





*'Oh, that is so tragic. It's been four days now since her accident. I guess Nurse Mason reading stories to her hasn't helped as much as we thought it would.'*

*'No, but it can't have done her any harm, either.'*

With that, the voices grew more distant and became distorted. Victoria Lynn slipped back into complete blackness, but she had experienced a glimpse of the old world and she was determined to get back to it as soon as possible.

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Some time during the next day, Victoria Lynn heard the distant, voice-like sounds once more, only this time, it registered that it was a very pleasant female voice reading aloud from a story of some kind.

The words of the story began to rumble around in her foggy, seemingly empty head until they struck a chord with something she remembered learning in school two decades earlier - it was a story from the Bible that she had liked very much.

Victoria Lynn tried to speak up but discovered her throat was so dry it felt like half the desert had entered her pipe. Grunting, she tried to reach up to her throat with her right arm but found - to her great horror - that it wouldn't obey her command.

Grunting louder, she tried to touch her right arm with her left but immediately wished she hadn't - the arm was cold and felt dead to the touch.

*'Doctor!' the female voice suddenly shouted. 'Doctor! She's waking up! She's waking up!'*

The cry created a commotion and she could sense several people standing around her. Little by little, the blackness disappeared and was replaced by a pinkish, blackish hue very similar to the one seen inside one's eyelids.

Without warning, there was no mistaking that she had returned from wherever she had been: her eyelids were forcibly pushed up and a lamp was shone straight in her eyes, blinding her completely and forcing her into letting out a surprised grunt that tore through her dusty throat.

"The patient has regained consciousness," a man sporting huge, white sideburns said an inch from her face.

"Oh, that is so wonderful, Doctor Cosgrove!" the woman with the pleasant voice said from the other side of the soft bed Victoria Lynn found herself in.

"Water..." she croaked, grasping her throat to illustrate what she meant since the only sounds that had come past her larynx had been inarticulate groans.

The Doctor let go of her eyelids which promptly fell shut. For a brief moment, she thought she had dreamt it all, but then she could feel cool glass touching her lips.

"Here you go, Miss Cooper," the Doctor said and reached under Victoria Lynn's head to help her take in some of the cool, vital liquid.

Once she had gulped down what felt like a gallon of water, Victoria Lynn let out a long sigh and was helped back down onto the pillow. "Thank you," she croaked through a throat that had only improved slightly from the water.

"You're welcome, Miss Cooper. Please, can you open your eyes?"

Victoria Lynn struggled for a few moments but eventually gave up - the gravity that held her eyelids in place was so strong it could have held back ten rampant stallions. Not wanting to appear like a scrawny little kitten, she tried again with all her strength but could only get them to flutter ever so briefly.

*'No, the patient is still too weak. Nurse, we need to reduce the dose, she needs to work through this herself,'* she heard the Doctor say, but she was fading fast and never caught the reply to the command.

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Six hours later, Victoria Lynn opened her eyes of her own accord. Whatever it was that had prevented her from doing so earlier was now gone, replaced by a dull, throbbing ache that permeated her entire system and that made her wish for the soothing blackness she had come from.

"He- hello...?" she croaked, but her voice was so tiny it didn't even carry past her nose. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "Hello? Hello? Anybody there?"

Looking around the room she was in, she instantly knew she was in Princetown's hospital: the creepy silence and the smell of disinfectant and medicine gave it away at once. Even beyond that, the walls and the ceiling were white or very pale gray, the windows were covered by lacy curtains that effectively shielded the sun, and the wooden floor was bare and freshly scrubbed.

The soft, white bed she was in was in fact a bunk on wheels that had a thin tent-like net covering it, no doubt to stop infections from spreading among the patients, Victoria Lynn thought. Next to her were two identical bunks, but they were empty and didn't appear to have been used recently.

Her exploration of the sickroom was cut short when the Doctor came into her room. Once he had noticed she was awake, he went back out and called for help from one of the nurses.

Soon, people were once again swarming around Victoria Lynn, causing her no end of confusion and making her dizzy from the activity. "Doc..." she croaked, "what am I doing here?"

The Doctor with the impressive sideburns came to her side and took her left arm to check her pulse. "Miss Cooper, I'm Doctor Cosgrove. You were knocked down and subsequently trampled by a pair of horses," he said, jotting down information on a clipboard.

"Oh... I can't remember... hey! Watch what yer doin' down there, lady!" Victoria Lynn croaked at the nurse who had reached in under the blanket and had placed a bed pan under Victoria Lynn's rear.

"Nurse Monahan is only doing her job, Miss Cooper," Doctor Cosgrove admonished, giving the stricken woman the sort of look that made it clear she wasn't fully aware of what had happened to her. "After all, you had a full glass of water some hours ago. It's easier to change the bed pan than to change the sheets."

"I haven't wet myself since I was seven and that was an accident," Victoria Lynn grumbled, but even as she said it, she knew that not all was right with her. Her favored right arm wasn't responding at all, and her left leg felt stiff and painful. When she tried to twist her torso, the pains that shot up from her abused ribs were so strong it felt like her innards caught fire. "O... kay... don't want... to do... that again..." she croaked, slowly returning to her original position.

"Miss Cooper," Doctor Cosgrove said, putting a calming, fatherly hand on her shoulder. "I can see I need to inform you of the extent of your injuries. When you were trampled, you received multiple minor cuts and

scrapes on your face and body, but you suffered three major injuries that, when combined, unfortunately mean that you have been crippled," the Doctor said matter-of-factly.

"Cr- crippled?" Victoria Lynn croaked, feeling the blood drain from her face.

"Yes. Two ribs on the right side of your rib cage were bent quite severely, though not fractured. We managed to pull them back out so your breathing shouldn't be too restricted. Your left patella was crushed and has most likely become stiff, but it may improve over time. Unfortunately, your right arm won't. You see, Miss Cooper, the humerus-

"Speak English, man!"

"Ahem," the Doctor said, shooting Victoria Lynn a pointed look. "The bone in your upper arm was trampled not once but twice, and the resulting fracture is more akin to a jigsaw puzzle than a recognizable piece of the human body. I'm sorry."

*I'm sure you are,* Victoria Lynn thought, but the news was so shocking that she couldn't even squeak. Instead, she rested her head on the pillow and stared wide-eyed at the white ceiling. She knew that she was lucky to be alive - she had helped scrape up another poor fellow who had been trampled by a single horse, so she could guess the odds for surviving getting trampled by two - but at that exact moment, she couldn't call herself lucky at all.

"Mmmm," the Doctor said and put the clipboard under his arm. "I can see you need some rest. In a little while, Nurse Mason will come in and continue her narration of the Bible. I'm sure you'll find solace in the Holy Scriptures. Good day, Miss Cooper."

As the Doctor left the room, Victoria Lynn followed him with her dusty green eyes, thinking that it would be a near-miracle if she could find solace in anything that was written in that book - after all, it had been used against her so often she had lost count.

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Twenty minutes later, Emily Mason peeked around the corner of the room to see if Victoria Lynn had gone back asleep. When the blonde was merely staring at the ceiling, Emily moved silently into the room and sat down on a stool next to the bunk.

"Hello, Miss Cooper," she said as she opened the Bible she had across her lap.

Victoria Lynn reluctantly tore her eyes away from the ceiling to look at her visitor. The nurse was a woman in her mid- to late forties with a somewhat stern face, though lines around her mouth offered hints that she was no stranger to smiling. She was wearing black shoes, white stockings and a white-and-pale gray uniform that came to her knees and wrists, and she had a starched, pale gray cap sitting quite low around her head, though a few gray strands had escaped their confinement.

Victoria Lynn looked blankly at the crucifix that was sown onto the nurse's cap. Sighing, she turned her head and resumed staring at the ceiling.

"I'm Emily Mason, and I've been reading passages from the Bible for you for the past several days. It truly warms my heart to see that you have improved so much, Miss Cooper," Emily said and touched Victoria Lynn's good arm quite tenderly. With a smile, the nurse returned to her Bible. "All right, the last time, I-

"Spare your voice, nurse. I'm not interested," Victoria Lynn said quietly.

"I understand, Miss Cooper, but-"

Never taking her eyes off the ceiling, Victoria Lynn let out a growl that made the nurse pipe down and close the Bible. "I don't think you do. I don't want to listen to it."

"But-"

"I just want to lie all by my lonesome, thank you. Good day, Miss Mason!" Victoria Lynn said in a voice that grew increasingly brisk as she spoke the words. By the time she delivered the final exclamation, she had already started feeling bad for treating the nurse so roughly, but it had been her own doing by bringing the Bible, she thought.

"I- all right," Emily said and got up from the chair. "Good day, Miss Cooper." - With that, the nurse left the room without even looking back.

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Just outside the room, Emily let out a deep sigh and leaned against the wall of the corridor connecting the sickroom to the entrance and the Doctor's office. When a pot-bellied man came in from the street and looked around like he was searching for someone, she discreetly wiped away a few tears that had somehow escaped her eyes.

The pot-bellied man wearing regular Western garb looked into the office, but couldn't find anyone there. When he caught a glimpse of the nurse, he took off his gray Confederate Cavalry hat and went up to her. "Hello, Ma'am. I'm Orin Cutler and I'm looking for Vict-"

"Miss Cooper is our only patient right now, Mr. Cutler. You can't miss her," Emily said and swiftly moved out of the corridor and into the office before the visitor could see she was crying.

"Victoria Lynn, when are ya gonna learn to keep your big yap shut?" Orin Cutler mumbled, scratching his graying walrus-mustache as he looked after the fleeing nurse.

Knowing Victoria Lynn's occasionally stormy mood - and not feeling particularly brave - Cutler peeked around the corner of the room and saw his former Deputy lie flat on her back, staring at the ceiling with an unreadable expression on her face.

Grunting, he dug into his pants pocket and found a white handkerchief that he proceeded to wave as a sign of his unconditional surrender. "Psst... Victoria Lynn? I heard that one of those fancy fellas over in Washington called some kind o' ceasefire on the hostilities... may I come in?"

Victoria Lynn looked away from her favorite spot in the ceiling and stared at the man she had worked for for nearly five years - that was all over now, she thought. "Yeah... come on in, Sheriff."

Orin Cutler took off his Cavalry hat and hung it on the backrest of the chair Emily Mason had just vacated. "Well..." he said, pulling down his pale brown leather vest - where something vital was missing - before sitting down on the chair.

"Yeah, I know," Victoria Lynn said, looking down at the broken version of herself. "Just half a woman left..."

"Well, that wasn't what I... uh... wasn't what I was alludin' to."

Victoria Lynn turned her head towards the older man and scrunched up her face. "Huh?"

"I ain't the Sheriff no more," Orin Cutler said and ran a hand through his graying hair.

"What?!"

Sighing, the former Sheriff looked towards the heaven but could only see the white ceiling, a fact that he thought underlined his hopeless position quite well. "I was deposed by the Chief Justice of the Peace for not protectin' Junior when he was knocked down last weekend."

"Aw hell, Sheriff, that's just diabolical- wait... last weekend? How long have I been lyin' here, anyhow?" Victoria Lynn said, staring wide-eyed at her older friend.

"Six days. Tomorrow is Friday."

"Hell... I didn't think it had been that long. Friday... Jesus," Victoria Lynn said with a long groan. "Not payroll Friday...?"

"No, that's next weekend."

"Thank God. Orin, who's the new Sheriff?"

"Tyree," Cutler said flatly.

At that piece of unwanted news, Victoria Lynn slapped her good hand across her eyes and let out a new groan that was doubled in intensity compared to the one she had only just produced. "Oh, hell no! He's a kid... hell, he ain't even that, he's still wet behind the ears!"

"I know, but... I'm afraid it is so. I tried to reason with Senior, but the old fella was adamant we should have new blood in the Sheriff's office... and boy, did we get that. And plenty of it."

"How's that?"

"I don't want to make you upset, Victoria Lynn..." Orin Cutler said, gently patting his former Deputy's good arm.

"Whatever it is, it can't be as bad as what I already got, so... spill it, Sheriff."

Orin grimaced and leaned back on the chair while he weighed the pros and cons of telling it how it was. He knew that the news he was about to deliver would probably set off Victoria Lynn's temper, but it was a risk he had to take. "Well," he said, but stopped at once when he felt a sudden need to go down to the end of the bunk so he was out of his former Deputy's reach. "During the week, Junior appointed seven new Deputies."

"Seven?!"

"Yeah... oh, Victoria Lynn, I told 'im it wouldn't work with them goons, but he just plum wouldn't listen!" the former Sheriff said, thumping his fist into his open palm.

"Wait, Sheriff... which goons? You need to be real slow with me right now..."

"Junior said the law needed to have a strong presence in Princetown, so... so... aw, hell... he hired every single goon Quint Connors had on his roster as the new Deputies. Blackie Durham among 'em."

Victoria Lynn opened her mouth to speak but she couldn't get a sound past her lips. A myriad of thoughts buzzed through her mind, not least the fact that the woman who was more or less responsible for putting her in the position she was in now had taken her job. "Blackie Durham is a Deputy?" she croaked after a little while.

" 'Fraid so."

"No, that's just too cruel..." - Victoria Lynn's mind had turned to mush when it came to most of the events of that fateful evening, but she remembered everything that had happened between her and Blackie Durham in the alleyway in vivid detail. Henry Junior's body on the ground, Mathilda's silver pocket watch, the news that Junior had tried to rape Mathilda...

*'I had her... I had her and I let her get away because of Mathilda... and Blackie Durham repaid my favor by stealing my job when I'm lying here as a Goddamned cripple,'* she thought, feeling her mood slip even lower than it had been before.

"Yes, but that ain't even half of it! Those goons have completely railroaded young Tyree... why, it ain't even been a week and we've already had three shootin's and two beatin's, and just yesterday, they made him walk into Roscoe's Waterin' Hole and arrest a poker player for cheatin' even though the real cheat was one of them goon Deputies! An ugly fella by the name of Merton... this town is goin' to hell in a reed basket, I'm tellin' ya..."

"And there ain't a damn thing we can do about it," Victoria Lynn said, looking down at her dead right arm and cursing it to the seventh level of hell in her mind.

"No," Orin Cutler said, shuffling back to the chair.

He had only just sat down when Victoria Lynn reached over and slammed her good hand down on his arm and gripped it hard. "Damnation, Sheriff, there's gotta be something! Someone we can call for... or... something... anything!"

