs before, huh? Savin’ yourself, I bet. The man your savin’ yourself for is just gonna have to settle with used goods.”

Josephine screamed behind his hand as he reached between them and began to yank up her skirts. His fingers brushed against her inner thighs, hiking higher and higher until they were pressed against
her most private part. She clawed wildly at his hand, then towards his face, before her mind clicked and she shot her hand down, grabbing her revolver from its holster. She cocked the hammer back and the man caught her wrist when he heard the noise.

“Oh none of that now, girlie, I’m gonna have my fun, now don’t you—”

With a mighty yank of her arm, she freed her wrist and brought the gun to his head and fired. The sound deafened her, and warm blood spilled from the man’s head down onto her face and neck. The blood dripped into her eyes and they shut against her will, stinging and burning fiercely. The fat body sagged against her and she shoved her hand against his face and hand, fingers sinking into his bloodied skin. A scream ripped from her throat, loud and awful, and she began to thrash, stuck under the man’s body and the mud. Dead weight, she realized, hands clawing and pushing at him, trying to get him off. But she was stuck. God, she was going to die here, suffocated under the body’s weight. Blood oozed into her mouth and she screamed harder, louder, throat going hoarse as she began to sob. The blood was warm, so, so warm. It blinded her, ran up her nose, trickled down her throat and nearly choked her. She turned her head and thrashed again, and the blood ran into her hair.

Just as she thought she was going to die, the body rolled off of her and she heard shouting, muffled to her ears from the blast. Warm arms yanked her from the mud, which she thought surely would have swallowed her up. She couldn’t see him or hear him, but she could feel him. She could feel hands on her face, hands on her shoulders. Josephine screamed again, tears slid down from her eyes which she still couldn’t open. She was hauled into Arthur’s lap, felt his thumbs press against her eyes, wiping away the blood, then his hands were on her head, holding her firmly to his chest.

Josephine couldn’t hear what he was saying, but he could feel his chest rumbling with each word. Her fingers found his shirt and she gripped it so hard the fabric ripped and buttons popped.

“Oh, lord.” Mary breathed, looking down upon the brutal sight.

“Arthur,” Josephine cried, her voice hoarse from screaming. He held her tightly, rocking gently. A lawman showed up, and Mary turned to deal with him. It wasn’t hard to put together what had happened, not when the waist of Josephine’s dress was marked with a dirty handprint.

When Josephine was able to open her eyes, she wished she hadn’t. Her head turned against Arthur’s firm grip and she saw it, saw the source of all that blood. Instead of a bullet hole against the man’s temple, like she’d tried to do, his head was turned towards her, and his face had been blown nearly clean off. A mighty scream ripped past her throat again and her feet scrambled against the mud, her eyes unable to leave the scene before her despite her terror. It wasn’t just terror caused by the bloody sight, but it was caused by the realization that she’d killed him and the fear of what could have happened if she hadn’t.
Arthur grabbed her cheek and forcefully turned her head away as she wailed. The sound began to come back to her and Arthur’s voice rang clear.

“Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?” It must have been the fortieth time he’d asked at that point, but he hadn’t stopped.

Josephine shook her head when she grasped what he had said, though she pressed her thighs together. Arthur felt it and his grip tightened.

“Bastard,” Arthur growled and Josephine began to tremble in his arms.

Her vision was blurry, but her head tilted down and she saw it. All of the blood. Covering the top of her dress, her hands, her arms. Her hands began to shake and she wailed again, scrubbing first at her dress, then at her face, then her hair. She was covered in it, in all that blood.

“Oh, god! Get it off—get it off!” She screamed, and Arthur grabbed her hands forcefully when she began to claw at her face and hair.

“Stop it,” Arthur said, hard and authoritative. It sounded harsh, but it grounded her. She stopped and blinked owlishly, breathing fast, too fast, through her nose. “We’ll get it off. We’ll get it off.”

With that, he hefted her up in his arms and she clung to him, face pressed tightly against his neck. She didn’t know where he was taking her, but she looked over his shoulder at Mary, who turned away from the lawman and trailed after them. People had gathered outside, looking at her in curiosity, in pity, in shock.

The sunlight disappeared as she was carried into a building and the blood on her face now felt so, so cold.

“I need a bath,” Arthur said harshly.

“S-sir, we can’t—”
“A goddamn bath!” He shouted, making both Josephine and Mary flinch.

“Y-yes sir, upstairs.”

“Mary,” Arthur turned towards Mary, and Josephine’s view of the world shifted. She looked at the clerk behind the desk and his face softened, just a touch. Josephine closed her eyes and hid her face from him. “Get her some clothes, please. I—I’ll buy you somethin’ new. We can’t, we can’t just put her back in this.”

“Of course, Arthur,” Mary said, and Arthur carried Josephine upstairs.

When the door was closed, Arthur set her down and her knees felt weak. Her body moved on autopilot as she kicked her boots off and gasped in shuddering breaths. He helped her get out of her dress and stockings and chemise, and Josephine would have been embarrassed about him seeing her nude. She didn’t want him to see her small breasts, her hips or her bottom, or the scars that ran down her back. But he didn’t say a word, didn’t look at her, just helped her into the tub until the water barely covered her chest and he began to undo her braid, now caked in mud.

With shaking limbs Josephine scrubbed herself, washing away the dirt and blood on her hands and arms. Arthur kneeled by the tub and cupped water in his hands, bringing it up to her face and hair. Josephine parted her legs and leaned forward, submerging her face in the warm water and scrubbing with her palms. When she came back up, she sucked in a deep breath and wiped her eyes, looking down at her knees in the water.

“Lean back,” Arthur said in the softest voice she’d ever heard come from him. Her eyes moved to him and she leaned back, bottom scooting against the bottom of the tub. Arthur placed a gentle hand on the back of her neck and guided her until everything but her face and her knees were submerged. He tilted her head back and her hands were drawn up, covering her chest as he began to scrub her hair with his fingers, drawing out any blood and dirt. Josephine looked up at his face; his eyes were so open and so, so sad, and the side of his face was smeared with blood. It brought tears to her own eyes once again and so she closed them, floating in a quiet world of just her and Arthur’s gentle hands in her hair.

He guided her to sit back up and her hair fell down her back and stuck there. Josephine pulled her knees close to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, now feeling so, so small. She rested her forehead on her knees and hid her face from Arthur, lips parting as she began to cry again. Tears, spittle, and snot fell into the now murky, reddish brown water as she cried and Arthur wrapped his arms around her, drawing her towards him.
“It’s okay, Jo. It’s okay.” He whispered against her wet hair. “Just breathe.”

Josephine pulled in a deep breath and released it with a sob, rocking herself gently. Arthur’s breaths grew heavier, slower; in through his nose, out through his mouth, and she realized he was teaching her how to breathe again.

Eventually, her breathing evened and her only enemy was her thoughts. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw it, saw the man’s pulpy, dead face. Felt his hot breath on his face, felt his blood spilling on her. Felt his hands on her waist and between her legs.

She pulled away from Arthur and looked down at the water again, and gazed upon her reflection when the water stilled. The blood was gone and it was herself who stared back, though her nose, lips, cheeks, and eyes were red from crying.

A soft knock and Mary’s muffled voice rang out from behind the door. “Arthur?”

“It’s Mary,” Arthur said and touched her hair gently. “Can she come in?”

Josephine nodded, and Arthur got up to let her in. Josephine’s eyes tilted up towards her when she walked in, a set of folded clothes in her hands.

“I can take it from here, Arthur. You go clean up.” Mary said, and Arthur obliged immediately. Josephine wanted to protest, but she couldn’t find her voice.

When Arthur was gone and the door was shut, Mary set the clothes down and stood by the tub with a towel. Josephine stood up, aware of Mary’s eyes on her body, possibly checking for blood between her legs, just in case she hadn’t been honest with Arthur. The water splashed loudly in her ears and she stepped out onto the wooden floor, the towel being drawn around her moments later.

Mary was gentle with her as she dried her body off, before moving onto her hair. Her scalp hurt where her braid had been yanked and she hissed softly. Mary immediately stopped, understanding her pain and went slower, impossibly all the more gentle.

“I brought you some of my clothes,” Mary said, to which Josephine didn’t respond. The towel was set carelessly on the back of the chair and Josephine stood nude before her. Mary helped her pull on a chemise and then a dress, which immediately felt suffocating. The high neckline and long sleeves
made her feel trapped in the frumpy gown. It wasn’t meant for work, like Josephine’s own clothing, with its modest necklines and short sleeves. It was a high society woman’s outfit. She wanted to ask Mary if she’d cleaned up as nicely as she pictured, but that would have been too rude of her.

Mary helped her with her stockings and boots, then used a comb to gently brush through her hair and lay it flat along her back. The dampness of it soaked through the dress quickly, but she didn’t mention it.

“Let’s go,” Mary said. Josephine looked around for her satchel and gun belt but found they were missing. Arthur must have taken them with him.

Mary led Josephine downstairs with a gentle hand on her back. Arthur had pulled the wagon full of provisions in front of the hotel, and the people from earlier had dispersed. When he saw them emerge, he got down off of the wagon and walked around it, holding his hand out for Josephine. He helped her up onto the wagon with a steadying hand on the back, and Josephine found her gunbelt and satchel resting on the seat. Her cattleman was gone, but she couldn’t say for a second that’d she’d miss it.

A glance downwards and she saw Arthur and Mary share a soft kiss, their bodies close as they said goodbye. Quiet words were shared between them, too soft for Josephine to hear, and she looked away quickly. A few tears slid down her cheeks and she wiped them away when the wagon jostled and Arthur climbed on. He looked at her, a look of pity and sadness that made Josephine feel ill.

“She is okay, Josephine?” Arthur rarely used her full name when speaking to her, and it made her sag and look down at her hands.

“I will be.”

She would be.

They arrived back at the camp near dusk. The wounds reopened when she saw Dutch and she ran to him, open-armed and crying. He didn’t ask what happened; he already knew. The look in her eyes, it was different. Her eyes had seen the first death dealt with her own hand. And Dutch cried for her.

That night, when the camp was quiet and the fire had dimmed, Josephine laid awake in Arthur’s cot. He let her sleep in it sometimes, while he slept on a bedroll next to it. She laid on her side, staring at the shadows of the trees around them cast by the moon on the tent. Arthur wasn’t asleep either; she
knew because his breathing wasn’t slow and even, and he’d shift and sigh heavily from time to time.

Eyes narrowing at the tent canvas, Josephine threw back the quilt and sat up. Arthur startled from his spot on the floor, and Josephine could feel his eyes on her as she got up and walked out.

“What are you doing?” He asked in a whisper, and Josephine ignored him as she found the mending supplies and pulled the scissors out. The steel tool glinted in the moonlight as she took it to her hair, and it was a sight that Arthur would dream about for years.

Josephine’s hair wasn’t beautiful, not anymore. The dark strands were nothing more than handles that could be used to subdue her, to hold her down. Arthur stood from the tent and watched as she yanked and snipped, long, slightly curly tufts falling and settling around her feet.

When she was done, the scissors dropped to the ground alongside it, and she ran her fingers through it. It was soft, blunt, and so, so light. The uneven strands fell just below her chin, and they already curled up at the ends.

It felt good.

And she began to weep for the innocence she lost.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On her sixteenth birthday only a few months later, Arthur came riding into camp leading a horse. Her eyes drifted up from the gun she was cleaning and the grin Arthur was sporting made her stand.

“Happy birthday, killer.” The nickname Arthur had been calling her since she was twelve meant something different now, but not to Josephine.

He approached her with the horses and Josephine walked to the stallion without fear. He was beautiful; a buckskin, with his golden tan coat and dark mane and tail. The horse snorted moodily, his tail whipping around and snapping in the air. Josephine lifted her hand to his head and laid her palm against his forehead, shushing him gently.

“I’ve been breakin’ him for you. He’s still a little wild and a little nasty, but he listens as long as you tell him what to do.”

“Oh, Arthur. This is…” She shook her head and tucked some hair behind her ear. Annabelle hadn’t quite learned how to style her hair away from her face now that it was significantly shorter.

“Hop on and take a ride with me. The saddle ain’t the best, but,” Arthur shrugged one shoulder as Josephine climbed into the saddle and settled. The stallion snorted and Arthur tossed her the reigns.

“Thank you, Arthur.” Josephine smiled, and it was the first time Arthur had seen her so genuinely happy since the day she’d met Mary. “He’s beautiful. How old is he?”

“My guess is around five or so.”

The stallion tossed his head when Josephine gripped the reigns and she loosened up a little.

“Oh, hush. It isn’t that bad.” She told the horse. She kicked him into motion and rode him in a few circles, getting the feel for his temperament.

“C’mon, let’s take him for a ride,” Arthur said, turning Boadicea and heading out of camp.

Josephine led the stallion after Arthur, and once the trees thinned out, she kicked her horse into a gallop and shot past him. He let out a laugh, shouted for Boadicea to run, and then they were racing over the plains, shouting and laughing under the sun.

Boadicea was fast, but Josephine’s stallion was faster. The wind that lashed through her felt amazing, it felt freeing. She rode him hard until they reached a stream and she slowed him down to a walk. He breathed heavily beneath her, and even Josephine was panting slightly. She turned her head to look back at Arthur as Boadicea slowed to walk and she fell in pace with Josephine.

“He rides like a dream.” She grinned and Arthur grinned back.

“He’s damn fast too. He’ll get you where you need to go, I reckon.” Arthur climbed off of Boadicea and lead her to the stream to drink.

“Let’s stop here for a while, I got a few more gifts for you.”

“What—Arthur! You didn’t have to get me anything! I’ve already gotten stuff from Annabelle and
“Hush,” Arthur shook his head and held his hand out for her. Josephine took the offered and dismounted, her stallion settling himself next to Boadicea to drink.

Josephine followed Arthur and sat down in the grass when he did. He reached into his satchel and pulled out an orange, tossing it towards Josephine. Her eyes widened slightly and she caught it, eyes flicking up to Arthur as he pulled out one for himself.

It wasn’t until they both had torn into the oranges and began eating did he pull out two presents, one was a box tied with a ribbon and a bow and the smaller one was wrapped in delicate fabric. She sucked her thumb into her mouth and licked the juice from her skin, before wiping her hand off on her skirts and taking the larger of the two gifts.

She looked up at Arthur uncertainly, then ripped the newspaper and lifted the lid off of the box. Inside lay a brand new shiny Schofield revolver.

“I can’t accept this,” she said immediately, sticking her arms out straight and holding the box toward Arthur. “Arthur, this must have cost you—”

“You can accept it, and you will. You need a gun of your own, one that ain’t any of our hand-me-downs. It don’t matter how much it cost.”

Josephine looked up at him, then brought the box to settle in her lap and carefully picked the gun up. It settled in her hand like a dream, much more comfortable than the old cattleman she’d lost. She straightened her arm and pointed it away from Arthur and the horses, testing the feel and the aim. It was perfect, and she voiced that opinion, too.

“I knew you’d like it. It packs a bigger punch than the cattleman. I brought some ammo for it. We can practice shooting later.” Josephine nodded her head and lowered the gun, holding it in her lap. “Open the other one.”

Josephine did as he asked and took the smaller box in her hands. She tugged at the fabric that wrapped around the box until it came free, and she lifted the lid.

“Mary, she helped me pick it out.” Inside the box sat a metal hairpin and a ribbon. The pin had three tongs and she knew it would sit snugly in her hair. The oval portion of it was decorated with pieces of blue and pink glass and gems and formed the shape of a horse head. It was absolutely gorgeous.

“Arthur…” She breathed, lifting her gaze up to him. “It’s, it’s beautiful.”

Arthur smiled bashfully and rubbed the back of his neck. “I heard Miss Annabelle complainin’ about your hair gettin’ in your eyes. It prolly ain’t the best for ridin’, it might fall out. But it’s—”

“I love it, Arthur. I love all of it. Thank you.” Josephine crawled over and hugged him, closing her eyes softly. “It means so much to me.” She mumbled against his shoulder.

“You’re welcome, Jo.” He murmured and hugged her back.

They pulled apart and Josephine sat back, reaching up as she began to gather the hair that fell at the sides of her face and pulled it back. Using the ribbon, she tied it off, then used the pin to secure it to the back of her head. A few quick shakes of her head told her that it was snug and went back to eating her orange.

“I’m gonna marry her,” Arthur said after a while, and Josephine felt her heart stutter to a stop. “Mary.
I asked her to marry me.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I did. She said yes.”

Not even a month later, Mary Gillis broke off her engagement to Arthur. Arthur had been gone for three days, something that worried Josephine more than anyone else. Dutch told her not to worry, for he was in love and very likely in the throwes of passion with her before they wed.

It wasn’t until the fifth night of his absence that Arthur rode in on Boadicea. Well, riding was a generous word. His body was laying nearly flat against her, one arm gripping the saddle horn and the other clung to a bottle of some kind of alcohol.

He slid off of the mare with a thump, staggering a bit before raising his bottle to his lips. Josephine had been settling in for sleep when she heard the commotion of buckets rattling and things being walked into. Arthur laughed loudly and pretty soon the whole camp was coming to life again. Josephine wrapped her quilt around her shoulders and walked out, staring at the sorry sight of Arthur Morgan as he threw his now empty alcohol bottle and plopped himself solidly in the grass.

“Mary Gillis’ daddy don’t like me!” Arthur laughed, his voice slurred and squeaky as a wagon wheel. He mumbled something incoherently and Dutch walked over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“What’s this about, son?” He asked, but Arthur shrugged his hand away and tried to roll away from the man.

“Mary Gillis’, Daddy. Don’t. Like. Me.” He punctuated the sentence with hard nods of his head. “And now, Mary Gillis won’t have me. Don’t want no roughneck outlaw who won’t change. Don’t want me, don’t want my name, don’t want…”

Arthur continued on until his voice trembled and he began to cry. Josephine had never seen him cry before. She’d never even seen him so upset, or this drunk either. Damn that Mary Gillis. Damn her straight to hell.

“Come on, son. Let’s get you to bed.” Dutch said, and to Josephine’s horror, Arthur let out a shout and pushed at Dutch’s chest. He screamed again, and Josephine felt tears in her eyes.

“Why ain’t I enough?!” He shouted and slammed his fist down hard into the packed dirt. He sounded so hurt it made Josephine’s chest seize up. She walked over to Arthur and carefully sat down in the dirt beside him.

“Jo-Jo,” Arthur whimpered and leaned into her when she opened her arms. She drew the quilt around him and he rested his head on her chest, clinging to her like a child. He mumbled incoherent things to himself, but Josephine heard the drop of Mary’s name more than a few times. Eventually, Arthur’s body sagged as he lost consciousness, arms falling from around her and his face dragging down her chest to press uncomfortably beneath her ribs.

Dutch didn’t say anything as he hefted Arthur up and carried him to his tent. Josephine sat in the
grass for a while, until Annabelle walked up and ushered her back to her tent. Josephine settled in her cot and Annabelle sat with her, rubbing her hair as they both thought back on what had just happened.

“Damn that Mary Gillis,” Josephine said after a while, the name feeling rancid on her tongue.

“Josephine—”

“Goddamn her!” Josephine hissed, hot angry tears stinging her eyes. “How could she do that? How could she do that to Arthur!”

At that moment, Annabelle seemed to understand something unspoken and pulled Josephine to her, smoothing a hand down her hair and holding her tightly.

“I don’t know, Josephine. But you’re right. Goddamn her.”

When Arthur woke up the next morning, he felt like horseshit, through and through. The past four days had been a blur of drinking and fighting. How he made it back to camp, he couldn’t remember. But the one thing he knew for sure, was that Mary had ended the engagement and relationship. Her father, the bastard, hated Arthur the moment he set eyes on him. But Arthur loved Mary, loved her more than anything in the whole world, and he was willing to put up with the nasty man for Mary. But then Mary started talking about the gang, about Arthur leaving, about shaping him up and cleaning him up for her father’s approval. She started talking about the house they’d live in and the babies they’d raise, and Arthur panicked. No, he remembered saying. No, I’m loyal to Dutch, I can’t leave them like that. And then there was shouting and arguing before Mary spat that she wouldn’t marry him and that she never wanted to see him again. He showed up the next night at their home, drunker than a dog, and begged Mary to have him back, crying and shouting from the stairs outside when he’d been thrown out.

The smell of coffee and roasting meat hit Arthur’s senses and he gagged. He shot out of his cot and stumbled towards the trees, vomiting up whatever had managed to survive his cesspool of a stomach throughout the night. He coughed and wiped his mouth off with the sleeve of his shirt, leaning up against a tree as he tried to gather himself.

A deep ache had settled behind his eyes and he closed them. Everything was so loud, the trees, the birds, the sound of that goddamn frying pan by the fire. When he opened his eyes again, he squinted and made his way over to the firepit and stumbled around, finding the percolator and pouring himself a cup.

The frying meat attacked his senses, but he lifted the coffee to his lips and drank some, trying his best to ignore it.

Only Josephine sat at the fire with him, pushing around the meat with a look that could kill if the meat she was tending to wasn’t already dead. He didn’t have to ask why she looked so mad. He didn’t remember, but he’d probably let everyone at camp know loudly that his relationship with Mary had ended.

Oh, that Josephine. She followed him around like a puppy ever since they’d picked her up when he was fifteen. He knew she fancied him, it was something that Mary had brought up once or twice.
Not in jealousy, but merely an observation. He noticed too, in the ways that Josephine acted around him and how fiercely protective she was of him, even though Arthur could get on just fine. He understood meaningless crushes on other people, especially at the age of sixteen. Hell, he was sweet on Miss Grimshaw when he was sixteen, a fact that Dutch had teased him about mercilessly until Arthur was red in the face and fuming.

As Josephine pushed around the meat with a look that could kill, Arthur was taken back to their first hunting trip when she’d broken the rabbit's neck and cried. It was a similar scene, now and years ago, and Arthur gazed upon her face with interest.

Her cheeks were no longer too chubby, and her lips no longer too full. The freckles that dotted her face had come back full force from all the sun, and her hair hung wavy and tangled from sleep at the sides of her face. No longer was she a plain looking girl, but an almost striking woman. Arthur had been so wrapped up with Mary that he hadn’t even noticed.

“Why are you starin’ at me?” She asked suddenly, her eyes turning to meet Arthur’s. He blinked, then shook his head.

“You were just lookin’ at the pan like you wanted to kill the meat again. What’s got you so angry?”

“Mary,” she spat, and the venom that seeped through her voice startled Arthur.

She took the pan off of the fire and set it on the ground with a clatter. She stood up abruptly and stepped back.

“Miss Grimshaw wants you to eat that.” She said, then she was turning on her barefoot and stalking away from the camp, out towards the bank of the river.

Arthur watched her for a moment, then grabbed the pan and picked at the meat. The camp was silent save for him, and he put it together that Dutch likely took Miss Annabelle and Miss Grimshaw to town while he looked for a lead.

Arthur only got a portion of the meat down before his stomach bubbled in protest. He finished the rest of his coffee and sat for a moment before he got to his feet and made his way over to where Josephine headed.

He found her leaned up against a tree, legs stretched out straight in the grass. Her horse, Duke as she’d named him, had abandoned the other horses and stood by her, head tipped down as she petted him. He was nasty to everyone, stamping, snorting, and biting when anyone but Josephine tried to feed or brush him. God forbid if anyone tried to tack him up. It’d only been about a month since Arthur gifted him to her, but she tamed him well and Duke took to her quickly.

Duke looked up and snorted when Arthur approached. Josephine shushed him and looked at Arthur. Her expression was open for a moment before she looked away.

“Did you eat?” She asked as Arthur sat down against a tree near her.

“A little,” he responded and Josephine left it at that.

Duke shifted, and then with a thunk, he laid down in the grass by Josephine. Arthur watched as she moved closer and untangled knots in his mane and patted his neck. He watched them for a while in silence, then looked away and out to the river.

“I’m a fool for thinkin’ it could work.” He said, mostly to himself. But it was loud enough and he heard Josephine’s clothes ruffle as she turned to look at him. She started to speak, but Arthur went
on. “What even was I thinkin’? That she’d join us, become an outlaw? Or that’d I’d live with her and her daddy and become one of the rich folk? I don’t—” he shook his head. “We don’t mix, people like her, and people like me. She was… She’s too good. She’s—”

“She don’t deserve you,” Josephine said firmly, and when Arthur looked at her, her eyes were fierce with anger. “She ain’t too good. Any person who does somethin’ like that ain’t good.”

“Does’ what?” He asked, shaking his head with an unamused smile. “She wanted me to change, and I said no. I was too rough for her, too bad. It’s my fault, it ain’t—”

“You ain’t bad, Arthur,” Josephine said and Arthur scoffed. “You’re a good person, under everything. I ain’t ever known someone like you. She’s the fool. She’s the fool for lettin’ you go.”

Arthur heard the pain in her voice and he looked up. She had tears in her eyes and she looked away. “Jo,” he started to say but was cut off when he heard fast, hard hoofbeats and the shout of his name.

He stood and ran into camp, followed closely by Josephine. When he saw Dutch, he saw Annabelle first, settled in the saddle in front of him. And she was covered in blood, skin sickly white and head lolling around. Josephine wailed behind him.

“Annabelle’s been shot!” Dutch shouted, stopping The Count and dismounting. He pulled Annabelle down and she sagged against him, barely clinging to consciousness.

“Arthur! Get me water! Josephine, get me cloth and bandages! Go, now!” Miss Grimshaw shouted when she rode in shortly after.

Arthur scrambled to do as she said, returning to Dutch’s tent with a bucket of fresh water and a bottle of whiskey. Annabelle was laying on the cot, Dutch at her side holding her wound and Miss Grimshaw at the other, trying to wake her up.

When Josephine came in with Miss Grimshaw’s supplies, she ushered Dutch and Arthur out.

“What the hell happened?” Arthur demanded when the tent flaps closed. Dutch was wide-eyed and panting hard.

“Colm,” Dutch said, his voice hard and low. “Colm shot her.”

That night, Arthur sat with Josephine by the trees again. He had his arm around her as she shook.

Annabelle’s death rang out in the form of Dutch’s pained shouting, begging, and calling.

Josephine covered her face and leaned into him as she began to weep. Arthur turned his head and pressed it against her hair as he, too, began to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this made me really sad to write. But I hope everyone is enjoying it so far!
Chapter 5

No one was quite the same after Annabelle’s death. She had been an ever there, ever gentle presence in the camp. She was as fierce as she was kind, and everyone had grown to love her deeply. Though, no one loved her quite as deeply as Dutch. He was harder after that, quicker to anger. Josephine knew he’d lost the love of his life, and she also knew that Colm O’Driscoll would pay for what he had done to their dear Annabelle.

They buried her under the large oak tree that looked out over the river they were camped by. Josephine and Arthur carved her name into the cross they stuck in the ground and Josephine cried for days after. Even after they moved camp and began to head west again, Josephine would cover herself in her bedroll and cry at night, longing for the woman to come strolling back into their makeshift camps.

It used to annoy Josephine endlessly when Annabelle would insist on combing her hair, and when she called her pretty and talked to her about boys and relationships. Now that Annabelle was gone, Josephine missed the woman’s warm presence so much it hurt.

While Dutch had lost the love of his life, Josephine had lost what she could almost call a mother.

It changed her. It changed her in a much different way than her first kill changed her. She started to see just how bad, bad men could be. It put everything into perspective for her; no one was ever really safe and tucked away from those bad men.

Josephine began to see the world for what it really was, and that, in turn, made her follow and listen to Dutch even more than she had before. She was seventeen when Dutch finally allowed her to rob a coach, and she knew Annabelle was the reason she hadn’t gone on any before. Dutch had told her one night, when it was just still him and Josephine awake, that Annabelle loved her like a daughter and never wanted to see her shot at or hurt.

The banking coach would be armed and protected, Dutch told her and Arthur before they left camp. It would be relatively simple and easy enough for just the two of them to handle on their own. Dutch had caught wind that it carried at least three grand in cash and a hefty handful of bonds. It’d get them all the way West, and even further still.

“Remember the plan?” Arthur asked as they sat atop their horses, overlooking the area where the coach was said to be coming through.

“Damsel in distress, my horse threw me and I’ve,” she got weepy and covered her face. “I think I’ve broken my leg.”

“Good,” Arthur nodded and took her rifle from her when she took it off her back. “If things go accordin’ to plan, I’ll keep ‘em held up, and you break the lock in back and get the money. If things start goin’ south, you keep your head down and I’ll take care of it.”

Josephine scowled at that but before she could argue, Arthur waved his hand at her. “I don’t wanna hear it. Head down there now and get into position.”

It was an order, and Josephine couldn’t do anything but follow. She wouldn’t hear the end of it if Arthur decided to tell Dutch. She climbed down off of Duke and patted his side.
“Stay here, boy.” She said, then adjusted her bandana around her neck to easier pull it up later.

With that, she headed down the slope, rocks sliding beneath her feet. As she neared the bottom, her ankle twisted under her painfully and she fell, rolling the rest of the way. When she reached the end, her palms and arms were scraped and her dress was dirty and rumpled. Well, at least she looked the part now.

She wobbled over to a spot and settled, arranging her dress and ruffling her hair. A sharp whistle sounded above her, and she knew it was Arthur. The carriage was coming. She leaned forward and began to cry, covering her face as she wailed in pain.

Soon enough, the telltale sound of hoofbeats and wagon wheels hit her ears and her heart thumped in her chest, both from anticipation and excitement.

“Whoa,” the driver called, slowing the horses down near her. Josephine clutched her leg and let out a weak cry of pain. “Miss, are you alright?”

“O-oh, please,” Josephine said, her voice wobbly and demure. “My horse bucked me, a, a stupid snake scared him. And I,” she covered her face and shook her head. “Oh mister, I think my leg is broken. I fell on it wrong and I can’t,” her voice got weepier and she sucked in a shaky breath. “I don’t think I can walk. Oh, I’m so scared, please, I—”

“Don’t worry miss…” He trailed off, and Josephine sniffled.

“Jessabelle,” she filled in for him. She could hear him calling off his men, who more than likely had their guns cocked at her. The wagon creaked as he stepped off and approached her.

“Miss Jessabelle. We’ll give you a ride to the next town and let a doctor take a look at your leg. Here, let me help you up.” She saw his hand in her vision, and she took it. Keeping her head down, she lifted the bandana over her nose, then hauled herself up with his help. She grabbed her revolver and released his hand, pointing it at the man in front of her.

“Thank you, mister. But you see, I’m gonna need some money to pay for those bills.” The guns were on her again, and she cocked back the hammer and looked at him. “Ah-ah, call off those guns. Ain’t no one gotta get hurt here.”

She could see the sheen of sweat that had gathered on the driver’s forehead and she cocked her head when he didn’t move.

“You heard what the lady said,” Arthur’s voice rang out behind her. “Drop the guns. We’ll get what we need and be on our merry way.”

The man waved his hand when he saw yet another gun trained on him and the guards around him lowered their own. The man was trembling lightly, and Josephine had to wonder why they hired such a delicate bastard to drive a banking coach.

“Please, Miss Jessabelle, don’t do this. You’re just a young lady, this ain’t no life for you. You can —”

“Oh, can it,” Josephine grumbled and pushed him back with her gun. “Against the wagon with your hands up, all of you.” When they didn’t move, Josephine shouted, “I said hands up against the wagon! Now!”

Arthur fired a warning shot behind them, and the men were all too ready to comply.
“You go to the back and get the cash, Jessabelle,” Arthur said, and Josephine could practically hear the amused smirk in his voice. Josephine stepped back from the men against the wagon, keeping her gun trained on them. Arthur tossed her the bag to collect the money in and she kept her gun pointed until she was behind the wagon. “Now, no goddamn funny business and no one dies.”

Josephine listened to Arthur spew threats at the men as she picked the lock and opened the door. The man Dutch heard was wrong, but not because there wasn’t any money. There was plenty. Thousands, maybe. So much more than expected. She picked up and a large wad of bills and whistled.

“Holy shit…” She paused, realizing Arthur hadn’t given her a fake name to call him by. She wracked her brain until it came to her. “Holy shit, Tacitus. There are thousands back here, at least.”

“Hurry up, let’s get our asses out of here,” Arthur said and Josephine did as she was told.

Her lips spread into a grin as she began to load up the sack with money and bonds until there was nothing left to grab. As she was tying up the bag and about to exit, a gunshot rang out outside and the wagon lurched into motion. She was thrown forward into the door, her body weight slamming it shut. Josephine let out a shout as she crumpled awkwardly to the ground. More gunshots and shouting rang out, and she was thrown around in the carriage roughly as the wheels hit rocks and bumps in the road.

“What the hell is going on!” She shouted, gunshots and shouting still ringing out.

“Goddammit!” She heard Arthur shouting until the gunshots stopped and the carriage was pulled to a rough stop.

The sudden stop sent her flying backward into the carriage, her back hitting the wall hard and knocking the breath from her. She scrambled for her gun when she heard footsteps around outside and raised it towards the door. The door was yanked open and Arthur’s familiar silhouette greeted her. Josephine relaxed and wheezed, coughing as she tried to catch her breath.

“Come on, we gotta go. Law will be here soon,” he grabbed the sack she kicked at him and whistled, calling the horses to them. He secured it to the back of Boadicea as Josephine climbed out of the carriage and mounted Duke. She glanced down at the bodies laying about, then watched as Arthur cut free the horses leading the wagon and fled them with swats to their hindquarters.

“Tacitus?” Arthur asked, amused as he mounted Boadicea and they rode off, riding the horses hard until they were a safe distance away.

“Shut up, you didn’t give me a name,” Josephine huffed and slowed Duke into a trot. She rubbed her back and shoulders, which now ached painfully from her ride around the carriage.

“What kinda name even is that? You get Jessabelle, and I get Tacitus?” He was amused, and Josephine shot him a playful glare.

“It was the first name that came to mind. It’s in a book Dutch gave me that I’m reading.” She brought her fist to her mouth and coughed hard, sucking in a big shaky breath to fill her lungs.

“You alright?” He asked, now concerned.

“Yeah,” Josephine answered and pulled down her bandana. “Just got thrown around in that damn carriage.” She rolled her shoulders back and shook her head.

“You did good,” Arthur complemented.
“You did all the shootin’,” she shot back and glanced at them as they rode.

“Sure, but you got the situation under control. Had they seen me sittin’ on the side of the road callin’ for help, they woulda shot off like a bullet.”

It was because she was young and pretty, and she knew that. It’s what made her cons and scams in towns easier, even if they were just petty theft. She had a soft face, one that was easy to trust. She’d been learning to use it to her advantage. The sweet smile of a naive girl or the tears of a lost orphan made the right man soft and trusting, and all that more easy to scam and rob blind.

“Dutch is gonna be real happy,” Josephine said and looked at the sack of money with Arthur. “All that will get us all the way to California, I reckon.”

“Dutch says we’re headin’ east again, he reckon,” Josephine pressed her lips together. Even though she was tired of traveling, she wanted to see Colm dead for what he’d done to Annabelle.

At her silence, Arthur continued. “Let’s just get this money back to Dutch.”

Josephine nodded and kicked Duke into a gallop, riding him hard next to Arthur as they made their way back to the house they had made camp in.

When they got back, there was an unfamiliar horse hitched outside. They both placed their hands on their revolvers on reflex, until a familiar figure stepped out.

“Hosea!” Josephine gasped, dismounting Duke and running to him.

“My dear Josephine!” Hosea said as they hugged. He grabbed her by the shoulders and held her back, inspecting her. “Oh, you’ve grown up so much. I would have hardly recognized you,” he grinned and Josephine grinned right back. “Oh, my Bessie would be so proud to see the woman you’ve grown to be.”

“Is Bessie…” Josephine looked past him, but she didn’t see the woman’s kind face anywhere inside.

“She’s gone,” Hosea said, and Josephine pressed her lips together. She hugged Hosea and shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly and moved out of the way so Arthur could greet Hosea too. “Why are you back? I thought you were walking away?”

“Dutch called me back.”

That night, they celebrated the return of Hosea and the gain of eight thousand dollars from Arthur and Josephine’s little robbery. Dutch gave them both a five hundred dollar cut each, and it was far more money than Josephine even knew what to do with. She tuck a hundred of it in her satchel, then stashed the rest in the sewing kit Miss Grimshaw insisted she kept around even though she was still just as dreadful at sewing.

They drank, sang, and danced to the music from Dutch’s gramophone. Hosea taught Josephine how to dance while her already pink sunburned cheeks were tinged red from drunkenness off the moonshine Hosea had brought with him.

Arthur and Josephine drank the most, throwing back gulps of whiskey and moonshine. They danced together and sang loudly and obnoxiously until Miss Grimshaw pried the alcohol away from them.
Josephine was elated—there were so many things to be happy about that she didn’t even care.

She and Arthur collapsed in drunken heaps onto their separate bedrolls as everyone else disappeared for the night to sleep. Arthur passed out and was snoring loudly, but Josephine followed after him shortly after.

The next morning, they packed up their things—Arthur and Josephine a little worse for wear than anyone else—and headed East, in search of a place to settle in and plot their next move against Colm O’Driscoll.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is definitely more of a filler, but I realized I hadn't written any outlaw stuff for Josephine yet. Not my favorite chapter of the ones I've written so far, but oh well.

Thanks to everyone who's been reading, commenting, leaving kudos and bookmarking the fic! It's really encouraging to me and there is definitely plenty more to come!
Chapter Notes

Happy Easter everyone! I didn't plan on posting today, but here we are. I hope everyone enjoys this chapter because I really enjoyed writing it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Josephine,” she heard her name and she looked up from the bills she’d been counting.

She, Dutch and Arthur had just finished another robbery, and she was counting out her cut. She was eighteen now, and could officially consider herself a somewhat seasoned outlaw. Her eyes flicked up to Arthur, and his face was stoic but he looked worried about something.

“Yes, what is it?” She asked and sat up straighter, tipping her hat back as she looked up at him.

“I need your help with somethin’.” The tone of his voice was strained, almost. She set the bills down and stood. He’d disappeared for nearly two weeks about a month ago, and left for a few more days every week or so.

“You in trouble?” His absence reminded Josephine of Mary, and it made her heart clench.

“No, no.” He shook his head and backed off a little, clearing his throat. “Just… Just need help with somethin’, is all. Will you come?”

“Of course,” Josephine responded immediately. “Where we goin’?”

“North a ways,” he stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and kicked the ground. “Prepare yourself to be gone for a few days.”

With that, he turned and went inside of the cabin they’d been camping at for a few weeks. Probably to let Dutch know they’d be gone.
Josephine tucked the money they’d made in the collection box, then headed for her tent. She packed a few days worth of clothes and provisions for herself and Duke. She grabbed some ammo as well, then packed her things into Duke’s saddlebags and got him tacked up. Arthur was quiet as he walked to Boadicea, and by the looks of it, his saddlebags were already packed for the journey. They mounted up and rode out, and it wasn’t until they were a few miles away from camp that Josephine finally spoke.

“What’s going on, Arthur?” She asked, kicking Duke to trot alongside Arthur and Boadicea.

“I uh… I got a girl into some real trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“She had a baby,” he cleared his throat and Josephine noticed he wouldn’t look at her. “My-my baby. My son. And she… she needs help fixin’ up the house I helped her buy. She ain’t like us, she knows what we do, but she ain’t like us. She don’t… Well, I don’t… I told her I’d help in any way I can, but I don’t wanna drag her and the boy, Isaac’s his name, into our world. I don’t want Dutch findin’ out about her. You’re the only person I really trust to bring with me.”

A soft pang of hurt rolled through her gut, but it was outshined by the warm swell of happiness. Arthur had a baby, a boy. What was more striking to her though, was that Arthur wasn’t abandoning them, as many fathers did with bastard children. There truly was nobody like Arthur, not to Josephine.

“I’ll help,” she nodded, looking forward when Arthur looked at her. “I’ll help in any way I can.”

“Thank you, Jo.” He cleared his throat and she saw him look away again. “We’ll be there for a few days. I ‘spose we’ll put up a fence and fix anythin’ that needs fixin’. We can go for a hunt too, get them some food to eat.”

“What’s her name?” Josephine asked and adjusted the hat on her head to better block the sun from her cheeks.

“Eliza.”
They arrived at the modest house just outside of a sleepy cattle town at dusk. There were flowers and a small garden bed outside, and drying laundry hanging up on a line. There was light inside of the home, and a shadow standing by the door when Arthur and Josephine rode up.

The front door opened up and she stepped out. “Arthur?”

“It’s me,” he greeted and dismounted. Josephine did the same and tied Duke up next to Boadicea.

Arthur stepped up onto the porch and embraced the woman, and Josephine kept herself modestly back, waiting patiently. The woman, Eliza, looked at Josephine from over Arthur’s shoulder.

“Whose this?” She asked, and Josephine smiled politely.

“I’m Josephine. I’m, ah, I’m one of Arthur’s friends.” Josephine stepped up onto the porch and held out her hand. Eliza took it, and Josephine noticed her hands weren’t soft, instead calloused from work.

Recognition flashed through her eyes and she pulled Josephine into a gentle hug. “Arthur’s spoken of you a few times. I’m glad to finally meet you.”

Eliza was beautiful, in a different way from Mary. Her cheeks were red from a sunburn, and her dirty blonde hair was tied back for convenience rather than beauty. The buttoned shirt she wore was slightly dirty and the top few buttons were undone, though Josephine figured it gave easier access for her to give her child her breast. She looked young, and Josephine realized she couldn’t be much older than herself.

A sharp, shrill cry of a child rang from the house, and immediately Eliza was releasing Josephine and walking inside. Arthur followed after her, and Josephine soon after him.

“How’s his cough?” Arthur asked as Eliza picked up a small bundle from the crib by her bed.
“The medicine you got him worked well, it’s gone.” She rocked the bundle gently in her arms, and Josephine watched with a small smile as Arthur reached for the babe.

It was odd to see such a big man hold something so small and fragile. He tucked the bundle in the crook of his arm and cradled him, cooing to him softly. Eliza looked to Josephine, then gestured for her to come closer. The baby quieted down once he was in his father’s arms, and Josephine walked up to them.

“He’s name is Isaac,” Eliza said and put her hand tenderly on the small of Josephine’s back. The baby cooed and Josephine saw his little hands reach up and grab at the air.

“Would you like to hold him?” Arthur asked, making Josephine’s eyes widen slightly. She’d never really been around an infant, let alone held one.

“I’m not—I don’t,” she started, but Arthur was already walking closer and holding the baby out towards her chest.

“Support his head with your hand,” Eliza instructed as Josephine took the baby and he settled in her arms. She supported his head with her hand, as Eliza said, and cradled him to her chest.

When Josephine looked down at him, she knew immediately that Arthur was the father. The big, blue-green eyes that stared up at her were a dead giveaway. Little Isaac also had Arthur’s nose, and a few tufts of sandy blond hair poked out from under the blanket he was wrapped in.

“Hi there, Isaac,” Josephine smiled. She could feel Arthur and Eliza’s eyes on her and she looked up. Isaac cooed at her and reached up, trying to grab at her hair.

“I’ve never really… Seen or held a baby.” Josephine admitted and Eliza smiled.

“I’m sure you’ll have one of your own, one day.” She said, and that made Josephine flush red and look down at Isaac.

“No, no I don’t think so.” Josephine couldn’t even begin to picture herself as a mother. Not with the life she lived. Even then, the only people who’d showed interest in her were stuck up rich boys and the putrid men who only wanted to rip off her dress and have their way with her.
Isaac squirmed in her arms and gurgled. His little hands fisted around in her shirt and he turned his head, pressing his face against the small swell of her breast beneath her clothes.

“Oh, he must be hungry.” Eliza plucked the baby out of Josephine’s arms with the grace and ease of a mother and Josephine stood back, smoothing her hands down the front of her dress. “Are you two hungry? There’s some rabbit stew on the stove if you’d like some.”

Eliza sat down on the rocking chair by the crib and laid a blanket modestly over her chest. She peeked beneath it and unbuttoned her shirt, then Josephine heard the soft suckling sounds coming from Isaac as he was fed. Eliza held Isaac to her chest and Josephine turned to help herself to the stew after Arthur.

As Josephine settled down with her stew, she watched Eliza button her shirt when Isaac was finished and pull the blanket off of herself. She situated him on her chest and shoulder and patted his back gently. His little toes peeked out from under his long clothes and Josephine couldn’t help but smile.

“He’s beautiful, Eliza,” Josephine commented and ate a spoonful.

“He is,” she said and looked to Arthur, who was looking back at her with a soft expression. “He’s a sweet boy.”

That night, Arthur set up a cot for Josephine and he slept on a bedroll on the floor near Eliza’s bed. Arthur loved Eliza, but not in the way that he’d loved Mary. He loved his son, that was clear as day. Josephine knew he loved his son more than anything. And she knew that he cared for Eliza, too. She knew he wanted to see them live and thrive.

In the span of four days, Josephine helped Arthur set up a fence around the property, fix any leaks on the roof of the home, and replace an old window that had cracked and refused to open. She’d sat and played with Isaac when Eliza and Arthur took a trip to town, and she even got to help bathe the babe. Eliza began to refer to Josephine as ‘Auntie Jo’ when speaking to Isaac about her, and warmth swelled in Josephine’s heart.

It was then, it that little trip to visit Eliza and her son, that Josephine realized she loved Arthur.

She loved him deeply and truly, and it pained her to think about it. Love didn’t work out in lives such as hers and Arthur’s. She’d seen it with Bessie and Hosea, and Dutch and Annabelle, and even
Arthur and Mary. It was a nasty thing that dulled the senses and shifted loyalties.

But watching Arthur, here, in a lovely little house with his son, it was hard not to love him. The real kindness that made up his character shone through as he played with, cooed at, and cradled his son to his chest. All of the murders, the robberies, the heists; they all melted away to show, truly, what Arthur was under all of that.

On the last day of their visit, Josephine sat on the top step of the porch, her back leaning against the support post with little Isaac laid flat on her lap. He had one of her fingers clenched tightly in his fists and Josephine was gently wiggling it, smiling as the baby watched wide-eyed and curious. Her other hand laid flat on Isaac’s belly and chest, keeping him anchored so he wouldn’t roll off.

Eliza stood in the yard, taking down the dry laundry and collecting it in a woven basket. Arthur was out chopping wood, and Josephine felt her eyes straying to him occasionally. He looked good, his shirt unbuttoned and his sleeves rolled up. He wiped away some sweat on his forehead and Josephine continued staring, her expression open and longing.

“You should tell him how you feel, Josephine.” Eliza piped up, stepping up onto the porch and taking a seat at the end of Josephine’s outstretched feet. She must have seen the look in Josephine’s eye.

Immediately Josephine averted her eyes and looked down at Isaac. His lips curled into a toothless smile and Josephine wiggled her finger. “I can’t. He’s… you’re…”

“He’s not mine, and I’m not his,” Eliza said and patted her knee. “I love him, but I don’t want to be part of the life he’s chosen for himself. I love my son, more than anything in this world, and I appreciate all that Arthur is doing for us, but he’s not mine. Not by a long shot.”

“He’ll never see me the way I want him to see me,” Josephine said softly, glancing up at Arthur to make sure he wasn’t coming over. Her insecurities were coming to the surface. Maybe it was because of Annabelle’s absence, or Eliza’s comforting youth. “He’s always just… He’s always seen me as a little sister, and nothin’ more. I can’t tell him I fancy him.”

“The time will come when his eyes find you, and he sees something else. You’re beautiful, Josephine.” Eliza shifted and pushed some of Josephine’s hair back behind her ear. “You are, and you’re kind. You and Arthur, you’re unlike any outlaws I’ve ever encountered.”
Tears gathered in Josephine’s eyes and she turned her head, tucking it against Eliza’s shoulder. The woman smoothed a hand over her hair and shushed her.

“It’ll all work out, darling. It will. You’ll see,” she kissed the top of her head and released her.

Josephine gently pulled her finger from Isaac’s grasp and wiped her eyes, sniffing softly. A pain had settled in her chest and she took a deep breath, looking back down at the baby in her lap.

“You just have the best mama and papa in the world, don’t you?” Josephine whispered and touched her fingers tenderly to Isaac’s hair. His eyes grew heavy as she rubbed his head and ran a finger between his eyes. It was something she vaguely remembered her mother doing to her, and how sleepy it made her.

Isaac yawned, then drew his hand up and stuck his thumb into his mouth. He drifted off to sleep in moments and Josephine smiled.

“You better take him inside, he’s gotten sleepy.”

Eliza took Isaac from at her and placed a soft kiss against her hair. “Think about what I said, Josephine.”

And she did; she thought about it a lot, until her attention was taken off of Arthur, and settled on a new man she’d met by chance.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand along comes Eliza and Isaac. I love these two so much, and I had a really fun time writing dad! Arthur. His relationship is really complex with Eliza and I’m not really sure if he loved her romantically or if he just cared about her deeply and wanted to make sure she and Isaac were safe. I’m interpreting it more as the latter.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

A little bit of a heavier chapter incoming, Josephine has sex with a boy for the first time and it doesn't end well. I didn't go into detail, but if it squicks you, then I suggest skipping the writing after the break in the story.

On another note, Arthur Morgan is an ass man, and no one can convince me otherwise.

Arthur hated Henri Marchand. He had gone months without knowing about him until Josephine snuck off on a supply run and he caught her making eyes and kissing him by the stable where he worked. Anger had rushed through him like a whip and he’d called for them, his mind racing back to his time with Mary and the mistakes he’d wished someone would have called him out on. He remembered how wide Josephine’s eyes got, and how deeply her cheeks flushed. Henri apologized in a thick French accent, and it only made Arthur’s blood boil more.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Arthur remembered demanding as they drove the wagon back to camp, which had a new member in the form of a skinny, almost feral twelve year old named John Marston.

She’d argued with him, and then landed a sharp slap to his cheek when they made it to the house and he told her Henri was only using her to get between her legs. Arthur knew what men wanted, even if he himself was terrible with women, he knew what went through their minds when they saw a pretty woman. But still, the slap stung and it silenced everyone who had been outside.

“You have to let her figure it out on her own,” Susan told him as she helped him unpack the wagon. “But if that boy hurts her,” her voice grew deeply protective. “I’ll help you string him up and take his manhood from him.”

That night, as Arthur sat in his cot with his journal on his lap, his mind was going a mile a minute, trying to figure out just why Henri and Josephine’s little fling bothered him so much, besides the obvious.

He came to the conclusion with a twist in his chest, that he was jealous. He was jealous of Henri and his closeness to Josephine, and the eyes she gave him. Of course, Arthur had known Josephine was sweet on him, even sweeter when she got older. But he had been so wrapped up in Mary, and Eliza and Isaac, that he’d missed something from right under his nose. It also didn’t help that he had known her since they were both nothing but lost children, and it made him fiercely protective of her.
He fell asleep thinking of her, his cheek still burning from the slap she’d rewarded him for his harsh words.

Josephine acted frosty towards him for two days before she finally let him back in. She’d approached him while he was chopping wood, waiting patiently for him to finish until she spoke.

“Dutch asked me to take John out and teach him how to hunt. I’m more than capable to do it on my own but I figured…” She shrugged and looked at him. Arthur became wholly aware of the sweat on his face and he wiped it hastily. “You might want to come along? John can barely speak to me on his own, so it might make him feel better if you was there too.”

Dutch had picked the poor boy up in Illinois, who’d been caught stealing and nearly hung for it. He was skinny as a twig and barely twelve years old. Ever the soft man at heart for orphaned children, Dutch brought John to them and there he stayed. He had a nasty mouth to everyone but Josephine, which was a fact Arthur found amusing. The boy would flush a bright red whenever Josephine was around and would storm off if anyone heckled him about it.

“Sure,” Arthur said and wiped his forehead again, then swung the ax down and lodged it into the stump.

“I’ll get our things together,” Josephine said then turned and walked off.

Arthur’s eyes strayed over her against his will and settled on her backside as her hips swayed while she walked away from him. She wore trousers around camp sometimes, and today was one of those days. Held up with suspenders, the pants accentuated her hips and round bottom, and the figure she’d most certainly grown into. Her chest wasn’t very big, he supposed it wouldn’t ever be beyond this point, but he’d never been partial to breasts much.

Someone cleared their throat by him, and Arthur whipped his head to Hosea, who had caught him staring. Hosea lifted an eyebrow and Arthur flushed. He scoffed and headed off to his tent, grabbing his rifle, hunting knife and coat, since the temperature had been dropping as winter approached.

He made his way over to Boadicea and checked her saddlebags. There were a few cans of corned beef and vegetables, and plenty of rope to use to secure any game they killed.
Josephine walked up to Duke and secured her rifle to her saddle, then a… bow?

“Where the hell’d you get a bow?” Arthur asked as he mounted Boadicea and patted her neck.

“Henri,” even the way she said his name ticked him off. *On-rhi.* Arthur narrowed his eyes as John settled on Duke and Josephine mounted up when she was ready. “He taught me how to use one, and gave it to me.”

Arthur wanted to say something, but he held his tongue. He figured it would make the trip easier if she wasn’t frosty with him.

“Hold onto me, John,” Josephine said when they kicked the horses into motion and John planted his hands awkwardly behind him on Duke’s back. “You’ll fall off.”

Arthur snorted in amusement at the scowl on John’s face and his red cheeks as he held onto Josephine’s waist. Arthur let out a laugh and John shot him a look that could kill.

“Why can’t I just ride with Arthur?” John grumbled, his voice squeaky and uneven.

“Because,” Josephine huffed and Arthur turned his eyes to her. “Dutch asked me to take you, and Arthur’s just here because I asked him to be. You’re my responsibility. Besides, Duke here is faster than Boadicea, so you woulda been left in the dust.”

With that, Josephine kicked Duke into a gallop and leaned forward, finding the rhythm of the gallop easily. Poor John’s eyes nearly bugged out and he grappled for Josephine, arms winding tightly around her waist as he was jostled around behind her.

“Hey!” Arthur shouted and grabbed onto his hat as he spurred Boadicea faster and trailed just behind Duke. Josephine released a sharp laugh that made Arthur’s lips curl into a smile.

They rode the horses hard for a while until the trees thickened and the trail dwindled slightly. Arthur slowed Boadicea into a walk next to Duke and looked at Josephine.

She looked… beautiful, Arthur realized with a flush. Her cheeks and nose were rosy from the cold,
and her lips were curled back in a grin. It was an easy and carefree grin, one that Mary and even
himself had sported when they were together. It was a grin only a person in love could sport, and it
made Arthur’s insides twist with jealousy.

“Guess this is a good place to leave the horses. What do you think, Arthur?” It pulled him out of his
thoughts and he blinked, now realizing Josephine was staring back at him.

“Oh, yeah, it’ll work just fine.”

With that, they dismounted and they all shrugged on their coats. Arthur grabbed his rifle and his
revolver, John took out his cattleman, which was awkwardly large and clunky in his hand, and
Josephine took out her bow and her Schofield.

“What’s so great about the bow?” Arthur asked as she strung it and a quiver of arrows over her back.

“It’s silent, and it won’t scare off any other game in the area like a gunshot will.”

Josephine had become quite the skilled hunter over the past few years. Arthur hadn’t been able to
join her much, not with Dutch taking him out for robberies and heists so frequently, and his visits to
Eliza and Isaac every few months. But she’d learned well, and surpassed Arthur’s skill level quickly.
He saw her bringing in game often and most of the money she donated and kept for herself was from
pelts she’d sold if she hadn’t been thieving that day.

They began to hike through the woods silently, scanning for life and tracks. Josephine kept her head
pointed to the ground, while Arthur walked in front of her to keep her tripping on something she
wasn’t paying attention to.

“John, look here. See these?” Arthur stopped too and looked down. She’d found a set of tracks.
“Deer tracks, pretty fresh too.”

“Looks like nothin’ to me,” John said and Arthur’s lips quirked slightly. He remembered when
Josephine grumbled about following tracks, saying she couldn’t see anything either.

“Well, it’s somethin’. Here, see… they’re going this way. Keep your eyes on them, and you lead the
way.”
“But I don’t see anything.” John hissed and Josephine rolled her eyes.

“Look again, I can assure you an animal has been through here.” John grumbled something under his breath and Arthur watched amused as Josephine raised her eyebrow. “Sorry, what was that?”

“...Never mind.”

“That’s what I thought. Now, look again. Whether or not we have somethin’ to eat tonight depends on you.” Arthur knew that was a lie, both he and Josephine would catch something if John couldn’t, but it was a tactic he himself had used on Josephine the first time they hunted together. It made John’s eyes widen and his cheeks flush, and it was enough to kick him into gear.

They trekked slowly through the forest until Josephine stopped them both and pointed at the whitetail deer standing at a stream drinking. Silently, she gestured to John and he took out his cattleman.

“Aim for the head or the heart, anywhere else and you might injure her rather than kill her. She’s not positioned right to aim for either of those, so whistle when you’re ready and be sure to shoot fast, or she’ll escape.” Josephine instructed, and Arthur watched as John went red and glanced at her.

“I can’t whistle.” He admitted, and Arthur turned his head to keep from laughing.

“That’s fine,” Josephine chuckled. “I’ll teach you later. For now, I’ll whistle, and you shoot. Got it?”

The boy nodded and Josephine waited until he was steady to whistle. Arthur watched the deer lift her head and look back at them, and the shot from John’s gun hit her squarely in the neck. A pained bleat left her and she shot off across the river, though she didn’t make it far. Josephine immediately bolted out and ran towards the doe, who now laid squirming in distress, calling out in panic and pain.

Arthur and John followed her and she dropped to her knees by the doe and used her hunting knife to stab into her heart.

“Sorry, girl.” Arthur heard Josephine whisper as the doe stopped struggling and laid limply on the ground.
John looked mortified, his eyes wide and his mouth open slightly. Josephine seemed to know what he was going to say before he said it and shook her head.

“It’s fine, kid. It happens.” She wiped her knife off on the grass and patted John’s shoulder. “It gets easier the more you do it, but you did well for your first try. I couldn’t even hit it the first couple of times Arthur took me out.” Her eyes flicked up to him and Arthur chuckled and nodded.

“Yeah, she was a pretty shit shot. Took a while, but now I think she’s finally *almost* as good as I am.” Arthur teased and hooked his fingers on his belt.

“Oh, you shut up.” She huffed and waved her hand at him. “I’m the better hunter, and you know it.”

“You caught me,” Arthur grinned with a shrug.

“Well, I think this’ll be enough meat for a few days. We should start heading back.” Josephine said and stood up.

Arthur stepped up and hefted the deer over his shoulder. He grunted lightly at the weight, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle. Josephine and John walked in front of him, and John led the way, leaving Arthur struggling to keep his eyes from wandering over Josephine.

The coat she wore was a wool frock jacket, and while it wasn’t the most flattering thing, she looked good in it. When she shivered and buttoned it up, the slight curve of her waist came back into view and his eyes drifted downwards against his will.

Arthur tripped over a root he hadn’t seen and nearly fell. “Shit!” He hissed and found his footing. Josephine looked back at him and grinned playfully.

“You goin’ blind now, old man?”

“Hey, you shut up. Or I’ll make you carry this thing.” Arthur grumbled, his cheeks flushing lightly.
“I never asked you to carry it in the first place, I could have gotten on just fine.”

She flicked her hair over her shoulder and Arthur noted that it had grown out a bit. It dropped down the back of her jacket just below her shoulder and curled at the ends. He wondered if she planned on letting it grow out again.

Arthur grunted in acknowledgment and continued on. Soon enough they reached the horses, and by that time a few flakes of snow began to fall. Instead of saddling up with Josephine, she settled John in Arthur’s saddle and helped him secure the deer to Boadicea.

“Where are you going?” Arthur asked in confusion as she mounted up.

“Town, I gotta take care of something.” Arthur narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“You goin’ to see that French boy?” He asked, and her face hardened.

“What’s it matter if I was? You disappeared all the time to go off and see Mary.”

“That’s different,” Arthur said, and he saw John shift out of the corner of his eyes.

“No it’s not, and you know it.”

“Yes, it is. I didn’t ever have any bad intentions with her, I —”

“All Henri wants with me is to use me, right? That’s it, huh?” She demanded, and Arthur’s face scrunched up.

“I know how men think, Josephine. I know what goes through their heads when they see a pretty woman. He’s gonna use you and then throw you in the dirt when he’s done. So don’t come cryin’ to me when he does, ‘cause I warned you.”

Arthur felt a tug in his chest when Josephine’s face screwed up and hot, angry tears gathered in her eyes. Her mouth opened to say something, but she shook her head quickly and kicked Duke into a
gallop away from where Arthur stood with Boadicea and John.

Arthur had been right. He was always right.

Josephine gave herself to Henri that night, not only to spite Arthur to prove him wrong, but because she thought she loved Henri, and Henri loved her back. But just as Arthur had said, the moment the hotel door closed, he’d pulled down her trousers and ripped open her blouse and used her.

It hurt.

It didn’t feel dreamy and good like how Annabelle described it. It didn’t end in a blinding flash of pleasure that made her body feel floaty and light. It ended with Henri spending on the back of her thigh and then leaving a short time later.

As she cleaned herself up she wiped his seed off of her skin, and when she touched between her legs, a place that now felt raw and achy, she pulled her fingers back and found the tips of them bloody.

To add insult to injury, Josephine found a money clip of two dollars sat upon the nightstand by the bed.

Josephine sat in the bed and cried; sobbed openly and loud because of the embarrassment and hurt that coursed through her. She thought Henri was sweet and kind. The kisses and soft words they shared had been special to Josephine, they made her feel like she mattered and she was loved. But she’d been wrong. Arthur had been right all along.

Josephine did her best to clean herself up, but most of the buttons on her shirt had popped off when Henri ripped her shirt open. She drew her coat tightly around herself and buttoned that up instead, thankful that it gave her at least a little decency.

She stared at the money clip on the nightstand and blinked back tears. Slowly, she made her way
downstairs and ignored the look the attendant had given her. Each step sent an ache up her spine, and it hurt like the heavens when she mounted Duke and settled in the saddle.

Tears from pain and shame welled up in her eyes as she rode Duke at an easy walk out of the town and towards the home they’d settled in. She tried to kick Duke into a trot, but the motion of riding quick hurt too much. The snow was falling harder now, and the temperature had dropped significantly.

When Josephine arrived at the house an hour later, the falling snow had soaked through her trousers and her body felt so stiff she felt like she would break. Dutch and Hosea were outside around the fire, and they looked up when Josephine approached. Dutch’s eyebrows drew together when he saw the state of her.

“Where have you been?” He asked, as both of them rose and approached her where she was trying to dismount. Her stiff legs and the pain between them making it hard to move.

“T-rtown.” She stuttered, the cold making her teeth chatter. They helped her off of Duke and Hosea wrapped his coat around her.

“Let’s get you inside, child.” He said, and as they began walking, he and Dutch exchanged a look over Josephine’s head at the gentle way she was carrying herself as she walked.

“And what were you doing in town this late?” Dutch had to ask, not missing the way Josephine’s eyes welled up with tears.

“Where’s Miss Grimshaw? I-I need to t-talk to Miss Grimshaw.” They ushered her inside and took her to the room that Miss Grimshaw had made her own.

Arthur was stretched out on his bedroll in the main portion of the house by the fire, and he looked up when he saw Josephine. She glanced at him, shame and embarrassment and sadness rising up in her throat like bile. He sat up at that, but Josephine looked away and continued on with Dutch and Hosea’s help.

Susan was already opening the door, and when she saw Josephine, her eyes widened slightly before they softened. Josephine let out a dry sob and Susan grabbed her, sharing looks with Dutch and Hosea. They shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders.
Once the door was closed, Susan immediately helped Josephine out of her wet clothes and didn’t miss the way she pressed her legs together as she sat by the fireplace in the room.

“Josephine, what—”

“I-I gave myself to a boy,” Josephine said, then started to weep. She curled her arms around herself, naked and shivering, and hid her face from Miss Grimshaw. “I’ve been seeing him since we got here and-and I gave myself to him and it hurt! It hurt real bad and—” Josephine sobbed harder, and Miss Grimshaw understood and picked up the quilt on her bed, wrapping it around Josephine’s shoulders and holding her to her chest. “He wouldn’t stop even though I said it hurt—”

“Shh, Josephine,” Susan said and moved them to sit on the bed. She smoothed a hand down her damp hair and tried to console her. “It’ll be alright, it’ll—”

“He left me two dollars on the nightstand!” Josephine cried loudly, and Susan’s blood began to boil. “He used me like a—a cheap whore!”

Susan glared at the wall as she did her best to comfort and console Josephine. It was nearly an hour before the girl calmed enough to sleep, and Susan offered up her bed for her so she wouldn’t have to sleep on the floor.

That night, her, Arthur and Dutch paid a visit to Henri Marchand. They dragged him from his home and rode him up to the woods, where they tied him to a tree. The boy acted innocent, as they all did when caught. Dutch circled him like a wolf, while Susan kicked, punched, and spat on him for abusing Josephine.

When they were done with their fun, Arthur had yanked down Henri’s pants and sliced his manhood clean off, his screams echoing through the forest, making the birds fly. Arthur dropped it in his lap with a look of disgust. Before they left, Susan threw two dollars at the boy and spat on him again, adding insult to injury as they left him for the wolves.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A little bit of a lighter chapter to follow up the last one, I figured it was necessary after that. Thanks to everyone who's been leaving comments, kudos, and keeping up with the story! I really appreciate it and it’s super encouraging for me! <3

Josephine didn’t speak to Arthur for two weeks. She pointedly ignored him, as his words about Henri, while right, hurt. She’d been wrong, but she remembered what Arthur said. Don’t come cryin’ to me. And she didn’t. She wouldn’t, either. Her pride had grown much too large over the years, and she didn’t want to admit she was wrong.

In the span of her pointed silence at Arthur, they’d picked up a new member by the name of Simon Pearson. Josephine had been with Dutch when they found him being harassed by a loan shark, and Dutch had killed the man, saying what a waste it was to prey on the poorest in their times of need. He quickly assimilated himself as the butcher and chief, but Josephine could hardly consider his position as chief an honorable one. The stews, soups, and meals he made tasted like nothing, and often Josephine found herself chowing down outside of camp before meal times so she wouldn’t have to eat it.

Josephine didn’t mind Pearson’s presence at all, though. He was a bit loud, but he was pleasant to be around. Josephine actually quite liked to hear about his time in the Navy, even though some of the stories seemed much too far fetched to be real. And he’d been appreciative to her as well since she went hunting often and always brought back good quality game for him to cook up.

“Josephine?” Said woman looked up when John spoke to her, and she stopped reading. She’d been relieved of her chores for the afternoon, though she had planned on going into town later, a new town this time, and getting some money.

“Yeah?”

“Arthur says he needs your help with somethin’.” The words made Josephine smile against her will. Enlisting the help of John to speak to her now, huh?

“Well, you can tell Arthur if he needs my help with somethin’, he can come over here and ask me himself.”
Unhappy with his new job as a messenger boy, John scowled and walked away. Josephine watched him walk over to Arthur, who was leaned up against one of the wagons, swallowed up in his thick coat puffing on a cigarette. Her eyes met him when Arthur looked at her before she looked away and returned to her book.

“Arthur says,” John announced to her as he walked up to her again just a few short minutes later. “That the last time he tried to talk to you, you glared at him so hard he thought you were gonna stab him with scissors.”

Josephine flicked her eyes to Arthur and he had his hat down, trying to look inconspicuous as he watched them. She waved at him and he looked away quickly, making Josephine chuckle.

“Tell him —”

“Why can’t you tell him yourself? I don’t wanna keep runnin’ between you two!” John griped, annoyance clear on his face.

“Because Arthur started it. Now, tell him if he wants to talk to me, I want him to apologize.”

John scowled and stomped off towards Arthur. She tilted her head down towards her book, however, her eyes flicked up and watched the two as John relayed the message. Arthur waved his hand at John, and it appeared John was relieved of his messenger boy duties.

It hadn’t been easy ignoring Arthur. Arthur was her best friend, really her closest friend in the whole world. She didn’t trust anyone more than she trusted him, not even Dutch. After that night she so desperately wanted to curl up in Arthur’s cot with him next to her on the ground and just cry. But he’d told her not to, and Josephine could admit she was too stubborn to get past that.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Arthur’s voice cut through the silence around her and she looked up at him.

Arthur had his hat tipped down and his thumbs hooked on his belt. His body language told her he had no idea what to do with himself, and Josephine had to hide her smile when she saw the flush on his cheeks, most likely from embarrassment.
“Alright,” she said softly and stood, setting her book down on the chair she had been sitting on under the eave of the porch.

Arthur lead her away from camp, out into the forest to the north of it. They found a clear enough trail and followed it, their pace slow and leisurely. It was silent, sans the sound of their footsteps in the snow and the rustling of their clothes. Josephine pulled her coat tightly around herself and stuck her hand into the pockets to keep them warm.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said after a while of walking. “I didn’t—I didn’t mean what I said, not really. I was just mad and frustrated you weren’t seein’ what I was seein’.”

“Well, you and Mary made me mad but I, I never said anythin’ about it to either of you.” Josephine shot back and Arthur grunted, though she saw the hurt in his eyes from the mention of Mary’s name.