"Whoa there, Calamity Jane... ain't ya forgettin' somethin'?" Cutler said while trying to pry Victoria Lynn's strong fingers off his arm. "There's seven of them and two of us... and quite frankly, I didn't get this old only to get gunned down by a bunch o' goons. No, I'm sorry, Victoria Lynn... you gotta put yourself first for a change. I know I am. It sounds awful, I know, but there's only so much one man and-"

"A cripple. Just say it, Orin."

"I was going to say a woman, you know. There's only so much one man and one woman can do. No, we... we wouldn't last two minutes if we came at 'em head on."

"Orin, there's something I don't understand," Victoria Lynn said and rubbed her eyes. Once she lowered her good arm, she turned her head to the left to look at her friend. "How the hell did Quint Connors-"

The rest of the sentence got stuck in her throat as she looked over Orin's shoulder at the two women who were standing in the doorway holding their hats and a small fruit basket. One was a petite redhead in a green Gingham dress, and the other was a six-foot tall, black-haired, Peacemaker-carrying outlaw by the name of Jane 'Blackie' Durham.

When Victoria Lynn stopped talking and started staring at a point on the wall, Orin Cutler turned around to see what was going on. The two new visitors made him grind his jaw and snatch his Cavalry hat rather abruptly. "Well. It was nice talkin' to you, Victoria Lynn. I just remembered I have things to do," he said and put a calming hand on his friend's good shoulder.

"Can't say that I blame ya, Sheriff," Victoria Lynn growled, never taking her eyes off Blackie.

The tension and resentment hung so thickly in the hospital room that Orin Cutler didn't even acknowledge Mathilda and Jane on his way past them.

Mathilda sighed and stepped into the corridor to look after the former Sheriff as he strode down the hall. When the front door had slammed shut behind him, she shook her head slowly and went back into the hospital room. "Hello, Victoria Lynn. It's so good to see that you've awoken," she said and placed the fruit basket on a small table by the bed. Bending down, she quickly embraced her dear old friend in an awkward hug before stepping back. "Jane and I have been terribly worried about your condition. We're truly thankful that you seem to be on the mend now."

Victoria Lynn's jaw was working overtime trying to keep down the scathing barb she had on her lips. While she was somewhat happy to see Mathilda again, the sight of Jane Durham casually leaning against the wall in her pale brown denim pants, her gray shield-front shirt and - worst of all - wearing the tin star on her chest signaling she was a Deputy with the Sheriff's Office of Princetown, Arizona Territory tore chunks out of her soul.

Looking up, Victoria Lynn could see from the lines and dark circles on Mathilda's pale face that the young redhead hadn't just been polite - she really had been worried. "Thank you, Mathilda. It means a lot to hear that... coming from you, I mean," she said, reaching for - and squeezing - Mathilda's hand with her good arm.

"Uh..." Mathilda said and stole a glance at Jane who had gained a slightly annoyed look in her blue eyes. "Yes... well... Jane has been worried, too. It seems that you made quite an impression on her," Mathilda said, returning the squeeze and adding a wink that said 'please be nice.'

"Mmmm. Did you bring me some fruit?"

"Yes, a few apples," Mathilda said with a smile, happy to get away from the touchy subject. "I remembered you used to like apples," she continued, buffing a particularly impressive specimen on her sleeve. Finding a knife she had in the fruit basket, she quickly cut it in quarters and removed the core from all of them.

"I love apples," Victoria Lynn said, looking at Mathilda's slender fingers working the knife. The deliberate movements made her think about the time several years earlier when Mathilda's fingers had roamed her body in the heat of passion; two confused young women fumbling along, one looking for something she didn't know what was, and one simply enjoying the fact that she had finally found a beautiful soul to share her true self with. *'But look at me now... now, even Horseface Hortense will demand the curtains closed if I ever visit her.'*

Sighing, Victoria Lynn pulled her eyes away from Mathilda's hands and over to the tall outlaw who was still leaning against the wall, as silent and stony as the wooden Chief outside the tobacco shop on Main Street.

After having cut the apple in four perfect quarters, Mathilda offered two to Victoria Lynn who began to chew on one of them at once. Turning around, she held out the other two to Jane, but the outlaw shook her head silently.

The apple was juicy and delicious, but the fresh taste acted as a devilfly in Victoria Lynn's ear, and she shifted slightly to get a better view of Jane Durham. "So... Deputy Outlaw. How are things going with your new colleagues, Quint's pack of bruisers? Heard they're pushin' Tyree McFadden around like a pencil."

Mathilda gasped loudly and shot the prone Victoria Lynn a sharp look, but it wasn't enough to stop her.

"Y'know, back in the day when I was selected to be Deputy, I actually had to prove my worth to Sheriff Cutler for two weeks before I got my star. Yessir, I had to do my rounds and his, I had to take the graveyard shift more often than not, I had to go in and get two fightin' men to stop fightin' simply by talkin' to 'em... no guns or nothin'. Yessir... now tell me, outlaw, what kind of merits do you have? 'Cos that tin star ain't just a fancy piece of jewelry, ya know. Whatcha do to earn it? Suck Quint Connors' d-"

Gasping even louder, Mathilda put her hands across her mouth and leaned down towards the stricken woman with a scandalized expression on her face. "Victoria Lynn!" she squeaked in a high-pitched voice.

"Lemme speak, Mathilda. Outlaw, you better listen, and you better listen good," Victoria Lynn said and pointed a trembling, accusing index finger at Jane. "Cripple or no cripple, I'm gonna rip that star off your chest, woman. Heed my words, you and me are gonna meet again, and meet over the barrel of a gun! And that time, only one of us is gonna walk away!"

"Victoria Lynn, will you calm down! You don't know what you're saying!" Mathilda shouted, clutching her hands to her bosom.

Jane pushed herself off the wall and reached into her pocket to find her pouch of tobacco. "I'll wait outside," she said curtly and left the room, putting on her low-crowned Stetson as she turned the corner.

"Yeah, you do that, outlaw... why dontcha go and see if you can get someone else run over while you're at it?" Victoria Lynn said, slamming her fist down onto the mattress. "Goddamn this broken body... I swear to God if I had full control over my limbs, I'd go after her and take care of business right now!"

"No... please don't say things like that... Jane has helped me so much since I came back," Mathilda said in a trembling voice, grabbing the former Deputy's good hand to get her to calm down. "The week has been so difficult for all of us..."

"Pah."

"Don't force me into choosing between you, please... b- because that's something you cannot win... do you understand me?"

"I-"

"Do you understand what I am telling you, Victoria Lynn? \*Don't\* make me choose between you and Jane," Mathilda said in a voice that suddenly turned strong.

Victoria Lynn closed her eyes and nodded curtly. "I understand. But I will not apologize for my outburst. That came from the heart. Mathilda, you of all people should understand what I am telling you."

"I do. But Jane has done what she could to keep things calm. When you get out, I hope you will see that." Mathilda got up from the chair and brushed down her dress. Before she moved away, she leaned down and placed a soft, tender kiss on Victoria Lynn's forehead. "I'll come back tomorrow. Get some rest... you look like you need it," she said quietly.

"Thank you, Mathilda. You're right... I'm awfully tired." - *'Sick and tired,'* Victoria Lynn thought, but decided against saying it out loud. "I think I'll get some shuteye now. There's a strange, dull ache in my bad arm... maybe it's getting better?" she said with a wistful smile.

Moving over to the corridor, Mathilda turned around and offered Victoria Lynn a brief wave. "Let's hope so. See you tomorrow."

Finally alone, Victoria Lynn let her left hand roam over her bad arm to feel if there were any improvements. When all she could feel was dead, cold skin, she had a nagging suspicion that something else had gone wrong somewhere inside it. Even as she was probing, the dull ache grew worse and reached a point where her upper arm felt like a hornet's nest that someone had given a good kick. "Nurse...?" she said, feeling a panic wash over her. "Nurse!"

Hurried footsteps were heard on the linoleum floor and it wasn't long before Lucille Monahan appeared at the corner of the sickroom. "Is something wrong, Miss Cooper? Do you need some water?" she said, holding a pencil that she hadn't had time to put down.

Even in the brief moments Victoria Lynn had waited for the nurse to appear, the pain had increased exponentially and she felt like she was being trampled all over again - only this time, it wasn't merely a pair of horses pulling a carriage, it was a stampeding herd of buffalo. "My- my arm... my arm... it h- it hurts..." she hissed through clenched teeth.

"Oh! Oh dear, Doctor Cosgrove is still not in, Miss Cooper," Lucille said and started wringing her hands.

"Can't you do something...? Jesus, my arm is... is... I need some morphine... or... or whisky!"

"I'm afraid the medicine is locked away while the Doctor is out..."

"Shit... Then get the Doc! I'm croakin' here!"

"All- all right, I'll... I'll find him," the nurse said and hurried back through the corridor.

When Victoria Lynn heard the front door slam shut, she stared at the spot in the ceiling that had held her interest for much of the day. She panted hard through her teeth, wishing the Doctor would hurry back from whatever he was doing.

It didn't take long for the pain to spread from her arm and up to her shoulder; from there, it moved along her collarbone until it reached her neck and throat. She couldn't feel if it stemmed from the pain in her arm or if she was simply clenching her muscles so tightly they were screaming at her to stop, but all in all, it didn't really matter.

Her chin started to quiver when the pain spread from her neck and down into the muscles on her chest that were still quite sore from the ordeal with her bent ribs, but she forced herself not to cry, determined to face her maker with her dignity intact. "I'm... not... gonna... cry... I... didn't... cry... when... Ma... died... not... gonna... cry... n- now... n- not gonna cry..."

Looking up through a veil of tears and pain, she could see Emily Mason standing at the corner with her hands folded in what appeared to be prayer. In a brief moment of lucidness, she wondered why the nurse had come back after being treated so badly.

She couldn't tell if it had been five seconds, five minutes or five years, but the front door was finally flung open and she could hear Doctor Cosgrove's heavy footsteps on the linoleum in the corridor along with Nurse Monahan's faster, near-frantic tripping. Soon, the elderly Doctor with the impressive sideburns ran into her room, throwing his arms down a white lab coat.

"All right, it's surgery. Nurse Monahan?" the Doctor said matter-of-factly after only looking at Victoria Lynn's arm for a few seconds.

"I'll prepare the operating table, Doctor," the nurse said and ran out of the room.

The Doctor turned his attention back to Victoria Lynn's arm where he touched, poked, prodded and probed all along the numb skin. "Miss Cooper, do you feel that? And this? How about now? And now?" he said as he pressed his thumb into various spots along her upper arm.

"No... no... no... Yes! Oh, Sweet Jesus that h- hurts like a sonovabitch," Victoria Lynn hissed, squirming wildly in her bed as the Doctor pressed down on a spot on her arm near the top of her mangled biceps.

"All right," Doctor Cosgrove said and wiped his hands on a handkerchief he pulled out of his pocket.

Lucille Monahan ran back into the sickroom and swept a few loose strands of hair back under her starched cap. "Nurse Mason is ready by the operating table as we speak, Doctor Cosgrove. Do you want me to fetch-

"There's no time," the Doctor said in a voice that was so grave that Victoria Lynn's heart skipped several beats of the fast Taps it was playing in her chest. "Nurse Monahan, I'll administer Miss Cooper some chloroform, but then she'll need a double dose of morphine. And prepare the bone saw. We have to amputate."

"Am- ampu-" Victoria Lynn croaked, staring with wide, frightened eyes at the Doctor, at Nurse Monahan, and at the bottle and cloth the Doctor was preparing with frantic gestures. Despite her best efforts, the awful news made tears spring forth from her eyes and run down her cheeks.

With no explanation - or even hesitation - Doctor Cosgrove poured a healthy dose of chloroform onto the cloth and draped it across Victoria Lynn's nose and mouth.

"God no, Doc... you can't amputate my arm... not my arm... please!" Victoria Lynn slurred, but the anesthetic soon set in and she lost the ability to speak. Her eyes began rolling around in her head like they weren't connected to anything inside, and she barely sensed that her mouth was opened and a leather bit with a breathing hole was inserted between her teeth to stop her from choking.

"You have contracted gangrene. It's your arm or your life, Miss Cooper," was the last she heard anyone say before her world went black.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

*Three days later.*

With her boots firmly on her feet, Victoria Lynn let out a long sigh and closed her eyes to regain her strength that had been sapped by the simple task.

Sitting on the bunk in the sickroom, she cursed the fact that the exertion from something as basic as putting on her pants and boots was such a strain on her weak being that she could hardly cope.

"At least I still have two legs... even if one of 'em is no good," she mumbled, massaging her stiff left knee.

Once she had regained her breath, she looked down at the empty sleeve of her shirt and began to grind her jaw at the wretched unfairness of it all. Getting up, she took her floppy, dark gray Stetson and put it down on her dusty blonde hair without bothering to tuck in the strands that fell down on the sides.

She moved over to the small cupboard they had given her and took those of her belongings that had been salvaged from the scene of the accident; her wallet, mainly, but also a letter from a friend she'd had on her. Her watch and a fountain pen she'd had in her pocket had been beyond repair after being crushed by a hoof, and the Winchester she had bought out of her own money had looked like it had been thrown from the top of McNear's Boulders, so that was gone, too.

The last item in the cupboard was her gun belt, but she simply stared at it with wide, sad eyes when she realized that she wouldn't be able to use it for a damn thing now - it had the leather holster on the right.

While Orin Cutler had still been the proud bearer of the Sheriff's star, he had taken her Colt so it wouldn't fall into the wrong hands, and for that, she was grateful. "If I'd had my gun... hell, I'd blow my brains out right now," she mumbled, softly closing the cupboard door to shut out the last reminder of her old life.

Turning back around, she hobbled across the floor until she was at the corner of the sickroom and the corridor. Even taking seven, mouse-like steps had made her so short of breath that she needed to lean against the wall and rub sweat off her face. Her mood - which had been dark to begin with - turned pitch black, and she was on the brink of weeping, a fact that made her even more angry with herself.

Behind Victoria Lynn, Nurse Monahan came out of the operating room further down the corridor and slapped her hands together in glee at the sight of her patient being up and about. "Miss Cooper... oh, Miss Cooper, it's so good to see you up. I heard that Doctor Cosgrove discharged you... are you sure you'll be fine?"

Victoria Lynn almost gave the Nurse an uncensored piece of her mind, but realized at the last moment that the jovial woman didn't have anything to do with the cause or the extent of her injuries. "I'll be fine, Nurse Monahan, thank you," she croaked, still holding onto the wall with her arm. "It's just a bit weird, that's all."

"I understand fully, Miss Cooper."

*No, I don't think you do,* Victoria Lynn thought, but kept it all inside.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No... but I've left my gun belt in the locker you gave me. Perhaps you can make a few dollars by sellin' it to Sofus Mikkelsen next door. I heard he buys second hand stuff from cripples who don't need their gear no more."

Pushing herself off the wall, Victoria Lynn began to hobble down the corridor to get to the front door.

"Oh, wait, Miss Cooper," Lucille Monahan said and hurried after the stricken woman. "Doctor Cosgrove is on a call, but he told me to give you an ointment that you're to use at regular intervals. I have it in here. Please wait," the nurse said and hurried into the office.

"All right."

It didn't take long for Nurse Monahan to come back out holding a small ceramic jar. "Here it is. You just apply a healthy layer on the stump and-"

'Stump' - The word tore through Victoria Lynn's soul and made her grimace so hard her face took on a demonic quality. Baring her teeth in a disgusted - and terrified - sneer, she turned around too abruptly and nearly lost her balance.

"Oh! You better watch yourself, Miss Cooper. You're not as nimble as you used to be," Lucille Monahan said as she grabbed onto the former Deputy's lapels to get her to stay erect. "Here's the ointment, I'll put it into your jacket pocket. Don't forget to use it. Doctor Cosgrove said that it'll help you if you remember to use it regularly. Miracles of modern medicine, you know."

"Mmmm!" Victoria Lynn growled, righting herself and taking a few deep breaths to get everything calmed down inside her. "Thank you. Have a good day, Nurse Monahan," she said hoarsely, hobbling down the hall to make her escape to freedom.

"Good day, Miss Cooper," Lucille Monahan said, offering Victoria Lynn a smile that she had no use for whatsoever.

Outside, the world still looked the same as it had done before her accident. Perry Street was still as busy as always, and the early time of the day meant that several mule trains were lined up outside the saloons and the general store.

Cowboys from most of the big ranches in the area were hard at work loading and offloading goods, including a group of men hauling large canvas bags onto a wagon marked with the easily recognizable symbol of 'Gentleman' George Ballentine's Circle Y ranch north of Princetown.

When Victoria Lynn stepped out onto the sidewalk and began to hobble down towards Main Street to get to her home on Canal Street, a loud bump followed by a howl and a string of inventive curses behind her made her turn around and look towards the general store and the wagon from Circle Y.

One of the cowboys had apparently dropped a canvas bag on his colleague's foot, and the two men were drawing laughs from the other members of their team while they were cussing loudly at each other.

In a flash, Victoria Lynn was on her way across the street to get the two men sorted out, but the first, hobbling step she took with her weak left leg was a stark, terrifying reminder that she was no longer the same woman she had been before her accident. She wanted nothing more than to go over to the men and settle their argument with a few, well-placed words before they'd start throwing punches at each other, but she wasn't strong enough.

She sighed deeply and turned back around. After regaining her balance, she looked down at her stiff leg and the empty sleeve of her jacket. "Damn this broken body... damn it straight to hell," she mumbled, clenching her fist so hard her fingernails dug into her flesh.

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Half an hour later, she sat down with a bump on the bench outside the Preminger Hotel at the corner of Main- and Canal Street and let out a grunt that was a cross between a growl and a sob. Earlier, it hadn't even taken her ten minutes to get home from the Sheriff's Office, but she realized with stark clarity that everything had changed for her, and changed for the worse.

Groaning with fatigue, she reached down and massaged her stiff knee. She was aware that the people who walked past her on the sidewalk shot her curious - or even pitying - glances, but she forced herself to ignore them.

Unfortunately, her desire to be left alone was about to be tested.

A few minutes later, a woman and two young children who walked past on the sidewalk stopped to look at Victoria Lynn's sorry figure. "Look at that lady!" a young boy said, pointing at the former Deputy.

"It's impolite to point at people in need, Emmett," the woman said in a smooth, mature voice that made Victoria Lynn look up.

When she realized the woman with the children was Emily Mason, the nurse she had chased away with her nasty comments, her mood went even further south. The nurse was wearing regular clothes, and it struck Victoria Lynn that she was far prettier in a dress than she had been in the starched white-and-gray uniform. Her face was still on the stern side, but her eyes appeared much softer and the dimples on her cheeks even gave her a friendly expression.

"But she's got no arm!" the boy continued.

"Hush, Emmett!"

The undeniable fact of the young boy's comment made Victoria Lynn chuckle in spite of her pain and the bleakness of her situation. With a struggle, she got up from the bench and hobbled down to the three people, intent on smoothing out her earlier, rotten behavior. "Hello, Nurse Mason," she said and put out her left hand while screwing a smile on her face.

"Hello, Miss Cooper," Emily Mason said, trying not to stare too hard at the empty sleeve while she shook the wrong hand. "I'd like you to meet Emmett and Daisy," she continued, pushing the two children forward.

"How do you do, Miss Cooper," Daisy said and put out her hand while curtsying like a proper lady.

"How do you do, Miss Daisy," Victoria Lynn said, shaking the little girl's hand tenderly. She furrowed her brow, thinking that it was quite odd that Emily Mason's children were so young. Neither of them appeared older than five, but Emily herself was no younger than her mid-forties.

"I can see you're racking your brain, Miss Cooper," Emily said with a small laugh. "Let me explain... Emmett and Daisy are my younger sister's children. I've merely borrowed them for the day so she could have a modicum of rest. She's expecting," she continued, pushing Emmett forward so he could shake Victoria Lynn's hand as well.

"Oh... I see."

The young boy was more reluctant than his sister, but he eventually shook hands with the former Deputy. "How do you do, Miss Cooper... what happened to your arm?"

"Emmett!" Emily hissed, but Victoria Lynn held up her hand.

"No, it's quite all right, Mrs. Mason. I lost it in an accident, Emmett."

"Oh... that's too bad," the boy said truthfully.

"Yes, I agree," Victoria Lynn said, looking up at Emily. She knew apologizing about her uncouth behavior would be the right thing to do, but all she could come up with was baring her teeth in an embarrassed grin. "Uh... Mrs. Mason, uh... I'm truly sorry for my behavior the other day. Please forgive me. And, uh, thank you for prayin' for me," she said, hoping that it sounded sincere.

Emily Mason observed Victoria Lynn passively for a few seconds, but then her face was transformed by a warm, genuine smile that seemed to light her up from the inside. "I forgive you, Miss Cooper, and you're welcome. If you ever need to talk about your hopes and fears, please visit me. I live across town, on number nine Madden Lane, that's the alleyway that runs between Main Street and the Ballen-"

"The alleyway behind the saloons," Victoria Lynn said as a statement of fact rather than a question. She was instantly whisked back to the last thing she remembered prior to her accident; holding Blackie Durham at gunpoint in the alleyway over Henry Wilkinson Junior's prone body.

"Why, that's right... oh, I forgot, you're a Deputy... of course you know Princetown inside and out." Emily Mason said with a polite laugh.

"Used to be..." Victoria Lynn said quietly, slipping back into her dark mood. "Well. I'm sure we're borin' the children to tears. I won't take more of your time, Mrs. Mason. It was nice talkin' to you."

"It certainly was, Miss Cooper. Do you need help? You look a little unsteady on your feet," Emily said, cocking her head at the sight of the former Deputy wobbling back and forth.

Victoria Lynn shook her head even before Emily Mason had completed the sentence. "No. No, I'm quite all right, thank you. I live just around the corner, so... I'll be fine. But thanks for the offer, Mrs. Mason."

Emily smiled again before taking Emmett's and Daisy's hands and leading them further up Main Street towards the Scandinavian quarter of Princetown.

Watching them walk away unhindered gave Victoria Lynn a new, dark jolt, and she rubbed her face angrily before she set off back to her home, hobbling in a way she felt resembled a lame burro.

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*The next day.*

The door to Knud-Anker 'Canute' Jensen's general store at the south end of Main Street had a whole set of chimes attached to it that the owner had installed for his own benefit - otherwise, the elderly man who was hard of hearing simply wouldn't be able to hear new customers arriving if he was in the storage room behind the shop.

Victoria Lynn hobbled into the store and closed the door behind her, setting off the loud chimes. The pastiness of her skin and the dark circles under her eyes proved that her night had been fraught; her sleep often interrupted with aches and pains shooting up from her injured limbs. The ointment for her stump had helped somewhat, but not enough to make her relax.

Moving slowly, she went up to the wooden racks at the head of the store where Canute kept his grains and other dry goods, and started looking around for the items she needed to buy - pearl-sago and salt.

When she realized that both items were on the bottom shelf, she let out a sigh and hobbled over to the counter. "Mr. Jensen? Mr. Jensen, are you here?" she said loudly.

*'I'm in here! I'll be with you in a couple of minutes... I'm churning butter!'* Canute said from the storage room accompanied by the rhythmic thump-thump-thump from the churner.

"Well... it's not like I have anything else to do," Victoria Lynn mumbled, leaning against the counter to take the weight off her bad leg. She let her eye roam across the contents of the general store and found a stack of wooden footstools that looked quite inviting for her tired mind and body. Grunting, she hobbled across the floor and tried to get the top one down so she could rest on it while she waited.

The task proved insurmountable with her lone arm, and it wasn't long before the entire stack toppled over and landed with a resounding crash on the floor of the shop. The one she had wanted to take had the longest to fall, and as it hit the wooden floor, one of the legs broke off with a crunch.

Victoria Lynn's shoulders slumped as she stared at the mess, already sick and tired of her helplessness. The rhythmic thump-thump-thump from the storage room meant that Canute hadn't heard the incident, but it also meant that he couldn't help her get it cleaned up.

To add to her misery, the chimes sounded from the door, heralding the arrival of a new customer. She briefly glanced at the door, but didn't have time to see exactly who it was, apart from noticing a dark suit. "Mister, would ya mind givin' me a hand? I seem to have made a mess o' things," she said without looking up. Instead, she tried to reach down to pick up one of the footstools, but her stiff knee made it difficult for her.

The pale brown boots and the dark gray Western suit should have alerted her. When she didn't get a reply, she looked up the front of the man standing next to her, up to the smug grin on his ruddy face.

Quint Connors and Ira Grubb, one of Connors' tin star-adorned goons and the proud owner of a graying circle-beard, stood next to her in the aisle, wearing identical, condescending grins that explained in no uncertain terms what they thought of her. "Oh, the little lady needs a hand, does she?" Quint said in his trademark lyrical accent. "We can do that, can't we, Ira?" he continued, nudging his swarthy companion in the side.

Crouching down, he quickly scooped up the footstools and put them in a somewhat orderly stack. When he was done, he offered the broken one to Victoria Lynn, holding it so the ragged edge of the stump was pointed at her. "Looks like you'll have to buy this one, little lady."

"Quint..." Victoria Lynn growled from somewhere deep in her throat, but at the exact same time, Canute Jensen came out from the storage room wearing a leather apron that he proceeded to wipe his hands on.

"Good day, Mr. Connors," the elderly man said in a flat south-Scandinavian accent. Canute was in his mid-sixties, but he looked older - his white comb-over, the rather large and ungainly nose, and the deep furrows on his face saw to that.

"Hello, Mr. Jensen. Looks like Miss Cooper here owes you a few dollars," Quint said and threw the broken footstool onto the floor.

"Pardon?" Canute said and put his hand behind his ear.

"She owes you money for this," Quint said louder. "I'll have two packs of Imperial cheroots. I ran out this morning, and I thought to myself, Quint, why don't you go down to that nice Mr. Jensen and buy yourself some new ones."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Connors," Canute said with a polite bow. Reaching behind him, he quickly found two packs of Imperials and put them on the counter. "That'll be two dollars fifty-eight cents, please."

"Here's five dollars, my good man. Keep the change," Quint said and opened the first pack at once. Turning back to Victoria Lynn, he put a cheroot into his mouth but didn't light it. "And for you, little lady... here's a dollar. That should help you get through the day," he said, throwing the coin onto the floor next to the broken footstool.

Tipping his white Stetson, Quint offered Victoria Lynn a nasty grin before he and his swarthy companion left the store.

The scathing insult had made Victoria Lynn's face grow even paler, and she felt she was only a scant heartbeat away from reaching the point where she'd keel over and never get up again. "Mr. Jensen," she croaked, "I need a pack of pearl-sago and a pack of salt... please. And I'll pay for the footstool. How much?" she said and found her money pouch.

"Pardon?"

"I need a pack of pearl-sago and a pack of salt!"

"They're right there on the shelf, Miss Cooper," Canute said, clearly not bothering to get the items for his disabled customer. "And you owe me twelve dollars for the footstool... they're handmade."

"Twelve dollars! That's... that's...! What do you think I am, a millionaire?"

"Pardon?"

Behind Victoria Lynn, the chimes rang again, and she let out a growl at the thought of Quint Connors returning to taunt her some more.

Just when she thought her day couldn't get any worse, it did - if Quint had been the first course, Blackie Durham promised to be the main dish.

"Victoria Lynn," the outlaw said calmly, never taking her ice blue eyes off the former Deputy's pale, lined face.

"Outlaw," Victoria Lynn growled, never taking her smoky green eyes off the tin star on the tall woman's chest.

Jane chuckled and moved up to stand next to Victoria Lynn. "That's Deperty Durham ta you, Miss Coopa," she said with a wicked gleam in her eye, echoing the very first conversation she'd had with the short-tempered woman outside Jens Olsen's livery stable.

Unfortunately, her joke fell flat and left Victoria Lynn even paler.

The chimes rang again to reveal Mathilda who quickly rolled her eyes at the sight of the two fighting roosters at the counter. "Hello Victoria Lynn. Good Lord, I'm so sorry to hear about your arm," she said and pulled her old friend into a very tender hug.

"Thank you, Mathilda. I... I need your help with something," Victoria Lynn said quietly, turning around to look at the bottom shelf.

"Anything... well, I'm not getting rid of Jane, if that's what you're asking," Mathilda said and hooked her arm inside the tall woman's. She added a smile to show that she was merely jesting.