“It’s, it’s different, I ‘spose. I guess it’s…” Arthur sighed and Josephine could almost hear how hard he was thinking and trying to process his thoughts into words without upsetting her. “It’s just, I’ve known you since you were this tall,” she looked and he held his hand out, showing approximately how tall she used to be. “And skinny as a stick. I’ve known you since you was a kid, so it’s, I guess it’s hard for me to see you growin’ up. And then Henri, I—”

“I was wrong about him,” Josephine said and clenched and unclenched her fists in her pockets. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

She wished with all of her heart that she would have just pulled her head out of her ass and listened. Arthur, he knew what he was talking about, and she should have known that. It would have saved her the pain of seeing Arthur’s expression whenever he looked at her for days after the incident. He stared at her with so much guilt and sorrow that it made her gut clench and twist with sadness. He’d been right, but it took her almost two weeks to realize that he couldn’t possibly want to be right, not in a situation like that.

“Hey, I don’t want you apologizin’ about that,” Arthur said, his voice firm. He stopped walking and grabbed Josephine by the shoulders, turning her to him. He looked at her, his eyes bright and open. “I’m the one who is sorry. You didn’t come to me like you would have after what he did to you because of what I said, and I’m so sorry.”

Josephine blinked back tears and pushed herself forwards against his chest. She pressed her cheek against it and hugged him tightly. She could practically feel the weight lift off their shoulders as Arthur hugged her back, and the world began to feel right again. They embraced for a while until Josephine pulled back and looked up at him.
“What happened to Henri? Miss Grimshaw left with you and Dutch that night, so I—”

“We left him for the wolves with his pecker on the ground between his knees,” Arthur grunted, and Josephine let out a breath.

“Wish I coulda been there to see that.” She said bitterly, and Arthur let out a short laugh. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they began to walk back and Josephine pulled her hands out to press them against her cheeks to warm her face up, though it was mostly to conceal the flush Arthur’s actions brought up.

“What did you want my help with?” Josephine asked, remembering the reason John had come up to her in the first place.

“Oh—it’s Eliza.” Josephine’s interest was immediately piqued and she looked up at him. “She sent me a letter sayin’ she got a horse, but she’s too afraid to ride him. Figured you’d like to come since you tamed the nastiest stallion I’ve ever seen, besides The Count.”

“Tamed is a… poor choice of words.” Josephine chuckled and looked ahead of them. “I broke him and earned his trust, but Duke ain’t tame in the slightest. I’d love to come, though. I haven’t seen Eliza in a while.”

“Yeah, last time I saw her she said she missed you and wished you’d come to see her and Isaac again.” Arthur withdrew his arm from around her when they got closer to the cabin they were camped in. “We’ll be gone for a few days. We’re headin’ south, so it’ll be a little warmer, but not much.”

Josephine nodded, then when they got to the house, she headed inside and packed up her things to prepare for their trip to visit Eliza and Isaac.

When they arrived at Eliza’s home two days later, the temperature had risen about ten degrees and
the snow had long since melted off. It felt nice to be away from all the snow, as it was something Josephine had never been fond of. It was too cold and too silent for her tastes. It was beautiful, sure. But the snow made it too hard to hunt and to travel.

Eliza was inside the house when they rode up, and the horse she had been given stood hitched to the porch. He shifted uneasily when Arthur and Josephine approached and Josephine shushed him as she hitched Duke on the opposite side of the porch, knowing he was nasty towards other stallions.

“Arthur, Josephine!” Eliza greeted them as they dismounted and walked up. She pulled Josephine into a tight hug and kissed her cheek.

“Hi, Eliza,” Josephine smiled and hugged her back.

“Oh, come inside, it’s cold out here,” Eliza said when she pulled back from Josephine. She ushered them inside and Josephine sighed happily when the warm air enveloped her. She stepped up to the fireplace and warmed her hands, smiling at nothing in particular. It felt nice to be here, to be with Eliza and Arthur and Isaac. While Dutch and his gang was her family, being here made her feel a sense of home. A wonderful, warm feeling she’d never really experienced before.

“I have something exciting to show you two,” Eliza said and reached into the crib for Isaac.

“Oh, he’s gotten so big.” Josephine beamed when she saw him. His big eyes locked on her and he grinned, and Josephine saw the beginnings of two little white teeth. She waved at him, and the baby bounced in Eliza’s arms and giggled.

Holding Isaac secure to her hip with one hand, she used another to throw the quilt from her bed down on the floor and smooth it out. Josephine and Arthur approached curiously and Arthur pulled out a chair from the table, taking a seat at it. Eliza set Isaac on the ground and he shifted up onto his hands and knees. A bit unsteadily, he began to crawl towards Arthur, and Josephine gasped excitedly. She looked at Arthur and saw he was just as shocked and excited, his lips curled into a proud smile.

“Ba-ba, baaa,” Isaac cooed, spittle dripping from his open mouth and settling on his chin. The chair squeaked as Arthur knelt on the ground and picked his son up, and Isaac stared at Arthur with a curious look. The curious look turned into a happy smile and he squirmed, giggling happily. “Daaaaaa, da-da, da-da.”
The baby talk sounded like babbling nonsense to Josephine, but it clearly meant something to Eliza and Arthur. Arthur’s eyes widened as he looked at his son, and Eliza gasped.

“Did he just—” Arthur started, and Eliza nodded her head quickly.

“He did, he did! He knows who you are, he knows your his daddy.” Eliza said, and Josephine realized just how important that moment was to Arthur.

She knew Arthur couldn’t be around them much, not only for their safety but because his time and loyalty rested with Dutch. It made her heart soar to know that despite his absence, Isaac still knew who his father was and was creating memories in his little baby mind of said man. The tender little moment between Arthur, Eliza and Isaac made Josephine long for a life like this, a life of warmth and love. As she settled in for sleep that night, her mind wandered to the unreachable. Her mind wandered to a little home with lots of land for horses, one with a garden out front and a chicken coop and a river cutting through the property. One where she had a child, maybe two, frolicking through the grass under the sun, carefree and happy. One where she had a man at her side, who had given her those two children, who had been faceless for a moment until his features morphed and Arthur stood next to her, smiling and proud.

The daydream was unreachable, but the happiness she felt wouldn’t be squashed by the longing that settled in her chest. She locked the fantasy away in her mind, locked it tighter than the most secure bank in the world, and fell asleep.

“Shiiiiiit!” Josephine shouted the next day, as she was thrown off of Eliza’s horse Beau. The name Beau was totally unbecoming of him, considering his behavior.

“Oh! Josephine, are you alright?” Eliza asked, concern clear in her voice as she stood on the porch with Arthur and Isaac.

“Fine!” Josephine called back, standing up and dusting the seat of her trousers off. She’d definitely feel that later. Beau stood before her, his ears back and his tail whipping. He jumped slightly, agitated, and Josephine held her hands out.

“It’s okay, boy. It’s okay. Here, I got this. You want a sugar cube?” Beau’s eyes flicked to her outstretched hand in interest, eyeing up the cubes in her palm. “Yeah, you do. Here,” she stepped closer to him slowly and offered the cubes to him. He took them from her carefully and Josephine patted his neck. “That’s it, boy, see? I’m no thorn in your side.”
She continued to talk to him and pet him until the horse calmed enough to let her lead him. She walked him around the far part of the property for a few minutes, before she tried again and climbed up into the saddle. He huffed and shifted, but otherwise accepted the new weight on his back.

“There ya go, boy. See, ain’t so bad is it?” She kicked him into an easy walk and took him around, getting a feel for him before kicking him into a trot. He put up a little stink at that, but Josephine didn’t leave him room for arguing and eventually he listened. She rode him up to the porch and grinned at Eliza.

“You got yourself a little stinker.” She said as she dismounted and gave the horse another sugar cube for his good behavior. “He’s a stallion, so his attention will turn like that,” she snapped her fingers. “If you let it. But he’s a strong, good horse. Come here, Eliza.”

Eliza handed Isaac to Arthur, then stepped off of the porch and stood next to Josephine. Beau shifted and Eliza stepped back, fearful.

“You ever ridden horses before?” Josephine asked and petted Beau’s neck to calm him.

“Of course, but I’ve never been around such a mean one.”

“He ain’t mean, not really. He’s just a stallion, so he thinks he’s the shit.” Arthur snorted at that and Josephine smiled. “My horse, Duke, used to be like that. He’s still nasty to just about anyone but me, but I’ve gained his trust and showed him I’m the boss, and I respect him, and in turn, he respects me.”

“How do you do that?” Eliza asked, and Josephine handed her an apple and some carrots.

“He demands respect, so you give it to him. Once you gain his trust, he’ll respect you too. Here, offer him a carrot and talk to him. He’s nothing to be feared, and he won’t hurt you unless you’ve given him a reason to.”

Josephine watched as Eliza stepped forward slowly and offered the carrot to Beau. “Here you go, boy.” The horse's ears flicked and he took the carrot from her.

“Go ahead and pet him, teach him your touch and help him learn to associate it with good things.”
As Eliza spoke and touched Beau, Josephine turned her head to look at Arthur. He was bouncing little Isaac gently in his arms, and when he saw Josephine looking, his cheeks flushed a light pink. Josephine loved that about him; his embarrassment whenever he was caught doing something kind or uncharacteristic for that of an outlaw.

Beau began to lean into Eliza’s touch, and Josephine returned her attention to them and smiled. His eyes were closed pleasantly as Eliza patted his neck and forehead. Josephine chuckled at the sight and ran her hand down his shoulder.

“See? He ain’t no big monster, he’s actually kind of a sweety.” Eliza smiled and cooed to him, and Beau heaved out a content sigh. “Think you’re ready to try and ride him?”

“I think so,” Eliza said and stopped petting Beau. She shifted around and stood by the saddle, watching Beau for any signs of displeasure. He didn’t offer any, and Josephine moved when she saw the saddle was just a little too tall for Eliza to mount on her own.

“Here,” Josephine said and knelt down. She patted her thigh and looked up at Eliza. “Use my leg as a step.”

Eliza looked hesitant, but did it anyway and settled up in Beau’s saddle. Beau snorted and stepped around uneasily and Eliza’s eyes widened.

“Don’t be afraid,” Josephine said to her and patted his neck, trying to calm Beau. “He can sense your fear, and it makes him fearful too. Remember, as big as they are, horses are still prey animals. If you’re afraid, he’s going to be afraid too, and he might buck you.”

Eliza took a deep breath and nodded. Josephine took the reigns and used them to begin to lead Beau around in an easy circle. He calmed down as Eliza did and after a few minutes of walking, Josephine stopped him and gave the reigns to Eliza.

“Now, he ain’t gonna do nothin’ he don’t want to. Be firm with him, and show him you’re in charge in a respectful way. You respect him, he’ll respect you and be more apt to do what you tell him. Talk to him while you’re ridin’, I know my Duke likes to be told verbally what to do as well.”

“Alright, boy, let’s go,” Eliza said and kicked Beau. He didn’t budge until she patted his neck and kicked a little harder. “There you go, what a good boy.” She praised as Beau began to walk around
Eliza looked beautiful out there, stuffed in a thick coat with her cheeks pink from the cold. She had a grace and elegance to her that no women like Mary could ever hope to have. She was admirable, in the firm and sure way she held herself. She wasn’t demure, though she wasn’t as hard as Miss Grimshaw either. She was unique to herself, and it was something Josephine admired greatly.

Josephine didn’t know it at the time of their visit, but it would be the last time she ever saw Eliza and Isaac alive.
Yet again another heavy one. I cried a little while writing this one, honestly, and it's the first time I've ever cried while writing anything. It was the hardest chapter I've written for this by far, and I hope I conveyed all the emotions and feelings right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A year and a half later, an almost twenty-year-old Josephine raised her gun at a man she’d stumbled upon rifling through their supply wagon at camp.

“Now who, the hell, are you.” She punctuated each word harshly, and the man froze stock still. He turned around, eyes wide. His face was fat and round, with a bulbous red nose and a thick gray beard.

“O-oh, miss. I didn’t know anyone else was here. I’m—I’m starving, and I thought this camp was abandoned.”

Josephine’s eyes flicked down to his gut and her eyes narrowed. “You don’t look like the starvin’ type.” She cocked back the hammer and the man shook. “Dutch! We got us a fat, starvin’ thief!”

Dutch was there in almost an instant, followed by Miss Grimshaw and John, who was now almost fourteen. Hosea had gone to town for a lead, and Arthur had been gone for nearly a week. He’d gone to visit Eliza and Isaac again, and since they’d moved further away from her home, it made sense for him to be gone for so long.

“Well, what do we have here?” Dutch grinned, placing his hands on his hips. “Lower your gun, my dear. He’s unarmed.”

With a flick of her eyes downwards, she noted that he was indeed missing a gun belt or any sort of weaponry. She decocked the hammer, then tucked her revolver back into her belt. She stepped back from the man, who’d relaxed visibly now that Josephine wasn’t pointing her gun at him.

“Oh-oh thank you, she’s quite scary, that one, I—”
“Oh, I’m a lot more than just scary,” Josephine growled and Dutch let out a sharp laugh.

“Relax, Josephine,” Dutch placated, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Now, I’d like to know how you found yourself all the way out here with your hands in our supplies.”

The man seemed to tense up when he realized Dutch was worlds worse than Josephine. Josephine’s anger had simmered right at the surface, as it usually did, but Dutch was calm and reasonable, which made him all the more off-putting to anyone outside of the gang. It’s what made him such a good leader and outlaw, at least in Josephine’s opinion. He knew how to control his anger and use it to his advantage.

The man’s eyes flicked around nervously and he held his hands up. “I’m on the run—”

“I thought you was starvin’,” Josephine said and Susan made a noise in agreement.

“Well, I’m gettin’ to that.” He huffed and then began to spiral down into a long-winded story about how he’d landed himself here that left Josephine with pain behind her eyes. Dutch seemed amused by it though, and the twinkle in his eyes gave Josephine even more of a headache.

“Dutch—” Josephine started to say, but the thief cut her off.

“But what it boils down to is, I got lumbago. Makes me real vulnerable, you see? I could die any day, so maybe fate landed me here, and if you’d be so kind and willin’ maybe you’d let me stay? You know, live out my last days in peace and safety.”

Josephine rolled her eyes so hard she thought they’d get stuck and she’d have to look at her brain for the rest of her life. Arthur would really get a kick out of this, she thought with amusement. She’d string the man up, then Arthur would take him down and string him up again himself.

“As long as you can earn your keep, you have a place with us,” Dutch said, and Josephine and John groaned at nearly the same time. “Be quiet you two. I’m sure we’ll find a use for him.”

“No one asked, but my name’s Uncle.” The bastard said and Josephine crossed her arms.
“This is stupid,” Josephine said, ignoring Uncle. “If he’s got lum… Lum-whatever, how is he gonna be any use to us?”

“A good distraction, perhaps. He snuck in here somehow without any of us seeing him. We’ll find a use for him.”

Uncle turned out to be just as useless as Josephine predicted. He worked a little, at first, but by the time his first week had wrapped up, he had made himself virtually a rock with an alcohol problem. The chores he was given were almost always passed off to someone else, and if he couldn’t bribe someone into doing it for him, he’d bitch and moan about his lumbago until someone took the task just to shut his mouth.

Though, as the week wrapped up, worry settled in the pit of Josephine’s stomach like rocks. Arthur hadn’t been back. The trip would have taken him a while, but two weeks seemed a stretch. Arthur had never been gone that long without at least leaving a notice or posting a letter to them. The worry ate away at her insides like mice until she couldn’t stand it any longer. The last time he disappeared it had been after Mary ended their relationship. Maybe something happened, maybe he was hurt, or drunk, or in jail, or—

“Shit!” The knife she’d been using to chop vegetables nicked her thumb and she jerked her hand up, sticking her thumb in her mouth and sucking the blood away.

“Jesus Peter, you were chopping like a madman.” Pearson chided as he stood back from the deer he was skinning. “What’s wrong with you? You’ve had your head in the clouds for days.”

“It’s Arthur,” Josephine said around her thumb before pulling it out to look at it. It was a rather shallow cut luckily, though it still hurt like the dickens. “I’m worried about him.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Hosea said as he walked up and grabbed her hand and inspected the cut. “He’s got a woman and a boy, he probably just stayed with them for an extra few days.”

Of course, the news about Eliza and Isaac spread once he and Josephine couldn’t justify their absences and the meager amounts of money they brought back after their visits. The only person who gave Arthur any shit about it was John, but John was fourteen and had no idea what family meant, at least not in the sense of fatherhood.
“I’m going to town,” Josephine said with a nod to herself. She went to her tent and wrapped her thumb in a scrap of fabric, then went to Duke.

“Keep your eyes open for leads,” Hosea called to her and she nodded, distracted as she strapped her rifle to her back then led Duke away from camp and towards town.

Her thoughts wandered to the worst possible outcomes. Arthur in jail for drunkenness or fighting, or worse, the O’Driscolls had caught him and killed him. It was a snowball’s chance in hell that she’d find him somewhere in the town, but she had to try. Something in her stomach didn’t feel right, and if her gut told her something was wrong, Arthur had been the one who taught her to listen to that feeling.

The sun had set as she rode into town and slowed Duke to a walk. Her eyes searched the hitching posts lining the storefronts, looking for that familiar mare of Arthur’s. She found her posted outside of a saloon at the end of the street, much to Josephine’s surprise. She hitched Duke up next to Boadicea and greeted the mare, patting her neck and cooing to her softly.

“Where’s your rider, girl?” She flicked her eyes around, then they settled on the saloon doors. “I’m gonna go look for him, I’ll be back.”

Josephine straightened her shoulders and stepped up, pushing the saloon doors open. Lively music and the general hustle and bustle of people drinking and eating and dancing hit her ears. Her eyes flicked around, searching for the familiar set of Arthur’s shoulders, or his hat or his face. But she couldn’t find it. All she found was a sea of unfamiliar faces. Where the hell was he?

She walked up to the bartender and waited for him to deal with a customer before smacking her hand a few times on the bar to get his attention. He seemed less than happy with the behavior until he saw she was a woman, and he relaxed only just a bit.

“I’m looking a man, goes by Arthur. He’s pretty intimidatin’, and he’s real tall,” she held her hand up for reference. “Has a hat with a cord around it, blond-ish hair. You seen him?”

The bartender thought for a moment, then nodded. “He paid for a room for a few nights. Barely see him except to eat or drink. Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was dead up there from alcohol poisoning.”

“What room is he in?”
“Three, I believe. Up the stairs and to your left.”

“Thanks,” Josephine muttered and headed up the steps.

Arthur drank a lot, but she hadn’t seen him drink like that since Mary. She knew it was the only way he’d been able to cope, to drown out the pain. Something must have happened. It wasn’t like him at all. At least when Mary had left him, he’d returned to camp and continued to drink and sulk and roll through the motions of losing his love. Josephine had no idea what she’d find up there, and she was honestly quite scared to find out.

The upstairs was smoky but quiet for the most part. The music from downstairs could be heard, though it was muffled. As she walked to her left and the first door she passed by, she heard a man and a woman in the throes of passion. Her face scrunched up and she continued on until she found door three.

“Arthur?” She called out as she knocked, and was met with silence. “Arthur, it’s Josephine. You here?”

Again, silence. Josephine tried the door, and it was as if faith and luck had settled proudly on her shoulders when the door clicked open. The first thing that hit her was the smell. It reeked of piss and vomit and cigarettes and whiskey.

“Jesus,” she breathed, lifting her sleeve to her nose. Her eyes found Arthur easily, as he was stretched out on the bed. The way he was positioned told Josephine that he had passed out rather than drifted to sleep.

Her heart immediately began to ache for him, at the state he’d been put into by some unknown force. She closed the door quietly behind herself and approached the bed, carefully stepping around the puddle of vomit by the bed. She pulled the bottle of whiskey from Arthur’s hand and looked down at him. At least a week’s worth of whiskers darkened the lower half of his face, and his eyes were set back deep in their sockets and dark from drinking and missing sleep. The smell was terrible this close to him, and she could see why. He still wore the clothes he left in, and his shirt was stained with so many unknown substances Josephine couldn’t even begin to name them.

“Arthur,” Josephine said firmly, shaking him lightly by his shoulders. “Arthur, wake up.”
For being in such a bad way, he came to life like a bullet. His eyes shot open wildly and his hands immediately grappled for Josephine, thinking she was an intruder or a thief, or someone out to kill him. One hand grabbed her arm, and the other shot to her throat and squeezed.

“Arthur!” She cried, pushing at his hand until he recognized her familiarity and he let go. Josephine backed away on instinct and reached up to touch her throat.

“What’re you doin’ ‘ere?” Arthur’s voice was hoarse and slurred. He was still drunk.

“I was worried about you.” She said, approaching him again and yanking the whiskey bottle off of the nightstand before he could grab it. He made an indignant noise and Josephine gazed down at his sorry case, a pain settling in her chest just from the sight. “Though admittedly, seein’ you like this don’t make me any less worried.”

Arthur grunted, and the guarded way his face settled told Josephine he wasn’t just going to tell her. She’d have to pick at him until he gave in.

“Arthur—”

His face contorted and he rolled to the side of the bed, vomiting onto the floor. Josephine jumped back to keep from getting vomit on her shoes and dress and narrowed her eyes at him. He retched and moaned in such a pitiful way, it made her chest hurt.

“Jesus wept, Arthur.” Josephine sighed when he was done and rolled onto his back. “You’re filthy, this room is just as bad. What the hell happened?”

Arthur let out a weak little moan and Josephine sighed, shaking her head.

“Stay there,” she said, taking the bottles of whiskey she could see with her as she left the room and went downstairs. She deposited the bottles on the bar for the bartender and reached into her satchel. “I need a bath, and another night in the room. The rooms in… real bad shape though. I’ll pay extra to have it cleaned while he’s in the bath.”

She handed three dollars to the bartender and then forked over a few cents for a shot. The whiskey burned on the way down and she shook her head.
“Bath’s ready, and I’ll send someone up after you to clean the room.”

“Send ‘em my apologies,” Josephine sighed bitterly and made her way back upstairs.

When she entered the room, Arthur was looking up at the ceiling, his expression open and conveying so much pain it was almost incomprehensible. He looked heartbroken and miserable, though there weren’t any tears in his eyes. When his drunken mind registered that he wasn’t alone, his face hardened up and Josephine met his eyes. Even sober, he couldn’t guard his eyes. They clearly conveyed his pain and sorrow and Josephine had to look away.

“Come on, we’re gettin’ you a bath.” To her surprise, Arthur didn’t put up a stink or argue with her as she helped him out of bed. She grabbed his clean union suit and stuffed it against Arthur’s chest. “Hold this,” she said, and he obliged by holding it to his chest with his free hand.

She strung his arm over her shoulders and supported him by the waist. Josephine wasn’t particularly a short or weak woman, but the weight Arthur put on her from his drunkenness almost crushed her. She steered him towards the bathroom and offered a look of sympathy to the woman tasked with cleaning his room. Josephine would have to give her a little extra money when she was done.

When they got to the bath, Josephine deposited Arthur on the chair by the tub as she shut the door and gathered herself. She took his union suit from him and set it aside, then knelt before Arthur and began to task herself with taking off his boots and socks.

“Are you hurt?” She asked, aware of his eyes on her as she tucked some hair behind her ear.

“No,” came his meek response, and Josephine nodded. If he was lying, she’d find out soon enough.

“How long’s it been since you ate?” The brunette asked and stood up, pulling Arthur up with her. She gestured to his shirt for him to unbutton, and while he tried, his fingers were too big and too clumsy. She shook her head and unbuttoned it for him.

“Few days,” he said, and his breath was rancid when it hit her face. It smelled of vomit and whiskey and it took everything in her not to recoil.
“I’m surprised you didn’t goddamn kill yourself with all this drinkin’.” Josephine sighed and knocked his suspenders off his shoulders to get him out of his shirt. He made a noise and Josephine inspected his chest then went around to his back to check for wounds.

Undressing Arthur was a fantasy she’d kept locked in her mind for only herself. It was something she’d so desperately wanted to do, to see him naked and aching for her. But this isn’t exactly what she pictured, and she refused to let the image of Arthur naked get her giddy when he was like this.

“Do your pants,” she said and wiped her nose off on her sleeve. She used the ribbon Arthur had given her however many years ago to tie her hair back and watched his shoulders move.

Arthur did as he was told and unbuttoned his trousers then stepped out of them. Or, tried to. They got caught around his knees and he wobbled dangerously and Josephine steadied him with her hands on his ribs and shoulder. With the new stability, he kicked off his trousers then dropped his drawers. Josephine sighed and averted her gaze, using her foot to kick the fabric away so Arthur wouldn’t trip.

Josephine let go of him and walked to the tub, sticking her hand in to check the temperature before straightening her back and holding her hand out for him. He took it and stepped into the tub with her help, sinking down into it with a mighty groan and a splash.

“Come on, let’s get you washed.” She grabbed the bar of soap and dipped it in the water, lathering it until it was soapy. It smelled pleasantly of lavender.

Josephine grabbed Arthur’s wrist and put the soap into his hand. He moved sluggishly as she cupped her hands and brought the water to his arms, shoulders, and head to wet him. Josephine realized very quickly that he was virtually useless in this endeavor, given the way he was washing, or not, in this case. She followed his line of sight and saw him staring at the bottle of wine perched at the end of the tub.

“Don’t you even think about it,” Josephine said firmly, snapping her fingers in front of his face. He blinked and swatted her hand. It was like dealing with a child, Josephine realized with a sigh.

She took the soap from him and began to lather his hair, using her fingers and nails to work the soap in and uproot any grease and dirt that had settled there. Arthur was silent save for his breathing, and Josephine used the silence to soap up the rag and scrub his shoulders, arms, chest, and back. As she was working the rag in slow circles down Arthur’s back, he broke the silence.
“Eliza’s dead,” he said, and Josephine froze. “So’s Isaac. Robbers killed ‘em.”

Josephine’s vision seemed to tunnel as she sat there, frozen. Her heart stopped and her stomach jumped up into her throat, and her insides felt like they were burning. They were on fire from the pain Arthur’s words ignited in her. It tore through her like a hot knife just fresh from the fire; red hot and dangerous.

Josephine’s mouth gaped open and closed, a soft whimper the only noise she could conjure up. She shifted to look at him, and she wished so desperately that it wasn’t true. She would give anything for that not to be true. But when she saw his eyes, and the look of raw, unfiltered pain on his face, she knew then that he was speaking the truth.

“O-oh, oh,” Josephine gasped. Once the first tear fell from her eyes, the rest followed like a stream, dripping down her cheeks and chin and neck. A loud, unfiltered sob left her throat and she grappled for Arthur, pulling him to her and ignoring the wet, soapy press of his hair to her chest and neck. The lump that settled in her throat prevented her from words, and it made her feel as if she was choking.

“Ten dollars,” Arthur said, his voice trembling. He wasn’t crying, and she realized why. He’d already cried so much he couldn’t possibly cry more. “Those bastards took their lives for ten dollars.”

Josephine couldn’t even begin to understand the pain Arthur was feeling, given just how badly she herself hurt. Eliza and Isaac had been important to her. While not in the same way as Arthur, they meant something to her. They were a paradise. They were a place where Josephine didn’t feel like she always had to be on guard, always looking over her shoulder with her hand ready to grab her gun. They were home. Eliza was her friend, one of her closest aside from Arthur. And now they were gone, just like that. Gone forever.

She’d never get to see Isaac’s chubby little face again, or hear his nonsensical baby talk, or feel his soft little hands grabbing at her fingers or tugging on her hair. Neither she or Arthur would get to see him grow up into a boy, and then into a man. She’d never get to sit up and talk with Eliza again. The nights they spent on the porch outside of her home, talking about everything and nothing all at once, were now nothing but fleeting memories. They were memories she cherished, and now the weight of them felt crushing.

Josephine wanted to talk to Arthur, to offer him comfort. But it wasn’t just the lump in her throat that stopped her. She feared there was no language in the world that held words that would console Arthur. He’d lost his family, two people who meant more to him than anyone in the gang combined. Just the look on his face, the pain there, told Josephine that no matter what she said, he wasn’t going to feel better.
Josephine let out a wet sob and released Arthur from her embrace. She wiped her eyes and brought in a shaky breath, trying to fill her lungs. Arthur wasn’t looking at her, but his hand moved and settled around hers. Comfort. He was trying to comfort her. It choked her up and she bent her head down, letting the weight and warmth of Arthur’s hand stay on hers until she couldn’t take it anymore and pulled it away.

“L-let’s,” her chin trembled as she breathed out through her mouth and grappled for the soap and rag. “Get you cleaned up.”

Josephine’s mind slowed as she set to washing Arthur’s legs, eyes staring blankly down at the sudsy water. When she was done with his legs, she gave the rag to him so he could wash the rest of himself. Silence fell over them, and when he finished scrubbing, Josephine placed a hand on his shoulder and supported his neck, guiding him to lay back in the water, just as he had done for her almost five years prior.

Josephine submerged Arthur until everything but his face and his knees were under the warm water. She looked down at Arthur as she gently scrubbed his hair to get the soap out. He was gazing up at her until his eyes closed and Josephine knew the feeling. Knew he saw the pain on her face and couldn’t stand to look up at it.

When his hair was clean and free of soap, Josephine guided him back up and pulled away. She grabbed the towel offered and helped him out of the tub, helping to dry him off and get him dressed. Silence hung heavy in the air, but Josephine didn’t know how to break it. She knew Arthur didn’t either, so she let it be. She helped him button up his union suit, then grabbed his soiled clothes and helped guide him back to his room.

It was cleaner now, at least. The vomit had been cleaned up, the sheets had been changed, and there was a dish of strong smelling potpourri on the nightstand to cover up the scent. As she helped Arthur get into bed, he shifted and tried to make room for her on the mattress too, but Josephine shook her head. She wouldn’t be sleeping yet, and even when she did plan on it, she didn’t want to sleep with Arthur. She just… needed to be alone for a while.

Josephine went over and settled in the wooden chair sat in the corner of the room. She watched Arthur drunkenly roll around in bed before he settled on his stomach, limbs stretched out and head laying on the flat pillow under him. It took only minutes for his breathing to slow down and deepen, signaling that he had fallen asleep. Josephine stayed awake for a while, her mind blank except for the pain and grief that swirled around in it.

After nearly an hour of sitting there, Josephine stood up and approached the bed.
For the first time in almost ten years, Josephine got down on her knees and prayed.

She prayed that Eliza and Isaac made it to heaven, even though she already knew they had.

She prayed that the men who killed them would be smited, though she had no idea they’d already met Arthur’s wrath.

The final prayer she said was for Arthur, that he’d be able to get through it and come out as strong as he’d ever been.

That prayer, as time went on, was one that was never answered. Josephine saw how Eliza and Isaac’s deaths hardened Arthur, how it sculpted him into a ruthless killer who hid his true kindness with everything he had. She saw that he never recovered from the pain of their deaths, and she saw the toll it took on his morals and heart. He refused to talk about it to her, to talk about Eliza and Isaac and all that pain. He kept it bottled up inside himself, tucked away to wreak havoc on his mind.

But Josephine still loved Arthur with all of her heart. She loved him hard and true, and it seemed Arthur himself was the only one in the gang that couldn’t see it. Or refused to see it, maybe.

It wasn’t until she was twenty-three, and Arthur twenty-seven himself, that she’d had enough. She witnessed Arthur beat a man to death with his bare hands for looking at her wrong, an act of such senseless violence that broke the moral codes she thought he held near. She realized that she couldn’t stay. She couldn’t watch the man she’d loved for so many years dissolve into a being of hatred and pain.

That night, she packed up her things and fled, riding Duke as far as he would take her.

Weeks later, she posted a letter that she hoped would make it to Arthur.

Dearest Arthur,

I hope one day you will understand why I had to leave. I hope and pray that you will find it in yourself to forgive me, some way or somehow. I had no other choice. You have changed in ways that break my heart, and I could not stand to witness it any longer.

I hope one day you will understand why I had to leave. I hope and pray that you will find it in yourself to forgive me, some way or somehow. I had no other choice. You have changed in ways that break my heart, and I could not stand to witness it any longer.
I never had the words to tell you that I loved you, and I continue to love you even though we are apart. I think, some part of me always will love you. I wish so desperately that I would have told you, that maybe, somehow, they would have changed our lives and maybe we would be together now. But I know that is only wishful thinking. Nothing more than the daydreams of a girl hopelessly in love.

I miss you, Arthur. I miss your neverending kindness and warmth for me. I remember you telling me that you aren’t that; good and kind. But you are, Arthur. You are the kindest man I have ever met, but I do not think anything I say or write will make you realize that. Just know that your kindness and warmth touched me in ways I cannot hope to explain, and it is why I love you so.

Please know that I am safe, and do not come looking for me. I know you, and I know that you must have looked. Just know that I was not taken and that I am safe. Thanks to you and what you have taught me since I was a girl, I know how to handle myself. For that, I thank you. But I need this. I need to be on my own. I need to discover myself and make my own in a world who does not seem to want people such as you and I. Please let everyone else know that too, and let them know that I am sorry, and I am grateful for everything they have done for me, especially Dutch. If he has not already found it, tell him I left my share of the money we have made in the sack of grains for the horses. I don’t need it, nor do I want it.

If you need me, I am sure you will know how to find me. If this reaches you, I hope you will write back. So, I desperately await your reply, if you can forgive me enough to send one.

Forever Yours,

J.D.

Chapter End Notes

Bum bum bummm. Jo's gone for the time being, but she'll be back soon!
Arthur looked down at the letter in his hands, now rumpled and worn around the edges. He’d kept it around all these years, despite himself. He looked at it now, in times of particular stress or anger, letting the flowing letters of Josephine’s penmanship settle his nerves.

The letter was five or six years old at this point, and Arthur still remembered the day Josephine had left them. The anger had boiled hot in his stomach, and betrayer rang in his head over and over. Until the letter came, part of Arthur had grown to hate her, despite their close relationship. He’d been bitter after reading the letter, but now, at the tender age of thirty-three, he was glad she’d left. He was glad she hadn’t seen his quick downward spiral into such a nasty, hateful bastard.

They’d found the money Josephine stashed for them, and to Arthur’s surprise, Dutch wasn’t mad about his skilled little hunter and gun woman’s escape. He was happy about it, actually. Arthur remembered speaking with Dutch about it, and Dutch told Arthur she deserved a chance at life. Unlike them, she wasn’t wanted and she didn’t have a bounty on her head. If the law ever saw her with them, they suspected she was a hostage rather than another perpetrator. He said she had a sharp mind and a kind soul, and she deserved to try to hone those traits for a cause better than theirs. It shocked Arthur, really, but he left it at that. Dutch seemed confident that Josephine would be back, but if she wasn’t, it was no thorn in their side. She would never betray them or sic the law on them, and that was a fact even Arthur was confident about.

‘...I loved you, and I continue to love you even though we are apart.’

Had she really loved him? Arthur hadn’t believed those words, and he still found himself questioning them. It was beyond him how she could love someone like him.

Arthur sighed and folded the letter, tucking it back in the envelope and setting it with his things next to his cot. He was hopeless, he really was. He spared a glance at the envelope, then at the picture he kept of Mary despite himself. What a sad sack of shit he was.