Victoria Lynn chuckled dryly and ran her hand across her clammy brow. "No. Would you mind taking a pack of pearl-sago and a pack of salt? I can't seem to get Mr. Jensen to do it."

"Really!" Mathilda huffed and shot the owner of the shop a flash of green-eyed lightning. "Of course, Victoria Lynn," she continued and quickly took the two packs and put them on the counter.

"Thank you," Victoria Lynn said, once again fixated on the tin star on Jane Durham's chest. "Well... there's another thing. I broke that footstool you see there... and I'm fully prepared to pay for it, but I... uh... I don't have twelve dollars with me," she said quietly.

Looking down at the broken footstool, Jane eyed the silver dollar that Quint Connors had thrown on the floor. She quickly bent down and picked it up. "Looks like ya dropped a dollar, Victoria Lynn. Here," she said and put the coin into the former Deputy's pocket. "Do'n worry 'bout the footstool. I'm sure it ain't worth twelve dollars... is it, Mr. Jensen?"

"Pardon?"

"You heard me."

"Uh... twelve dollars... y- yes it is..."

"I'm sure it ain't. Is it, Mr. Jensen...?" Jane repeated in a husky growl that left the shop owner even paler than Victoria Lynn.

"N- no... I g- guess it isn't..."

"How much is it, Mr. Jensen?"

"Pardon?"

"How. Much?" Jane said, narrowing her eyes down into blue slits.

"T- ten... eigh- f- five...? T- two dollars, Deputy."

"Mmmm," Jane said and turned back to Victoria Lynn. "Ya got two dollars?"

Watching the curious scene unfold, Victoria Lynn wanted most of all to apprehend Jane Durham for trying to strong-arm a small, independent businessman into giving her a discount she didn't deserve, but she knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth - or to challenge someone wearing a tin star. "Yes," she said quietly, taking the dollar from her jacket pocket and adding another. Sighing, she put the coins on the counter. "How much for the pearl-sago and the salt, Mr. Jensen?"

"Pardon?"

"The pearl-sago and the salt, fer cryin' out loud! How much?!"

"Dollar forty-nine," the owner said, putting out his hand.

Victoria Lynn duly put two further coins into the man's open palm and waited for the change. Once she had been given the single cent, she took the two packs and moved away from the counter.

"Good day, Mathilda. It's always a pleasure talkin' to you... less so you, outlaw." For once, Victoria Lynn added a crooked smile to take the sting out of the words, but it wasn't enough to stop Mathilda from gasping.

Chuckling, Jane tipped her low-crowned hat at the former Deputy and matched the crooked smile with one of her own. "Good day, Ma'am."

As Victoria Lynn hobbled out of the store holding the two packs, Mathilda and Jane looked at each other with identical, worried expressions.

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Later that same day, Victoria Lynn sat down with a bump on the doorstep outside her home on Canal Street, utterly fed up with life in general and her broken body in particular.

She was completely drained of energy from sleeping poorly and from walking back from the other end of Main Street where she had bought a personal hygiene product that was only sold in a drugstore near Madden Lane - a special bar of soap from Boston, the only luxury she had ever allowed herself.

With a trembling hand, she took off her gray, floppy Stetson and wiped her soaked brow. When she had still been a whole woman, she wouldn't have broken a sweat from the walk, but now, her stiff knee and the wretched stump were hurting so badly she couldn't stop a few tears from escaping her eyes even though she hated how it made her look weak.

Groaning from the pain, she glanced at the brown paper bag containing the bottle of whisky she had bought when she came past the Old No.4 Saloon which was next to the drugstore. She knew that whisky was a better painkiller than most medicine so she put the bottle between her thighs and yanked out the crude cork. After sniffing the contents to make sure the bartender hadn't sold her colored horse-piss, she took a deep gulp and felt the strong liquor burn its way down her throat.

"Ahhhhh," she said and held the bottle to her forehead in the vain hope it could cool her off. She suddenly noticed a pale brown wooden cane with a curved handle leaning against the wall next to the doorstep - the cane had a small note wrapped around it, but it was on her wrong side so she couldn't get to it.

Once she had taken another deep gulp of the whisky, she put the bottle between her thighs and rammed the cork back down the neck. Putting the bottle back into the paper bag, she donned her Stetson and clambered to her feet to check out the mysterious cane.

The note attached to it read, *'Dear Victoria Lynn. We hope you will accept our gift. It's from the heart. Your Mathilda and Jane.'*

Victoria Lynn stared at the note for so long that her eyes began to sting. After finally blinking a few times, she put the note in her pocket and took the cane to test how it felt in her hand - it was perfect, feeling like it had been tailor-made for her.

Sighing, she clutched the sturdy cane, wishing that Mathilda wasn't involved with the tall, tin star-wearing outlaw. "Still," she said quietly. "I can always use the cane to give Blackie a good beatin' the next time we meet. I think I'll keep it. Mmmm."

With that, she unlocked her front door and went inside with the brown paper bag and the rest of the things she had bought.

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By the time dusk had fallen on Princetown and the night watchmen had lit the torches lining the streets, most of the whisky had moved from the bottle to Victoria Lynn's gut where it burned brightly.

Sitting on her bed in her sparsely furnished chamber in semi-darkness, the former Deputy hated the world and everyone populating it, including Blackie Durham, Quint Connors and the rest of their tin star-wearing gang of cutthroats - but most of all herself.

Everywhere she looked, the flickering shadows playing across the furniture reminded her of what had been and what would never be again. The simple chair, the table with the half-eaten bowl of sago pudding that she had been too tired and too drunk to finish, the cupboard where she kept her clothes and her firearms, the small stove in the corner where she had always prepared her food, and, worst of all, the bed she was sitting on - the bed she and Mathilda had spent a few glorious nights in so long ago.

"All gone," she slurred, taking a swig from the bottle before putting it on the floor.

Grunting, she donned her gray Stetson and reached for her new cane. She needed a few moments to focus her efforts, but eventually managed to get to her feet. After throwing the cane onto the bed and retrieving her bottle of whisky, she took a long swig and left her room without even bothering to lock the door.

In her heart, she wasn't sure she'd ever come back.

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Staggering around the corner, she needed to lean against the wall of the Preminger Hotel for a little while before she could go on. With a grunt that turned into an over-ripe whisky-laced burp, she pushed herself off the wall and continued up Main Street.

When she spotted a nicely-dressed couple that came toward her, she took a long swig from the bottle and stepped in front of them. "I'm gonn' die tanight," she slurred, spooking the common folks with her stinking breath, wild hair and even wilder eyes.

They quickly left her to her own devices, but she didn't care one bit. With another swig from the bottle, she hobbled up Main Street towards the action that was sure to take place on Perry.

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Gunshots, whinnying horses, assorted rebel yells and general mayhem proved that Victoria Lynn had arrived at Princetown's number one hot spot. Everywhere she looked, cowboys from all the neighboring ranches were going at it, shouting, singing, drinking and fighting.

Two men were slugging it out in the middle of Main Street outside the Birrell Hotel, and others had used the windows in the Milligan Stage Company's office for target practice.

Somebody's horse had been left without a rider, but several cowboys were trying hard to rope it in outside the all-day bakery using lassos and various other pieces of rope. Unfortunately, the men's ability to do their job had been affected proportionally to the amount of liquor they had consumed, and none of them could do anything about the spooked horse.

Just as the swaying Victoria Lynn was looking at the riderless horse, it delivered a pile of steaming manure right on the sidewalk in front of the bakery out of sheer terror. The men all laughed their rear ends off, but the former Deputy didn't think it was that funny.

Taking another swig from her whisky, she continued up the sidewalk past Sofus Mikkelsen's gun shop, the hospital - that she spat at - and the small enclosure where somebody's buggy had been shot to pieces.

Two beefy bouncers were standing in front of the Golden Wings Saloon which kept the mayhem to a minimum there, but the Bull Rider Saloon a bit further up Perry Street was less fortunate. A couple of cowboys were throwing wild punches at each other right in the middle of the swinging doors, but neither were able to hit much, or even anything at all.

When Victoria Lynn got closer, she could see through the dense fog that had invaded her mind that one of the two fighting men was wearing a tin star. She shook her head in disgust, but the image wouldn't go away.

Gunshots behind her made her duck and spin around, but she had moved too fast for her condition and ended up on her butt in the middle of Perry Street. She had managed to keep her bottle out of harms way and promptly emptied it by chugging down the last few gulps.

The strong liquor sent fiery tendrils through her gut and throat, but she didn't care. Aiming for the sidewalk, she threw the bottle away and scored a direct hit on the wall of the Bull Rider, right between two of the large windows, where it shattered into a hundred pieces.

The two fighters slugging it out in the swinging doors stopped punching each other for long enough to stare at the drunken woman who was lying in the middle of the street. They both laughed at her before going back to their bare-knuckles fight.

Victoria Lynn rolled over onto her knees, but the pain that shot up from her stiff limb nearly killed her right then and there. Though a superhuman effort, she clambered to her feet and staggered over towards the Bull Rider.

She squeezed past the two fighters and entered the Saloon on unsteady legs. Looking around in a daze, she wasn't able to see much, apart from the fact that the saloon's famed dancing girls were on stage and strutting their stuff. She sort of remembered the saloon's advertisement claiming they didn't have any nudity in their show, but someone had clearly forgot to tell the dancing girls who were all naked from the waist up - except one who was naked from the waist down, adding a furry patch of color to the proceedings.

Victoria Lynn looked at the naked dancers with blurry eyes, but even the endless display of very fine, pale flesh couldn't hold her interest. Unable to breathe in the heavy clouds of smoke from the countless cigarettes, cheroots and cigars, she staggered back to the swinging doors and squeezed past the two fighting men.

Standing outside - swaying like a reed caught in a breeze - she debated with herself if she should go down towards the Golden Wings or up to Roscoe's Watering Hole. The decision was made for her when there were more shots fired down by the Wings; hiccuping, she decided to go for Roscoe's.

She never got that far. In a cruel twist of fate, she bumped into one of Quint Connors' bruisers almost exactly at the spot where she had been run down and trampled. The impact knocked a glass of beer out of the man's hand that ended up all over his yellow shirt, pale brown vest and denim pants.

The barrel-chested man of mixed race - with dark, beady eyes, a heavy walrus mustache under his nose and a dull tin star on his chest - growled loudly and gave Victoria Lynn such a shove that she ended up on her rear on the sidewalk.

As she was on her back looking up at the man, she couldn't stop a bitter laugh from escaping her lips. "Man... you ugly..." she slurred, pointing at the goon. "You so ugly I bet yer mama thought she'd pooped a long brownie instead o' givin' birth... whassamatter, fella? Never look at yerself in a mirror?"

The look of sublime annoyance in the goon's eyes proved that he was two seconds from whipping out his gun and putting a few slugs in the cheeky woman's chest, but a shadow falling over him made him move his hand away from his Colt.

"Do'n mind that drunkard, Gomez," Jane Durham said as she stepped in between the Deputy and Victoria Lynn, making the cigarette she had in the corner of her mouth bob up and down. "She's just shootin' off her

yap. Go get another brew. My treat," she continued, flipping the man a silver dollar that he caught with his left hand.

Gomez stared daggers at the woman on the ground and grumbled a few inaudible words while trying to wipe off the wet stain on his shirt. Eventually, he grunted, turned around and went back to Roscoe's.

Jane kept her hands near her Peacemaker for a short while, but when her fellow Deputy had moved into the Watering Hole, she spun around and shot Victoria Lynn a sharp glare. "Just what the hell d'ya think ya doin', ya crazy broad? Are ya actually tryin' to get yaself kilt?"

"I ain't talkin' to you, outlaw!" Victoria Lynn slurred and tried to get on her feet. She wanted to roll over onto her knees again, but the pain that shot up from her injured limb was enough for her to give up and fall back down.

"Get on your feet, drunkard," Jane growled and pulled Victoria Lynn up without breaking a sweat.

"Get yer flippin' hands offa me!" Victoria Lynn slurred and tried to push Jane away but only ended up in more balanced-induced trouble - this time, she fell against the wall of the general store next to the mouth of the alleyway where she had been run down.

Jane looked towards the heavens and rolled her eyes repeatedly. "Ain't ya got somewhere ya need to be instead of bein' here, hasslin' me?"

"Naw!"

"We gotta talk," Jane said and stubbed out her cigarette on the wall of the building. Reaching down, she grabbed hold of Victoria Lynn's coarse outfit and dragged the drunken woman into the alleyway where she slammed her up against the wall of the general store without any problems at all. "Lissen to me Victoria Lynn, why are ya doin' this? Ya practic'lly beggin' for someone to come along and clean yer clock... ya lost ya arm, not yer brains, ya know? Dontcha know how close ya was to losin' your life back there? Enrico Gomez is a mean sonovabitch, he do'n mind killin' wimmen."

"Piss off, outlaw..." Victoria Lynn croaked, making Jane shy back from the stench of whisky that came from the former Deputy's mouth.

"I ca'n do that. If I did an' ya ended up on Boot Hill, Mathilda would'n speak to me fer a week or more."

"Mathilda... yeah, don't get me started on Mathilda," Victoria Lynn slurred and tried to push herself off the wall. "Don't ferget, outlaw, that's my woman you're fingerin'-"

Jane growled out loud, grabbed hold of Victoria Lynn's clothes and yanked her so close they ended up within an inch of each other. "I'm about ta give ya some free advice, drunkard. Do'n use that kinda language when ya talkin' 'bout a proper lady. You an' me, we're just trash... ya can call me all the names ya want, but Mathilda is a lady, ya hear me? I suggest ya talk about her accordin'ly."

Sobering, Victoria Lynn realized her indiscretion and nodded with a jerk.

"Ya hear me?" Jane growled again.

"Yeah, yeah... I hear ya. Goddammit, Blackie, you just make me so mad, ya know..."

"All right," Jane said and let go of Victoria Lynn's lapels.

The unsteady woman staggered backwards until she was back leaning against the wall of the general store. She opened her mouth a couple of times, but she couldn't get a coherent sound past her chapped lips.

"If ya gonna hurl, do it down wind," Jane said and stepped back from Victoria Lynn.

"I ain't... Emily..." Victoria Lynn slurred, trying very hard to get two thoughts to form an orderly line in her abused brain. "Emily s- said we could talk... I need to t- talk right now... if I don't get this offa my chest... I-I'm gonn' do somethin' I'll regret..."