“I see you readin’ that letter a lot,” came Abigail’s voice, the former prostitute and mother of their newest, and youngest, member Jack. John—Abigail said he was the father, but no one could really be sure—had run off just after his boy turned one. It’d been almost a month since anyone had seen
him, and the anger that had set in Arthur’s chest was hot and real. John may be Dutch’s pride and joy, his golden boy, but that boy was stupider than anyone took him for, especially for leaving his shot at a family.

“It’s nothin’,” Arthur mumbled after clearing his throat. “You need somethin’, Miss Abigail?”

“It’s John,” she said, her voice all hopeless and soft. She was in love with him, through and through, and Arthur remembered that feeling very, very well. Part of him felt sorry for her. It was hard to picture John ever reciprocating those feelings. “He’s been gone for so long and I’m… I’m worried about him, Mr. Morgan.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Arthur sighed and fiddled with his hat. “He’ll come to his senses and be back in no time.” He said that, but he didn't believe it. Not really.

“Will you go and look for him in town? Look for his horse?” Arthur opened his mouth to object, and Abigail clasped her hands at her chest. “Please? It would mean so much to me, Arthur, please.”

“It’s—” Arthur sighed and relented. He’d never been able to say no to a woman in need, no matter how silly or dumb the task seemed. “It’s a little outta my way but I-I suppose I can take a look.”

It was a lie, it was completely out of his way. He planned on heading out for a homestead robbery with Javier, which was placed in the opposite direction of the town. But he supposed if it went well, he’d be heading there any way to treat himself to some drink and a hot meal, and maybe even a new gun to add to his slowly growing collection.

“Oh, thank you, Arthur,” Abigail said in that sweet voice of hers and squeezed his shoulder.

“No need to thank me,” Arthur said as she left, then headed off to find Javier.

They armed themselves, then rode off to the little homestead that Javier had heard had a decent pile of cash stowed away. Dutch needed money again for a plan he was cooking up. He hadn’t told Arthur about it yet, but it felt like a big one this time.

They rode up onto the homestead, and the plan was for Arthur to distract the occupants, and Javier to sneak inside and find the money. Didn’t want to senselessly waste bullets, after all. It went to plan until Javier fell inside and a firefight broke out. Arthur handled the two bastards outside easily, and
Javier handled the rest who were inside. The money was hidden underneath a floorboard and was a pretty hefty sum of three hundred dollars. They each got their shares, and Javier took the rest with him back to camp, while Arthur took his share and headed into town.

He rode Boadicea through the streets slowly, sparing glances at lawmen even though he was sure they weren’t onto him. He kept his eye out for Old Boy too, though he didn’t see the war horse anywhere. He was an easy one to spot, after all. Arthur knew that John was long gone, off to figure out whatever the hell he needed to figure out. It made Arthur’s blood boil to know that John was off doing fuck-all, while Abigail was raising their son on her own. He had a shot, a shot that had slipped through Arthur’s fingers like water years ago, and John was pissing it away.

“Goddamn idiot,” Arthur grumbled as he hitched Boadicea in front of the saloon and dismounted.

As he was rounding Boadicea’s hindquarters, he spared a glance up, and what he saw nearly made his heart stop. The familiar, proud buckskin standardbred that had nipped at Arthur for years rode by, his even more familiar rider mounted on top of him just as proudly. Arthur’s eyes widened as he watched Josephine’s back as she rode out of town, and it appeared that she hadn’t noticed him. Maybe she’d seen him, and chosen to ignore him. That seemed more likely to Arthur.

Against his better judgment, Arthur mounted Boadicea and followed the woman out of town, Duke’s unique golden coat and coal black tail a bright beacon to spot and follow. Arthur tipped his hat down to conceal his face and watched her, following a good few paces back to assure she wouldn’t notice him following her.

The darker, bloodthirsty part of his mind told him to kill her for deserting them, but Arthur stomped that thought out in a second. He’d grown cold and ruthless, but not that ruthless. He liked to think he killed for a purpose and did his best to stray away from senseless murder. He grunted and watched Josephine’s posture, noting it was relaxed. She had no idea she was being followed. Arthur thought they taught her better.

The road before them veered off three separate ways, and Josephine steered Duke to the left and was swallowed behind the trees the path was led into. Arthur sighed and when he steered Boadicea in the same direction, his eyes widened when he found the path empty. Josephine and Duke were gone, seemingly vanished into thin air.

That is until the bushes rustled behind him and he heard a shotgun being cocked back.

“Who the hell are you, and why are you followin’ me?” Her familiar voice called out, hardened with anger. No nonsense, he knew. She used that voice when they were robbing and kidnapping and killing.
“I ain’t followin’ you, miss,” Arthur said, raising his hands up and keeping his head facing forward.

“Bull shit. You take me for an idiot, huh? Get off your horse, now.” Arthur did as he was told and slid off of Boadicea. Josephine must be an idiot, somewhere deep down. She loved his mare, and Arthur was surprised she hadn’t recognized her.

Arthur heard Josephine dismount Duke and walk over to him. He felt the barrel of a shotgun press snugly against the small of his back and he grimaced as it fired up the pain of old age and sleeping wrong. A hand grappled at his shoulder, yanking him roughly until he turned around.

“Why the hell was you——” Josephine’s breath caught in her throat when Arthur tipped his hat up and revealed himself.

His eyes immediately found her face, and the world seemed to drop away. She looked exactly the same, more or less. Unlike him, she aged gracefully. What was she, twenty-eight, twenty-nine now? She’d aged slightly, but Arthur could barely notice it. Her face was just as thin and elegant as it used to be, with high cheekbones and a softly curved jaw, and those freckles still dotted her skin. Her hair was long now and spilled down her back and over her shoulder in thick wavy tresses. She looked older, but not in the way Arthur looked older. She looked more mature like she’d seen things. From her defensive actions, he was sure the years hadn’t been kind on her. That she hadn’t found a peaceful place to settle and live out her life.

“Arthur…” She breathed, and silence fell between them. His eyes met hers, and the shotgun fell away and they just stood there, staring at each other. Her hazel eyes were even more beautiful than he remembered. It was silent, save for the trees around them and the rustling of Josephine’s dress in the wind, which he noted was quite dirty and ripped up.

In an instant, Josephine pushed forward into his arms and they embraced. Arthur wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her to his chest. No tears were shed, on his part at least, but knowing his Jo, she would be shedding a few. No matter how tough she claimed to be, she always found a way to cry.

“I saw you in town,” Arthur said and looked down at her as they parted. His hands stayed planted on her shoulders, gripping her as if she would dissolve and float away like a dream. “Followed ya out, and you had me goin’ there for a while. I thought you was a right idiot for not payin’ attention, but I knew we taught you better.”
“I thought you were an O’Driscoll.” Josephine sighed and threw her hair back off her shoulder. “No matter where I go, they’re there. I’m always on edge now. I nearly killed a poor feller who I thought was followin’ me, but turns out he was headed to the same place I was.”

“You always saw right through my lies. So no, they ain’t been kind. They been kind to you?”

Arthur snorted and shifted his stance, moving his weight to his other foot and hooking his fingers in his belt loops. “Kind? Dutch is always kind.”

“Dutch…” Something flashed in Josephine’s eyes and Arthur watched her as she slung her shotgun across her back and looked up at him. “Is he… Is the gang around here?” At Arthur’s nod, her back straightened up and an unreadable expression crossed her face. “Can I come back with you?”

“That’s not why I left, Arthur.” She looked confused for a moment. “Did you not get my letter?”

“I got your letter.”

“Then you know that’s not—” Josephine sighed and looked away from him. “Please, Arthur? I need to see Dutch and explain myself.”

“I—I suppose,” Arthur sighed. He’d never been able to say no to her, no matter how hard he tried. At least she didn’t look at him with big wide eyes like she used to. No, he’d really gone soft. All she had to do was speak now and Arthur would oblige. “But it ain’t because I think it’s a good idea. It’s because you’d follow me no matter what I say, and I don’t want you sneakin’ in and gettin’ killed by one of the new guys.”

“We got a whole slew of new people now.” Arthur climbed up onto Boadicea and they rode off, taking the horses in an easy walk next to each other. “Javier, Bill and Sean, and we’re apparently money lenders, now. Got a guy doin’ that.” Arthur sighed, part of him thankful that John had been such an idiot and Abigail, poor girl, had been worried enough to send him to town to look. He wouldn’t have run into Josephine otherwise. “And Abigail, she’s, well, she was a-workin’ girl. Uncle brought her to us—”

“Uncle? I thought that lazy leech woulda been dead by now.”

“You’re tellin’ me,” Arthur chuckled bitterly. “But anyway, Uncle brought us to her and she fell pregnant. Little Jack was born about a year ago. She says John’s the father but… well, everyone’s got their doubts about that, within reason, ‘a course.”

Josephine was quiet at that, and Arthur looked over to see a sort of solemn look on her face. “I take it John’s bein’ an idiot?”

“He’s doin’ what he does best.” Arthur shook his head. “That’s why I was in town. I was lookin’ for him. He’s been gone for almost a month now.” The bitterness seeped through his voice like venom and Arthur noticed a scowl form on Josephine’s lips.

“Guess I’ll just have to drag him through the mud by his ears when he comes back like I did when he was tryin’ to peep on me while I was changin’.”

“That’s right, send him through the wringer. The boy deserves it.” Arthur said with a laugh despite himself, and soon enough Josephine was joining him.

“I missed you, Arthur,” Josephine said after a while, her voice soft and tender.

‘I miss you, Arthur. I miss your neverending kindness and warmth for me.’

Warmth and an ache blossomed in his chest and he didn’t know how to handle it. He didn’t know how to grasp it and deal with it and explain to Josephine that he missed her too. Feelings had all but escaped him over the years. He’d never had a way with words, but especially not now. He couldn’t possibly explain to her how much he’d missed her; her presence, her warmth, her stubbornness. He missed the days when things were easier, less complicated. He missed celebrating with her after a good robbery, he missed sitting away from camp and talking with her, even though Josephine had been the one doing most of the talking. He missed Mary, and he missed Eliza and Isaac. But the
person he had missed the most had been Josephine, and he hadn’t realized just how much he needed her until she had left them.

Chapter End Notes

Jo-Jo's back now, yaaay! I know it's a very slow burn, but it's gonna start picking up from here on out, I swear <3
“Dutch,” Josephine breathed, standing beside Duke as she watched Dutch, older now, but still Dutch, step out of his tent. A whole wave of emotions hit her at the sight of him. Dutch had practically raised her, and he had easily taken up the role of her father. It had been hard to not have his comforting presence around the past six years. When the world tested her, she couldn’t run to Dutch. She couldn’t lay out her insecurities and worries in exchange for his advice.

A sudden rush of shame made her shoulders sag and she couldn’t help but glance around, catching all the new and old faces watching her. Would Dutch even want her back? She was a deserter, after all. Would he kill her? She hadn’t breathed a word about the gang to anyone, so he wouldn’t have a reason to end her life. What if he was angry? What if he made her leave again? What if —

“What are you waitin’ on, girl?” Dutch asked, and when Josephine looked at him, his arms opened and he wore an expectant look on his face.

Josephine’s hands found her skirts and lifted them as she ran towards him. She suddenly felt like a scared little girl again, reaching out for Dutch and clinging onto him like a lifeline. Their chests thumped when Josephine ran into his arms and she felt Dutch stumble back, arms wrapping around her securely when he found his footing. Josephine wouldn’t allow herself to cry, not like this in front of everyone. But happiness washed over her and she pressed her face against his chest.

“I’m sorry, I—” Josephine started, but Dutch shook his head and shushed her.

“Don’t be,” he said, though his tone told her they had many things to discuss in private. “I’m glad your back, Josephine. I always knew you’d come back.”

Deep down, Josephine knew that too. This was her family, it was where she belonged. The civilized world had been cruel to her, no matter how hard she worked and fought to make a space for herself. The ranch she’d worked at for a while fired her when she showed off her skills as a gun-woman during an attempted robbery. They realized she was an outlaw, a murderer, and a thief, and they strung her high and dry. She wanted so desperately to go straight and make a life for herself without robbing and killing, but it was hard. So, so hard. Up until she found bounty work, she had hit rock bottom and nearly became a working girl at a saloon. She told Dutch as much once they settled in his tent away from the prying eyes, and Dutch only shook his head and laughed.
“Now you know why we’re doing what we’re doing, my dear. We’re free out here, free to live as we wish. The civilization, it’s stifling. It’s cruel and ugly and only seems to beat down those who are less fortunate.” Josephine had nodded along, understanding truly now. The words he said, while they made sense to her when she was younger, absorbed completely now that she was a woman. She understood because she lived it, and she never wanted to live it again.

“I don’t wanna go back,” Josephine had said, shaking her head, and Dutch put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“You’ll always have a place with us, Miss Josephine. Always.”

He’d asked her all the questions she knew he would, such as her whereabouts, what she had been doing over the years, if she’d been caught by the law, and if she’d told anyone about them. She was honest and transparent, and it was one of the reasons she knew Dutch trusted her. Josephine never had any reason to lie to him.

That night, the camp held a party in Josephine’s honor after Dutch’s insistence. While the newer members were distrusting of her, Josephine knew no one would give up the excuse to drink and dance and make general fools of themselves. Josephine noticed Dutch still had his trusty gramophone, but before it could be turned on, Javier whipped out his guitar and the camp exploded in singing and joy.

Josephine sat with a bottle of whiskey in her hand, Arthur posted on her right as they passed the bottle between them. Javier began to play a song she recognized and she joined in, singing and smiling and feeling at ease for the first time in years. When a young man plopped himself down on her left, she paused her singing and looked at him.

“Sean Macguire, at yer service.” His voice held a thick Irish accent, and he had an air of overconfidence about him most young men did.

Josephine regarded him, taking in his shaggy red hair and the whiskers that peppered his face. “Josephine Davis,” she said plainly, taking his hand when he stuck it out. It was warm and sweaty.

“Tell me, Miss Davis. You ever been wit an Irishman?” He asked, his lips quirking into a flirtatious smirk.

“In fact, I have, Mr. Macguire,” Josephine said, tipping her nose up at him and looking forward. She
flicked some hair over her shoulder to add some flair to her clear disinterest. “I have to say, I was rather underwhelmed with the stench of whiskey and a quick finish. I’d not care to revisit the experience.”

She saw his expression change into one of embarrassment out of the corner of her eye and she had to fight to keep a straight face. His ego was bruised, and she reveled in that fact.

“Well ‘den,” Sean huffed, his expression shifting yet again into one of confidence. “I guess one day I’ll have to show ya how a real Irishman pleases his woman.”

“No, thank you. My left-hand does the job just fine.” She said, and Sean let out an indignant noise and left with a huff.

Once he was gone, Josephine couldn’t stop the snort that left her and she leaned into Arthur, covering her mouth as she laughed into her hand. Arthur joined her in her laughter and clapped her on the back.

“Jesus, woman, you sure are cruel now.” Arthur took a swig of the whiskey, then looked at her, the serious look on his face nearly making Josephine cry with laughter again. “You really lay with an Irishman?”

A snort cut through her laughter and Josephine covered her mouth again, shaking her head quickly. “Of course not!” She giggled and took the whiskey from Arthur, taking a drink to quell her laughter a little. The alcohol was hitting her fast—she hadn’t had much time or the coin to enjoy a drink that often. “I made friends with some workin’ girls, and they told me more stories about more men, and women, mind you than I’d ever care to share.”

The mention of working girls seemed to sober Arthur up and looked serious again. “You work with ‘em?” He asked, his voice guarded as he tried to cover up the concern in his tone.

“No,” Josephine shook her head and handed the whiskey back to Arthur. “No, but I thought about it. That’s how I met them—they were the ones who turned me off of it with their stories. Well, not just their stories, but the stories helped.”

“Good,” Arthur mumbled, taking a deep drink from the whiskey. Josephine watched him swallow it down with a wince and a hiss.
Now that she had a good view of him, she took him in unabashedly, bold from the alcohol. While she wanted to say he aged well, it was hard to tell with his unkept beard and hair. He hadn’t seen a proper barber in a while. There was the whisper of wrinkles on his forehead and crow’s feet around his eyes. When he turned his head to look at her, the shadows changed on his face and Josephine realized he was beautiful, regardless of all that. The orange light danced across the masculine cut of his jaw and cheekbone, and his eyes seemed to sparkle in the light. The urge to lean forward and kiss his full lips hit her like a train thanks to the alcohol, and she had to clench her fists to stop herself. He seemed to be taking her in as well and after a stretch of silence, he looked away.

“Years ain’t been kind to me,” Arthur said simply, scratching his fingers through his beard and over his mouth. “I’m a pretty sad sight nowadays.”

“That’s not true,” Josephine denied, shaking her head. “You’re still my Arthur.” The words made his cheeks flush and she could feel his discomfort. She backpedaled immediately, touching his scraggly jaw with her knuckles with a teasing smile. “A shave and a haircut wouldn’t hurt ya, though.”

That seemed to cut the tension and Arthur rolled his eyes. “Ya ain’t been back but coupla hours and you’re already tellin’ me to shave again.”

“Well,” Josephine grinned and shrugged her shoulders. “I always hated it when you didn’t. You look so much better when you ain’t hidin’ behind a big bushy beard.” To make her point, she tugged on the ends of the hair on his chin and he grunted indignantly.

“I’ll think about it,” he said and swatted her hand away.

She snatched his hat up and inspected it. She knew the story behind it and considering Arthur’s thoughts on his father, she never understood why he kept it around. “This old thing has a few more scrapes and bullet holes than I remember.”

“Happens,” Arthur said, letting her inspect his hat. “What happened to yours?”

“Fell off, and Duke stamped it to death. Just never got around to findin’ myself a new one.” It was something Josephine had been sad over for a while; Arthur had been the one to buy her the hat. She felt Arthur’s eyes on her before she returned the hat to his head and brushed her fingers against his shoulder. “‘Spose I best be gettin’ to sleep. If I know Miss Grimshaw, I know she’ll be workin’ me ‘till I collapse tomorrow.”
“Y’got that right,” Arthur chuckled and Josephine used his shoulder to stand. Her fingers lingered on him for a moment as she stepped over the log they’d been seated on.

With a yawn, Josephine grabbed her bedroll off of Duke and rolled it out near Abigail and Miss Grimshaw’s tent. As she settled on it, she turned her back to the fire and closed her eyes, the sound of music and life making her smile. The hardest part of her time away was sleeping in silence. Sleeping on the ground under the stars had never bothered her; only when it was only her and Duke and the silence did it bother her. Here, the noise made her feel safe, it blanketed her in sleepiness and warmth. That night, she dreamt of the stag again.

“Dammit, woman!” Arthur grumbled as Josephine ushered him towards the barber after they finished their duty of restocking on food and supplies a few days later.

“Come on, you’ll feel so much better.” Arthur heard her say as they approached the door. The barber looked out at them and Arthur felt his cheeks flush at the knowing smirk.

“Fine, fine. Just stop pushin’ me, would ya?” Arthur grumbled and righted his jacket when Josephine stopped pushing him.

“Best to listen to her, my friend.” The barber teased from inside when Arthur opened the door. “Our women know best, they do. Without ‘em, I fear we’d just be nothin’ more than filthy mongrels with hair down to our knees.”

“Damn right,” Josephine grinned, patting Arthur’s shoulder. “A haircut and a shave for this one right here, if you please.”

“Of course! Barber wouldn’t be my job title if I did no barbering.”

Arthur settled in the seat and watched Josephine in the mirror. She touched his shoulder and met his eyes through the reflective surface.

“I’ll wait for you outside, Arthur,” Arthur responded with a grunt and with a swish of the dress she
was wearing, she walked outside and seated herself at the bench. Arthur sighed and looked at himself, then immediately looked up at the barber, a deep discomfort settling in his stomach from the sight of himself.

“‘We best get you looking sharp for that one out there.’” The barber said and fiddled around with the long hair growing down Arthur’s neck. “Got a particular style you like?”

“No,” Arthur huffed out a chuckle. “Somethin’ new with the hair, I ‘spose, and just a trim for the rest.” The barber nodded and began to cut his hair, the soft snip of the blades filling the room.

“How short you willin’ to go?” The barber asked, making Arthur chuckle.

“‘S long as I’m not bald, I don’t really care. Surprise me. Or I guess, surprise her. I’m only doin’ this ‘cause she wants me to.” Maybe it was a little for himself, too. He’d always sort of enjoyed the feeling of a fresh haircut and shave done by a professional, but he wasn’t about to admit that aloud.

“You hooked yourself a good one, I do reckon.” Arthur furrowed his eyebrows and looked at the man in the mirror. “She your wife?”

“No,” Arthur mumbled immediately, eyes flicking towards the window where he could see the top of her head. “No, she ain’t.”

“You should do somethin’ about that. Women like that,” the man whistled and shook his head. “A man would kill for a looker like her.”

“She’s a looker, but stubborn as a mule.” The barber laughed at Arthur’s comment.

“It’s always easier to just do what a woman says. She’s almost always right, even if ya don’t wanna admit it.”

Arthur hummed in agreement and went silent as the barber cut his hair and trimmed up his beard. Josephine was pretty, Arthur saw no point in denying that. But a pretty woman like her, he couldn’t even begin to imagine why she’d consider an old bastard like himself. Not with all his scars, his wrinkles, his bad personality. She’d more likely be embarrassed about being with him than proud to be seen with him, or even take his last name.
The barber brushed off his shoulders and clothes when he was done, and Arthur regarded himself with a few twists of his head to admire the haircut. It certainly was short. He ran his fingers over the fade on the back of his head and stood up.

“Looks good,” Arthur complimented and inspected his facial hair, which was little more than stubble now, though it was shaped up and defined nicely. “Thanks, mister.” Arthur handed him the money he owed the barber for the haircut and a few cents extra as a tip, then exited the shop.

He looked to the left and saw Josephine stand up when the bell over the door jingled. She turned to him, and Arthur saw her stop in her tracks as she took it in. Quirking a smile, Arthur rubbed the back of his now fuzzy neck and head and looked at the ground, embarrassed.

“That bad, huh?” He asked, noting the pink on her cheeks when he flicked his eyes to her.

“Not at all!” Josephine said, stepping forward. He felt the tips of her fingers in his hair and cleared his throat. “Oh, Arthur, it looks so good. It took ten years off you, at least!”

The way she was looking at him wasn’t the way other women, and even a few men, had looked at him in the past. They’d looked at him like they wanted to undress him where he was standing and jump his bones. Like he was a prime piece of meat to eat. It annoyed him, and he could admit, it was partially why he let his appearance go, though it was mostly because he simply didn’t have the time. But not Josephine. Her gaze was soft and full of admiration. Why it made his insides flutter, Arthur had no clue.

But, he decided, maybe it wouldn’t be so hard to visit the barber more often.

Chapter End Notes

She’s reunited with the gang now! This chapter’s mostly meant as a filler/slice of life piece.

Lot’s of things are coming though, and Josephine and Arthur’s relationship will start to change <3
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Arthur and Jo have a little heart to heart and get interrupted. This chapter was pretty fun to write, and I hope y’all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You really mean all that stuff in your letter?” Arthur seemed to finally find the courage in himself to ask, and Josephine’s expression went soft.

The fire crackled between them as dusk drew near and the slight chill settled. They’d gone out hunting and rode further out than intended. Instead of pushing through the night and arriving at camp in the wee hours of the morning, they decided to set up a camp of their own and stay there for the night. Josephine was thankful for that; Miss Grimshaw had been grinding on Josephine’s nerves, and while she loved little Jack, he sure had a set of lungs on him. All his screaming and crying left her with an ache behind her eyes. They’d both felt cooped up, her and Arthur, and Josephine had suggested a hunting trip to get away.

“I did,” Josephine said, now slightly embarrassed about it. She’d been heartbroken and lonely when she wrote it. “I—I do mean it, still, somewhere in me I think.”

A shyness seemed to roll over the both of them and Josephine saw Arthur tip his head down, hiding behind the brim of his hat as he picked at the pheasant they’d killed and cooked.

“I’m sorry,” Josephine blurted, looking down at her trousers and picking at a new hole that had formed in the knee. “It was probably… Well, not probably, it was real inappropriate of me to send you somethin’ like that. I hardly remember what it says but… I remember blamin’ you for needin’ to leave, then I, I wrote that I love you. It’s—” Josephine sighed harshly, stressed at herself for being so stupid, and struggling to find words to explain herself without upsetting Arthur. “It sounded—it sounded like something Mary would do if I’m honest with you. And I never, ever want to be like her.”

Her eyes flicked upwards towards Arthur, and she could see the discomfort in his body language. Mary was still a sore subject. Or, or maybe it was the letter.

“It’s fine,” Arthur said, his voice thinly guarded. “I know it was my fault you left, I beat that man to death and you ain’t never seen me that angry before. I understand you was scared.” Was that really
what he thought?

“I wasn’t scared. Not of you. I was scared for you, Arthur. After… After Eliza and Isaac, you weren’t the same.” She said softly, tentatively. Josephine didn’t dare look up at his reaction. “I loved you so much, I couldn’t stand to sit there and watch you do what you were doing.”

“Well,” Arthur started, and Josephine heard the bitterness in his voice. “You’re back now. You impressed with the man I’ve become? I ain’t good, Josephine. No good for you, and too far gone to be deservin’ of any love anymore.”

Pain blossomed in her chest and Josephine stood up. Arthur’s eyes followed her as she walked around the fire and sat down next to him. She didn’t really have a plan she just… Needed to be close to him. She settled close enough to him so that their shoulders were touching and she could feel the warmth radiating off of him. It was a pleasant sort of comfort from the chilled air, and she couldn’t help but tilt her head and rest it on Arthur’s shoulder.

“Don’t say that,” she murmured. “You ain’t too far gone—everyone deserves to love and to be loved. Even you.” Josephine wanted to reach out and take Arthur’s hand, and kiss him and show him all the love she still held for him. But she didn’t. She didn’t want to push him too far. “I don’t care what you say, or what you think. Because I still love you, Arthur. I can’t just… make that go away. I tried to make it go away with Henri, and you know how that ended.”

Arthur didn’t say anything, but when he shifted and wrapped an arm around her back, it was all Josephine needed. It was comforting, even if she wasn’t sure what it meant. Josephine tilted her body and leaned against him, and when her thigh touched his, she felt a hardness on the outside of Arthur’s leg. Face twisting in confusion, Josephine reached down and grabbed it, finding Arthur’s leatherbound journal.

“You still carry this around?” She asked curiously, dragging her fingers over the worn leather and allowing the subject to shift for now.

“Had to get a new one recently. Filled up the last one.” Arthur said, and she felt his eyes on her as she inspected it.

“Can I look in it?”

“I—” Arthur started, then sighed and she felt him shift. “Sure.”
Josephine remembered how often she spotted Arthur scribbling in it. He always had it with him and was always doing something in it. She’d seen a few of his drawings when he showed them to her, but otherwise, he kept it under lock and key. It was like his diary, of sorts. Deeply personal, too personal, and Josephine suddenly felt bad for even asking.

“On second thought, maybe I better not—”

Deep, boyish giggling cut through the air and both Arthur and Josephine tensed.

“Oh, mama’s gonna be so happy with us, Joey.”

“A lady too. We got lucky tonight Jeffy, we did, we did.”

“Dinner for days!” The delighted giggling sent chills down Josephine’s spine and her hand moved to her holster, only to find it empty.

“Ah, ah. Don’t you try nothin’.” Her eyes searched around and found her revolver sitting on the stump where she had been before, having placed it there after cleaning it.

There was a cock of a shotgun and slowly Josephine raised her hands up. Arthur looked at her, confused, but Josephine winked at him and shook her head. She had a plan; one that may end in her getting shot, but it was a plan.

“Please,” Josephine said, voice feeble as she kept her hands high and turned around on her knees. “Please don’t hurt us.”

The two boys standing just a few feet away behind them could barely be considered human, Josephine realized. They were deeply inbred, and the sight of their faces made Josephine want to turn and run away. The taller one was lean and lanky, his arms twisted and long. His hair was stringy and greasy, falling down to his shoulders and framing his lopsided face. One eye was higher on the face than the other, his nose was fat and long. His upper lip looked as if it had been partially cut off, and it showed his rotting teeth. The other one was shorter and stockier, with thin wisps of hair clinging to his head. His face was almost exactly the same and what Josephine could easily assume was his brother. Both of their necks were almost wider than their heads, and their ears were large and stuck out.
“Oh, look Jeffy. She’s *pretty.* ” The tall one spoke, making them erupt into giggles.

“Real pretty, maybe mama will let us keep her.” Josephine felt Arthur stiffen beside her and she desperately hoped he wouldn’t try anything. They had two shotguns trained on them—one of them was bound to get shot if a firefight broke out.

“Please, just let us go. We ain’t—we ain’t from around here.” Josephine kept her voice soft as she looked at them. “See here? This is, this is my husband, Arthur. Arthur Callahan. And I’m Jessabelle.”

“I’m Jeffy, this here’s Joey.” The short one said, jabbing his finger at the taller one.

Josephine smiled kindly at them and nodded. “It’s nice to meet you, Jeffy, Joey.” The boys giggled again and looked almost bashful. Josephine wanted to throw up. “See we—we came out here to hunt and—”

“I don’t see no deer.” Jeffy pointed out, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Not deer, pheasant. We… we have some left. Would… would you care to join my husband and me?” Arthur looked at her aghast and Josephine kicked him subtly behind the log.

The boys turned to talk among themselves and Arthur yanked on her belt. “What the hell’re you doin’?” He demanded in a low whisper. “Why ain’t we just shootin’ ‘em?”

“Because, my gun is over there,” she gestured with her eyes. “So is the rest of the pheasant.”

“Jeffy says he don’t want no bird. But I do.” Joey said, and Josephine gathered he was the simpler of the two. She smiled and slowly stood up, carefully lowering her hands.

“Your husband ain’t say much,” Jeffy said as Josephine made her way around the fire. As she rounded it and walked by the stump, she snatched her gun up and tucked it in the back of her pants as she turned to face them.

“Arthur’s rather simple if I’m honest. He don’t talk much. He’s a wonderful hunter, though.” As
Josephine was preparing the pheasant, she could feel the boys eyes on her and chills ran down her spine.

“On second thought, Miss Jessabelle, we oughta wait.” Josephine stopped and watched the boys slowly approach their camp. “We like lady meat much more than a bird.”

“Yeah, lady meat.” Joey agreed and grinned at her, the sight of him making her queasy.

“Mama’s gonna be real proud of us. But if she don’t let us keep the lady, I won’t mind too much. Love me that lady meat. It’s real tender, ‘specially the meat from the thighs.” Jeffy said, making Josephine stiffen.

“Don’t take it too personally, Miss Jessabelle and Mr. Arthur. But we gotta eat too.” Joey said and Josephine began to tremble as the boys drew closer.

“Oh, please don’t!” Josephine wailed, letting fake crocodile tears well up in her eyes. “I-I’ll do anything! Just let us go!”

“Anything?” Joey asked, and the boys looked at each other.

“Anything! Please!”

“Show us your bubbies,” Jeffy said as he stepped closer. “Ain’t never seen any ‘side’s mama or Sissy’s, or from meat.”

“Yeah! You wear pants like a feller, but you’re a lady. Show us your bubbies.”

Josephine’s let out a fake, wet sob and straightened herself. With shaky hands, she reached up and unbuttoned the first button on her shirt, and the boys tittered excitedly. She let out a little noise, then reached to untuck her shirt. One hand disappeared behind her back and she grabbed her revolver. In an instant, her fake tears were gone and she raised the gun at the boys. She saw Arthur move and raise his gun as well.

“Sorry, boys. You picked the wrong people to have for dinner.” Josephine said, and the boys
stiffened and lifted their guns. Time seemed to slow down as she took aim and fired, sending a bullet straight through Jeffy’s forehead.

“Jeffy!” Joey screamed as his brother’s stocky body crumpled to the ground. “No, Jeffy! No!”

The shotgun went off in Joey’s hands, the bullet whizzing by Josephine far too close for comfort. Arthur laid a few bullets into Joey until he fell too, and Josephine gasped sharply.

“Jesus Christ, woman!” Arthur shouted as Josephine dropped herself onto the log and began to laugh. “You nearly got yourself killed!”

“They wanted to eat us, Arthur.” Josephine laughed, raking her hands down her face as she laughed, the situation totally absurd and hysterical to her in its absurdity.

Arthur was moving around their camp quickly now, packing things up with rough movements and jerks of his arms. “We gotta go, now. Folks like these, they ain’t ever the only ones.”

“Right, right,” Josephine sobered up and stood, helping Arthur roll up the bedrolls and stick everything else into the saddlebags. “Let’s go, I dunno about you, but I don’t think I wanna be meetin’ mama and Sissy.”

It was Arthur’s turn to snort as they mounted up and rode the horses hard away from their temporary camp. Josephine cooed to Duke quietly, trying to calm him from the gunshots that had spooked him. They rode the horses for a few hours until the sun had completely disappeared and they were a safe distance away from where those boys had been ‘hunting.’ Rain began to trickle down on them and Josephine groaned in frustration.

“Least the rain will make them lose our scents,” Josephine said when they found some cover under a few trees. She lit a lantern and slid off of Duke, holding it up so Arthur could see.

“Ha-ha,” Arthur said humorlessly, dismounting Boadicea and pulling his tent out of his saddlebag. “Don’t bother settin’ yours up.”

“Oh, kickin’ me out to the rain now. Take it it’s my punishment?” Josephine teased, standing by Duke as she watched Arthur set up the pup tent.
“No, we can just share mine. I don’t particularly feel like helpin’ your cursin’, frustrated ass try to set up your own. Takes too long.” Arthur said as he pitched the tent easily and staked it into the ground.

“I know how to pitch a tent, Arthur.” Josephine griped indignantly, grabbing their bedrolls from the horses and tucking them under her arms. Arthur held back the flap for her and gestured to her.

“Sure you do,” he said, and Josephine gave him a halfhearted glare when she saw his teasing smile. “After you, my lady.”

“Oh, so I’m a lady now?” Josephine shook her head as she knelt down into the tent and rolled out both of their bedrolls.

“Accordin’ to those inbred hicks, you’re a real fine lady. Got lady meat and everythin’.”

“Poor bastards,” Josephine chuckled, setting the lantern between the bedrolls and collapsing onto hers with a sigh. “Died thinkin’ about lady meat and ‘bubbies.’”

Arthur disappeared from the opening of the tent for a moment, but she heard him hitching the horses and dropping some hay for them to eat. He came into the tent a few moments later, tying the flaps closed and sinking onto his back. Josephine rolled onto her stomach, flicking her hair out to fan over the thin pillow and floor of the tent. She tucked her head in her arms and watched Arthur for a moment, watching him take out his journal and pencil.

“You stayin’ up?” Josephine mumbled, sleepiness making her voice soft. Arthur’s eyes met hers when she spoke, the light from the lantern making them bright and striking.

“Not for long. Light gonna bother you?” He asked, ever concerned as he reached for the lantern to blow it out if she said it would.

“No, I’ll be fine,” she said and watched as his hand retreated. With a yawn, she rolled on her side facing away from Arthur and shifted around until she was able to find a decently comfortable position to sleep in.

The soft sound of Arthur’s pencil on paper filled the tent, making her eyes grow heavy. She closed
them and listened to it, comforted by the scratching of it and the sound of Arthur’s even breathing. She couldn’t be sure if he was writing or drawing, but it didn’t matter, not really. As she was drifting to sleep, listening to Arthur and the soft pattering of the rain on the canvas, she heard Arthur sigh.

“Jo?”

“Mm,” Josephine hummed, shifting a little as she was pulled gently from sleep.

“What in the hell possessed you to fall in love with a man like me?”

The answer was so obvious to Josephine, but to Arthur, she knew he was oblivious. He was smart, smarter than almost all of them. But he could be dense as a rock, especially when it came to women. The way he viewed himself had no help in that, either.

“I’ve loved you since I was eighteen,” Josephine mumbled, rolling onto her back to look at him. He looked shocked, and rightly so. “Maybe—maybe even before that. I don’t, I don’t really know. But I knew I loved you when you first took me to see Eliza.” Pain flashed in his eyes and Josephine took his hand in an act of fatigued boldness. Surprised that he allowed it, she held his hand, eyes inspecting his cracked knuckles and fingers, the pads thick with callouses. “It was your kindness that got me. Still gets to me,” she smiled and laced their fingers together.

“I ain’t…” Arthur started, his hand squeezing gently around her own. She lifted her gaze back to him and found him staring at the tent wall, searching for words. “I ain’t worthy of you. You deserve someone better, someone who—”

“Nonsense,” Josephine interrupted him. “You’re more than worthy of me, Arthur. You’re the only man I’ve ever wanted.”

By the look on his face, Arthur didn’t seem convinced. But he seemed to be deep in thought. Josephine squeezed his hand again, rubbing the back of it and his wrist with her free hand.

“I’m gonna sleep,” she said, and Arthur’s cheeks went red at the realization that he’d been the one who woke her up and continued to keep her up.

“Right, sorry,” Arthur mumbled. His hand flexed softly, in question, but Josephine held onto it. “Never gonna get my hand back, am I?”
“Mm… not tonight, no.” A tired giggle escaped her lips and her eyes closed. Arthur’s hand was a warm, comforting weight in her own and the simple little touch made her feel safe.

Arthur shifted and she heard the pages of his journal shifting as he opened a new page. His left hand stayed settled comfortably in her own, while the other began to scratch away. This time, Arthur stayed quiet, and Josephine’s hand relaxed around his as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

They talked, now feelings ensue! Little smut incoming for the next chapter, so stay tuned!
Josephine’s thirtieth birthday came and went, and it had been nearly ten months since she was welcomed back into the Van der Linde Gang. They’d picked up two new girls — Tilly Jackson and Mary-Beth Gaskill. Tilly was an outlaw herself, and on the run from the last gang she’d been a part of. She was sweet and kind and got along well with just about everyone. Mary-Beth was picked up by Dutch and Arthur while being chased by a few men she’d pickpocketed, and stayed with them for a few days until she ultimately chose to stay. Josephine liked her, though the girl was too naive yet, with very girlish views on the world and romance.

In those ten months, little Jack, who was almost two, had learned how to walk and sometimes his baby babble sounded like words. He loved to talk, even though just about nobody but Abigail could understand what he was saying.

Josephine sat at the edge of camp with said babbling baby, the summer heat making her sticky and sweaty. Abigail had run into town with the girls and Sean to go pick up some supplies and do some thieving and had tasked Josephine with watching Jack until she returned. It wasn’t a task she disliked at all, as she liked little Jack and spending time with him was always fun.

“Jo-Jo!” Jack said from where he sat about two feet away, tapping away and whacking his wooden tinker toys together.

“Hm?” Josephine turned her eyes to him and sat up a little. He babbled on nonsensically, but Josephine was able to pull out the words ‘hot’ and ‘off.’ He tugged on the shirt he was wearing uselessly and Josephine got the message just fine.

“I know, Jack. It’s real hot today.” Josephine leaned forward and helped Jack get his shirt off, his skin already tanned from how often he ran around without it. She used the end of it to wipe the sweat and drool off his face, then laid it out to dry.
Jack dropped his tinker toys and rolled back into the grass. Josephine chuckled and leaned over, tickling his sides and making the boy squeal and kick. Their laughter drew the attention of a few of the gang members, and it wasn’t long before a familiar gentle gunslinger came meandering over.

“What are you two gettin’ up to today?” Arthur asked, and Josephine looked up at him lazily, the sun and heat sucking away all of her energy. Even in the shade, the heat was sweltering.

“Just muckin’ around in the grass, waitin’ for the sun to go down so it ain’t so hot,” Josephine answered, smiling up at Arthur. She could see the sweat on his face and his chest where he’d unbuttoned the first few buttons of his work shirt.

Over the months, Josephine and Arthur had been dancing around each other. Their relationship had long since gone beyond just close friends if the lingering, tender touches and soft looks were anything to go by. It was tentative and almost shy, their relationship. Josephine knew what she wanted, but she left it in the hands of Arthur, letting him take his time and make moves when he felt comfortable enough to do so. He wasn’t an intimate man in the slightest; he was shy and unsure when it came to her, but Josephine didn’t mind. Arthur was unsure of where he stood with her, but when the other men of the camp tried to put the moves on her, Arthur was there in an instant, sliding an arm around her while not so politely telling them to fuck off. Mary-Beth had giggled and gone red when she first saw it, gushing to Josephine about how she wished she had a man like that for herself.

“Why don’t we go swimmin’?” Arthur asked, making Josephine perk up immediately. A dip in the water sounded lovely. “There’s a lake, ain’t too far from here. We could pack up Boadicea and Duke and head out ‘till Abigail gets back.”


“Swim,” Jack parroted with a quick, excited nod of his head. “Swim swim!”

With that, Arthur headed off to prepare some provisions for their little trip, and Josephine picked up Jack and his shirt and went to Susan, telling her where they were headed and to tell Abigail that as well if they weren’t back by the time his mother returned.

To her displeasure, Josephine slid on some stockings and her boots for the ride, and did the same for Jack, though the little boy was much more vocal about his discomfort. Once he was dressed, she picked him back up and situated him on her hip, snagging a few peaches from Pearson’s wagon.
before walking to the horses.

“You wanna ride with me, or Uncle Arthur?” Josephine asked as she handed Arthur the peaches to set in his saddle bag.

Jack seemed speculative before he grabbed at Arthur. “Arfur, Arfur.”

Arthur climbed up into his saddle and Josephine handed Jack to Arthur once he settled. She watched with a concerned eye, making sure Arthur had a good grip on him before she swung herself onto her own horse bareback, deciding not to tack him up due to the heat.

“You got him good?” Josephine asked as they pulled their horses away from the hitching posts and headed into the woods surrounding the camp.


“Oh, can it,” Josephine laughed and flicked her eyes over to them. It was always a cute sight, Arthur and Jack. Despite the things he said, Arthur was a good man and would make a good father.

“What’d you bring to eat?”

“Always thinkin’ about food.” Arthur teased her.

“Hey—I hate Pearson’s food. If there’s a chance to eat anything but the shit he makes, I’m gonna do it.”

Arthur laughed and shook his head. “I brought some salted venison and some cans of corn and strawberries. Also got those peaches you gave me. Also figured I’d try my hand at fishin’, see if I can catch us somethin’ to eat.”

“Oh, you better let me do the fishin’. If you do it we’ll be waitin’ for hours.”

“I forget just how cruel you can be, woman,” Arthur said, making Josephine grin cheekily.
Soon enough, they broke through the trees and walked their horses down to the bank of the lake. Josephine rode Duke right up to the water, though when she tried to pull him to a stop, he continued on, walking through the water.

“Oh shit—Duke, no, come on, wait ‘till I get off!” Her words went ignored as he began to paw at the water and nicker excitedly, and Josephine could hear Arthur and Jack laughing behind her. Josephine grabbed Duke’s neck and mane as he dropped his knees into the water and laid down. The water seeped through the bottom of Josephine’s dress and she groaned. “Duke! Come on, get up!”

The horse ignored her and snorted happily, then flopped down on his side in the water, throwing Josephine into the lake with an indignant splash. Josephine sat up, the water only lapping around her waist.

“You shit!” Josephine shouted, playfully splashing water at Duke, who only whinnied and shook his head around as he sat up. “I’m glad I rode you bareback—you woulda ruined your saddle.”

Josephine struggled to her feet and scratched Duke’s head and neck before trudging to the shore, her dress now waterlogged and heavy. She began to unbutton the shirt as Arthur and Jack dismounted and Arthur took off Boadicea’s saddle and tack before leading her to the water to play in too if she wished.

“You sure do got a handle on that horse of yours,” Arthur teased, grinning at her as he unbuttoned his shirt and watched Josephine strip down to her chemise and bloomers.

Josephine flicked him off as she took her dress and hung it up over a low hanging tree branch. “What can I say? He’s ticked off about the heat too.”

Josephine returned to Jack and helped him out of his boots and shirt and shorts until he was sporting only the cloth diaper Josephine had changed not long before their trip. Once he was stripped down, the boy barreled off towards the shore, making Josephine laugh and run after him. She scooped him up before he could get to the water and situated him on her hip.

“You coming, slowpoke?” Josephine teased Arthur, turning to look back at said man. Her breath stilled in her chest when she saw him ambling towards them, dressed only in his drawers.

Arthur constantly complained about being old, and the comments about himself only got worse when
he turned thirty-four. But his body, the one he said was old and ugly, was beautiful. Masculine and strong, with wide shoulders and strong biceps and a chest that Josephine just wanted to lay her head on and kiss. His skin was tanned and sunkissed and dusted with hair. His muscles weren’t overly defined, but the thickness of his torso and arms and even his legs told her he was no old man, and he was not one to be messed with.

She realized she was staring and realized that Arthur had caught her staring, and a flush reddened her cheeks. She looked away immediately and down at Jack, taking a deep breath as she stepped into the water and waded out.

Jack giggled and squealed excitedly when the water touched his toes. He kicked at it, making small splashes as he slapped his feet down on the surface.

“That’s it! Feels nice, huh? Uncle Arthur sure did have a great idea.” Josephine hummed, dipping lower and smiling at Jack’s responding squeal when the water rose up to his tummy and chest.

A big, warm hand pressed against the small of her back under the surface of the water and Josephine turned to look at the person attached to it. Arthur stood just behind her shoulder, smiling softly down at Jack.

“You enjoyin’ yourself there, Jack?” The little boy giggled and nodded, responding with a soft ‘yah’ as he kicked and played. “I’m gonna swim out a way, Jo. Shout if you need anythin’.”

“I will,” Josephine smiled and touched his arm, letting it linger there until he pulled away and waded deeper into the lake. “Let’s go sit on the shore, hm?”

Josephine carried Jack back up to shallower water. She sat down where the water barely reached over her hips and sat Jack down next to her. With a steadying hand on his back, she let him kick and splash and play with the rocks. Occasionally she splashed some water on him to keep him cool.

Only a handful of minutes later Arthur returned, his hair slicked back and his skin glistening from the water. A wave of shyness made Josephine look away and she ruffled Jack’s hair.

“Here, I’ll sit with him. You go have a swim and cool off,” Arthur said, and Josephine flicked her eyes to him. He sat down on the opposite side of Jack, and the boy giggled and showed him the rock he’d been playing with.
“Shout if you need me,” Josephine teased, splashing Arthur lightly before she stood and waded out.

The water felt heavenly once she submerged herself. It was cool and quiet, and soon she found herself swimming around, then floating on the surface on her back and staring up at the vast blue of the sky.

As she grew tired, Josephine swam back to relieve Arthur, and they traded like that for nearly two hours. When Abigail came to fetch Jack, she found Jack and Josephine napping in the shade while Arthur sat against a tree not too far away, sketching the two secretly in his journal.

The sun was going down by that time, but the temperature had barely dropped. Abigail took Jack with her back to camp, but Josephine and Arthur made no move to leave. It was quiet, a soft pleasantness that they didn’t get much at camp. Arthur set to building a fire for the two of them, and Josephine remained in the grass, watching the sky turn pink and orange as the sun went down.

“I’m gonna swim,” Josephine said, looking at Arthur and leaving a silent invitation as she stood.

Arthur grunted in acknowledgment, paying no mind as he lit the fire. That is, until he heard the soft ruffling of clothes down on the shore, and looked up to find Josephine walking naked into the water, her chemise and bloomers nothing but a small pile in the rocks. His breath stilled in his chest as he gazed upon her, upon her dark hair that spilled down her back, the soft curve of her waist, the dimples that rested at the small of her back, and the soft, supple flesh that made up her bottom and thighs. She looked back at him then, and Arthur swore she was an angel.

A soft smile curled on her lips and she turned to him fully. Against his will, his eyes traveled over her body, taking in her small breasts, nipples peaked from the chill of the air. His eyes traveled further still, mapping out her waist and hips and the place between her legs, hidden from his eyes with dark curls. He’d seen her naked before, from when he washed her, and when he accidentally walked in on her. But this time, she wanted him to look. And he allowed himself. Only because she wanted him to. Only because this was for him, and only him.

Josephine watched him stand, watched him walk towards her and drop his drawers next to the pile of her own under clothes. As he drew closer to her, Josephine stepped back into the water, just out of his reach. Teasing.

She sank into the water and swam backwards until the water was at her waist. She watched Arthur, could see the pink on his cheeks and the frustrated look in his eyes. Lifting her hand out of the water, she gestured, come here. And he did.
It was a little dance.

Arthur drew closer, and Josephine would slip away. A soft chuckle, a grunt in frustration, it was their music.

When Arthur finally caught her with an arm around her waist, it was simply because Josephine allowed it. He drew her against his chest, and his warmth seeped through her back. They stood like that, back to chest, Arthur’s arms wrapped around her waist—too modest to touch anywhere else—, breathing slowly and steadily.

Josephine closed her eyes and leaned her head back against Arthur’s shoulder, and he leaned his cheek against her temple. She felt his head turn, felt his lips on her temple, on her cheek, soft and gentle and seeking. Her arm was drawn up and she touched his hair and cupped jaw.

His grip loosened, only slightly, as she turned around and pressed against him. Their chests touched and gooseflesh erupted over her skin. A shiver ran down her spine and Arthur’s arms tightened, warm palms pressed against her back.

“You cold?” He rasped, and Josephine ran her thumb over his bottom lip.

“No,” she whispered, gazing up at Arthur. His eyes were soft and clear, and Josephine reached up to push away some hair that had fallen over his forehead. “No, I’m not cold.”

“Good,” he murmured, and one of his hands retreated from her back and laid softly on her collarbone.

Josephine knew he hated his hands. Hated how rough and calloused they were, and told her once he was worried about touching her and hurting her with them. But now, now they were gentle, a featherlight touch ghosting over her collarbones, shoulders, and neck. He pulled some of her hair that had fallen over her shoulder back to join the rest, and then he was leaning down, lips soft and stubble rough as he placed a gentle kiss where her neck met her shoulder.

Josephine’s hands slid up his back, over his shoulders, and into his hair. She carded her fingers through it, finding it was soft, softer than even her own, and clean from swimming. When Arthur’s lips left her skin and he pulled back, she moved her hands from his hair to his cheeks, gently cupping his face in her palms.
“Arthur,” she whispered, feeling the heat from Arthur’s blush under her thumbs. “Am I spoken for?”

The silence was deafening, for a moment. At first, she thought she overstepped something, broke their tentative courting with bold actions and words. Panic settled in her and Arthur must have felt it, must have seen it and realized he hadn’t said anything.

“Yes,” he said as Josephine began to pull away. She stopped and looked at him, her expression softening. “Yes, if you’ll have me,” he mumbled, looking down at their naked bodies first, before looking away as bashfulness made his neck and chest red.

“Of course I’ll have you,” she whispered, petting his cheek and neck with a tenderness Arthur wasn’t used to.

“I ain’t—I ain’t-a soft man, you know that.” He murmured, and Josephine could practically hear the self-deprecating thoughts. I don’t deserve a woman like you. I’m too old. I’m too rough. “I’m old, I ain’t kind, I—”

“Shut up, Arthur,” Josephine said, sliding her hand around the back of his neck and pulling him down.

The kiss was awkward and rough, more of sliding of lips until Arthur joined in and helped. Their eyes slipped shut and their tongues met, tentatively at first, then bolder. Arthur tasted faintly like tobacco and peaches, and something else that was unique only to Arthur. It was addicting. A soft gasp left Josephine’s lips and they broke apart, pressing their foreheads together and enjoying the closeness.

Josephine let her lips wander, kissing at his cheeks, pecking his lips, and pulling away slightly when Arthur tried to chase her and kiss her again. She let them drag along his jaw, pressed a tender kiss to the little scars on his chin, and dragged them down his neck. She explored the hard planes of his chest with her hand, while her lips mapped out his neck, noting spots that made him shift and gasp when she nibbled or kissed them.

“You’re killin’ me, woman,” Arthur grumbled, and it made Josephine release a short little laugh.

She straightened back up and kissed him again, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pressing them impossibly closer. She could feel the hard line of him, warm and smooth against her belly just
above the curls between her legs. She pressed their hips a little closer, making him moan, and Josephine could feel wetness gathering at her center. Her thighs pressed together to relieve some of the aching, but it only seemed to make it worse.

“I’m cold, Arthur,” she whispered, hands tangling in his hair again.

His arm wrapped around her waist, the other one searching, down, down, until he grabbed the meat of her thigh and hauled her up, the water splashing loudly around them. Josephine’s legs wrapped securely around his waist and her arms around his shoulders. They were the same height now, and Josephine used the new height to lean in and steal another kiss. She feared she’d never be able to stop.

“Let’s fix that, shall we?” A smile curled Josephine’s lips skyward and she nodded.

As Arthur began to walk out of the water, the summer air left Josephine’s skin cooling and goosebumps erupted again. She clung to Arthur, feeling naked and vulnerable so out in the open like this. The sun had long since set and the sky had turned purple and blue as it said goodnight to the sun. A shiver ran down her spine and she tucked her face against his neck, licking at that tender spot she’d found before. She could feel Arthur’s muscles working between them as he walked, and all that power and strength made another gentle wave of arousal course through her to settle between her legs with a throb.

He laid her out on the bedroll she’d been napping on in the grass, the fire crackling and rolling only a few feet beside them. It warmed her up almost immediately, added with Arthur’s warm presence cradled intimately between her thighs and caging her in.

Their mouths met again, and Josephine reveled in the plushness of Arthur’s full lips. His stubble scratched at her skin, making it feel tender and raw, but Josephine couldn’t find it anywhere in herself to complain. The hair dusting Arthur’s chest and trailing down his belly tickled her skin, and another shiver rolled down her spine from it.

Arthur pulled away, and Josephine gazed up at him as he sat up, leaving her body exposed to the summer air. She stared at him, and he stared right back as they took each other in. Arthur’s cheeks were flushed red, and lips were love bit and soft looking. His eyes shifted down, taking in her skin and her curves, his hands remaining firmly planted on her waist, his thumbs gently stroking her skin.

“Touch me,” Josephine whispered, and she felt his cock jump against her thigh as his eyes shot up to hers.
When he didn’t move, Josephine realized he was afraid, perhaps. Afraid of hurting her with his hands that to him were too rough. Josephine reached down and grasped his wrist, pulling it up towards her face. She kissed his palm first, then his knuckles, then up to his fingertips. She kissed each one tenderly, eyes locked with Arthur’s.

“I trust you,” Josephine whispered, guiding his hand by the wrist to her chest. She laid his palm on her breast, then covered his hand with her own. “I ain’t-a doll; I ain’t gonna break. If there’s,” Josephine let out a shaky sigh as Arthur’s hand began to move. Her nipple scraped along his palm, and he tightened his grip a little, squeezing, experimenting. “Somethin’ I don’t like, I’ll tell ya.”

His hands began to explore, emboldened by her words, and Josephine watched him with hooded eyes. His hands, which had been the last hand’s many men had felt before they died, touched her with a gentleness she’d never experienced before. He could kill her, could break her bones and snap her neck, but he didn’t. His hands were incredibly soft and gentle with her, cradling her like a precious piece of glass.

“You’re beautiful,” Arthur murmured after a little while, while his hand squeezed her breast and fingers teased her nipple. His other hand traveled up and down her side, from her ribs to her waist to her hips, then over the plane of her belly and up between the valley of her breasts. It rested on her neck and her pulse jumped under his fingertips as he explored the soft skin.

“I could say the same about you,” she said, watching his eyes follow the trail his hand made. When their eyes met, Josephine reached out and cupped his cheek, running her thumb along his cheekbone. “I mean it,” she whispered, to give Arthur a little reassurance to hopefully quiet some of those dark thoughts she knew had to be running amok in his mind.

She sat up and Arthur’s arms hook around her waist with ease, helping to hold her up and keep her close. It was her turn to let her hands wander, and she dragged them wherever she could, marveling in the expanse of skin laid out for her and the man that lived in it. She traced her fingertips down his chest, over his ribs, ran her knuckles along his belly, the hair there tickling at her knuckles. Boldness made her hands move lower, and when her palms skimmed his hips, he let out a frustrated noise and she felt his member jerk.

Josephine leaned back a little and looked down, curiosity getting the better of her as she dragged her index finger up his cock, and the grunted out moan was like music to her ears. She wrapped her fingers around him, warm and silky in her grip, and experimented with a gentle tug from root to tip. When she pulled downwards, the skin pulled back and revealed the head, smooth and shiny in the light. She wanted to lean down and taste him, lick up that little clear bead of liquid that had gathered and make him positively sing. She continued moving her hand, slowly, up and down, a twist from time to time, until Arthur’s eyes closed and he gripped her wrist.
“Stop,” he murmured, and Josephine felt his cock give a twitch when he pulled her hand away. “Keep doin’ that, and I’ll be done.”

“I want you inside me,” Josephine murmured, almost drunk off of arousal.

“I’ll take care of ya,” he whispered, and he sure did live up to that promise.

His fingers danced down her chest and belly, then as he reached her thighs, Josephine parted them wider, very familiar with this little dance due to all her time spent alone. Her arm shook at the effort to keep herself up, so she laid back, her thighs slightly elevated on Arthur’s lap. Frustration built in her when Arthur just kept rubbing teasing circles with his thumbs up and down her inner thighs, dipping close to where she ached and dripped, but never close enough.

“Arthur,” she huffed, voice sounding high and whiny. “Arthur, please just—”

“Shh,” he interrupted, and when their gazes met, Josephine was shocked at the intensity in those blue eyes. “Let me take care of ya.”

He obliged her pleading anyway, fingers slipping between her legs and lapping at the wetness that had gathered there. His thumb spread the slick around, dragging it up to her clit before he began to circle it, lightly at first, then firmer when Josephine’s back arched and she moaned, soft and low.

Never before had a man touched her like Arthur was touching her. The slow, firm circles were heavenly, and when he slipped a finger inside her, she swore she saw stars. He was slow and careful with her, working her clit and opening her up at an easy, unrushed pace. Warmth built in her at a snail's pace, but it was good. It was wonderful and pleasurable and she made sure to moan and tell as much to him. He slipped a second finger in, and Josephine clenched down on the thick digits, her own fingers digging into his hip and the grass.

She could feel the sweat dotting on her skin, cooling her off as it dried. He worked her slowly but ever steadily towards her end, thumb working faster and faster until the coil in her belly snapped and her back arched. She cried out, hips jerking and rolling through the orgasm Arthur had given her. He worked her through it until her thighs pressed together and he took the silent message, pulling his fingers out and wiping them on the grass.

Josephine’s limbs felt heavy and jelly-like as Arthur leaned down and kissed her. She moaned again,
fingers tangling in his hair. She held him there, panting softly into his mouth as they kissed.

“Arthur,” she breathed, dropping her head against the bedroll. He looked down at her, gaze heated and lustful. The look itself was one she had never seen before, and it made heat shoot down to her cunt. She reveled in the fact that that look was for her, and only her. “More,” she whispered, and Arthur’s face changed, almost into a look of bashfulness.

“You’re really gonna kill me, woman.” He chuckled, voice breathy and a bit strained from his need. Josephine smiled cheekily at him, leaning up to kiss him again.

She felt his weight shift slightly, heard him spit into his palm, then felt his arm against her thigh as he slicked himself up and began to rub the head of his cock between her folds. The tip caught her clit and made her gasp, legs twitching around his hips from oversensitivity.

“Relax,” Arthur breathed when she tensed, and Josephine took a deep breath. His cock pressed against her opening, then his hips were shifting forward and he was sliding in.

The stretch burned, but it wasn’t entirely unpleasant. His hips drove forward until they were pressed firmly against her and he was seated fully inside. Josephine gasped, then moaned and wrapped her arms around Arthur’s shoulders. She clenched down on him, experimenting with the new fullness, and it was enough to drag a deep groan from Arthur. His hips pressed forward, grinding down on her, and Josephine dug her nails into his back.

“You okay, Jo?” Arthur asked, his voice strained and husky.

“Yes,” Josephine panted, tilting her head back. Arthur dropped down to his forearms, trapping her head between them. One hand moved to her hair, pulling it out from underneath her head and tangling his fingers in it. “Move, Arthur. Please,” she groaned, growing frustrated now.

He didn’t need to be told twice.

His hips pulled back and when they pressed back in, Josephine’s back arched and she moaned again, fingers flying to his hair. It felt good. Better than she could have ever imagined. Each push and pull made her body sing, and as the pace picked up, the pleasure continued to mount and drag her towards that dazzling end again.
Josephine’s head fell to the side and she moaned openly, and eventually, Arthur became more vocal, boldened by the pleasure he was giving to her and receiving in turn. His pace picked up again and their lips met, hard and sloppy. His hand moved downwards, between their sweaty, rutting bodies, and Josephine nearly screamed when his fingers found her clit and began to work it in quick, firm circles.

Her end came even stronger than the last, leaving her vision white and her back arching.

“Arthur!” She cried, legs shaking as they tightened around his waist.

“Josephine, Jo, Jo,” Arthur panted, head tilted down close to her ear, moaning and groaning quietly.

Just for her. Only for her.

Each push and pull of his hips dragged Josephine deeper through her orgasm until she was left shaking and gasping. His thrusts grew erratic and Josephine could feel how tightly his muscles had coiled. With a deep groan, Arthur pulled out of her and rutted into his hand until his orgasm hit him and he came, painting her belly and pubic hair with thick ropes and drops of white.

He collapsed then, body layering over Josephine’s comfortably. Her hands found his back and she pulled him close, turning her head to kiss him. Arthur’s hands curled around her and Josephine felt so safe suddenly. Safe and comfortable and floaty.

She finally understood that feeling Miss Grimshaw and Annabelle had described.

But she felt better. Ten times better than that, at least. A soft, content sigh left her lips at the warmth that coursed through her and she dropped her head against the grass, closing her eyes and savoring the afterglow.

“You okay?” Arthur asked, concerned, his voice a bit husky with a breathy lilt to it. “Was it…”

“No, Arthur. It was perfect,” Josephine laughed, opening her eyes and gazing up at him. A smirk curled over her lips and she pecked his lips. “For such an old man, you still got it.”
Arthur shook his head and chuckled. He looked as if he was going to say something, but the words fizzled on his lips and she watched him gaze down at her, his expression changing into something soft. Something deeply admiring and open. He looked deep in thought, and she felt his fingers come up, stroking and cradling her cheek tenderly.

“Are you okay?” Josephine shot back softly.

“I love you,” Arthur said, and Josephine froze. It was the first time she ever heard those words come out of his mouth, and she knew it’d been years since he’d said them at all. “I… I do. I love you. Just… just wanted you to know that.” Arthur continued, averting his gaze.

A wave of emotion hit her and her eyes went blurry with water. Arthur wasn’t good with words, but she knew what he meant, knew all that went unspoken. A soft, happy sob bubbled up from her throat and Arthur looked down at her, horrified.

“Why are you cryin’? Did I—” Josephine shook her head and let out a wet chuckle.

“No, you stupid man.” Josephine laughed, leaning up to kiss him. “I’m just happy. I love you, too.”

“Never understood why women cry when they’re happy,” Arthur grumbled against her lips. “It’s confusin’.”

“I don’t understand it either,” she murmured, shifting when Arthur rolled off of her and sat by her hip. His hand found her waist and he dragged his fingers over her stomach before he used his palm to wipe up the mess he’d made on her.

“You wanna go back to camp?” He asked, and Josephine shook her head.

“Not tonight,” she murmured and sat up, watching Arthur stand and nod.

“I’ll get a tent set up,” he said as he made his way for the horses, though nearly tripped and fell when he turned around and headed to the lake, quickly retrieving their discarded underclothes.

His cheeks were red as he pulled his drawers on and handed Josephine her chemise and bloomers.
Like a true gentleman he looked away as she pulled the chemise over her head, and Josephine couldn’t help but smile. It was cute how bashful he was, considering that they had just been rutting in the grass like wild animals.

Josephine stoked the fire and when the tent was set up, she picked up her bedroll and climbed in. Arthur kneeled next to her and threw a glance at her before he pushed the two bedrolls closer together and laid down. He opened his arms to her as she tied the tent flaps and Josephine gave him a look. He’d never been so openly affectionate.

“Well,” he huffed, embarrassed. “Get over here.”

And she did. She sank down onto the bedroll with him and his arms curled around her comfortably. Sleepiness made her eyes heavy as she tangled their legs and laid her head on his chest. Arthur pulled the thin top of the bedroll over them and she felt the soft press of warm lips on her forehead.

No words were shared, but Josephine could feel the love and the warmth and the protection. She laid her arm over his waist, felt him shift to get comfortable, and then she was asleep, feeling excited about the future for the first time in years.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I'm blasting through writing chapters, so I figured I'd update a little earlier than normal! Just some fluffy stuff for this chapter, but some bigger things are coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one at camp was particularly surprised when Josephine moved into Arthur’s tent. They only lasted a week in separate tents, until one morning the camp awoke and found Josephine and Arthur tangled up tightly in his cot. Sean heckled Arthur that morning over coffee, and Josephine twisted his ear until the young man was shouting and red in the face.

Josephine spent the next three days sewing flaps on Arthur’s tent, cursing and swearing up a storm at the edge of the camp. The canvas was difficult to sew through, and Josephine, who was already horrendous with a needle and thread, found it beyond frustrating trying to piece it all together.

The first night, they slept cuddled up beside his wagon under the stars, until the rain began to fall and they were forced to hop inside said wagon and use the partially sewed canvas as a roof over top. The next two they spent in the tent that had once been hers.

By the time the canvas was all sewed together, the tips of Josephine’s fingers were red and irritated from accidentally stabbing herself over and over with the stupid needle and constantly working with the rough canvas. It felt good though, the night when they were finally able to drop the flaps and gain some privacy, away from the prying eyes of the other gang members. It felt worth it, no matter how terribly her fingertips hurt.

They made love that night, slow and quiet. When they finished, Arthur complimented her on the lovely sewing job—which they could both see was horrible, with the gaps between stitches and the wobbly lines of said stitching—to which Josephine responded with a hard pinch on his ass and a kiss.

With the newly erected walls, it made the space feel somewhat cramped, but the two of them barely spent any time in the tent except at night when they retired from the nightly camp festivities.

“You still keep a picture of Mary around?” Josephine asked softly one morning as she sat on the cot and inspected the belongings Arthur kept on the table beside the bed. Arthur looked at her from where he was getting dressed and scratched the back of his head.
“Yeah—I—I forgot it was there if I’m bein’ honest.” He mumbled and took the picture from her, inspecting it before he set it back down, face down this time. “Haven’t thought about her in a long while.”

Josephine wondered if she had anything to do with that.

She hummed thoughtfully and used one hand to button up her shirt, while the other continued to inspect his little collection of things. The flower encased in a glass was something she’d seen before when she was very young and was surprised to see it was still in such good shape. Her eyes found another framed picture of a woman and she grabbed it.

“This your mama?” Josephine asked, flicking her eyes up to Arthur and noting the resemblance.

“Yeah,” Arthur mumbled and sat down on the cot next to her. He pulled on his boots as he spoke. “She died when I was young. I don’t remember her all that well anymore.”

“I don’t remember mine much anymore either,” Josephine said and set the photo back where she’d gotten it from. “What do you think Dutch’s got planned today?”

“He talked to me last night ‘bout this feller he met. Said he’s a real slick conman and trickster, and he’s got some mighty big connections that could help us. I figure he’ll be here today or tomorrow, so we’ll be seein’ soon if it’s worth it. You got anythin’ planned today?”

Josephine hummed and pulled her hair over her shoulder, dragging her fingers through it to free up any tangles. “Figured I’d hang around camp and help the girls with some chores, see if there’s anythin’ Miss Grimshaw or Pearson needs me for.” She began to section off her hair before she began to braid it, and flicked her eyes to Arthur, who was watching her with interest.

“Never could figure out how women can do that,” he gestured to her hair with a look on his face.


“Yeah, braid. It looks complicated as hell.”
“It ain’t, not really. Here, I’ll show you.” Arthur looked like he was about to object, but she shook her head and shushed him. “If you learn, you could braid Boadicea’s tail. She’s always getting shit stuck in it.”

“I-I ‘spose,” Arthur huffed and Josephine smiled at his attitude.

She turned on the cot and sat closer to him. “Watch me, I’ll go real slow.” She said and began to slowly demonstrate to him how to braid. He watched closely, and that was one thing Josephine admired about Arthur. No matter how stupid the task or how seemingly reluctant Arthur was to learn, he always paid attention and tried his best anyway.

“Aint too hard,” he said and took her hair when she moved closer and handed it to him.

“It ain’t, and once you get it down, you’ll never forget it.” She laughed and watched him slowly braid the sections of her hair together, pointing out any mistakes he made.

The bottom portion of her braid was visible looser and not as uniform than the top portion, but she didn’t mind. When she reached for the ribbon, Arthur let out a grunt.

“It don’t look too good, you should redo it.”

“It looks fine, Arthur.” She tied the end of her hair securely with the ribbon, then tossed the braid over her shoulder. “Thank you for doin’ it for me. Now that you know how to do it, maybe I’ll just have to make you do it for me every mornin’.”

Arthur looked less than pleased with those words, but Josephine knew he’d do it if she wanted it of him. It was a trait of his that would be far too easy to abuse; his willingness to help and make people happy.

Josephine slipped on her boots and tucked her trousers into them, then stood and stretched her arms above her head. Arthur stood as well and grabbed his hat from the stand by the bed.