"What the hell are ya talkin' about, woman...? Who's Emily?"

"Blackie... Madden Lane... where's Madden Lane?"

Jane furrowed her brow - of all the things she had expected the former Deputy to say, that hadn't been one of them. "Pretty close... it's right down there," she said and pointed down the alleyway. "What the hell for?"

"I g- gotta talk to s- someone..."

"On Madden Lane?"

"Hell, yeah!" Victoria Lynn said, nodding so hard she nearly lost her balance.

"All right... where on Madden Lane?"

"Number nine... I think. Yeah... number nine. Or maybe num- no, definitely number nine."

Pushing her low-crowned hat back on her head, Jane briefly scratched her forehead while trying to figure out the location of that address. "Hell, that's clear down the other end."

"Crap..."

"I'll help ya," Jane said and reached out for Victoria Lynn, but the former Deputy brushed off her hands.

"Naw! I can do it," she said and staggered away from the wall. Three steps later, she was on her hand and knees on the ground, moaning from the pain that shot up from her stiff knee.

"Aw hell..." Jane said with a sigh. After looking back over her shoulder to check if anyone was watching them, she put her hands in under the fallen woman and scooped her up like she weighed nothing at all.

"Yeow!" Victoria Lynn howled, flailing her arm so wildly she nearly knocked off Jane's hat.

"Quit snakin' around, woman!" Jane said, trying to hold onto her hat and her precious cargo all at the same time. "Jesus, what are ya? Five? I'm tryin' ta help ya here! Shut up an' keep still, fer Pete's sake..."

Victoria Lynn looked up at her rescuer with a husky green pair of wide, blurry and completely uncomprehending eyes. "Wh- where are ya takin' me, Blackie?"

"To number nine Madden Lane... ain't that where ya wanted to go?" Jane said flatly, rolling her eyes as she stepped over a puddle of something she really didn't want to know what was.

"Oh... thank you."

"Ya welcome. An' if ya need to hurl, let me know in advance... okay?"

"Uh-huh," Victoria Lynn mumbled, leaning her weary head against the outlaw's soft chest.

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### CHAPTER 3

By the time Victoria Lynn woke up, it was broad daylight outside. It took all her strength to crack open her eyelids, but when she had, she could see the sun shining through a pair of lace curtains and illuminating the wall above the nice, comfortable double bed she found herself in.

Initially, her brain was still too foggy to realize it wasn't her own bed, but as she looked around the small bedroom, it slowly dawned on her that she had spent the night in a stranger's house.

The bedroom was well-equipped but tastefully decorated. A nightstand had been placed next to the bed with a kerosene lamp and a leather-bound Bible that was closed, but bookmarked. To her right stood a table with a small bowl and a water pitcher - and a porcelain chamber pot on the floor below it - and finally a dresser with a mirror on top where a dried flower had been inserted between the glass and the frame. The wallpaper and the rug were both held in feminine patterns, and the dress that hung on the door of the wardrobe beyond the foot-end of the bed clearly belonged to a woman.

Peeking over the edge of the bed, she could see a pair of slippers placed haphazardly, almost like someone hadn't had time to put them on.

Flopping backwards, Victoria Lynn rolled over onto her back and tried to speak, but found that her tongue had been glued to the roof of her mouth over night. It wasn't the only side-effect from her heavy drinking - her head felt like a yellow-eyed devil dog was gnawing on her brains, and her gut was burning so strongly she was worried the whisky had been horse-piss after all.

When she finally managed to get her tongue to release, the vile taste that spread through her mouth and nose made her wish she hadn't. "Ugh..." she croaked, trying to grab the white blanket she was under to get out of bed before she had an accident on someone else's bedlinen.

At first, she tried to use her right arm, forgetting it wasn't there anymore, but the dull ache that shot up from her stump made her realize that she should use her left instead.

As she lifted the blanket, she looked down at herself and discovered she was wearing a highly feminine shortsleeved salmon-colored nightshirt instead of the dark gray outfit she was sure she had been wearing the day before. "Wha... whaddin da hell...?" she croaked, staring at the thin shirt with red, blurry eyes.

The delightful smell of warm coffee suddenly wafted past her nostrils from beyond the closed door, and made her redouble her efforts at getting up. "Where the hell am I? This is... ugh... Ugh!"

Since nobody had been around to claim the slippers, she snuck her bare feet into them and moved to get up from the bed that was much softer than her own. With a bit of effort, she got on her feet and shuffled over to the door on legs that were even stiffer than usual.

The bedroom door led Victoria Lynn to the living room where Emily Mason was sitting on a chair at a table, drinking coffee from a cup and reading the hot-off-the-press morning edition of the Princetown Bugle.

"Wha...?" Victoria Lynn croaked, wiping her red eyes with the back of her hand.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Cooper," Emily said and folded the newspaper. After taking a sip from her coffee, she pushed the chair back and got up. The sight of the hung over former Deputy made her chuckle, but she disguised it very politely with a small cough. "Would you like some coffee?" she said, closing her house coat as she walked over to a stove where a black kettle was blubbering.

"Coffee? I... I... guess," Victoria Lynn croaked. Even in her foggy state, she had noticed that Emily Mason's figure had been less matronly and more sculpted than she had expected. Snapping out of those wholly inappropriate thoughts, she cleared her throat and shuffled over to the table.

Sitting down, she rested her aching head on her arm, but suddenly remembered something from when they had met on Main Street. "Hey... where' ya kids? Didn't ya have a couple o' kids?"

"Emmett and Daisy are my sister's children, Miss Cooper," Emily said as she took the kettle off the stove.

"Oh... shoulda remembered that. Uh... where are my clothes?"

Emily reached into a cupboard next to the stove and took a very fine porcelain set and a bowl of sugar. "Out back. They were too... how can I put it... too smelly to keep in here. I gave them a quick wash and left them to dry."

"Huh. Figures. I guess I musta stolen your bed... where d'ya sleep last night?"

"On the chaise longue," Emily said and nodded at a ruby red chaise longue that was placed at the other end of the living room, under a pair of windows that were covered by white lace curtains.

A reading table, an armchair, a bookcase filled with leather-bound tomes and a small table with a shrine devoted to Jesus completed the ensemble, but Victoria Lynn's eyes weren't capable of looking that far so she could only shrug at Emily's comment.

"Who, uh..." - Victoria Lynn stopped and looked down at herself - "Who... uh..."

Putting the porcelain set on the table, Emily poured coffee into the cup and got ready to add a dash of sugar. "I did. Sugar?"

"Naw... thanks, I need it black," Victoria Lynn said and shook her head, though she regretted it instantly when pink spots appeared at the edges of her vision. "Ugh... uh... ya didn't see me naked, did ya?" she said, holding onto her head so the devil dog couldn't run off with her brain.

"By the light of the kerosene lamp in the bedroom, yes."

"But I'm a grown woman!"

Chuckling, Emily went back to the stove and put the kettle on the red-hot metal. Once everything was in place, she dusted off her hands and turned back around. "So? I'm a nurse. I see naked women at least three times a week," she said with a smirk on her way back to the table.

"Not this body, sister..." Victoria Lynn croaked, looking down at herself. She wasn't uncomfortable with another woman seeing her breasts or even her blonde patch of curls, but her missing arm was another story altogether.

The edge of the stump was still colored an unhealthy, angry red, and she could feel that it was aching worse than it had been. The fact that the nightshirt she was wearing was short-sleeved made her acutely aware of her disability, and she racked her fuzzy brain to come up with a solution that would make her - quite literally - stick out less.

In the end, she pulled her arm into the short sleeve and let the fabric cover everything.

"Miss Cooper," Emily said and leaned across the table. "Please don't feel ashamed on my behalf."

"I ain't. I'm ashamed on my own behalf," Victoria Lynn said quietly, focusing hard on her cup of coffee. "A cripple ain't worth nothin' out here. Nothin' at all. And there ain't nothin' I can do 'bout it... in short... I'm nothin'."

"I declare, Miss Cooper, you're wrong about that. Terribly wrong," Emily said and tapped her knuckles on the tabletop. "Pardon me for being indiscreet, but last night, I saw that you still have plenty to offer a friendly fellow who's willing to take a chance at love."

"Aw hell," Victoria Lynn said and blushed harder than she had for years.

"I'm speaking the truth. Or perhaps there already is a sweetheart waiting at home, wondering where his peach has gone?" Emily said, giving Victoria Lynn an inquisitive look above the rim of her coffee cup.

Victoria Lynn looked up and just caught the tail end of said inquisitive look. Grunting, she took a long swig of her coffee to give herself a few more seconds to come up with an answer that wouldn't involve shocking a woman who was carrying a Crucifix at work. "Uh... no. No sweetheart waitin' at home. Uh... how about you, Mrs. Mason? Is Mr. Mason working on one of the ranches around here?"

"No," Emily said and put down her cup. "I'm a widow. It's been a year and a half now since my Clarence left me to rejoin our Lord. We had been together for seventeen years, but I take solace in the wisdom that the Almighty works in mysterious ways."

"Oh... shoot. I'm really sorry. Bandits?"

"No. It was an illness. A very bad one that came like a thief in the night. When it struck him, he... he withered away over the course of a few months."

"Mmmm," Victoria Lynn said and rubbed the end of her stump against her chest.

The silence in the living room suddenly turned oppressive, and Victoria Lynn tried to dig through her foggy mind to come up with something that could rekindle their easygoing conversation. When nothing came to her, she looked across the table at her host.

For each time they met, she thought that Emily Mason looked better. Her stern face and her gray hair couldn't mask the warmth in her eyes nor the cute dimples on her cheeks, and her rich, melodic voice was just what the Doctor ordered. *'But there's no way... no way on God's green earth that she would be interested in women... not after seventeen years with a man. No way!'* Victoria Lynn thought, biting her lips at the thought of exploring the sculpted, mature figure covered by the housecoat.

To get the inappropriate thoughts out of her head, Victoria Lynn thought back to the first time they had spoken after she had regained consciousness. Once again, she felt so bad for growling at the pleasant, helpful woman that she had to look down. "Mrs. Mason, I'm... I'm truly sorry for snappin' at ya when ya offered to read from the Bible back at the hospital. I'm not a religious person, but I keep forgettin' that others have every right to be."

"Oh, that's quite all right, Miss Cooper. I've heard worse," Emily said and got up from the chair to do the dishes. "I must admit that it hurt at the time, but it says in the Holy Scriptures that we should forgive and forget, so I do."

"I, uh... wouldn't know," Victoria Lynn said, fidgeting with the newspaper that Emily had left on the table. A screaming headline grabbed her attention and made her turn it around: *'Whore slain last night!'*

Reading the headline made her old instincts bubble up inside her, and she was all good and ready to get dressed, grab her trusty Winchester and commence an investigation on the fatality. When reality slapped her hard across both cheeks, she pushed the newspaper away and let out a long, deep sigh that made Emily turn around and look at her with a puzzled expression on her face.

"I'm all right," Victoria Lynn croaked, wiping her clammy forehead. "The real world just caught up with me. It's... it's when something like this happens that I'm cursin' my broken body, Mrs. Mason," she continued darkly, reaching around herself to touch her stump.

Emily nodded and put away the tea towel she had been using. "I understand. My offer still stands, Miss Cooper. When you're ready to talk, I'll listen."

"Thank you... I'm not there yet. But I'll remember it," Victoria Lynn said and sighed deeply. A flash of something she had said tried to crawl out of the deep recesses of her foggy mind, but she couldn't connect it to anything - and she wasn't even sure it wasn't something she had heard from someone else instead.

"By the way, you may call me Emily. May I call you Victoria Lynn?"

"My friends call me Vic, actually. Or Vicki if they wanna tease," Victoria Lynn said with a cautious smile.

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After returning from the outhouse, Victoria Lynn sat down at the table and took the morning edition of the Princetown Bugle. All through doing her business, she had been unable to get the headline out of her head, fuzzy though it had been.

"Whore slain last night," she mumbled, reading aloud from the article on the cover. "At a quarter past midnight, the twenty-six year old Elva Slater, native of Carson City, Nevada, lost her life in a suspected row over payment for her services. She was found outside her room at the Velvet Garter, shot in the chest at point blank range. Miss Slater's business associates, though they were all busy servicing their own customers, streamed into the connecting corridor after hearing the gunshot. They found the deceased Miss Slater on the floor clutching a torn-off piece of pale brown fabric and what appeared to be a Deputy Sheriff tin star, possibly identifying her killer as being an employee of the Princetown Sheriff's Office, though we have not been able to get that confirmed by Sheriff McFadden..."

Victoria Lynn put down the newspaper and stared into empty space for several seconds. "Jesus... I knew it would come to this," she mumbled, shaking her head slowly.

Emily came back into the living room in her nurse's uniform which transformed her appearance so much that Victoria Lynn thought for the briefest of moments that they had been joined by someone else.

"Did ya read this, Emily?" Victoria Lynn said, tapping her index finger on the newspaper.

"Yes. Did you know Elva through your job?"

"I've probably seen her around, but I can't remember her."

"I knew her. She came to the hospital about six months ago, feverish and trembling from a sexually transmitted disease," Emily said, sitting down at the table to pull up her knee-length socks. "She was a kind, if lost, woman. She was addicted to laudanum," she added quietly.

Victoria Lynn nodded, thinking about some of the sorry prostitutes she had seen through her time as a Deputy. Only a very few had been able to retain their dignity - or even humanity - after a while in that job. "Mmmm. I've heard that several of them are. That's the only way they can get through... well, what they do."

"And now she was most likely killed by someone who really should have been protecting her," Emily said harshly. The red spots that appeared on her cheeks proved that it was a subject that was close to her, and she suddenly turned around and tapped her knuckles on the tabletop. "Ever since Sheriff Cutler was deposed last week, this town has fallen to pieces... when you were still unconscious, the new Deputies that were appointed by Mr. Wilkinson fell over Princetown like a swarm of locusts... they've threatened the shopowners, they've not shied back from intimidating, harassing or even beating common folks, the streets at night look like a latter-day rendition of Gomorrah... why, just yesterday, two of them even threatened Doctor Cosgrove with a beating when he tried to stop them from roughing up a patient who had come to us with several facial injuries..." - Realizing her comment had turned into a heated diatribe, Emily suddenly shut up and turned away from Victoria Lynn.