“You want a cup of coffee?” Arthur asked, to which Josephine responded with an eager nod.
“Of course, and a bowl of porridge if Pearson made some this mornin’.”

“You got it, killer.” Arthur teased and Josephine grinned at him. As he was making his way towards the opening of the tent, Josephine grabbed him and stole a quick kiss. When she pulled away, Arthur chased her for another, then smiled softly down at her.

For a man who claimed to be big and brawny and scary, he sure gave the softest kisses.

“Shout if you need me,” Josephine grinned, and Arthur shook his head with a laugh.

“Likewise to you, my lady.” They shared another kiss, and then Arthur was ambling out of the tent and towards the fire.

Josephine took to tying back the tent flaps on either end of the structure and sighed as the fresh air blew through it. She stepped out and made her way over to the fire, taking the cup and bowl of porridge Arthur offered her.

Outside of the privacy of their tent, her relationship with Arthur hadn’t changed. The two of them were very private people, though Arthur was moreso than Josephine. She knew it was hard for Arthur to show affection so openly, for fear that it would make him seem weak and soft to the other men. Josephine would wring any of their necks if they accused such things, but she respected Arthur’s reasonings and left it at that. If anything, she enjoyed it. It just meant she’d be worked over double by Arthur once their tent flaps closed.

As she ate, she chatted with Arthur until he was pulled away by Dutch, and then she turned her attention to Miss Grimshaw as the camp came to life.

Early mornings were slow rolling and quiet, though as more members woke, it quickly livened up. Susan had the place running in smooth order, for the most part. Everyone had their jobs, and Susan was always quick to tell them their task for the day, lest they forget.

As noon rolled around, Josephine found herself seated by the other girls’ tent, scrubbing at the laundry that had piled up. Abigail and Tilly sat near her doing the same, and Mary-Beth too, but she was working at a much slower pace. The camp was rather quiet since most of the boys had ridden off to chase a stagecoach and go after a homestead.
Josephine dug her toes into the grass as she scrubbed at a particularly nasty stain, having long since shed her shoes and socks after the heat of the day set in.

“Josephine?” Mary-Beth’s sweet voice rang, making Josephine look up. “What’s Arthur like?”

“What’s he… like?” Josephine repeated, confused. Tilly and Abigail now had their eyes on her, and Josephine felt warmth settle in her cheeks when she realized what Mary-Beth meant.

“You know,” Mary-Beth dropped her voice down to a whisper and leaned towards her. “In bed. What’s he like?”

“Mary-Beth!” Josephine huffed, making the young woman giggle.

“Don’t act all shy now! We heard you gigglin’ last night when you two went to bed! Come on, please? There ain’t great pickin’s around here anymore. ‘Least you can do is give us a little material for the imagination, if you get my drift.” Mary-Beth grinned impishly, making Josephine gape and scoff.

“He’s—he’s,” Josephine sighed and flicked her eyes around, finding no trace of Arthur anywhere. She didn’t want to join in on the girlish gossip, but part of her couldn’t resist. She had to tell someone about her time with Arthur, just like Miss Grimshaw and Annabelle used to do about Dutch. “He’s very good with his hands, I’ll put it like that.”

Even Abigail and Tilly began to snort and giggle at that, and she saw blushes forming on their cheeks. They chuckled and laughed loud enough to alert Susan, and the woman came stomping over like an angry bull.

“Ladies! That laundry ain’t gonna finish washin’ itself. Best get back to work, lest we decide you ain’t been pullin’ your weight and kick ya back to the streets where we found ya.” She griped, making them all quit laughing and quickly return to the work at hand.

Josephine knew that unless they had just cause, Dutch would never force any of the members to leave. It just wasn’t in his nature. Though she was very familiar with Susan’s wrath, and that was one thing she refused to mess with.
Soon enough, the sun hit the highest spot in the sky and the laundry was rinsed and hung up to dry. She helped Pearson cart around some bags of grain and fetch water for the washbins, then settled in and helped him chop vegetables for the stew.

When dusk rolled around, the boys had returned, all except Dutch, Arthur, and Hosea. When the three of them did return, they returned with an unfamiliar horse and rider. The man was wearing a dapper looking suit and top hat, with a finely kept up mustache. He didn’t look like he belonged here, not in the slightest. He was most likely the man Arthur told her about that morning.

“Miss Davis!” Dutch called, making Josephine excuse herself from the game of dominoes she’d been playing with Tilly. “Come join us, we have a plan to discuss.”

The three men disappeared into Dutch’s tent and she could see the lantern light up. She made her way over and dipped in. Arthur nodded his head at her and she nodded back; it was the first time they’d seen each other all day.

“Josephine! This is our… associate, Josiah Trelawny. Josiah, this is—”

“Josephine Davis,” she introduced, stepping forward and sticking out her hand. The man took it, though rather than shake it, he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, miss.” He said, and his voice held a strong British accent to it. It was floaty and flamboyant and it reminded her of the way actors spoke in plays.

Josephine smiled politely and pulled her hand away. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Arthur shift and puff out his chest. Josiah seemed to notice too and let out an amused chuckle.

“Don’t get your feathers ruffled, dear boy. I’m a con-artist, but I’m no adulterer. I know a taken woman when I see one.”

“Then you’d best be careful.” Josephine cut in before Arthur could. “What my Arthur… lacks, in brains, he makes up tenfold with brawn. And what Arthur doesn’t finish, I’ll be sure to wrap up if you touch me again.”

That comment made Hosea laugh and a small smile form on Arthur’s face.
“Alright, alright. We have things to discuss, let’s stop this charade and get to business.” Dutch said, and with that, all their attention was turned to said man. “There’s a man, goes by the name of Albert Thomas. Owns a few of the big oil companies in the area.”

“He’s got a gambling problem,” Hosea chipped in. “Holds a big event once or twice a year at one of his refineries.”

“This year,” Dutch continued, his face turning giddy. “Our friend has informed us that he’s holding it at his home. And, we’ve been told, he keeps a whole lot of money stashed up in his office. A lot of money. We’re talkin’ enough to get us to New York, and then back to California three times if we wish.”

“Where do I come in, though?”

“You, my dear, will serve as our distraction while Arthur sneaks up and robs him blind.”

“I—” Josephine sighed. “No offense, Dutch, but I got more talents than just servin’ as a distraction. I’m gettin’ kind of tired playin’ as a distraction or a damsel in distress. I got more to offer than that.”

“She’s right, Dutch,” Hosea chipped in. “She’s quite a talented hustler. She hustled me in a game of poker and I didn’t even see it comin’.”

Dutch flicked his eyes between them and seemed to consider it. He scratched his chin and nodded, mind already whirling as he pulled a plan together. “I’ll think of something. We have a few days to prepare. In the meantime, Mr. Trelawny, make yourself comfortable, Miss Grimshaw is setting up some accommodations for you. Josephine, Arthur, head out at some point and get yourself some fine clothes, and scout out the house, see what they have in terms of security. I’ll figure out the rest.”

With that, he waved them out and Josephine idled around outside until Arthur came out. Susan came up and whisked Trelawny away, and Josephine leaned against Arthur’s side in greeting.

“He’s an… an interesting character,” Josephine chuckled and shook her head.

“He’s a conman, through and through. If Dutch ain’t careful, we could be the ones bein’ robbed
“He’s a slippery sonofabitch, I can tell.” She felt Arthur rest his hand on the small of her back as they walked towards the fire. “You ate today?”

“Had some salted venison on the road. Didn’t really have time otherwise.”

“I’ll get you some stew,” Josephine said, heading over to the pot and spooning them both some stew. She grabbed a bottle of whiskey as well and returned to him.

They ate and drank in relative silence, and it was nice. It was peaceful. The sky slowly turned dark and as night came, Javier whipped out his guitar and played soft ballads while others drank, danced, and sang along.

About an hour later, Josephine found herself riding Arthur’s hips, the tent flaps closed securely, shielding their activities away from the rest of the gang. A soft moan escaped her lips and Arthur’s fingers tightened on her hips, pushing and pulling her, guiding her at a steady pace.

“Arthur,” she breathed, head tipping back. Her hair cascaded down her back and tickled her skin, and her fingers grappled for Arthur’s arm, holding it tight as her climax grew.

Suddenly, outside of their little world, a shout resounded and there were quick footsteps near their tent. They both stilled, and one of the flaps was ripped open.

“‘Ey—woah!” It was Sean, and immediately Josephine threw herself down against Arthur’s chest, covering herself as he grabbed the quilt that had gathered around her hips and yanked it up to shield her from his eyes.

Embarrassment made her feel hot, and the sweat that had gathered between them didn’t help. She turned her head away and tucked it against Arthur’s chest, and she felt him rumble with a growl.

“What?” He ground out, tugging the quilt still until nothing but her head was visible. Arthur shifted his hips and slipped out of her, and Josephine had to bite her fist to not whine at the feeling.
“Sorry to interrupt yer little romp, but we got a visitor,” Sean said and Josephine felt her heart jump and Arthur’s body tense beneath her.

“John Marston, you stupid son of a bitch!”

Chapter End Notes

Lil Johnny Marston is finally back, boys <3
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, it's been a little bit since the last update! I've been pretty busy these past few days, and just hadn't gotten the chance to post!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well if it isn’t little Johnny Marston,” Josephine said, almost smug as she walked out of the tent, now dressed in a shirt and pants. She ignored the wolfish look Sean gave her and kept her eyes trained on John.

He was older now, no doubt. Still scrawny, but more of a man than he’d been when she left. His hair was longer, and he looked like he hadn’t washed in a while. She wondered vaguely if he was still afraid of water, knowing he used to be so terrified of it he would refuse to even get near a river or a lake to wash. The light of the campfire did him little good. His eyes widened when he saw her, and his cheeks were red from the shouting and the slap Abigail had rewarded him.

“Josephine?” He asked, clearly shocked to see her back. She’d left when he was around seventeen, still learning to be a man. Clearly, he hadn’t quite learned what he needed to. “When… when’d you get back?”

“‘Round a year ago,” she said simply, lips curling into a soft smile. “You just gonna stand there? Get over here,” she opened up her arms for a hug, and immediately he went to her.

Josephine flicked her eyes to Arthur, who was looking at her strangely. She could see the underlying anger in his eyes from John, and she knew Arthur wasn’t going to be quick to forgive him.

Once John was close, rather than hug him, she cuffed him hard upside the head then grabbed his ear and twisted.

“Are you stupid, John Marston?!” She shouted, and the man began to shout in pain. “What is wrong with you, boy? You left your woman and your child, to go do fuck all for a year. A goddamn year!"

“I needed time!” John ground out, now down on his knees as she kept her grip tight around his ear.
“Time for what?” Josephine hissed, releasing his ear now.

“To think,” he said, standing up. Before she could butt in, John continued. “What’s it even matter to you, anyway? You left us, too.”

“Because, John, you pissed away a family, and I know I would kill for a shot at that.” Josephine sighed as her anger settled and she moved towards him. John flinched, afraid she’d grab at his ears again, but she shook her head. “I’m gonna hug you, you dumbass. It’s been too long.”

They embraced, and Josephine took special care not to get her nose too close to him. A soft sigh left her at the familiarity. Even though what John had done made her angry, she’d missed the boy — the man. He’d been like a little brother to her, always following her around, learning all the things she had to teach. It almost made her cry to see him now, seven years later. He still wasn’t that bright, but he was alive and kicking, and that’s what mattered to her.

Dutch was standing just outside his tent when Josephine met his eyes. He nodded at her, then she stepped back and patted John’s arms. He looked down at her, down at her, and she smiled when she realized he was taller than her now.

“Would you look at that? Little Johnny’s finally taller than me.” His face twisted and pink tinged his cheeks. “You’d better get on and go talk to Dutch.”

She patted his arm again, then backed up to stand by Arthur. John looked at the two of them and his eyes lingered on Arthur, but the man was silent. Josephine could feel the anger and the betrayal radiating off of him in waves. John looked like a kicked puppy with his tail between his legs. Part of her felt bad for John—he’d looked up to Arthur like he did with Dutch. But she understood Arthur’s anger and knew John didn’t deserve to be so easily forgiven.

“Come on,” Josephine said softly, sliding her arm around Arthur’s and guiding him away. He resisted at first, then relented and allowed her to guide him.

John’s eyes widened a bit when he watched them disappear into Arthur’s tent and he glanced at Sean. “Well, that’s… new.”

“No it ain’t,” Sean snorted, clapping him on the shoulder. “Been in the works for a while, I tink.”
“Are you ready, Mr. and Mrs. Callahan?” Trelawny asked them as they rode up to the Thomas residence, where the party would be held.

“‘Sides feelin’ like a damn buffoon, yeah, I’m ready.” Arthur griped, and Josephine had to agree with him.

They looked like money, but Josephine felt wholly out of place. The dress she wore, which cost her a pretty penny, made every task difficult. The bustle made it practically impossible to ride her horse and the corset squeezed her into lovely shape, as Mary-Beth had put it, but made it hard to breathe and move in general. Mary-Beth had spent hours making her over and helping her dress. When she’d finished, Josephine didn’t even feel like herself. Her hair, which was naturally wavy on its own, had been curled into tight ringlets and gathered at the side of her head with the hairpin Arthur had given her all those years ago. The dress itself was long, heavy and stuffy, but part of her felt giddy at the prospect of dressing up, of becoming a woman for the night. The top of the dress was pretty and flattering, with short sleeves and a scoop neck, and she wore a shawl around her shoulders for modesty. Luckily enough for her, the dress had pockets, which currently held her revolvers, lest anything go wrong.

“Least you don’t got whalebone rearranging your insides.” Josephine huffed and watched Arthur from where he rode next to her.

He looked good, despite his complaints. He’d been forced to splurge a little too and the outfit he wore looked good on him, while also serving its purpose of making him look like he was a rich man who’d struck gold. He didn’t wear a full suit like Trelawny, and instead wore an ornate black vest, a crisp white shirt, and brand new pants. Fancy pants, Josephine had teased him before they left. He’d also gotten a haircut and a shave, and Josephine had nearly keeled over when she first saw him.

“Remember, you two are married. You struck gold in the west, and are now traveling east in search of new lands for prospecting.” Trelawny said as they approached the house. It was huge, the biggest house Josephine had ever seen.

“What the hell’s one man need so much money for?” Josephine said, struggling to dismount Duke until Arthur jumped down and helped her.
“Watch your mouth, Miss Jessabelle. Ladies don’t curse.” Arthur chided as he set her down on the ground and Josephine smacked his side playfully, then reached into her saddlebags and pulled out her gloves, which were pristine white and settled just above her wrists and accented with lace.

“Oh, I’m sorry dear. I’m just out of my head today, I think.” Josephine’s voice turned light and airy and she fanned at herself with the fan Mary-Beth had borrowed her.

“I’ll start the poker game,” Arthur said quietly. “When I go to get a drink you’ll switch me places, I’ll excuse myself, then I’ll head up and do my thing. You do yours, but don’t be too obvious.”

“I know how to hustle, dear husband.” She grinned and kissed his cheek.

“You ready?” He asked and she took his arm, holding it daintily.

“Of course, you lead the way.”

“If anythin’ goes awry, you get out and ride back to camp. Let me handle it.” The words made Josephine scowl.

“I can handle myself, Arthur. I’m just as skilled with a gun as you. If somethin’ goes wrong, I ain’t leavin’ you, you should know that by now.”

Arthur sighed and patted her arm. “Well, if we keep an eye out and are careful, I don’t think we gotta worry about a firefight.”

“Let’s hope so,” she said, then straightened her back and put a soft, demure expression on her face.

Arthur’s body language changed as well as they walked into the house and were greeted with the soiree in full swing. Lively music played from somewhere further in the house, and it was smokey from all of the cigarettes and cigars being puffed on. Trelawny guided them through the house, his body almost floating through the people gathered around with elegance and grace only very confident conmen held. A few of the men and women sent them sidelong glances, either in curiosity, distrust or interest, and Josephine did her best to smile softly back at them.
Josephine kept her shoulders thrown back and her expression soft and open. She had to act like a lady to make this work, too.

“Ah! Mr. Thomas, how good it is to see you again!” Trelawny greeted the head of the house when they stepped through a doorway. The room they entered was a large parlor of sorts, and the furniture had been rearranged to accommodate a few tables ongoing poker games. “I’d like to introduce you to my associates. This is Arthur Callahan, and his dashing wife, Jessabelle.”

The man Trelawny was speaking to was fat and red, and it became clear to Josephine that he’d never worked a day in his life. He was the type to make others work for him, while he raked in the rewards. Josephine suddenly felt giddy at the prospect of robbing him absolutely blind.

“Welcome! Any friend of Trelawny’s is a friend of mine.” The man stood up and approached them. He took Arthur’s hand first, shaking it firmly. When he took Josephine’s, he was far gentler and lifted her gloved hand up to his lips. He kissed it, his eyes bright with a look she was very familiar with at this point in her life. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Callahan.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Josephine smiled, offering him a soft smile that she knew stroked his ego in just the right way.

“Well, what a gem you have found yourself, Mr. Callahan,” Thomas said, turning to Arthur now. “However did you find yourself a woman like that?”

“If I’m bein’ honest, she found me more than I found her. She was… relentless.” Arthur said lightheartedly, and Thomas barked out a laugh.

“Consider yourself a lucky man, Mr. Callahan.”

“Please, call me Arthur.”

“Well, Arthur, would you care to join us for a game of poker? We were just about to start a pot,” he offered, and the plan was in motion.

“Would you mind, Jessabelle?”
“Of course not, my love. I’m sure I’ll find something to do. Just don’t you go forgetting about me,” she pouted, and she saw a sparkle of amusement in Arthur’s eyes.

“Never,” he said, and Josephine patted his chest.

With that, he approached the table and settled in it. Thomas started up the game and engaged in some small talk, such as how Arthur had come across his money, the inner workings of his business, and future business plans.

Josephine listened idly as she wandered around until she found a small bevy of women. They regarded her as she approached, and she was pleasantly surprised to find that the women weren’t outwardly judgemental. They exchanged compliments on their dresses and appearances and began to chatter quietly among themselves. Josephine blended in without a hitch, chattering with them about the finer things in life, such as sewing, child-rearing, and their husbands.

“Jessabelle? Come here, dear.” Josephine excused herself and made her way over to Arthur, slower than normal due to the corset squeezing her insides.

“Yes, my sweet?” She laid her hand on his shoulder where he was seated and looked down at him.

“If it’s alright with the men, would you mind filling in for me? I’d like to get a drink and a breath of fresh air.”

“Oh, Arthur, you know I’m terrible at gambling.” She nearly whined, and the men seated around the table let out some laughs.

“Don’t worry, miss. We’ll play fair for a pretty thing like you.” One of them reassured, and Josephine blushed.

“Oh, well… I suppose I can.” Josephine said and took Arthur’s seat when he stood up. She settled and set her fan down, leaning into the kiss Arthur placed on her temple.

“Now, don’t go losin’ all my money,” Arthur teased, making her chuckle and shake her head.
“You can’t blame me if I do, love. You know how terrible I am.”

Arthur shook his head and laughed, and with that, he left her alone with the men. She looked at the hand Arthur had, and it was dreadful. *Can’t play poker for the life of him, either,* she thought and put on a soft, almost bashful smile.

The men, true to their words, went easy on her, making their expressions a little less guarded and more open when viewing their hands. It was slow going, but Josephine allowed them to win, at first, folding when she didn’t really need to. Giving them confidence, and slowly gaining the upper hand for herself.

The first time she dropped a winning hand, the men gasped. A straight flush. She gauged their reactions and smiled bashfully.

“Is that a good hand?” She asked as she looked around, unsure of herself.

“Almost the best,” one man said, puffing on his cigar.

“You’re learning quite well, miss Jessabelle. You are one… interesting, woman.” Another said, and Josephine blushed, fanning herself daintily.

She pulled in the money, at least four hundred dollars and without skipping a beat, she pushed it back to the middle.

“As my husband says… all or nothing.” She nodded and smiled sweetly. “At least, I think that’s the saying.”

The men, most of them at least, pushed the remainder of their chips to the middle. They seemed intrigued by her innocent confidence, and Josephine knew she had every single one of them wrapped around her finger.

They were silent this time, as they were dealt their hands and the game began. The hand was terrible, but she kept a soft look on her face, flicking her eyes up occasionally to the men. The air had changed as the competition settled. It was a lot of money on the line, now. Thomas folded almost immediately, shaking his head. One by one, the men folded until it was just Josephine and a young man with a handsome face and dark eyes. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Arthur approaching
and he looked over her shoulder at her hand. It was a two-seven offsuit, hardly a winning hand.
Arthur raised an eyebrow in faux surprise.

The man began to squirm until he folded with a deep sigh.

When Josephine revealed her cards, the men gasped and one stood up angrily.

“She… she hustled us!”

“She’s done no such thing,” Thomas said, standing as well and set a placating hand on his shoulder.
“She’s simply done what you do in poker. She’s quite good, actually. Your dear wife is a quick
learner, I must say.”

“That she is. And here I thought we’d be leaving without a cent to our names.” Arthur teased, and
Josephine tutted at him. He patted his chest, a signal that he’d found what they were after, and she
clapped her hands together.

“It was fun, gentlemen! Maybe we can play another round one day if we ever meet again.”
Josephine said sweetly as the men paid their shares to her.

She hoped the purse full of nearly a thousand dollars in cash and gold would make Dutch happy.
They wandered around the party for a little while longer, until Trelawny fetched them and they
excused themselves. Once outside and riding away, Josephine let out a laugh and looked at Arthur.

“Rich folks sure are dense. That was easy, almost too—”

“Stop them! We’ve been robbed!” The distress call was matched with the crack of a gun, and Duke
spooked, jerking under her roughly. Josephine held on tightly as he shot off like a gun, and she could
hear Boadicea and Gwydion galloping after.

“We gotta go!” Arthur shouted, and Josephine reached into her pocket and drew out her revolver.
The whistle of the law sounded and Josephine’s heart began to race.

“Stop!” More shouts followed them, and she heard Arthur’s cattleman go off, laying shots into the
lawmen chasing them.
Bullets whizzed by her, and the adrenaline pumped through her like fire, making her limbs feel tingly. The corset poked into her side, hard and uncomfortable, but she ignored it, riding Duke as fast and as far away as possible. Eventually, the law gave up their chase, but they kept riding through the night until the land became familiar and they neared the camp. The horses slowed, and Josephine’s vision grew spotty. She grunted and looked down, and she saw dark blood seeping from a wound in her side and staining down her skirt.

“Jo?” Arthur called when he heard her grunt.

It wasn’t her corset at all, it’d been a bullet.

She’d been shot.

Josephine’s arm felt numb and far too heavy as she groaned, the pain setting in now as she pressed her palm against the wound. The blood spilled hot over her hands and that’s when Arthur noticed it too. She wheezed, the corset preventing her from pulling in a deep breath as her vision tunneled and her body began to slump forward.

“Josephine!”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger guys, the next update is coming soon!!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

If you'll notice, this is chapter 16/30! I finished writing the fic, so now it's time to play catch up and post the rest!

This chapter isn't much more than a filler while Josephine recovers. There wasn't much else I could do, not after she was shot. But regardless I hope everyone is still enjoying, and thank you to everyone who's still commenting and leaving kudos, it means a lot!

Arthur would never forget the sound and sight of Josephine sliding off of her horse that night. She'd hit the ground with a sickening, hollow thump. It was a sound he'd heard plenty of times, but it hit differently this time. It hit deeper. He remembered the overwhelming feeling of dread that washed over him and he'd dropped to the ground next to her, putting pressure on the wound and calling out her name.

A bullet had torn through her side, through and through. He was angry at himself for not noticing the blood when they were riding, and even as he sat by her side four days later, he was still angry at himself.

It was lucky she was alive, Susan told him. But alive was a generous word. She was barely hanging on, even now. Her skin, which had come back to a somewhat normal shade, was still sickly pale. Josephine ran a fever on the second day, but Susan got the beginnings of the infection under control quickly, and she no longer ran hot.

Every day she slept, the more restless Arthur grew. He couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t eat, barely could sleep. Hosea had tried to take him out hunting to take his mind off of it, but Arthur had grown sick with worry and had to return, only bringing back a few measly rabbits.

Every second away from Josephine was akin to torture. What if she died in her sleep? What if she woke up alone?

On the fifth day, Arthur sat on one of the chairs he’d dragged into their tent, his journal open as he scribbled away. His journal was the only thing he’d shared his thoughts with over the past week without snapping or becoming angry. It was only the women, Dutch, and Hosea who seemed to understand his anguish. The new woman Dutch had picked up, Karen, had ragged on him for a bit until she heard the pain in his voice when he snapped at her and that quieted her down.
Focused in on his writing, Arthur almost, almost didn’t notice the subtle movement in Josephine’s hand. It wasn’t an uncommon sight to see; she’d been twitching subtly over the past week, just little jerks and twitches in her arms and legs. Even that wasn’t out of place though, as she had a tendency to twitch when she slept anyway. But this movement, it was different. It was jerky and shaky, and when Arthur lifted his head to look, he saw her fist clench and her head move.

He was on his feet in a second, moving to the bed. When he gazed down on her, his heart leaped as her eyes fluttered open and her chapped lips parted. Her eyes, unfocused and blurry, flicked around and confusion washed over her face. When her body tensed and she tried to sit up, Arthur put a hand on her shoulder and eased her down.

“Hey, hey, none of that now,” he murmured and her eyes found his face. Arthur laid a hand on her cheek, ignoring how rough it looked against her soft skin, and shushed her. “It’s okay, Jo. I gotcha.”

A tremor overtook her and tears began to spill from her eyes. She was scared, he could see it on her face. Scared and confused. As far as he knew, the last thing she remembered was being shot. It’d happened to Arthur, but when he was shot, he hadn’t slept nearly as much as her.

Her teary eyes moved around the tent again, searching, confused. Using his thumb, he brushed away some of the tears, then used his fingers to push her hair away from her face. There was a silent question written on her face and in her eyes.

“You’re at camp,” he filled in. “You was… you was shot.”

“H-” her voice was rough from disuse, and he could see the pain on her face when she tried to use it. She tried to clear her throat, and Arthur reached over to pour her some water when she turned her head and coughed, the noise rattling through her chest.

“Here, drink this,” he held the tin cup with one hand and supported her head and neck with the other. He brought the cup to her lips and he felt her warm fingers settle on his wrists. She drank slowly at first, then took a large gulp and sputtered.

She was so weak it made sadness swell in Arthur’s chest. He’d never seen her so weak, and the most recent time he could think of her like this, was when she was fifteen and had killed for the first time.

“H-how…” She cleared her throat and started again once Arthur laid her head down on the thin
pillow and put the cup down. “How long?”

“Five days,” Arthur said honestly, and he watched as shock passed over her face before her eyes slid shut. “We all thought you was gonna…”

He didn’t need to finish the sentence to know Josephine understood. It really was a miracle she was alive. She’d nearly bled out before she even realized she’d been shot.

“Is everyone okay..?” Came her soft voice and fondness swelled in his chest. Always thinking of others.

“Yeah, Trelawny and I are fine, not even a scrape.” He let out a bitter laugh and stared into her eyes when she opened them. Oh, how good it was to see those soft hazel eyes of hers again. “You remember anythin’?”

“I remember lookin’ down,” she cleared her voice again and her arm moved, resting on Arthur’s arm. He relished the contact and laid his hand over her own. “Seein’ all the blood. I thought…” She let out a weak laugh and he felt her legs shifting around as she tested her motion. “Thought it was the damn corset. Didn’t know I’d been shot, ‘till i saw the blood. I-I remember fallin’, but I don’t remember hittin’ the ground.”

Good, Arthur thought. At least she didn’t feel the sickening thump her body made when she hit the packed dirt.

“I… I could hear you,” she continued, and Arthur looked down at her. “I could feel you, too. It was like… like I was covered in a real thick blanket. Everythin’ was muffled ‘n quiet.” She paused then, and Arthur pulled the chair over and sat down, staying close, but not close enough to crowd her. “I was scrammin’ in my head but I… I couldn’t move or open my eyes or talk.” Another wash of emotion rolled over her and she squeezed Arthur’s wrist, the pressure hardly there from her weak muscles. “I-I heard you cryin’ .”

“I thought I was gonna lose you,” Arthur replied softly and honestly, bringing her hand up to kiss her knuckles before he pressed it to his cheek and held it there.

“Can’t get rid of me that easy,” Josephine said, and there was a hint of amusement somewhere in her voice. Her fingers twitched and he felt her thumb rubbing over his cheekbone. “I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”
Arthur closed his eyes and let silence fall over them. He didn’t know what he would have done if Josephine hadn’t woken up. He didn’t know if he could handle another loss or death, not now.

That night, Arthur slept on the ground on a bedroll, ignoring Josephine’s protests. He didn’t want to risk rolling on her and hurting her when they slept. It took her two days to be able to sit up on her own, and another two after that to walk again, though she needed assistance. The bullet had gone clean through, and as she began to perk up, eat, and move, it healed well and quick.

It took nearly two weeks before she was able to do things almost entirely on her own, though Arthur stayed posted by her side as much as he could, helping her when she needed it and soothing her when she hurt. It was a slow process, but Dutch was understanding.

At dusk, Arthur returned with Hosea from a hunt and found Josephine settled in their tent, the flaps tied open with Jack settled comfortably on her lap. His arms were secured around her as she read to him, and the two of them didn’t seem to notice Arthur’s presence.

“...I have never forgotten my mother's advice. I knew she was a wise old horse, and our master thought a great deal of her. Her name was Duchess, but he often called her Pet.” He glanced at the cover and found her to be reading Black Beauty, and the young boy in her lap was listening intently, eyes wide and wonderous.

The scene made warmth and longing flow through him like a river. It made his chest ache for this sight, to see Josephine reading to a son or a daughter of their own in a little home they cultivated for themselves. Realistically, he knew it couldn’t happen. But, he could dream. He could dream about a different life, a simpler life free of crime and bloodshed.

Josephine continued on reading for a few minutes until she spared a glance up and noticed Arthur. A soft, warm smile spread across her lips and Arthur felt frozen to his spot.

“Hey there, cowboy.” She greeted and gingerly lifted Jack from her lap when he started to squirm in excitement. She set him down, and the boy shot off like a bullet towards him, knocking into his shins before Arthur leaned down and picked him up. “Get some food for us?”

“Plenty,” Arthur grinned, settling the boy on his hip. “What have you two been up to today?”

“Reading,” Jack answered, but it came out more like ‘weeding’ in his childish little dialect.
“Ah, reading,” Arthur nodded. He looked glanced around the camp, finding neither John nor Abigail. “Where’s your ma and pa?”

“Oh,” Josephine let out a little laugh and he looked over to her. “They’re having some alone time right now. I’m on little Jack duty until they get their fill.”

Arthur snorted at that and walked the rest of the way into the tent. “Whatcha readin’?”

“Horsey,” Jack babbled and Josephine held up the book to show Arthur.

“Black Beauty. Hosea brought it over for me to read to him.”

“You mind if I join? Ain’t much goin’ on right now.”

“Not at all, Arthur,” her smile was like the sun and Arthur found himself smiling as well. He took the chair next to the cot and stretched his legs out.

“Move the chair closer,” Josephine said, and Arthur did so as if lead by an invisible string. He scooted the chair closer, and Josephine’s bare feet, which had been dangling off the side of the cot while her back rested against the wagon, landed lightly on his lap and rested there.

“What am I, a footrest now?” Arthur teased good-naturedly as Jack climbed off of his lap and onto the cot.

“Just for now,” she hummed and Arthur shook his head.

Jack settled snugly against Josephine’s side and her arm wrapped around him, keeping him close and comfortable. The book opened up to the page she’d left off on, and Arthur removed his hat as she resumed her reading. He ran a hand through his hair and relaxed, calmed by her soothing voice and steady reading.

His hand dropped and rested on her ankle, thumb rubbing soothing circles on the inner part of it. His
eyes flicked to hers and she smiled at him, warm and inviting, and Arthur’s hands itched to draw her. Draw her curled up reading to little Jack, or maybe a child of their own if he allowed his imagination to go that far. He committed the sight of them to memory, tucking it away to remember and draw later.

A pleasant calm washed over them and Arthur felt his eyes growing heavy despite himself. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, and realized he wasn’t the only one who’d grown tired. A stretch of maybe ten minutes of reading was all it took to put Jack to sleep, and Arthur only noticed when Josephine stopped reading and looked down at the boy.

Her arm, dotted in little freckles and moles, lifted and she gently brushed Jack’s hair back. A sad look washed over her face, and Arthur squeezed her ankle gently to grab her attention.

“You got that look on your face. What’re you thinkin’ about?” He asked, and Josephine looked at him.


“What about?” Arthur had a guess what it was and was almost willing to bet it was similar to his own train of thought.

“‘Bout… life.” She shrugged and looked away, down at Jack.

Arthur let it be for a while, simply resigning to watching her as they sat there in the quiet.

“You’d make a good mama.” He said after a while, and watched as her cheeks reddened.

“Maybe, but I-I don’t think I’m destined for babies. Maybe in another life.”

“Why?” He blurted without thinking, his genuine curiosity taking hold of his better judgment.

“Why?” Josephine questioned, then closed her eyes. “This life we live, for one. I couldn’t… I understand Abigail could, but I don’t think I could raise a baby in a place like this. And well… Let’s just say you ain’t the only one who’s gettin’ old, Arthur.”
“You ain’t old,” Arthur hit back immediately, shocked at her words. A smile quirked on her lips and she nudged him with her foot. “That’s absurd, you ain’t old at all.”

“Now you know how I feel, tryin’ to say the same thing to you.” She shook her head and Arthur watched her play with Jack’s hair.

Arthur left it at that, dropping the subject from his mouth, but he couldn’t drop it from his mind. He tried, but it was hard. The deep, hidden part of his heart longed for a family and children, but the dark, hateful part of him screamed that he wouldn’t be a good father, that he’d get his family killed again. He’d mess up again.

When they curled up for bed that night, long after Abigail fetched Jack and supper was served, Arthur’s mind was still working and alive. Josephine, who laid at his side with her head on his chest, was just as awake and restless.

“You ever think about leavin’?” Josephine asked after a while, her voice soft and quiet.

It was a question that he’d considered often, especially in recent times. Dutch; while he was still a loyal, smart man, was changing. The world was changing, something Arthur used to despise, but as it changed, so did Dutch. He was becoming cold, and sometimes Arthur found himself questioning him. The world was closing down on them — there was no longer room for cowboys and gunslingers and outlaws, and Arthur could feel Dutch growing restless because of it.

“Sometimes,” Arthur whispered, laying his hand in her soft hair and stroking it gently.

“What do you picture your life like?” There was a hopeful lilt somewhere in there, and Arthur closed his eyes. “If you did have a chance to leave?”