"I apologize for my uncivilized outburst," she said after a few seconds.

"It's all right, Emily. I share your resentment," Victoria Lynn said and looked down at her stump. "If only I wasn't a cripple I'd fight back at them sons of bitches in an instant... Goddammit it all to hell. Pardon my French."

Emily's heated words churned on in Victoria Lynn's abused brain, and it took her several seconds to think of the two women who were at - or at least near - the heart of the matter. Reluctantly, she had to admit that Jane 'Blackie' Durham was a better woman than she gave her credit for, but if she had to go through her to save Mathilda, she would. "Emily... there's a female Deputy with long, black hair... tall drink o' water... always wearin' a low-crowned hat... I'm sure ya know who I'm talkin' about."

"Of course I do, Vic. She was the one who brought you here last night."

"Oh... she was?" Victoria Lynn said and furrowed her brow. She tried to penetrate the fog that swept around her brain to get a clearer view of what she had done the night before, but everything was still held in shades of black.

"Yes, she was. What of her?"

"Do ya know if she's been involved in any of the... uh... worst things? I know she's been, uh, intimidatin' the shop owners, but... the beatin's and those things...?"

"I don't. Do you want me to ask around?"

"No. No, that would be far too dangerous for ya, Emily," Victoria Lynn said bluntly, causing the nurse to cock an eyebrow. "Oh... I... uh, didn't mean that ya don't know what you're doin', of course... I didn't mean no offense, Ma'am."

Emily chuckled at the look of embarrassment on the tough, former Deputy's face. "And I didn't take any. Vic, I need to go to work now, but your clothes are dry and ready for you in the bedroom," she said and got up from the chair.

"Oh, thank you," Victoria Lynn said and followed her hostess up from the table. Her balance was still affected by her hangover, but it only took a few seconds for the iron ring around her skull to lift so she could start moving her legs towards the bedroom.

Halfway there, she turned around and scrunched up her face. "Emily... the reason I was askin' 'bout Blackie is that the, uh... the, uh... the woman she's livin' with used to be a very dear friend of mine. And I'm worried that she might get caught in the crossfire. If anythin' was to happen to her, I would... uh, anyway, do ya think it would be possible for ya to ask around after all? Just what the female Deputy has been doin' during the troubles? Nothin' else."

"I... I wasn't aware there were women like that in Princetown," Emily said shocked, turning away from Victoria Lynn and walking over to the small religious shrine at the far wall.

Victoria Lynn's jaw worked overtime at the surprising statement. "Well, there's a few of us," she said curtly, putting her hand on her salmon-colored, nightshirt-clad hip. When Emily didn't reply but kept standing with her back turned, looking down at a Bible and a blackwood picture frame, Victoria Lynn grunted and hobbled into the bedroom to get changed into her regular clothes.

Emily chose that exact moment to turn around, holding her hands to her bosom. "You see, Vic, it's just that... oh..." she said with slumping shoulders when she realized she was speaking to an empty room.

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Five minutes later, Victoria Lynn hobbled back into the living room, fully dressed and busy putting her gray, floppy Stetson on her head. "Thank you for the food and lodgin', Emily. I slept well. Far better than in my own bunk."

"You're welcome," Emily said, sitting at the table and looking at the former Deputy with an unreadable expression on her face. "How is your head?"

"Better, thanks."

"Oh," Emily said, clearly trying - and failing - to come up with intelligent questions. "Vic, what are your plans for the day?"

"Well... first of all, I'm gonna go over to Tyree and knock some sense into his wooden head," Victoria Lynn said and shoved her hand down her jacket pocket.

Emily opened her mouth but quickly closed it again. Then she opened her mouth and formed a W with her lips - but soon closed it again.

By the third time the nurse did that, Victoria Lynn knew something was up. "Are ya havin' breathin' problems? If ya are, we're in trouble 'cos you're the nurse here," she said, chuckling at her own joke.

The humor broke Emily's tension and she laughed politely as she stood up. "I was merely working up the courage to ask if you would be interested in coming over for supper on Friday night. It won't be an extravagant affair, but..."

Victoria Lynn cocked her head and looked closer at the nurse, or rather, at the red spots that had suddenly formed on the nurse's cheeks. "I was under the impression that bein' this close to one of them there special wimmen made you uncomfortable," she said, putting her weight on the good leg.

"You read me wrong, Vic. I'm..." Emily said and grimaced so hard Victoria Lynn could see her back teeth. "Oh, it's... to tell you the truth, it's been a while since I've had an adult in the house. My sister and her husband have so much to do with their children, and I don't want to bother them. It's been so refreshing to hold proper, adult conversations for a change. Will you come?"

"Sure. Sure, I ain't sayin' no to a free meal, Emily," Victoria Lynn said, flashing the nurse a charming, crooked grin. "At eight or so?"

The news made Emily break out in a wide, genuine smile that reached her eyes in an instant and set the pale blue orbs alight. "Eight would suit me just fine. Good!"

"Jus' fine," Victoria Lynn echoed, hobbling over to the front door. "Have a nice day, Ma'am. See ya around town," she continued, putting her index finger to the rim of her hat before depressing the door handle.

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A couple of minutes later, Victoria Lynn was overtaken by Emily as the nurse hurried through the alleyway between the Golden Wings Saloon and the all-day bakery to get to the hospital. "Where's the fire?" she shouted, waving her hand at the nurse.

"My shift started three minutes ago!" Emily said over her shoulder as she hurried past.

Victoria Lynn chuckled out loud at the thought that it was possible to be late after merely talking, but her good mood only lasted until she reached the Perry Street sidewalk. The street was as busy as ever at that time of the day, but a stench of blood, sweat, urine and even cordite from the many rounds that had been fired during the night hung in the air and poisoned the environment.

There were splatterings of blood in several places along the hard-packed dirt road, and the pile of droppings the spooked horse had let go of when Victoria Lynn was watching had only been half-heartedly shoveled down on the street, leaving the pale gray sidewalk right outside the bakery a disgusting shade of brown.

Across the road, two men were trying to remove the broken shards of glass from the ruined windows in the ticket office of the Milligan Stage Company, and the shot-up buggy in the enclosure between the hospital and the Sheriff's office was being towed away by a team of mules.

"Damn," Victoria Lynn said quietly, clenching her fist. "We need to get this town cleaned up... this crap can't go on!"

While the former Deputy was watching the muleskinner try to get his two beasts of burden to work together, Jane 'Blackie' Durham came around the corner of Perry and Main Street and steamed up the sidewalk in her characteristic long stride.

Victoria Lynn scrunched up her face, trying to figure out which peg she needed to place the outlaw on. *'She's bad news no matter how I twist and turn it... but on the other hand, she could easily have gunned me down last night, but didn't. In fact, she helped me. But does that mean I can trust her, or is she simply a cut*

*above the other bandits...? Hmmm. Mathilda would never spend as much as a moment with a low-down, no-good piece of scum, so... hmmm. I think I need to have a word with her before I talk to Tyree,' she thought, stepping out onto Perry Street.*

Two steps later, she came to a dead halt right in the middle of the street. Jane Durham had reached the Sheriff's Office and was speaking to someone who had come out - the identity nearly made Victoria Lynn bite her tongue in two. "Quint Connors... that sonovabitch. And that goes double for Blackie! Dammit, jus' when I was about to- Jus' when I thought she was- Oh, Goddamnit!"

After rubbing her eyes repeatedly to get the disappointment to go away, Victoria Lynn watched the two people go into the Sheriff's office without closing the door behind them. "I gotta listen in..." she said and began to hobble across the street at twice the speed she normally would. "Gotta listen in... gotta... listen... in... if it... kills me..." she said, panting from the strain of moving her stiff leg so fast.

Huffing and puffing, she hurried past the door to the Sheriff's office and leaned against the brick wall. From her years working in and out of the building housing the office, she knew that if she stood at a certain angle out front, the door would act as a funnel and she'd be able to hear everything said inside, even though she would appear to simply be minding her own business.

*'-pinching every penny,'* Quint Connors said in his trademark lyrical accent.

*'How's that?'* Jane Durham replied in a voice that brought an image of silky smooth velvet to Victoria Lynn's mind.

*'Well, you see... From what I've been told, back when the old-timers founded Princetown, they valued all the land and split the deeds between 'em, thinking that the town would prosper even though there weren't no mines or anything nearby. Well it did.'*

*'I'll say. Princetown is the biggest settlement in the entire county.'*

*'Yeah. Over the decades, when Bobby Prince, Chuck Sullivan and Ches Perry croaked, their deeds were split equally between Ballentine and Senior. Well, now, Gentleman George naturally owns deeds to a large part of Princetown, as do the men we're working for... but unlike their deeds, Ballentine's are worth so much money that he can roll in it if he wanted to 'cos he's got all the best parts, along Main Street, Perry Street, you name it.'*

*'I thought he'd made his fortune through horse breedin?'*

*'He did, and that's the whole point, Blackie. He's already filthy rich so he doesn't need to collect property tax from the deeds.'*

The sound of a match being struck was heard, and soon, cheroot smoke wafted out the door.

*'Property tax?'* Jane said strongly. *'What the hell... is this whole dirty game jus' a matter o' some half-assed property tax? It's about nothin' but money? Jesus, Quint!'*

*'Well of course it's about money. Ain't that everything there is to life? But not just money, tons of money. Now, the plan... concocted by yours truly, but accepted by Senior and that little pissant Junior... is actually quite simple. Get the deeds and increase the property tax. Not a big spike, mind ya, but a little at a time... ya know, a cent here, a dollar there.'*

*'Eh.'*

*'I heard a rumor from Senior that the railroad might be swingin' by in a couple of years... or maybe even sooner. If that happens, the value of the deeds will go through the roof.'*

*'The railroad?'* Jane said and let out a dry chuckle. *'The railroad is a town killer, Quint. I seen that happen often enough to know.'*

*'Not if we can persuade 'em to get a stop here.'*

*'Yeah, okay... I'll give ya that.'*

*'Naw, it's gonna work out great. Look at whatshisname Birrell, Harvey DuBois or Madam Bessie over at the Velvet Garter... fat cats who can pay loads more than what they do now... which is hardly anything.'*

*'Yeah, but the common folks gonn' pay them taxes, too. An' they ain't exactly rich 'round these parts, Quint.'*

*'So?'*

*'Hmmm.'*

The conversation had seemingly come to a natural break as both speakers went quiet. While a couple of cowboys from the Circle Y and Bar J ranches rode past tipping their Stetsons to Victoria Lynn, she could hear a chair being scraped across the wooden floor, quickly followed by another match being struck.

*'And when you say get the deeds from Ballentine, you mean...?'* Jane said in a voice that was slightly muffled by the cigarette that was no doubt hanging from the corner of her mouth.

It didn't take long for a cloud of cigarette smoke to creep around the corner and trickle into Victoria Lynn's nostrils where it began to tickle her quite fiercely.

Quint didn't answer Jane's question verbally. Instead, a nasty chuckle wafted through the door and out to Victoria Lynn who was rubbing her nose to stop the explosive sneeze she knew was coming.

"Aw hell!" she croaked, moving away from the wall and hobbling further up the sidewalk. At the last moment before she couldn't hold back the sneeze any longer, she turned around so it looked like she was coming from the other direction. "HA- HA- HA- CHOOOOOOOO!"

The sneeze was loud enough to stop traffic on Perry Street, and it only took Jane two seconds to stand in the doorway to the Sheriff's office with her Peacemaker drawn and trained up the street. "Bless ya," she said drolly at the sight of Victoria Lynn wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"Thanks," Victoria Lynn said, hobbling down Perry Street while sniffing deeply.

"Where ya been?"

"Huh?"

"Where ya been since I saw ya last?" Jane repeated and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The tall outlaw holstered her revolver but kept a sharp lookout at the people walking past her and the former Deputy.

Victoria Lynn pushed out her chin and assumed a cocky stance. "Lately I was up at the Garter. I wanted to hear about the murder that took place last night," she fibbed. "Know anythin' about it? Seems like it was one of them brothers-in-arms o' yours who shot that soiled dove stone dead. Bam, right in the titties."

"Nasty business, that," Jane said flatly, making her cigarette bob up and down in her mouth.

"Yep. Is Tyree in there? I need to have a word with him."

"Naw, he ain't around. 'bout what?"

"Well, how can I put it...? Hmmm... oh yeah, ain't none o' your beeswax."

Jane arched an eyebrow and looked down at the shorter woman. "Which reminds me, d'ya spend the night with the nice lady over on Madden Lane?" she asked quietly.

"An' what if I did?"

"Nothin'."

"Well, for your information, outlaw, the nice lady an' I had a very pleasant mornin' together. The night... I'm not sure. Hell, I can't remember a damn thing about it," Victoria Lynn said and reached up to scratch her hair above her ear.

"Happens with cheap booze."

"Yeah." - Cocking her head, Victoria Lynn tried to gauge the look on Jane 'Blackie' Durham's face. It seemed as neutral as ever, but she felt she could see a couple of slight worry-lines that hadn't been there before etched across the forehead and around the ice blue eyes.

She didn't want to guess at the cause of those lines, but she knew there was no way the outlaw could know that she had listened in on the conversation that had just taken place, so it couldn't be that. *'Which means it has to stem from what Quint Connors told her about the deeds and Gentleman George Ballentine... maybe there's hope for Blackie Durham's soul yet,'* she thought, frowning her own brow.

"Anyway, how's the lovely Mathilda today?" Victoria Lynn said and began to hobble down Perry Street to get away from her former workplace and the squatter she detested more than anyone else in Princetown, Quint Connors.

Jane shrugged and knocked some ash off her cigarette. "Bloated and irritable. She's got the curse. Came durin' the night."

"Oh. My condolences," Victoria Lynn said and took off her hat. Holding it to her bosom, she offered Jane a short bow before continuing on down the street with the outlaw's velvety laughter ringing in her ears.

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*Later that same day.*

The Friendly Folks Cafe & Eatery next to the Preminger Hotel on Main Street was quite full. All twelve round tables were occupied by common folks eating an early supper, and the long line at the counter had the elderly owner and her husband running around panting like steam locomotives to keep up with the flow of orders - but that hadn't stopped Victoria Lynn from hogging a whole table to herself.