“Only thing I can see is you.” It was romantic, terribly so, and Dutch probably would have clapped him on the shoulder if he heard such words come out of Arthur’s mouth.

“I see… A little house.” She murmured, and the vision started coming to life in his mind. “In the mountains, maybe. Near a stream, with lots of land for horses. And I see you, and me.”
There was no violence in this place. No crime or bloodshed. No stealing, no killing. It was the perfect escape. It was bright and lovely for a moment until his mind got to it. He didn’t deserve something like that. Not after all he’d taken. He’d taken too many lives to deserve a life like that.

“I can hear you thinkin’, Arthur. You deserve it. We deserve it.”

Maybe they did.
If anyone has any requests for OC inserts for the characters of Red Dead, I'm down to write them! I'm itching to write more, but I don't really know what to write to follow up this fic. Feel free to send me some ideas or requests and I'd be happy to write them!

“Everyone! This is Miss Molly O’Shea, and she’ll be staying with us for the time being.” Dutch announced, and Josephine looked up from the dishes she was scrubbing.

The woman was beautiful — her skin was pale and freckled, from her cheeks all the way down to her bust, which was put on display from the scoop neck of her dress. The paleness of her skin amplified the redness of her hair, and her eyes were bright green, like emeralds. The way she held herself gave off an air of entitlement, and Josephine had a feeling she wouldn’t be very helpful in any respect.

“Well,” Josephine heard Sean say, cocky and sure of himself as he approached her. “What is a beautiful woman like you doin’ in a gaggle of thieves like us?”

“Lookin’ for adventure;” she responded in a thick Irish accent, tipping her chin up at Sean snottily.

“All for adventure,” Dutch’s arm looped around Molly and pulled her to him, the woman releasing a giggle at the action.

Part of Josephine wondered if she’d ever acted that way with Arthur, giggly and obnoxious. In private, maybe.

Molly and Dutch made their rounds through the camp, introducing the new face. Josephine watched with interest, noting the woman’s posture and body language when encountering the different members. Men she mostly turned her head to, politely of course, but the air around her screamed that they didn’t deserve her. The women, all except for Miss Grimshaw, were given heated, but still polite stares. This is my man, back off, the look screamed, and when Josephine herself was a victim of it, she had to hide a smile.

Dutch excused himself when he saw Arthur ride in, speaking about a plan they needed to talk about. Molly looked around now, suddenly unsure of herself, and Josephine sighed and stood up. She
wiped her hands off on her dress and looked at Molly.

“You don’t gotta worry about any of us girls,” Josephine said, nodding at Molly and the woman began to follow her. “I been with Dutch since I was a kid, almost twenty years now. He’s more of a father to me than anythin’ else.”

Molly’s cheeks went red at that and she huffed. “I… Apologize, then.” It didn’t sound very sincere, but Josephine didn’t mention it.

“Where are you from, if you don’t mind me askin’, Miss O’Shea?”

“Dublin,” she answered shortly.

“No offense, miss, but you ain’t gonna last here long if you’re rude to everyone around,” Josephine warned, stopping in front of the girl’s tent. “All of us here—we’re family. We protect our own. We don’t always get along, but you won’t last a minute if you treat everyone like they’re beneath you. Dutch won’t have it.”

She heard Karen whistle and Mary-Beth gasp. For a moment, the anger in Molly’s eyes made Josephine fear of a cat-fight, but the woman huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. She didn’t say anything, so Josephine relaxed her posture and nodded at the tent.

“You’ll sleep here,” until Dutch decides otherwise, she wanted to say but bit her tongue. “Miss Grimshaw’ll set you up with a bedroll, and prolly a list of chores too. If you ain’t out gettin’ money for the camp, you gotta pull your weight here.”

With that, Josephine left Molly to the real piranhas whose names were Karen Jones and Mary-Beth Gaskill and returned to the washbin to finish up the dishes. She scrubbed at them hard, and she didn’t realize the hard look she had on her face until Arthur ambled up and pointed it out.

“Careful, you might just make those plates drop dead with that look.” Arthur teased, and the look on her face immediately disappeared when she looked up at him.

“Sorry, I’m just…” She shook her head. Her monthly had arrived, and the cramping in her lower belly added with the unease of being cooped up at camp for over a month was getting to her. “I’m goin’ crazy here, Arthur. I need to get away from camp for a day. I feel like I’m gonna tear
“It—” Arthur sighed. “It ain’t been that long since you were shot. It ain’t a good idea for you to ride out just yet.”

“Please, Arthur. Just take me to the lake, or into town, or—or somethin’.” Josephine practically begged.

Arthur heaved out a heavy sigh and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Mary-Beth asked me to get her a new journal in town. I guess I can take you with.” He sounded reluctant, but it made Josephine smile wide.

“Thank you, Arthur, I’ll go get my boots.” Josephine put the last plate into the bin of clean dishes before heading off to their tent.

She approached Arthur and Boadicea a few minutes later with her boots and satchel. She looked around and found Duke standing a ways away, grazing with the other horses and free of his saddle and bridle. She sent a questioning look to Arthur.

“We’ll just take Boadicea if you don’t mind.” Josephine shook her head and moved close to her.

Arthur held her carefully by the hips, avoiding her now mostly healed wound, and lifted her up onto the back of his horse. Josephine wrapped her arms around Arthur when he settled into the saddle and just like that they were off.

The vast, rolling hills spread out before them and Josephine sighed the fresh air in deeply, free of the stench of cigarette smoke, campfire, alcohol, and horses. Arthur rode Boadicea at an easy walk, unhurried as they made their way down the dirt path. Josephine leaned forward and pressed her nose against Arthur’s shoulder despite herself, and breathed in. He smelled of fresh herbs and mountain air, with an undertone of cigarettes and horse that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. It was masculine and entirely Arthur, and it made warmth spread in her chest.

“You sniffin’ me, woman?” Arthur griped, but Josephine could hear the amusement and endearment in his voice.

“Can’t help it,” she hummed and laid her cheek against his back. The cotton of his shirt was a bit
rough against her skin, but she didn’t mind. “Haven’t ridden on the back of Boadicea with you in a while.”

“You hurtin’ at all?”

“Yeah,” she answered without thinking, and she felt Arthur stiffen.

“Why the hell—”

“It ain’t from the bullet. I started my monthly this mornin’.” She told him honestly, and he relaxed, only a little.

“That hurts you?” He asked, genuine curiosity laced in his voice.

“Most of the time it does. Just kinda feels like real bad muscle cramps. I used to get sick from ‘em when I was younger.”

“S there anythin’ I can do?” He asked, and Josephine smiled despite herself. Arthur was so caring and concerned under all the baggage he carried to keep himself seem ruthless and cruel.

“No, not really. They pass after a day or two.”

Arthur was silent for a moment, then made a noise and reached into his satchel. He produced a little clear bottle with a cork in the top. The liquid inside of it was yellowish, with what looked like herbs floating around in it.

“Have some of this. Hosea made it for me, ‘cause my back hurts sometimes. It takes the pain right away like magic.” He held it up over his shoulder for her to take, and Josephine grabbed the bottle and inspected it.

“What is it?” She asked, uncorking it and sniffing at it.

“Some herbs and whiskey, I think.”
Josephine hummed and shook it up a little, then lifted it to her lips and drank some. Immediately she sputtered and coughed. It tasted horrible, and she told Arthur as much.

“It’s pretty nasty,” he laughed. “But it works real well.”

“Thank you,” she said and corked the bottle and passed it back. She planted a soft kiss just behind his ear and wound her arms around his waist again.

They rode in silence for a while, and after about twenty minutes, the pain from her cramps had melted away. When she noticed it, she squeezed Arthur a little to grab his attention.

“It’s already workin’. I’m gonna have to get Hosea to show me how to make that, I reckon.” She said, looking over his shoulder and seeing the town now come into sight.

“He showed me a while back, but I ain’t good at rememberin’ shit like that.”

“You never have been,” Josephine teased, patting his hip playfully.

“You need anythin’ while we’re here?”

“I could use some more soap, I lent mine to Abigail for her and Jack, but they used the rest of it up, I think.” She reached into her satchel and looked through it. “Otherwise, no, can’t think of anythin’ else.”

“Soap it is,” he hummed, and they fell into another comfortable silence as they rode closer to the town.

Arthur pulled Boadicea to a stop in front of the general store and helped Josephine down. She looked around at the storefronts as Arthur guided her up to the porch with a warm hand on her back.

“I think I’ll wander around for a little while, Arthur,” Josephine said when her eyes landed on a particular building. She turned her head and looked up at him, and he nodded.
“A’right, I gotta head to the post office after this. Meet me back here whenever you got your fill of wanderin’.”

Josephine nodded and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, then turned and walked down the line of storefronts. When she glanced back and noticed Arthur was inside, she picked up her skirts and walked across the street, heading inside of the photo studio.

The man inside was tinkering with his camera when she walked in. Josephine cleared her throat and he jumped, face going red.

“Oh, oh hello! How can I help you, miss?”

“I’m just wonderin’ what you do here? It’s a photo studio, but I don’t really know what that means.”

“It’s exactly how it sounds! I take photos, mostly portraits of people. I use my camera here,” he gestured to it and Josephine moved closer to inspect it. He began to explain the process, which went right over Josephine’s head, but she was fascinated regardless.

“How much for a portrait?” She asked as he was showing her samples of his work.

“Normally it’s five dollars,” the photographer said, to which Josephine whistled. “But, for a beautiful lady such as yourself, and since you listened to me ramble on, how does two-fifty sound?”

“Two-fifty sounds fair. Thank you, mister.” Josephine put on a polite smile and reached into her satchel, pulling out the fare and handing it to him.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what’s the occasion?” He asked as he guided her over to the set and she sat down in the chair provided.

“Just a present for my husband. I lost my wedding ring,” she lied easily, holding her hand up to show him the missing band. “He’s gettin’ me a new one right now, and I wandered on over here. If you’re photography’s good, we might just be comin’ back for another portrait.”
The man flushed and moved over to his camera. “What a wonderful present, if I may say so.”

“So… what do I do?”

“Get comfortable, position yourself however you’d like.”

Josephine pulled her hair free of its braid and shook it out, pulling it forward to rest over one shoulder. She straightened her back, tipped her chin up slightly, and listened to the man’s tips as he too helped her position herself from his spot behind the camera. When he told her to hold it, Josephine’s lips curled up in a soft, warm smile and the photographer captured the picture. The bright flash and pop made her jump, and she looked at him curiously.

“I believe I have it. Give me… ten minutes, and I’ll process the photo for you.”

Josephine nodded and stood up from the chair as the man scurried into a back room. She wandered around the little shop, looking at the photos he had hung around, smiling at the plethora of different faces and people captured in the photos. There were men, women, families, children, and even a few dogs and cats. They came from different classes too; some were wealthy, some clearly not. There were farmers and bankers and waitresses, and even a gaggle of working girls that made Josephine smile.

The man returned with her portrait shortly and she took it from him, inspecting it with interest. A smile formed on her face as she gazed upon herself. She didn’t look in the mirror often, hardly at all, in fact, but she couldn’t help but feel giddy at seeing herself. Josephine thought she looked pretty, and while she’d felt unnatural and stiff while sitting there, the photo of her looked perfectly content and comfortable.

“Thanks, mister. It looks beautiful.”

“Well, I hope your husband doesn’t mind me saying, but you’re a very beautiful woman. It’s not my doing, it’s yours. All I did was immortalize it.”

Josephine flushed at that and tucked the picture carefully into her satchel. “He’s going to enjoy this very much, I think. Thank you again.”

“Thank you.” the photographer said and Josephine smiled at him sweetly before exiting the building.
She found Arthur leaned up against a post by Boadicea, puffing on a cigarette. When she approached, Josephine snatched the cigarette from his lips, grinning and giddy as she took a puff off of it, blew out the smoke, and handed it back to him.

“ Took ya long enough,” Arthur griped, making Josephine whack him playfully in the arm. “What were you doin’?”

“Oh, nothin’,” Josephine said sweetly with a shrug. “Gettin’ my picture taken.”

“Your picture?” He whistled and Josephine could see the interest in his eyes. “What possessed you to do that?”

“Well,” she reached into her satchel and pulled the photo out. “I dunno I… figured you could put me in a frame.” Josephine handed the picture to him and she suddenly felt bashful as Arthur held it and inspected it. He was quiet, and it made her squirm. “It… it ain’t bad, is it?” She asked, suddenly unsure of herself.

“It’s for me?” He asked, eyes flicking to her, then back down at the picture. There was a look on his face, a mix between bashfulness and adoration. His cheeks turned pink when Josephine nodded.

“You don’t gotta put it in a frame, I—” She shook her head. “I guess I just wanted you to have it. A picture of me.”

Arthur didn’t know what to say, and Josephine could see it on his face.

“I—I love it,” he said finally. A simple phrase that conveyed all Josephine needed to hear. “This is… thank you, Jo.”

“You really like it?”

“I do,” he nodded, and in an uncharacteristic fashion, he pulled her close and kissed her, full on the lips. Josephine returned it, cupping his cheek and smiling into it.
That night, as they lay in Arthur’s cot, sweaty and sated from a slow round of lovemaking, Arthur took out her picture and grabbed the framed photo of Mary. He popped open the back, removed Mary’s picture, and replaced it with Josephine’s own. He placed the frame upright on the table next to the bed and they both gazed at it for a while, a soft silence settling over the two of them.

“I love you,” Josephine murmured, and then Arthur was rolling over her, trapping her in the warm, strong cage of his arms.

“I love you,” he murmured back, and Josephine relished the warmth the words caused to swell around her heart.
Every day, Dutch slipped a little more. The law always seemed to be closing in, and Josephine could see it on Dutch’s face. The words he used to preach, those ideals that brought everyone in the gang to them, were getting harder and harder to preach. Folks wouldn’t believe the impossible.

Dutch hid it well, but Josephine could see it. She could see it in his body language after a close call, could see it on his face when he spoke to her, Arthur, and the boys about his plan. He tried to hide it, but Josephine had learned how to read people straight from Dutch’s own teachings. She didn’t voice her concerns, as she didn’t want to create paranoia in the camp and perhaps even get herself killed by the most loyal among them, such as Javier and Bill.

As they fled west in 1898, away from the net of the law, their gang grew. First, with a priest, who saved Dutch’s life, somehow or some way. Dutch didn’t mention it to her, or anyone for that matter, and the priest, Swanson, they called him, didn’t speak much of it either. He wasn’t much of a priest, but he had some pretty interesting stories.

A few months after that, the Callender brothers joined, too, and with their arrival, the tone of the camp shifted, if just a little. They were criminals, though Josephine had to admit all of them were criminals in some sense. But they were cold and hateful. Brutal bastards, but they, like Sean, were wild and unpredictable, which bet well for Dutch in robberies, heists and the occasional kidnapping.

“Where are we headed, Dutch?” Josephine said, riding Duke up to fall into pace with Dutch and The Count. The rest of the camp followed behind on wagons and horses, sans Arthur and Bill, who rode ahead and the Callender brothers who rode far behind, both groups meant as a safety net between the rest of the camp and any trouble.

“New Austin,” Dutch said, turning his head to look at her. “Lands out there are pretty wild still, a good place to hunker down and hide in. I know of a place, not too far from a town called Blackwater. We’ll stay there, get some money, and then be on our way west once more.” Josephine furrowed her eyebrows and looked forward. “You seem pensive, my dear,” Dutch prompted and she shook her head.

“It’s — the worlds really comin’ down on us now, Dutch. I’m scared if I’m bein’ honest.” Dutch barked out a laugh.
“Josephine Davis, scared? Hell really must be going cold, now.”

“I mean it,” Josephine huffed. “What are we gonna do when we ain’t wanted no more?”

“We ain’t been wanted in a long time, Josephine. That’s why we fight.”

Josephine nodded, the words doing little to quell the unease in her stomach. She dropped back and checked on each of the wagons. When she paused by the wagon with Swanson, Abigail, Jack, Strauss, and the girls, she smiled when she saw Jack happily babbling and playing on Abigail’s lap.

“You doin’ okay, Abby?” Josephine asked, looking up at her as she rode Duke next to the wagon.

“’M fine. Just scared, is all.” She ran her hand over Jack’s back and Josephine nodded.

“I understand, but Dutch’ll keep us safe. We’re headed to New Austin. Dutch says we’ll lay low there until we’re able to leave safely.” Abigail sighed and nodded, and with that, Josephine dropped Duke back and fell in line with John.

He seemed just as skeptical as her, but neither mentioned it.

The gang traveled across the plains of New Austin until sunset and only slowed when Arthur and Bill came back to report that they’d found a safe place to set up camp. A sigh of relief seemed to be released across the traveling caravan. Josephine knew she certainly was ready to settle; her thighs were raw from the saddle, and her back ached fiercely.

When they got to the spot, it was hidden well enough in a group of trees, and as they pulled in and stopped, Josephine scoped it out. The trees were green, but the ground was dry and brown. The temperature was low, but Josephine knew that to be plains and desert weather. Tomorrow, it would likely be hot and stifling once the sun came up. Josephine dismounted Duke and groaned, pain shooting up her back. She fed and watered her beloved horse, then as she was working on removing his saddle Arthur came up behind her and took over.

“Let me,” he said, and Josephine sighed and leaned against a tree.
“You can’t be in much of a better way than me,” she pointed out as he removed Duke’s saddle and dropped it on a fallen log nearby. “We haven’t ridden that long in a while.”

The camp came to life quickly as Miss Grimshaw and Pearson got to work. Wagons were parked, tents were erected, and a firepit was built. Pearson was already working on a stew by the time Susan got things in order. Normally by this time, people were drinking and partying to forget, but it seemed everyone was in the same boat as her and Arthur.

“And Josephine,” Miss Grimshaw called, and Josephine pushed herself away from the tree. “Your wagon, it’s over there.” She gestured and Josephine followed it, nodding when she saw their space. The canvas wasn’t up yet and most of their belongings were still packed away in the wagon, but the cot was out, and that was all that mattered to Josephine.

“Great, thank you, Susan.” Josephine smiled tiredly. Arthur was whisked away almost immediately by Dutch, and Josephine set herself to help in any way she could, despite her exhaustion.

As the camp quieted down, Miss Grimshaw dismissed her and Josephine trudged over to the wagon. She kicked off her shoes, found the quilt, then collapsed onto the cot. The thin cushion did little for her back but laying down felt heavenly. She unfolded the quilt then nestled into it, fatigue and tiredness making her body feel heavy as lead.

As she was moments away from sleep, heavy footsteps landed near her space and she felt Arthur’s warm back against her when he sat on the edge of the cot. Josephine groaned sleepily as he removed his gunbelt, satchel, and whatever else, and then laid down next to her, fitting his chest against her back and shuffling until they both fit comfortably on the small space. Her body jostled around from his movements as he made room for himself, and he offered her a quiet apology. His arm looped over her waist and Josephine laid her hand on it, sighing heavily at his added warmth and comfort.

“You okay?” She heard him ask, and Josephine smacked her lips, shifting her head until he stretched his arm out under her, and she was able to rest her cheek on his bicep.

“Been better,” she murmured. Fighting off sleep was getting hard, and Arthur seemed to sense that too.

“You’ll get us outta this, he always has.”

A soft, weak grunt left her and with that, the world went black and Josephine slept peacefully despite
When she woke up in the morning, the sun had barely risen up over the mountains. The sky was still mostly dark, and Josephine realized the rest of the camp hadn’t even risen yet. She looked around blearily, blinking away the sleep that clouded her vision. Someone was snoring loudly, and she realized not even the horses were awake yet.

A chill had settled in the early morning, making the air crisp and fresh. A soft groan left her lips when she stretched her legs out, and she felt Arthur grumble and shift against her. Her eyes turned to him, and thankfully he hadn’t woken. He now laid on his back, and Josephine gazed at his face which was peaceful and free from stress and emotion. The wrinkles on his forehead had smoothed out, and his lips were parted softly. He looked young and carefree again.

Josephine laid her head back down and tried to sleep, but it wouldn’t come. Eventually, she carefully slid off of the cot and adjusted the quilt, pulling it over Arthur so he wouldn’t grow cold. She tiptoed to the end of the wagon, popping open Arthur’s trunk and dragging out his coat before she stepped away and made her way to the fire. She pulled the coat around herself and hunkered down, poking at the coals and dropping a few pieces of wood onto it until they caught.

The silence was nice; Josephine allowed herself to just sit there and relish in it, mind still slow and bleary from sleep. She warmed her hands first, then grabbed the percolator and started a coffee pot, yawning when the smell hit her.

The chickens came to life first, and then the horses. Josephine flicked her hand out at the rooster when he came too close, and huffed when he tried to peck at her.

“Get out of here, you shithead.” She waved her hand again, and this time he retreated, feathers puffed up and proud as if he was the one who’d been the victor of that little interaction.

“I wish Mr. Pearson would just wring that damn things neck already,” came Susan’s voice and Josephine let out a soft chuckle. “He causes too much trouble for his own good.”
“Not unlike our dear boys here at camp,” Josephine teased and poured a cup of coffee when it finished, handing the first cup to Susan, then pouring a cup for herself.

“Not unlike them at all,” she agreed and sat down near Josephine on the ground. The groan Susan let out told Josephine she was just as sore, and Josephine smiled at her sympathetically.

“You should rest today, Susan. Yesterday was a hard day on all of us.”

“There’s not gonna be any rest for us for a while, my dear. Not anymore.”

Josephine sighed and sipped her coffee. “Dutch will get us out of this,” Josephine said, copying what Arthur had told her the night before. “He always finds a way.”

“Maybe so,” Susan responded, though Josephine could hear the doubt laced in her voice. She wouldn’t admit it, but Josephine felt it too. It was going to be hard to get out of this one, now. There were twenty of them now, all family in some way or another. Dutch had dreams of fleeing west and hiding out and thriving there, but it was hard to hide and provide for so many people, let alone travel with them without raising alarm.

Josephine yawned heavily and rubbed her eyes. She sat with Susan until the sun began to rise and the sky turned soft pink. The camp started waking up then, slowly, starting with Pearson who started a pot of porridge, and he was followed by Strauss and Dutch.

When she finished her coffee, she took it over to the wash bin and found the source of all the snoring. Uncle had fallen asleep—passed out, more likely—next to Pearson’s wagon, the bottle he nursed still in his hand. Josephine scowled and kicked his foot, waking him up with a rough snort.

“What?” He griped, making Josephine roll her eyes.

“Get up, you lazy bastard. Your snorin’ sounds like the end of the world.” Uncle waved his hand at her and rolled over.

“Let me sleep in peace;” he slurred, and Josephine rolled her eyes again.
Slowly, Josephine made her way around the camp, counting heads despite herself and getting herself acquainted with the new setup. The air still had a chill to it, but the peaking sun was already warming her. By the time she made it back to her and Arthur’s shared tent, the man was already awake. He sat on the edge of the cot with his elbows on his knees, scribbling away in his journal.

Arthur never told her what he wrote in the journal, and she never pried. Never felt the need to, really. When she got close, she smiled and laid her hand on the back of his head, smoothing down the hair that stuck up from sleep. He looked up at her, and she looked down at him, and the sun caught his eyes in a way that made them shine, bright and blue. Her eyes fell further to the journal between his hands and found he wasn’t writing at all, but instead was drawing. She turned her head and sat down next to him, looking at the sketch that stretched over two pages.

It was a drawing of her and Miss Grimshaw sitting around the fire, sipping on their coffee. Arthur’s coat practically swallowed her up in the drawing, and she noted the fine details he’d added, such as the tangles in her hair and the nicks and scratches that marred his coat. In the background sat Pearson’s wagon, said man working diligently behind it. The other tents that sat around them were sketched out too, and Josephine whistled softly. Below it, ‘Blackwater’ was written in that beautiful rolling cursive of his.

“You been awake for that long?”

“You woke up not long after you got up,” Arthur said, returning pencil to paper as he shaded a few things.

“You got any plans for today?” The question was mundane and almost a ritual for them at this point.

“Gotta head into that town, Blackwater or whatever, scout a few things out, look for leads. If I find somethin’ I might be gone for a few days.” Josephine nodded at his words and moved her hand to rest on the back of his neck, scratching her fingers gently against his scalp. His eyes fluttered and she smiled. “You wanna come with?”

“Mm… I figure it’d be best to stick around, help Miss Grimshaw and Pearson get the camp in order.”

It was the truth, but beyond that, Josephine had been spending more and more time around camp rather than out in the world, raising hell and taking names. Truthfully, she was burning out on it; on the robberies and the heists and the murders and the kidnapping. She enjoyed it, she liked the rush, but she wasn’t the young woman who’d stared death in the face and laughed anymore. She’d do it, still, she had the ability, but no longer did she seek it.
“If I ain’t got nothin’ better to do, I’ll come find you.” Josephine continued and rubbed Arthur’s stiff shoulders.

“I’m gettin’ too damn old for this.” Arthur sighed, closing his journal and leaning into her touch. Josephine shifted to better rub his back and sighed with him.

“Just a little longer,” she murmured. “Then Dutch’ll get us to California, and we’ll disappear.”

She prayed that night, in the solitude of their tent after the sun had gone down and Arthur hadn’t returned. She prayed that they’d make it and that Dutch would get them out of the hole they’d fallen in.

As usual, her prayers went unanswered when a man by the name of Micah Bell joined them just months later.

Chapter End Notes

The next couple of chapters are going to be terrible. Mostly because Micah is in them and I despise him with a burning passion. A

Also, sidenote!

I'm going to be attending SacAnime in Sacramento from June 6th to the 10th! I'll likely not be posting or responding to comments for those days because I'll be busy. I just wanted to let everyone know! And thank you again to all those people who keep leaving kudos and commenting, and means so much to me and I'm really glad to have the support!
“You did good, kid,” Josephine said to Lenny Summers as they rode in from a home robbery just south of Blackwater. He’d asked her to ride along, and knowing his generally cool-headed personality, she was willing to help him. She’d distracted the man of the house, while Lenny snuck inside and made out with two hundred dollars and a bottle of whiskey older than Josephine herself.

“You ain’t so bad yourself. How long you been ridin’ with them?”

“Twenty years, give or take. Dutch saved me when I was a girl, taught me everythin’ I know. Though, Hosea’s to thank for my theatrics.” Josephine chuckled, recalling the hysterics she’d put on when the man of the house turned to go inside.

“What do we do with the money?” He asked, still unused to the way they did things.

“We each get a cut, and the rest goes to the camp. That whiskey though… We oughta keep that between the two of us. If Uncle or Karen gets a hold of it, we’ll never taste a drop.”

They slowed the horses and Josephine let Lenny handle splitting the money. He handed her twenty-five, then pocketed twenty-five for himself. The rest he tucked in a money clip and put in his saddlebags.

“Twenty-five fair?” He asked, and Josephine tutted. She handed him back ten and shook her head.

“Fifteen’s fine for me, you keep the ten. It was your lead and you did most of the work, anyway.”

“Thanks, miss.” He said, then with that, they continued on towards camp.

“So… Jenny Kirk, huh?” Josephine said after a stretch of silence, a small smile curling on her lips.

“What about her?” Lenny asked defensively, but the look on his face gave away the bashfulness he felt.
“Nothin’,” Josephine played innocent and looked ahead. “She’s cute, is all. Saw you makin’ eyes at her this mornin’.”

“I was not,” Lenny denied, making Josephine smile wider.

“Sure you weren’t,” Josephine dragged out the phrase and shook her head. “You should do somethin’ about it. As Dutch would say, romance is all any of us have left.”

Lenny seemed to ponder that, and Josephine let silence fall between them. She leaned forward and patted Duke’s neck, complimenting him on the good ride and telling him how good of a boy he was, and the stallion seemed to preen under her. He tossed his head and picked his legs up higher while he trotted, showing off for the mare next to him.

“I think he likes your mare,” Josephine chuckled, glancing at Lenny and his horse. “What’s her name?”

“Maggie,” he said proudly, bending to pat her neck. “She’s a real fine horse. The man I took her from, well… Let’s just put it that he won’t be needing her no more.”

Josephine snorted at that and shook her head. “Gotta do what we gotta do.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Lenny agreed, and with that another silence fell over them, following them the remainder of the way back to camp.

When they arrived, the air was tense. Josephine laid her hand on her revolver and looked around, eyes landing on an unfamiliar Missouri Fox Trotter hitched next to The Count. Josephine narrowed her eyes and pulled Duke to a stop, dismounting and pausing to wait for Lenny. Josephine kept her hand near her revolver and approached the camp, taking a quick inventory of the horses as they walked. Arthur, Sean, and the Callender brother’s horses were gone, though they’d been gone even before she and Lenny went off to the homestead.

“Ah! Josephine, Lenny, there you two are.” Dutch said when they entered the camp. Hosea, one of the new members Charles, John and an unfamiliar figure stood and sat around Dutch’s tent. “Come over here, will you?”

Lenny left her briefly to stick the money into the collection box, then returned to her, stiff and on
high alert. Judging by their faces, something was... off. John didn’t look comfortable, and his face was hard as stone.

“Dutch?” Josephine questioned, eyes flicking to the man standing next to him. He had piercing, beady blue eyes, and shoulder-length blond hair. Something about him set Josephine off, and her stomach rolled with unease. His eyes met hers and his lips curled back in a grin that could curdle fresh milk.

“Now who might this be, my friend?” The blond man directed at Dutch.

“Josephine Davis and Lenny Summers,” Dutch introduced, running his fingers along his mustache. “This is Micah Bell. He saved my life today.”

“You needed savin’?” Josephine questioned, shifting when the man, Micah, stepped down off of the raised platform under Dutch’s tent and onto the ground. She laid her hand on her revolver and Micah only grinned.

“Yes, even I need saving from time to time.” Dutch sounded amused, and Josephine offered him a tense smile.

“A feisty one, I can tell,” Micah said and rested his hands on the dual revolvers on his waist. Josephine’s eyes flicked to his and he smirked. “I sure would like to see what this one’s like alone. Probably wild as a —”

As quick as a whip, Josephine unholstered her revolver and raised it to Micah’s head. Micah was quick as well, and his guns pointed her down. She stared down the barrels at him, eyes narrowed and cold.

“I’ll shoot you dead if you continue that sentence,” Josephine responded, making the man smirk. A gasp sounded from one of the girls behind her and John stood up roughly, making the chair he’d been seated on squeak and fall back into the grass. Micah’s eyes narrowed, and Josephine cocked back the hammer when he didn’t yield.

“Hey! Break it up!” Dutch called, to which neither of them did, at first. With a smug look, Micah broke first, tipping his guns skyward and shaking his head. He held his hands up in surrender, seemingly satisfied with himself for listening to Dutch. Gaining trust, Josephine realized. She pointed the gun at the ground and decocked the hammer.
“He stayin’?” Josephine heard herself asking, blood rushing in her ears from anger.

“Of course. Anyone who saves my life has always got a place with us.”

“Then you best keep away from me, Bell.” Josephine spat, anger rolling in her like a storm. “Because I will kill you if need be. That’s a goddamn promise.”

“Josephine,” Dutch said, his voice hard with that reprimanding tone he’d used with her when she was wild and young.

How Dutch could trust a man like that was beyond her. All of them were dangerous in some way or another, but Micah… There was something about him. He was an outlaw like them, but his eyes told Josephine there was something more there. Something slimy and dangerous and nasty. He may fool Dutch with his wit and charm, but he couldn’t fool Josephine.

Josephine shook her head and ignored him, turning on her heel and walking away. She heard Micah comment about her, how unruly she is, questioning his word. Susan watched Josephine walk and followed her despite herself. Josephine stormed into the treeline, only stopping a few paces in, once she was away from the eyes of the camp. She looked at Susan, and her eyes brimmed with tears. Not from anger or pain, but from fear.

Josephine was afraid of Micah Bell, and she was terrified about what his presence meant for the future of their family.

When Arthur returned that night with Sean after a lengthy kidnapping and ransom, the camp was alive with a party. There were singing and dancing, and when Arthur turned to look at Sean, the Irishman was already bounding off to join the party.

Tired and sore, Arthur sighed, grabbing the camp’s cut from their kidnapping and heading into the heart of it. He dropped the money into the collection box and looked around, searching for anyone who wasn’t too busy drinking or singing or dancing to talk to. His eyes landed on Josephine, who sat by Hosea at one of the fires towards the edge of the camp. When Josephine noticed him, their eyes
met and she smiled, though the sun and the warmth was missing from it this time. The smile was tense and her eyes held a storm.

“What’s goin’ on?” He asked when he was close enough, sitting down on a stool between the two.

“Our dear old Dutch had his life saved today, now we’re celebrating,” Hosea said, puffing on the cigarette between his fingers. “A man by the name of Micah Bell rescued him, or so the story goes.”

“There’s somethin’ off about him,” Josephine said, and Arthur laid a hand high on her back despite himself. She was tense beneath his palm and Arthur moved his hand in slow circles, trying to offer some comfort. “I don’t get a good-feelin’ about him.”

“Considering you two held each other at gunpoint, I think that was plainly obvious.”

Arthur stiffened and looked down at her. “What?"

A fit of hard, hot anger rolled within him and when Josephine looked up at him, he saw fear. His Josephine was afraid of next to nothing. She’d been shot at, stabbed at, tied up and had stared down the barrels of shotguns with not a lick of fear in her eyes. But she looked up at him now, and the fear was there, and it told him all he needed to know.

“Are you okay?” Arthur asked, now concerned. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she said looking away and leaning closer to him. “If the bastard ever gets close enough to even get the idea of doin’ somethin’, I’ll blow his goddamn head off.”

“I’ll fill you in on it later, Arthur,” Hosea said, and Arthur followed his eyes to what he could only assume was their newest member.

The way he held himself told Arthur he was a seasoned outlaw and killer. He had a bottle in one hand and the other was planted on young Jenny Kirk’s waist. His eyes moved and caught Arthur’s and a smirk twisted his lips. He let go of Jenny and then was walking over. Arthur felt Josephine shift under his hand and Arthur pulled it away, though the man smirked wider when he saw his hand retreat.

“Well, another new face,” he spoke. “Micah Bell.” He offered his hand, the one that’d been on
Jenny, and Arthur ignored it.

“Arthur Morgan,” he said shortly.

“Sheesh, what a gaggle of lively ones you are. Friendly, too.” His voice was thick with sarcasm and his eyes dropped to Josephine. “Well, would you look at that, the beast has been tamed! She your woman?”

“You best be gettin’ on,” Arthur said, fists clenching.

“Oh, she must be. I’m surprised you haven’t trained her yet. Women like that need a big man to put her in her place. Like horses, my dear old daddy used to say. Gotta break ‘em to train ‘em.”

“I said,” Arthur stood up, finding himself to be slightly taller and wider than Micah. He set his shoulders and glared at him. “You best be gettin’ on.”

Micah whistled and shook his head. “Whatever you say, cowpoke. But you best tame that woman, lest one of us gets tired of it and does it ourselves.”

Before anyone could answer, Micah was turning away and leaving. When Arthur looked down at Josephine, he found the spot empty and saw her retreating into their tent.

“What the hell’s Dutch thinkin’?” Arthur sighed, rubbing his temples as he sat down. It was best to let Josephine cool off and deal with her thoughts for a while before stepping in.

“I’m not sure anymore,” Hosea sighed.

Arthur grunted in agreement and lit a cigarette. He stayed out for a while, drinking and smoking and talking with Hosea. Recently, he’d been spending more time with the older man. He hated his theatrics when conning, but sometimes, he needed a break from all the chaos that seemed to follow Dutch around like fleas on a dog.

When he retired to the tent, he found Josephine seated on one of the crates, the back flaps facing away from the camp open. She was puffing on a cigarette, and the butts he noticed lying around told him it wasn’t her first. Her hair now laid freely down her back, spilling out like a dark waterfall.
“You okay?” He asked, tying the flaps. She didn’t look at him, but her body turned towards him slightly.

“I ain’t no goddamn horse,” she said, and Arthur moved closer, laying his hand lightly on her warm back. “I don’t need tamin’. If he…” She shook her head. “I’ll kill him, Arthur. I really will.”

“I ain’t got a doubt about that.” Arthur murmured, smoothing his hand up and down her back, the strands of her hair tickling his knuckles.

Josephine flicked the cigarette out when she finished it, then climbed off of the crates and moved to the cot. “I’m afraid,” she admitted softly, looking up at him with those eyes, the expression on her face making his heart sting. “I don’t like bein’ afraid.”

“I know,” he cupped her cheek, running his thumb over the freckled skin. It was soft and warm under his touch. “We’ll… we’ll figure all this mess out.”

“Let’s just go to bed. I—I want to put this day behind me.”

“Alright,” he murmured, letting go of her when she laid down on the cot and pulled the quilt up. He wished he was better at comforting her, wished he could find the words to make her discomforts and fears just melt away. He’d never had a way with words, and part of him hated himself for not being able to offer her proper comfort. “I’m gonna stay awake for a while, do some writin’. That okay?”

“That’s fine,” she said, though gestured for him. “Come here.”

He obliged her, leaning down and meeting her lips in a soft, chaste kiss. His hand found her hair and he smoothed it out when she laid down, smiling at the way her eyes went heavy and dreamy. She rolled over and he moved away, sitting down and digging around in his journal.

He wrote for the better part of an hour, scribbling his thoughts down over three or four pages by the time he finished. Josephine was sound asleep by that time, breathing evenly and slowly. Arthur put his satchel away, set his journal on the table, then removed his gun belt and boots. He blew out the lantern and slid into the cot next to her, apologizing quietly when she grumbled and stirred.
Her body was warm and soft against his own, and each night he slid into bed with her, he relished it. Cherished the warmth and comfort of a woman in his bed. He thought he’d never experience it again before she came along and stole his heart, a heart he’d lost after he lost Eliza and Isaac. He sighed and willed himself to relax, drifting off into a dreamless, but partially peaceful sleep.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Wow, sorry it's been so long guys! I've been really busy after I got back from SacAnime, but the trip was amazing! I actually got to meet Roger Clark and Rob Wiethoff and get their autographs, which was an experience beyond words. They're both such sweet people, and it truly was a great experience getting to meet them.

Anyway! A warning, this chapter is short but very heavy. If you're squicked by animal death, go ahead and skip this chapter. I'll do a double upload so you guys aren't left with such a heavy one.

Thanks for your patience, and I'll try to get back to a consistent uploading schedule! Adult life is super busy, y'all.

“You sure robbin’ a ferry is a good idea, Dutch?” Josephine asked, months later after the turn of the new year.

Dutch seemed hopeful for the year of 1899, but Josephine couldn’t say the same for herself. Micah had posted himself close to Dutch’s ear, feeding him ideas and whatever other kinds of poison. Dutch had changed since the outlaw had joined them; Josephine could feel it in the air and see it on Dutch’s face. She knew his world was falling apart, could see it for herself, too. He was panicking. And Micah was only adding heat to the fire.

“You questioning my judgment, girl?” There was a venom in his voice that Josephine didn’t care for.

“No, no of course not. I just —” She sighed and glanced at Micah and John who stood around as well. “It’s big, Dutch. Lots can go wrong.”

“Sure, but we can handle it.” There was a finality there and Josephine threw her shoulders back, not backing down. “Just go and do whatever it is you do. We have plans to make, I don’t need you questioning every move I make.”

Taken aback, Josephine narrowed her eyes. “Whatever, Dutch.”

As she retreated from his tent, she could hear Micah speaking about her. “She’ll be the first to betray us, boss. I can see it in her eyes, she’s squirrely. She’ll rat on us first chance she gets. She deserted
you before, she’ll do it again.”

She heard John jumping to her defense, but she had walked too far away to catch what he was saying. Josephine shook her head and clenched her fists, storming off towards her tent. Before she could make it, she thumped into a hard chest, too wrapped up in her own mind to watch where she was going. Arthur caught her around the shoulders and was looking down at her when she looked up.

“You alright?” He asked, eyebrows furrowing. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she noticed Micah was watching her like a hawk.

“No, can we…” She sighed and shook her head, anxiety making her stomach roll. “Go huntin’ with me, just for today. I… I need to get out for a bit.”

“Yeah, okay,” his hands moved down her arms in a comforting sort of gesture. “You need anythin’ before we go?”

“No, I’m ready if you’re ready.”

“I need to go talk to Hosea, then we can be on our way.”

Josephine nodded and bit her lip as she went over to where Duke and Boadicea stood. She checked Boadicea’s tack first, then Duke’s. She fed him a few carrots when she finished, patting his neck and brushing out his mane with her fingers.

“Things are gettin’ weird, old boy.” She kissed his forehead and closed her eyes when he nuzzled her. He was getting old, proven by the way his muzzle had lightened subtly in color. She didn’t ride him hard anymore and tried her best to refrain from riding him too far and too long. “But I got you, my good, good boy. You make things easier.”

Duke nickered softly and moved his head, dropping it over her shoulder. Josephine wrapped her arms around his neck and patted him. Next to Arthur, Duke was her closest friend. He’d been with her for nearly sixteen years, and he was her most loyal companion. She’d need to retire him soon, and it pained her to think of selling him or stabling him. He was still strong, but his stamina was beginning to stagger.
“We’ll get through it, boy. Yes, we will,” she whispered and pulled back, petting his cheeks and forehead softly.

Spurred boots turned her attention away from him and she watched Arthur approach. He held a few provisions in his hands and tucked them into Boadicea’s saddlebags. Josephine mounted Duke and patted his neck, leading him out of camp with Arthur once Arthur was ready to go.

“Where we headed?” Arthur asked, letting Josephine take the lead on this trip.

“North,” she answered, knowing there was some good game up there. They needed to bring back some food at least, to keep from raising eyebrows or cause suspicion from Micah.

“What’s this about?” Arthur asked after a while when they were a few miles north of the camp.

“You hear about the ferry Dutch and Micah plan to rob?” Josephine asked, turning her head to look at him. At his nod, Josephine shook her head. “I don’t have a good feelin’ about it, Arthur. It’s too big, it’s—people are gonna die, our people.”

“I know, it’s goddamn Micah.” Arthur sounded just as bitter as she felt. “I’m not gonna be part of it. I—Hosea and I are workin’ on a lead, bring us in enough money to disappear.”

“I thought we had the money to disappear months ago,” Josephine muttered, and Arthur chuckled humorlessly.

“So did I, Jo. So did I.”

They followed the Upper Montana River north until they found a dense forest. Josephine pulled out her bow, much more skilled now after the lessons Charles had given her and dismounted with Arthur. They trekked silently through the forest, stopping occasionally to listen, and other times stopping to talk to one another, to speak their worries and questions about Dutch’s judgment.

By the time they finished hunting, Josephine had Duke loaded up with a deer and two wild turkeys, while Arthur had Boadicea loaded up with a buck, three turkeys and a rabbit. It was good hunting, and it’d feed the camp for at least a few days if Pearson stretched it far enough. The moment Josephine felt their luck was going skyward, it was almost immediately squashed as they rode slowly over the trail.
“There they are!” A shout resounded in the trees, and then suddenly a wagon was rolling into the path, blocking their exit. “Now!”

An explosion burst the wagon into flames, and before Josephine could even process what was happening, gunshots rang out from all over. Duke screamed beneath her, rearing back. Josephine scrambled, then was dropped on the ground, her beloved horse falling right next to her. Scrambling for her gun, she shot at the O’Driscoll Boys who emerged from the trees, laying bullets into two of them as she ran forward for cover behind a tree.

“Goddamn O’Driscolls!” She heard Arthur shouting with the accompany of the crack of his rifle. She searched for him and found him taking cover behind a large rock just across the path.

Blood rushed in her ears as she moved from cover momentarily, shooting at another O’Driscoll and dropping him easily to the ground. She counted ten, at least. They hadn’t seen this many of them in months!

“Push forward!” Arthur shouted, and she did just that, finding cover behind a fallen log. She unloaded her gun, paused to reload, and did it again. They worked in tandem until the remaining men retreated, shouting and running into the trees. “Cowards! That’s right, you cowards! Run!”

Josephine cautiously stood up and held her gun out, searching for any remaining boys who wanted to be brave. When she turned around to scan behind them, her stomach dropped deep into her belly.

“Duke!” She screamed, gun dropping from her hand as she sprinted back to her horse, who now laid panicked and bloody on the ground. “No, no! No, Duke!”

He’d been shot just about everywhere, and his blood pooled on the ground. Josephine dropped to her knees by his head and released a wet sob. His eyes were huge and his breath was coming out in quick, panicked puffs. His head jerked and Josephine pulled it into her lap, cupping his cheeks and rubbing his forehead. His eye looked up at her and calmness seemed to wash over him as he recognized her.

“It’s okay boy, it’s okay. I’m here, I’m here.” Tears dripped down her cheeks and landed in his hair. “I’m sorry, Duke, I’m so sorry. It’s okay, it’s…” she trailed off, when he nickered softly, then heaved in a breath and exhaled his last. “Okay, it’s okay. I’m sorry boy, I’m here.” She sobbed, leaning over his head as his eyes glazed over. “I love you, boy. I love you. You was the best horse, you…” Her throat tightened and she held his head. A warm hand landed on her back, rubbing
gently. Sobs wracked her as she hunched over him, clinging to her companion.

“I’m sorry, Jo,” Arthur whispered, but Josephine could barely hear him.

“Thank you, Duke,” Josephine whispered, and she heard a soft intake of breath from Arthur. She wasn’t aware of it, but Arthur was shedding a few tears too. “Thank you, boy. For everythin’. You were… you were the best horse I coulda asked for. I’m sorry it… I’m sorry it ended this way.”

Josephine sat with him for a few more minutes, petting his body, cooing to him softly. Her mind raced through all her memories with him, of playing with him, splashing around with him in the lakes or rivers, of him nipping at her hat and nudging her around. She remembered the first time he saw snow and played in it, and the times spent laying with him around camp. Eventually, she pulled away from him, petted his snout and kissed his forehead one last time, then stood up.

Arthur was still standing behind her still, and when she looked up at him, she saw the tears that had dried on his cheeks. She watched as he bent down and petted Duke’s cheek, whispering his goodbye to the horse.

Josephine rode on the back of Boadicea in silence, eyes tilted towards the setting sun. It bathed the land in a soft golden glow. A pack of wild horses could be seen running over the plains, and Josephine smiled softly.

“I’m so sorry, Jo.” Arthur breathed, and Josephine laid her cheek against his back.

“It’s okay,” she murmured. “He’s… he’s in a better place now. I’m… I’m glad that the last thing he saw was me. I couldn’t… I couldn’t forgive myself if he died there before I got to him.”

“You gonna be okay?” Arthur asked tentatively.

“I will be.”

She put on a brave face for the camp when they returned. Everyone seemed to know what had happened, but only the members who had been with them the longest seemed to understand at a deeper level. Even Dutch had offered her a look of sympathy. But when he laid a hand on her shoulder and said her name, Josephine shrugged him off and continued on towards her tent. Once she would have run to him and cried, but this Dutch wasn’t her old Dutch anymore.
Josephine cried herself to sleep that night, sick with grief and misery. Arthur rubbed her back and whispered soft words to her, doing his damndest to comfort her. Even in her sleep, she cried. The dream that plagued her was not one of sadness or misery, but the tears she shed in her sleep were ones of happiness. She dreamt of Duke and Annabelle and Eliza and Isaac. Annabelle was seated proudly atop of her stallion, while the sun warmed Josephine’s skin. Eliza held little Isaac in one hand and was leading Duke with the other. The dream grew hazy as they walked away from her, and Annabelle waved back at Josephine, her smile just as bright and beautiful as it had always been. They dissolved into petals and were carried by the wind, and when Josephine woke up in the morning, she questioned if it was really a dream at all.

Was it a dream, or had she gotten a glimpse of Heaven?
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Aaaaaaand we're finally up to current timeline where the game starts!

Two weeks passed, and the ferry job had been a disaster like Josephine had thought it would be. Dutch asked her to ride with them, but she refused. She refused to possibly lose her life in a mission like that.

When John came bolting in, covered in blood and reeking of gunpowder, he warned the rest of them, shouting that they needed to pack up and go. The heat of the law was fierce this time. They packed up as quickly as possible, but when the sounds of gunfire in the distance began to come closer, they were forced to leave behind most of their supplies and belongings.

The wagons came, but not much else.

Arthur was already gone, ran off to join the fight and keep the law back a ways so the rest of them could flee. Josephine’s blood rushed in her ears as she jumped into the back of the covered wagon with the rest of the girls and Jack, though noticed Jenny was not with them. She questioned as much, and Tilly pointed to the woman, who was fleeing on the back of Lenny’s horse.

The wagons lurched into motion and when they came out of hiding, the gunfire just seemed to grow. Bullets whizzed past her head and Josephine screamed for the girls to get down. She unholstered her gun and bent down, popping up to shoot at the lawmen now chasing them. She dropped a few, but not nearly enough. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and she removed her rifle, tossing her Schofield to Karen.

“Help me!” She shouted to the woman, and Karen did just that.

A bullet grazed her shoulder, tearing pain down her spine. The warm blood seeped down into her dress, but Josephine ignored it in favor of picking off the lawmen. In the distance, she saw the rest of the gang coming up behind the seemingly endless line of lawmen, picking them off with ease. A quick scan and she noticed that a few faces were missing from them.

Sean and Mac were gone, nowhere to be seen.
Dead, probably. Josephine mourned them briefly, using her rifle to pick off a few more lawmen. The wagon rocked as they flew over the plains, fleeing north, higher north than any of them had ever gone before.

A pained scream to her left drew her attention, and she saw Jenny clinging to Lenny, blood seeping down her back in thick waves.

“Lenny!” Josephine shouted, momentarily forgoing the rifle as John and Charles flanked the wagon to protect them. “Come this way! Tilly, help me lift Jenny into the wagon.”

When Lenny was close enough, she and Tilly leaned out with Mary-Beth and Abigail keeping tight grips on their waists. They grappled for Jenny, and the woman weakly reached out for them.

“One, two, three… pull!”

Heaving together, they pulled Jenny into the wagon and she slumped against them. The blood had soaked her back, but it didn’t soak her front. The bullet was still lodged inside. Gunfire continued to ring around them and added with the sound of the girls crying and the horses screaming, it was deafening.

“Jo!” She heard her name and saw Arthur, bolting up to the wagon. His eyes caught her bleeding shoulder and as he was about to shout something to her, Boadicea screamed under him and fell, throwing him roughly to the ground.

“Arthur!” She shouted, panicked. Charles shot off after him, yanking him up onto the back of Taima. Boadicea laid dead on the path, and Josephine sent her a silent goodbye. Charles rode Taima beside the wagon again, then handed the reigns to Arthur, shouting something indistinct. He squatted on the saddle before jumping over to them, landing in the wagon with a thump.

Josephine’s hands were soaked with Jenny’s blood, but she kept the pressure on the wound. Abigail removed her shawl and Josephine used it, pressing it against Jenny hard to soak up and slow the bleeding.

“Let me,” Charles shouted over the noise, and Josephine let him take over.
She picked up her rifle, but her hands were slick with quickly drying blood. She positioned herself at
the back of the wagon again, shooting at the now dwindling lawmen. She could see Davey barely
clinging to life on his horse, and Josephine shouted at John, covering him as he rode up and lead
Davey to one of the other wagons.

Another bullet grazed her arm, deeper this time, and she couldn’t fight the pained shout that left her.
She dropped back and leaned against the back of the wagon, panting as she clutched her arm.


“Ain’t nothin’ but a graze.” She grunted, though when she tried to sit back up and continue shooting,
the gun slipped from her hands from all the blood and she cursed. She pushed the rifle into Karen’s
hands and stayed low.

Mary-Beth removed her shawl this time and handed it to Josephine, and as she tied it around her
shoulder and bicep, Josephine took in the rest of the girls. Little Jack was crying, clutched low
against Abigail to protect him from the gunfire. Molly was with them, her eyes wide as she sucked in
quick breaths, clearly in the midst of a panic. Tilly was bent over Jenny, talking to her, telling her to
stay awake, to look at her. Tilly was crying, and so was Mary-Beth. She could hear Susan shouting,
telling Josephine she was the one driving the wagon.

Eventually, the sky began to turn dark and small flakes of snow began to fall. The gunfire had ceased
as they fled high up into the Grizzlies, where no lawmen with a good working brain would follow, at
least not yet. As things began to calm down, Lenny dropped back with a large pile of quilts and coats
on the back of his horse. The temperature was quickly dwindling, and they had all curled up together
to keep warm.

“What’s the damage?” Lenny asked as he tossed them coats and blankets, and they all grappled to
pull them on.

“Jenny’s… she’s barely clinging on, but we’ve slowed the bleeding.” Josephine said, yanking the
thick coat on and adjusting her bandana around her neck to cover her nose and mouth. “I have a few
grazes, Karen’s got a few too. Where’s Arthur?”

“Dutch sent him and Micah out ahead to scout, he’s fine, I think. John was shot,” the words made
Abigail gasp. “But he’ll live. We lost Mac and Sean was captured in Blackwater, Davey’s barely
hangin’ on. It was goddamn… it was a mess. There were lawmen everywhere.” His eyes were wide
as he recalled it, and Josephine shook her head.
“What the hell happened?” Josephine asked, though she already knew the answer.

“We—”

“Lenny, get up here!” It was Dutch, and Lenny excused himself, tipping his head down as he pushed Maggie forward.

The blizzard got worse the longer they rode, and they sat huddled up, shivering under the thick blankets. Jack was pressed between Abigail and Josephine, and they both kept their hands on him, rubbing his hands and feet and legs to keep him warm.

Tilly kept close to Jenny, and eventually looked up at them with a sad look in her eye. “Jenny’s gone,” she said, sounding like a whisper over the howling wind.

Josephine mourned for her. Jenny was such a sweet young thing, she didn’t deserve to die like that. Lenny would be crushed by the news. She knew he’d been sweet on Jenny for a while now.

They kept the blanket on her and she heard Mary-Beth begin to weep. What a mess. What a huge goddamn mess.

There was shouting at the front of the caravan, but Josephine could barely hear what was being said. She pulled her coat tighter around herself and hunkered down. No lawmen would follow them in this weather, but they’d resigned themselves to freezing or starving to death rather than die by a shot to the head or a rope around their necks.

Abigail was taken to the wagon in front of them to look after Davey, and Josephine held Jack tightly to her chest under the blanket. He let out a wet little sob occasionally, and Josephine did her best to comfort him.

After another hour or so, the wagon came to a rough stop and Josephine opened her eyes. Snow and ice clung to her eyelashes, and her skin burned from the cold. She saw the faint outline of a building, and then there was more shouting. Miss Grimshaw came around the wagon, holding a lantern high.

“Come on girls!” She shouted, and slowly they slid out of the wagon. Josephine stayed in with Tilly,
and together they carefully wrapped Jenny’s body in the blanket she’d been using before she passed. “Davey’s close to death, we have to get him inside.”

Her limbs felt stiff and sore from the cold, but she picked Jack up and jumped off the wagon and landed herself in the snow that nearly came up to her knees. She followed the girls as quickly as she could manage into one of the cabins, and Davey was carried in shortly after.

Miss Grimshaw began barking orders, and Josephine watched as Abigail looked over Davey’s body. The door came closed with a hefty bang, closing them off from the wind and the cold.

“Davey’s dead,” Abigail said, making a quiet fall over them.

Arthur, Hosea, and Dutch began to speak among themselves, and Josephine carefully set Jack on the ground. He clung to her side, then rushed for his mother when she stepped close.

“Listen,” Dutch said, drawing Josephine’s attention to him. “Listen to me all of you, for a moment.” And Josephine listened. She clung to Dutch’s words, even though they gave her little to no hope. They’d push through this, she knew. They’d find food and supplies and they’d make it through this. But beyond that, Josephine was unsure. His words were enough though, they lit a fire in her, even if it was momentarily.

Her eyes met Arthur’s, and she gave him a small smile. He didn’t return it, but she didn’t expect him to.

“Stay with me!” Dutch said, looking over all of them. “We ain’t done yet!” He finished, voice cracking as he grabbed a lantern and turned towards the door. “Come on, Arthur.”

Josephine wanted to protest but held her tongue.

Once they were gone, the cabin seemed to come alive. Davey was carried out to be buried alongside Jenny, and Miss Grimshaw and Pearson barked orders, sending people this way and that. Josephine helped them unload the food and supplies, of which there was little, and get the cabins ready for everyone. Josephine lit the fires and hung lanterns, and by the time Arthur and Dutch had returned, Josephine felt ready to pass out.

A woman was brought to them, a widow named Sadie Adler, and Josephine’s heart cried out for her.
Dutch spoke of a train the O’Driscolls had been planning to rob, but Josephine was too exhausted to question if that was a smart decision or not.

“Mr. Morgan, we set you up over there, and Mr. Bell, you’re over with the other men.” Josephine heard as she helped Mrs. Adler inside. “Miss Davis, when you get her inside, go ahead and rest. Get your wounds taken care of, I’m going to need your help tomorrow.”

Josephine nodded and got Sadie situated with the other women. Her eyes were wide and terrified, and she saw so much pain laced in them it made Josephine’s heart hurt.

On her way out, Josephine grabbed a few bandages and a small bottle of health cure from Strauss, then made her way over to the cabin Arthur was posted in.

Hosea sat in the main room on his bedroll, warming his hands on the fire. “I heard you were injured, Josephine. Are you okay?”

“Mm-hm,” Josephine hummed, closing the door after herself quickly. “Just a graze, nothin’ I ain’t had before. Are you okay?”

She looked at the doors beside the fireplace. One was closed, and the other one was open. She saw Arthur sitting on the cot with a lantern on the ground.

“Yes, I’m just dandy.” He said, though his voice was thick with sarcasm. “Just in need of some rest. You get some too, girl. We all need it.”

Josephine nodded and walked into the room Arthur was in, tracking snow as she walked. He looked up at her, and he looked exhausted. He stood up when she closed the door and Josephine walked into his chest, wrapping her arms tightly around him. He cradled her to him and they relished the warmth, relished knowing they were still alive and hadn’t lost each other.

“It’s a goddamn mess,” Arthur breathed, letting go of Josephine and moving her to sit down.

“I know,” she shook her head, pushing the coat she was wearing off of one shoulder. The bleeding had stopped, but the blood had congealed around the wounds and peeling back the shawl made her hiss and cry weakly.
Arthur was with her in a second, helping her pull her arm out of one side of her blouse and clean and dress the wounds she'd got. Once they were cleaned and wrapped, he helped her re-dress and pull the coat on, then laid with her on the small cot, pulling the quilt up and nestling their bodies together.

“I’m… I’m sorry about Boadicea.” Josephine whispered, tucking her face against his neck.

Arthur was quiet for a while. “She was a good horse,” he murmured, but Josephine didn’t miss the pain behind his words. Boadicea had been a wonderful horse, Arthur’s most loyal companion, and Josephine was highly aware of the pain losing such a companion caused.

“What are we going to do, Arthur?” She found herself asking, and felt his arms tighten around her.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “But Dutch will get us out of this, he always does.”

Maybe he could have gotten them out of it years ago, but Josephine wasn’t so sure anymore.
Man, it feels super bittersweet the closer I get to posting the final chapters of this story. I'm excited to share the ending with you guys, but at the same time, I'm sad to see it wrapping up. If anyone has any ideas for a spin-off series, let me know :) I'm itching to write more for these two.

That night spent in Colter was miserable. Despite Arthur’s warmth pressed up against her back, a chill had settled deep inside Josephine. Everything seemed so helpless. They’d lost so much. Jenny, Sean, Mac, Davey. Sweet Jenny was too young, too naive to be gone. Sean, ever annoying and cocky, had grown on her like ivy on a trellis. Mac and Davey, they were violent and brash, but they’d grown on her too. They were all family, and the loss Josephine felt stung her chest. The added cherry on top of the situation—which sent her into a fit of weeping in Arthur’s arms—was that Dutch had lost all of their money. All the money they’d been collecting had been left in Blackwater.

Panic settled in then, and Arthur, bless him, did his best to comfort her.

Both of them barely slept that night, not with the cold wind that blew outside, and the cold thoughts that blew through their heads and out of their mouths as they talked. The sleep Josephine did get was restless and unpleasant, and she could only assume Arthur was in a similar way.

The sleep from then on barely got any better. As the days stretched on, the weather got slightly better, but nothing else did, not really. Dutch was like a cornered lion. His face was courageous, his words were courageous, but deep down he was faltering and Josephine could see it.

With all their money gone, stuck in Blackwater, it felt like there was no hope anymore.

It’d been days since they’d made camp in Colter, and the weather had hardly let up. While the blizzard died in intensity, the snow hadn’t let up, and still came down in heavy blankets, making it hard to see and hard to move between cabins. For a while there, Josephine was worried they’d be completely buried by the snow.

When John still hadn’t returned from scouting, Josephine wanted to slap Abigail for enlisting Arthur’s help. Arthur put up his own stink, but ultimately, Josephine knew he wouldn’t refuse. John and he had their disagreements, but Arthur wouldn’t abandon him. He was too altruistic to refuse Abigail’s pleads.
And so he and Javier left.

Josephine had requested to ride with them, but ultimately, Arthur denied her. It was too cold, too dangerous, and there were still too many things to do around camp. Josephine understood and left it at that. Miss Grimshaw and Pearson needed all hands on deck.

So she helped, in any way she could. She helped Pearson put together a pot of rather sad looking stew, but it was warm nonetheless, and everyone was thankful to have it. She helped Miss Grimshaw patch holes in the cabins to keep the cold out, and all the while anxiety ate away at her stomach.

Every second Arthur and Javier were gone, the more worried she became.

As she was helping Miss Grimshaw collect the scattered bowls and spoons to be cleaned, a wave of nausea rolled over her and made her drop her dishes. She scrambled for the door, causing heads to turn towards her curiously. Josephine slammed the door open and threw herself into the snow, before doubling over and upturning the stew.

She grappled for the nearest tree and dry heaved, her body growing hot and sweaty. It was from stress and anxiety, she knew. All of it was wreaking havoc on her mind. A culmination of the past week of events laid splattered in the snow.

She heard shouting out on the main road, and immediately recognized the voice to be Arthur’s. Relief washed over her until she realized he was shouting for help.

It was John, she soon came to find out. He’d been mauled by wolves. When she gazed down at his face later, after he’d fallen under the morphine and his face had been cleaned and stitched, she felt pain and fear so raw it made her cry.

Every day, things just seemed to be getting worse and worse.

It would only get worse from there, it had to. They had lawmen and Pinkerton’s after them and not a cent to their names.

Josephine just prayed no one else would have to die before they got themselves out of this.
A few weeks passed, and the weather had taken a turn for the better. The sun came out, and with it, a few inches of snow burned off. It wasn’t warm, but the sun helped. It warmed Josephine’s cheeks and made her feel hopeful, even if it was just a little. It cleared away some of the dark clouds in her mind.

The sun, however, seemed to spur Dutch’s plans on. After he’d found the train robbery plans after looting an O’Driscoll camp, he’d locked himself away as he usually did, making up dreams and plans for their future. Josephine hadn’t heard about the robbery until Dutch and the boys were spurring up and leaving. Arthur was among them, and Josephine couldn’t help but sigh.

She had barely spent any time with Arthur the past few days, with him being tugged this way and that, and it was grating on her.

From the window, she could see Hosea arguing with them, and she knew he was right. The weather had evened out and showed no signs of worsening. They could leave; flee west and lie low like Dutch said they needed to. Now, all of a sudden, they were robbing a train? Josephine didn’t understand what was going through Dutch’s head anymore, and honestly, she hadn’t in a long while.

While the boys were gone, Miss Grimshaw, Hosea, and Pearson began to prepare the wagons, loading them up and stocking them so they could leave on short notice, lest the train robbery went wrong. Josephine helped as best as she could, but a headache had settled itself behind her eyes and nausea rolled through her stomach in waves.

“You must be fallin’ ill,” Miss Grimshaw told her when Josephine tried to lift a crate and nearly toppled over. “Go inside and rest, we got this handled.”

Josephine nodded and did as she was told, hunkering down in the cabin with John, who was loopy and drowsy from the morphine the Reverend had given him. She laid back and must have dozed off, waking up sometime later when she heard the heavy landing of hooves and Dutch’s voice. Slowly she stood up and made her way outside.

“There you are, Josephine, I—you look pale, are you doin’ alright?” It was Dutch, and Josephine only spared him a glance as she looked around at the men who’d arrived with him.
“Yes, fine. Where’s Arthur?” She didn’t see him among them. “Is he okay?”

“Don’t worry about your little ol’ Arthur.” Micah’s grating voice spoke up. “He’s a big man, can handle himself.”

“Shut your mouth, Micah,” Josephine snapped.

“He’s fine, I left him to deal with the train. I think our luck is beginning to turn,” Dutch said, ever the optimist, and dismounted. “We’re going to be heading out, all of us. There’s a spot Hosea says will be good to lay low, out in New Hanover. We’ve traveled through there a few times.”

“New Hanover? I thought we were headed west, Dutch.” Josephine said, drawing her coat tighter around herself.

“East for now, until we can gather up enough money.”

“Alright,” Josephine sighed. She left it at that and went to help the rest of the camp gather up the last of their supplies and belongings.

When Arthur arrived, they’d finished loading everything up and Josephine stood, leaned up against one of the wagons. She rubbed at her temples, the ache still persisting even after she’d rested. Dutch and Hosea gave Arthur the scoop of what was going on and he was asked to drive the wagon she was leaned on with Hosea.

“You alright?” Arthur asked when he saw her, laying his hand on her shoulder. The wagons in front of them began to move, and Josephine pulled off of theirs.

“Fine,” she sighed, shaking her head and squeezing her eyes shut. “Just feel kinda sick, is all.”

“You wanna ride with us?” She glanced at the wagon and shook her head. There wasn’t enough room in the back for her to comfortably sit, and she had no intention of kicking Hosea off the bench. Arthur pulled a face, then whistled and his horse approached them. “You can ride my horse, got him when we saved Mrs. Adler. Ride by us so I can keep an eye on ya.”
There was worry in his voice, and it made Josephine press her lips together. She didn’t want him to worry about her. Not when there were other things that needed his attention. Before she could protest, his hands were on her waist and he was lifting her up onto the saddle. She settled in it before she could slip off and Arthur patted her thigh.

“You gonna be okay up there?” He asked, and she nodded.

“Should be fine.”

“Bundle up and keep warm, and shout if you need me.”

The words quirked a smile on her lips and she nodded. She adjusted the coat around herself, wrapped the scarf Mary-Beth had lent her over her head, and then they were off.

It was hours before the snow began to melt and the green of the grass and bushes underneath were able to peek through. The sun shone and for the first time in weeks, she truly felt warm. As the snow disappeared behind them, Josephine half listened to Arthur and Hosea talk, though for the most part, her eyes looked around at nothing in particular and her mind wandered.

It wasn’t until they were crossing a river and Arthur let out an almighty curse that she was pulled from her thoughts. The wagon wobbled dangerously, and then the wheel popped right off.

“Shit!” Arthur said, making Josephine pull the horse to a stop. “I broke the goddamn wheel.”

“What a driver you are,” Josephine jested, making him grumble.

Josephine watched them as Charles approached and they worked together to get the wheel back on. She smiled as Arthur and Hosea jested among each other, though the smile slowly fell away as another wave of nausea hit her. She breathed deeply through her nose, eyes turning skyward when they noticed they were being watched from the cliff above them. The words Hosea was speaking blew right over her head as the entirety of her attention settled on keeping the urge to vomit at bay.

The attempt was useless, however, as when Arthur, Hosea, and Charles began to climb onto the now fixed wagon, her stomach lurched. Josephine made a noise that drew Arthur’s attention to her before
she slipped ungracefully from the saddle and sprinted towards the trees.

“Jo?” Arthur’s voice called after her, but it went unanswered as she heaved up that morning’s breakfast into the grass. Her body trembled as she threw up the rest of whatever was lurking in her stomach and continued to heave even after her stomach had been emptied.

“Poor girl,” came Hosea’s voice.

A warm hand landed on her back, rubbing gently and soothingly. When she finished heaving and trembling, Josephine wiped her mouth off and Arthur helped her up.

“Guess you really are gettin’ sick,” he said and Josephine leaned her head on his shoulder. “Feel good enough to ride the horse the rest of the way?”

She wished she was, but Josephine shook her head honestly. Better to be cramped in the back of the wagon than fall off the horse and break her neck.

“A’right, Charles, why don’t you take my horse and go on. Tell the others we’ll be right behind ‘em.” Arthur said, passing her off to Hosea as he moved to clear out space for her to sit on in the back of the wagon. Charles mounted Arthur’s horse and rode off, and Josephine watched him go.

“Here, Josephine. I have this.” Hosea pulled out a bottle from his pocket and placed it in her hand. “Ginger tea. It’ll settle even the toughest stomachs.”

“Th-,” she cleared her throat and nodded. “Thanks, Hosea.”

Arthur patting the wagon drew her attention and she walked to him. He lifted her up onto the wagon by her waist and she settled in as comfortably as she could.

“We aren’t that far now, Hosea said. So just hang on,” her lover said, to which she nodded and uncorked the bottle. He left her with a gentle pat to the thigh, then disappeared ‘round the front of the wagon.

She sipped on the ginger tea as the wagon was put into motion, and found it eased her rolling
stomach. She finished about half the bottle before she corked it again and leaned her head against a
crate. Josephine’s eyes glided over the trees and they fell on a doe and her fawn, a sign of spring. A
small smile formed on her lips, though quickly, it disappeared and all the color drained from her face
as realization washed over her.

It’d been at least two months since she’d had her period.

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