Several pieces of paper were lying around on the table; some had awkward streams of text on them, others had crude drawings and sketches. What they had in common was the message that she had written in fat types at the top of every page: *'Reclaim Princetown!'*

She had bought a coffee and a slice of apple pie - which was just as good as the one served at the DuBois' Cafe, only at one third of the price - but had promptly forgotten all about them in her eagerness to get the flyers finished before the print house at the Princetown Bugle closed for the night.

Finally realizing that her empty stomach was screaming at her, she put down the pencil and reached for the plate and her mug, but discovered to her great horror that the coffee was as cold as the bottom of a well. "Ugh," she croaked, spewing the bitter liquid back into the mug.

The line at the cafe counter was too long to go there at once, so she decided to try the apple pie instead. As she dug into the scrumptious treat, she looked around at the people she was sharing the Friendly Folks Cafe & Eatery with.

Every last one of them was a regular Joe or Jane, hardworking folks in coarse, monochrome clothes with lined, weather-beaten faces that told stories of hardship and perseverance. Unlike the clientele at the more fancy places further north on Main Street, the men's beards and hair weren't waxed or meticulously groomed, nor did the women resemble delicate porcelain trophies only brought to town once a week by their wealthy husbands.

*'This is the kind of folks who made Princetown into what it used to be... before Quint and his goons ruined everything,'* Victoria Lynn thought, munching on a bite of apple pie. *'This is the kind of folks who'll help us rebuild it. Hell yeah.'*

The dinging of the little bell above the door made Victoria Lynn look up with half the spoon stuck into her mouth. Orin Cutler had just walked in, and she waved at her former boss to get him to come over.

As the pot-bellied man made his way to her table, Victoria Lynn furrowed her brow at the odd sight of a pair of maroon suspenders on Orin's denim pants. "What the hell... losin' ya pants, are ya?" she said, munching on the next bite of apple pie.

"Losin' my pants 'cos I got less money to eat for. The bank won't let me get my pension," the former Sheriff said as he sat down with a bump on the wooden chair.

"Wha..." - *gulp!* - "What? That sonovabitch Quint Connors is withholdin' your pension? How dare he?!"

Orin took off his Confederate Cavalry hat and hung it over the backrest. Sighing, he mussed his graying hair before leaning in towards his friend. "Not Quint. Junior."

"Aw hell... Hell," Victoria Lynn growled and leaned back on her chair. "That ties in with what I heard earlier today..."

"Which was?"

"I, uh... accidentally overheard Quint Connors and Blackie Durham flappin' their gums on a subject called deeds. How Gentleman George has plenty, how Senior and Junior wants Ballentine's, too, even though \*they\* already got plenty."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Turns out it's all about money, Orin. Money and the railroad possibly swingin' by. If it does, they can raise the property tax... and stuff. I won't claim to understand all of it, but what I know makes me mad. I pay rent to my landlady and I sure as stink on shit can't afford to pay more than I do now. Do ya own your house or pay rent...?"

"I own my own place, yeah. Damn. It had to be something as corruptin' as money," Orin said and rubbed his walrus mustache.

"Orin, how could we have been so wrong about those two varmints... huh? I'll bet the signs were there from the get-go, we was just too busy mindin' the streets to see 'em..."

"Probably. How's the apple pie today?"

"Great. Here, ya can have mine. I've lost my appetite," Victoria Lynn said and pushed the plate with the half-eaten slice over to her old friend.

"Naw, I can't..." Orin said and put his fingers on the plate to stop it.

Victoria Lynn shook her head and kept pushing. "It's all yours, Orin. This town ... this town is givin' me the burps right now. I'll get us some fresh coffee instead," she said and got up.

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A couple of minutes later, Victoria Lynn put two mugs of steaming hot coffee on the table and sat down with a groan. "I'm tellin' ya, Orin... we gotta do somethin' to take back Princetown from those goons," she said and tenderly stretched out her stiff knee. "This can't go on... I was over at Perry Street last night and it

was mayhem... naw, mayhem is too weak. It was... it was... Hell Street in Diablo Canyon in its heyday, that's what I'm talkin' about!"

"I know," the former Sheriff said and took a sip of his coffee. "And Tyree is in way, way over his head. In fact, I'm surprised they've even let him keep it."

"The star?"

"Naw, Victoria Lynn. His head," Orin Cutler said flatly.

"Oh... yeah. He ain't gonna stand up and be counted, that's for sure." Sighing, Victoria Lynn leaned back in the chair and looked around at the other people. It seemed that most of them had finished eating as there were thick clouds of cigarette and pipe smoke hanging in the air. "That's why I've been working on these," she continued, pushing the sketches over to Orin.

"Flyers?"

"Yeah. We can't be the only ones who object to how Princetown is run these days. If we can make people aware that others are just as angry about it, maybe-"

"Who's this 'we' you're referrin' to, kid?" Orin Cutler said and pushed the sketches back to Victoria Lynn. "I don't see no one else here. Surely you ain't talkin' about me, are ya? I'm sorry, Victoria Lynn... like I told you last week, I didn't get this old only to be gunned down now. No, I can't join your revolution."

Victoria Lynn chewed on her cheek as she digested the words. Initially, she wanted to object, but she knew deep down inside that it wasn't a battle for the old man. "Yeah. I understand, Orin. But I have to try. Hell, if I don't, we won't have a Princetown left in a few months' time."

"If you win, I'll vote for ya when ya run for mayor," Orin said with a grin.

"Thanks. And if I lose?"

"Then I'll put new flowers on your grave every day for a week. And then I'll leave Princetown."

"Fair enough," Victoria Lynn said and took a long swig of her coffee.

From a table across the eatery, a beardless man wearing dark denim pants, a pale brown shirt, a red-and-white bandanna and a dirty white Stetson put down a few coins as a tip and got up from his seat. Nodding to the elderly woman behind the counter, he walked closely past Victoria Lynn's table on his way to the door.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

To Victoria Lynn, the trip back from the print shop - just as the night watchman lit the torches along Main Street - felt like the forty days in the wilderness, but her new cane meant that she suffered less strain on her back and her good leg so she was in a less depressed state than she had been earlier.

The slow, rhythmic tap-tap-tap of the hard tip of the cane mixed with the clanging sounds from the tacks of the horses that rode past her to create a soothing soundscape that meant she could think about the stack of papers she was carrying.

The printer at the Princetown Bugle had agreed to make a limited run of twenty-five flyers after retyping her original, fumbling attempts. The end result had looked far better than she had dreamt of and she couldn't wait for the morning to come so she could distribute the flyers among the residential areas beyond the main arteries of the town.

As she passed by one of the night watchmen, the man tipped his derby at her but she was in no condition to reply to his greeting as she carried the stack of papers under her arm that also held the cane. "Good evening, Sir," she said, offering the elderly man a wide smile.

The split second she walked past him, she noticed that his face changed to one of worry. He appeared to be looking behind her, further up Main Street. She tried to strain her hearing to suss out if she was being followed, but there were too many ambient sounds for it to be effective.

The next shop was the Friendly Folks Cafe & Eatery where she had talked to Orin Cutler. Pretending to be tired - which wasn't a stretch at all - she stopped in front of the store window and looked inside at the two owners who were mopping the floor after having put all the chairs upside-down on the tables.

She squinted left, looking at where she had just come from but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary - though on a second squint, it did seem out of the ordinary that the sidewalk was empty. Even the night watchman was gone.

Scrunching up her face, she turned around and resumed walking. After a few paces, her keen hearing picked up the sounds she had been dreading - a jingling of spurs and a clicking of hard heels on the wooden sidewalk behind her. *'The kind of heels bandits use for their riding boots,'* she thought and tried to up the pace.

She was only able to move faster for a brief while; losing her breath, she had to slow down again. As she walked past the Preminger Hotel and turned onto the hard-packed dirt of Canal Street, she only had forty short yards to go until she was safe - unfortunately, she wasn't allowed those forty yards.

Suddenly, three people ran up behind her and tore the stack of flyers out from under her arm, scattering them all over Canal Street.

"You rotten bastards!" she howled and spun around, holding her cane high to clobber the cowardly attackers, but the sight of three Colt Peacemakers trained on her made her stop and lower the cane.

The three revolvers belonged to Enrico Gomez, the man she had spilt beer on during her drunken stupor, the beardless man from the Friendly Folks Eatery - and finally a tall, black-haired outlaw by the name of Jane 'Blackie' Durham.

Victoria Lynn's face turned into a mask of rage at the sight of Jane. "You miserable piece of scum!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

Smiling coldly, Jane stepped forward but kept the Peacemaker pointing at Victoria Lynn's gut. "Ya sure is talkin' big fer a cripple, li'l lady. Hear this, we can do this the hard way, or the harder way. The choice is yours... all yours."

"Go ta hell!"

The ugly brute Gomez stepped forward as well and shifted his revolver to his left hand. "She ruined mah shirt... les' make mincemeat outta her, Blackie," he said in a gruff voice.

"I love me some mincemeat, Enrico," Jane said, giving Victoria Lynn an ice cold glare.

"Oh yeah? Well, that's all ya gonna chew once I'm done with ya!" Victoria Lynn barked and shook her cane at her three opponents. She briefly glanced down at the printed flyers that were being swept away by the small breeze that always ran through Canal Street, and felt sick to her stomach that she hadn't thought of the idea sooner - now, it was most likely too late.

"Ooooooh! The cripple's got balls!" Jane said, laughing nastily. "Naw, ya lissen good now, ya gonna play along, aintcha? Ya's gonna be a nice cripple an' play along... aintcha? If ya play along, maybe, jus' maybe you'll get outta this in one piece. If ya struggle or mouth off at us, ya ain't gonn' be so lucky. D'ya think I can hold them strappin' fellas off for long, cripple? Do ya?"

Victoria Lynn narrowed her eyes and clenched her jaw so hard the muscles on her cheeks stood out. The volcano inside her was brewing so fiercely that she was about to blow her top, but just when she wanted to let out her inner banshee, she began to analyze what Jane Durham had actually been saying. *'Play along... she emphasized play along... but... does that mean she's on my side after all? Jesus, this is so confusing...'* she thought, looking from Jane to Enrico Gomez to the last, beardless man who hadn't said anything yet.

All three were wearing tin stars, but the condition of the last man's star made Victoria Lynn scrunch up her face. Jane's and Gomez' were dull and filthy, but the last man's was shiny, like he had just snatched it from the box of spares Orin Cutler kept in the desk drawer. *'But why would he get a new star?'* Victoria Lynn thought. *'Unless he misplaced the old one... or lost it... crap... the soiled dove who was killed at the Velvet Garter was clutching a star in her hand...!'*

She knew she didn't have time to properly weigh her options, but she decided to go out on a limb and pretend to cower at the might of Jane Durham. "I'll... I'll do anything you say, Deputy... please don't hurt me," she squealed, looking Jane straight in the eye - and praying to every Saint she knew that she hadn't misread the tall outlaw's intentions.

"Aw, that's a nice cripple. Hey Enrico, ya wanted mincemeat? Y'all better find yer camp set, dude," Jane said and suddenly jumped forward. With a loud grunt, she swung her left fist directly at Victoria Lynn's gut, but leaned in at the very last second and whispered: "React!"

Victoria Lynn only had a split second to follow Jane's command, but the fist that flew at her like a ramrod only thumped her gut very tenderly, thus proving that her hunch had been right. To send the proper message to the other two goons, Victoria Lynn let out a braying groan and fell forward into Jane's waiting arms.

Jane grabbed the former Deputy's lapels and pulled her upright. "Ya ain't gonn' cause no more trouble for us, are ya?" she growled into Victoria Lynn's face, following it up by seemingly ramming a knee upwards into the junction of the blonde's legs.

It was hard to hear who squealed the loudest - Victoria Lynn in an award-winning performance, or the two male bruisers whose squeals were in an even higher pitch.

"Are ya?!" Jane said, shaking Victoria Lynn by her lapels.

"Nooooooo..."

"I did'n hear ya." Quickly letting go of the lapels, Jane was seen to ram the hilt of her Colt directly down on top of Victoria Lynn's breasts, earning herself yet another loud squeal that segued into a sobbing groan.

"Goddamn..." Enrico Gomez said, grimacing so wildly at the wanton violence his teeth were showing.

Coughing and spluttering, Victoria Lynn slipped down the coarse wall and landed very softly at Jane's Hyer Brothers boots. "I wo- I wo- won't cause ya no trouble... no trouble..." she squealed, shaking like a leaf in a storm.

"Good," Jane said and stepped back from the prone woman. "Gomez, y'all can stick yer fork in 'er, she's done."

Enrico Gomez shook his head with a sour expression on his face. "No flippin' point, is there, Blackie? I don't take sloppy seconds from no one."

"Suit yerself, fella. Hey, cripple..." Jane said and reached for her tobacco pouch. "Did ya learn ya lesson? If ya did'n, lemme say it again... we be the law 'round here. Do'n mess with us. If ya do, we'll mess ya up much worse. Have a nice evenin', Ma'am," she continued and put her fingers to the rim of her low-crowned hat in a mocking impersonation of civility.

Enrico Gomez and the other goon seemed to find that funny as they both laughed out loud moving away from the cripple who had supposedly been horribly beaten.

As soon as the three Deputies walked away from Canal Street and turned back onto Main Street, Victoria Lynn found her cane and clambered to her feet. "Man... who knew hell could be found at the bottom of a woman's blue eyes," she said quietly. Grunting, she began to scoop up the flyers before they could run off too far.

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Half past nine the next morning, Victoria Lynn hobbled into the backyard of Annie Mikkelsen's Dresses For The Modern Woman and came to a halt at the foot of the wooden flight of stairs that went up to the apartment Jane 'Blackie' Durham shared with Mathilda.

Though her new cane was a great help, she still felt dizzy at the prospect of climbing the endless staircase, but she knew her reason for being there required her to do it. Sighing, she put her good leg up on the lower step and began the long, arduous journey.

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Three and a half strength-sapping minutes later, she leaned against the railing at the top of the landing and wiped her sweaty brow with a trembling hand. Sighing deeply at the thought that she needed to go down the staircase as well a little later on, she used the handle of the cane to knock three times on the door.

A brief squeal was heard from the inside, quickly followed by a bump and a muted curse. Moments later, the door was whooshed open to reveal Blackie Durham holding her indispensable Peacemaker.

Victoria Lynn had to grimace at the sight of the feared outlaw with damp hair and flushed skin, and - last but not least - wrapped in a sheet that she probably hadn't noticed was fairly sheer. "Okay, that's another item to scratch off the list..." she mumbled, pushing herself off the railing. "Good morning, Blackie. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"Actu'lly, ya did," Jane Durham growled, twirling her gun.

"Didn't you say Mathilda had the curse?"

"Yep. But I do'n," Jane said and stepped back inside, leaving Victoria Lynn to grimace all over again. *'It's Victoria Lynn,'* the former Deputy heard Jane say to Mathilda.

*'Would you mind asking her to wait outside for a couple of minutes...?'*

*'Of course not,'* Jane said from inside the apartment. As she stepped back out onto the landing, she shrugged which nearly made the sheet fall down, though she managed to keep it wrapped around herself - not that it mattered due to the sheerness of the fabric. "Wouldya mind waitin' here? Ain't gonn' be long."

"Nope," Victoria Lynn said with a broad grin plastered all over her face.

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Two minutes later, Mathilda appeared in the door wearing a housecoat that was tied together with a wide belt. "Oh, good morning, Victoria Lynn," she said and pulled her friend into a hug. "What brings you here at this early hour? Come inside, please," she continued, stepping aside to let their guest enter.

"It's not that early, actually. Time just flies when you're havin' fun," Victoria Lynn said, grinning cheekily. She turned around and put her gray, floppy Stetson on the bottle green chaise longue.

"Mmmm... possibly," Mathilda said and closed the door behind them. Her cheeks had gained a rosy hue that Victoria Lynn knew all too well from their shared past.

"Oh!" Mathilda suddenly exclaimed to get away from the embarrassing subject. "I see you're using your new cane!"

"I am. It's a very big help to me. Thank you very much. Both of you," Victoria Lynn said, nodding politely at both Mathilda and Jane.

The outlaw merely grunted as she finished buttoning her shield-front shirt, but Mathilda pulled Victoria Lynn into a tender hug and finished by giving her a little peck on the cheek. "You're welcome. It was the least we could do," the young redhead said with a smile.

"Mmmm, yeah. And while we're on that subject," Victoria Lynn said and hobbled over to a chair by the window. "I guess I owe you big time for last night, outlaw. For a second there, I didn't think I was gonna walk away."

"For a second there, ya was'n," Jane said and began to roll herself a cigarette. "One of the fellas came runnin' back from the eatery and told me and Gomez what he had read on yer flyers. I thought I'd better come along. Good thing I did."

Mathilda looked from her old lover to her new, but neither Victoria Lynn's nor Jane's faces revealed what they were talking about. Furrowing her brow, she held the housecoat together and sat down at the reading table where she began to fidget with a book she had been perusing. She was already a bit embarrassed to have the two most important women in her life so close, but the fact that they shared a secret that she wasn't a party to made her downright nosy - she knew better than to ask, though.

"Yeah," Victoria Lynn said and nodded somberly. "Anyway. I have to make a confession. While you and Quint were talkin' in the Sheriff's Office yesterday, I just happened to be outside, accidentally overhearin' everythin'."

Jane chuckled throatily which made a cloud of cigarette smoke burst out of her mouth and float up towards the ceiling. "Why ain't I surprised?"

"Once a Deputy, always a Deputy," Victoria Lynn said, glancing at the tin star on Jane Durham's gray shield-front shirt. "Deeds. Is that really what this is all about?"

"Apparently so. I do'n know anymo' 'bout it than what Quint Connors told me... so... I guess we both know the same," Jane said, making the cigarette bob up and down in the corner of her mouth as she spoke.

Victoria Lynn grunted and looked through the lace curtains at the street below. Down there, people went about their business like they always did at that time of the day, but there was an uneasiness hanging in the air that she had felt on her way there. She could only guess how it would feel up at the saloons and the Sheriff's Office on Perry Street, or even in the Rat's Nest on Sullivan Street. Wetting her lips, she looked over at the outlaw who was smoking her cigarette with a pensive look in her eyes. "Listen, Blackie..."

"Jane's my name," the outlaw said, flashing Victoria Lynn a wide, peace-offering smile.

"All right. Jane. Oh, and mine ain't li'l lady but Vic... or Vicki if ya wanna tease," Victoria Lynn said with a grin.

"Fair enough." Getting up, Jane put out her left arm and Victoria Lynn promptly shook it.

Once again Mathilda found herself staring at the two women, wondering what on earth was going on between them.

The grin on Victoria Lynn's face faded away as she leaned forward on the chair. "Jane, today is payroll Friday and I'm sure I don't hafta tell ya that tonight is gonna be hell on earth. What happened the other night is gonna look like a little pile of mule shit compared to what's gonna go down later on."

"Mmmh."

"It's always been that way. When the cowboys come into town with their pockets lined with dollars, there ain't no holdin' 'em back. Earlier, Sheriff Cutler and Tyree and myself, hell, we could barely do it when I was a whole woman... but now... no offense, but the new batch o' Deputies are... how can I put it. Hmmm... part of the problem, not the solution."

"I know," Jane said and took a long whiff of her cigarette. "I've been thinkin' about it, too. I know I ain't no saint-"

Victoria Lynn couldn't stop a hacking cough from bubbling up from her chest. "Pardon me. It's the smoke. Go on," she said with a broad grin.

"Cheeky. I know I ain't no saint, but them other fellas are downright dangerous hombres. Ya wo'n wanna turn ya back on 'em at the best o' times... but tonight... Jesus. Sowin' lead and harvestin' blood. They're gonna be right in the thick o' things."

"Like the silent man from last night was at the Velvet Garter...?" Victoria Lynn said, pinning Jane to the spot with a strong flash from her green eyes.

The outlaw merely nodded.

"Thought as much. All right... he needs to be taken care of," Victoria Lynn said somberly. "What's his name?"

"Look, Vic-

"Ya can tell me his name, can't ya?"

Jane took a final whiff from her cigarette and stubbed out the rest on a metal ashtray. Her jaw was grinding hard but she eventually looked up and locked eyes with the former Deputy. "Wally Shaye. I'll take care o' him mahself."

The sudden onset of angst proved too much for Mathilda who shot up from her chair and began to wring her hands. "Will somebody please tell me what's going on here? And when I say somebody, I mean you, Jane," she said strongly.

Victoria Lynn smirked and chose to stay out of the conversation.

"Well," Jane said and got up. She quickly crossed the distance between herself and Mathilda and wrapped her long arms around the slender body. "Remember readin' in the Bugle that one of the painted ladies got herself kilt at the Velvet Garter the other day?"

"Yes?"

"One of the other Deperties did it. He was braggin' about it. Said that she'd been sickly so she did'n deserve a cent for the lousy screw... his words. But she insisted on gettin' the three dollars he owed her... so he shot her dead."

"Oh, no... why haven't you reported him to the Sheriff, Jane? You've been protecting a murderer!"

"It ain't quite that simple, baby," Jane said and leaned down to place a gentle kiss on Mathilda's strawberry red hair.

"It never is in Princetown, is it? Victoria Lynn, I remember payroll Friday from the old days..." Mathilda said, stopping when she couldn't find the right words.

The former Deputy got up from the chair and hobbled over to get her hat from the chaise longue. She was acutely embarrassed at the sight of Mathilda and Jane embraced in a tender hug, and wanted to give her former lover and her new outlaw squeeze some privacy. "Yeah. It's gonna be awful, no two ways about it. Decent folks are best advised to stay in their homes and barricade their doors and windows." - *'And the rest of us are gonna roam the streets armed with a stack of flyers, trying to rally support to protect our town the best we can,'* she thought with a sigh.

"Hey, Vic," Jane said, locking eyes with Victoria Lynn. "Watch ya ass. I ain't sure I can do it for ya the whole time."

"Ya don't hafta, Jane," Victoria Lynn said and put on her dark, floppy Stetson. "Well, Mathilda, it's been a pleasure but I need to be excused. I have a supper date tonight and I have plenty of things to do before then. Why, I'm even gonna take a sponge bath though it ain't been a week since my last one. Ya might say I've had a rough couple o' days. Have a good day, ladies."

"You have a whaaaat? A supper date?" Mathilda howled loud enough to wake the dead. "Victoria Lynn, you're not going anywhere until you've told us all about it! And you better start right this minute!" she continued, stamping her ankle boot into the carpet at every syllable of the last words.

Jane chuckled and gave Mathilda a little squeeze around the waist. "Vic, when she says it like that, she means it."

Victoria Lynn grinned, took off her hat and threw it back onto the chaise longue. "Weeeelll, it's like this..."

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At five minutes to eight in the evening, a freshly scrubbed and watercombed Victoria Lynn hobbled up the short garden path in front of Emily Mason's house on Madden Lane. Before she knocked on the door, she put the small bouquet of flowers she was carrying in under her stump so her good hand was free to straighten her lapels and adjust her hat to make it line up just right.

When everything was in good order, she nodded once, cleared her throat twice and knocked three times on the door, just to keep the God of Balance satisfied.

The door was whooshed open to reveal Emily Mason in a dress that promptly took Victoria Lynn's breath away. The nurse had shed her starched, oppressive outfit and had donned an electric blue Frontierwoman's dress that, although it was primly buttoned up to her neck, accentuated her hourglass shape perfectly.

"Goodness gracious me, Mrs. Mason... I mean, Emily," Victoria Lynn said, experiencing problems taking her eyes off the nurse's surprisingly scrumptious figure. Reluctantly, she forced herself to look away from the delights and lock eyes with her hostess. "I must say you are a sight for sore eyes. My MY, you look fine! And look at your hair!"

The nurse blushed quite badly but found time to reach up and bob her brand new, graying corkscrew curls. "Thank you, Vic. It's nice that someone notices... I thought you might appreciate it. I needed a change, so..."

"May I come in?" Victoria Lynn said with a laugh - then she realized she had forgotten all about the flowers she was holding. "Oh! And here's a little somethin' for my charmin' hostess."

"Thank you very much. And please, do come in," Emily said and stepped aside, already sniffing the flowers.

Smiling, Victoria Lynn went into the small house and closed the door behind them. In order to carry the flowers, she had decided to forego on the cane, but she was regretting it as a throbbing pain was shooting up from her stiff knee.

After massaging it briefly while Emily tended to the flowers, she took off her jacket to reveal a white cotton shirt with a starched collar that she promptly stuck a few fingers inside to loosen up.

She looked around the small house and once again felt that it was exquisitely decorated, with plenty of quality furniture and fewer of the little knick-knacks and trinkets that she had seen in Jane and Mathilda's apartment.

The religious shrine on a table by the far wall caught her eye, and she hobbled over to it, thinking that she ought to show some respect as a guest of the house. The shrine was simple, consisting of a four-inch crucifix on the wall above the table, a Bible, two tallow candles, an icon of Jesus, and a black frame

displaying a picture of a stern-looking man with an impressive handlebar mustache - the items were all resting on a white, tightly-woven lace kerchief.

"That's my Clarence," Emily said quietly, peeking over Victoria Lynn's shoulder.

Nodding, the former Deputy secretly enjoyed the close presence of the nurse, but didn't let it show. "I guessed as much."

"He was such a beautiful man, inside and out. In seventeen years, he never raised his hand in anger against me. He never even raised his voice. I miss him, I must admit."

"I understand, Emily," Victoria Lynn said and patted Emily's hand.

"He was the second husband I carried to the grave. When I was sixteen, my father gave me away to a drunkard... a rich drunkard whose wealth kept my father in business for several years. That marriage lasted for six awful years until my husband inevitably died of alcohol abuse. I was alone for four years after that until I met Clarence. He took a great risk marrying a twenty-six year old widow. I wasn't exactly a desirable commodity then."

Victoria Lynn grunted and looked carefully at Emily's profile. "In all honesty, looking at you now, I find that very hard to believe."

Emily blushed furiously and pulled back from the former Deputy. "Thank you... but it's true. My first husband's reputation stuck to me, too. The times were different back then in the late fifties. The people my first husband had treated poorly all wanted to get their revenge on me, so I had to move West. Then came the dreadful war."

"Mmmm," Victoria Lynn said, giving the photo another look.

Emily discreetly wiped her suddenly misty eyes and moved over to the stove. A minute later, she said: "The first course is ready, Vic. Please have a seat."

"Much obliged, Emily," Victoria Lynn said and hobbled over to the dining table where she had enjoyed the coffee on her first visit.

After Emily had poured a thick chicken broth into two bowls and put two slices of bread on the table, she sat down and folded her hands on the tabletop. "Vic, I don't know if you say Grace, but I do."

"To be truthful, I don't, but I've learned a lot since I, uh, uh... dismissed you so rudely back at the hospital," Victoria Lynn said and put her clenched fist on the table, the closest she could get to folding her hands.

Emily smiled briefly, but soon closed her eyes and concentrated on saying grace. "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, let this food of ours be blessed. Amen."

After the official business was over, the two women smiled broadly at each other and picked up their spoons.

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After supper, Emily helped Victoria Lynn over to the ruby red chaise longue and sat down next to her. "Do you need a pillow for your back, Vic?" she said, sitting with her knees together, her legs to the side and her hands in her lap like the proper lady she was.

"No thanks, I'm just fine. Man, I need to drill a new buttonhole in my pants... I haven't eaten that well for weeks... naw, better make that months!"

"Thank you," Emily said as a blush tinted her cheeks. "I haven't cooked for two since Clarence died. I'm glad to hear that you think I'm still capable of doing it."

Victoria Lynn briefly scrunched up her face, wondering if Emily understood the innuendo of her words. *'Of course not, sheesh... now you're seeing ghosts in broad daylight!'* she thought, mentally giving herself a thump over the head for even thinking such nonsense. "Well, I must admit it was just perfect, Emily."

"Would you like a cigarette or a cigar to help you digest supper? I have quite a few left from Clarence. I don't smoke so I don't know if they're still smokeable."

"Oh, we better not," Victoria Lynn said with a chuckle. "I don't smoke either, Emily. But thank you for the offer."

"You're welcome."

A contented silence spread over the two women who were both - secretly - checking out the other. After a little while, Emily turned towards Victoria Lynn and smiled very shyly, a gesture the former Deputy found to be boundlessly cute. "Did you want to say something, Emily?"

Emily looked straight ahead and licked her lips. After another few seconds had gone by, she nodded and let out a little sigh.

"Mmmm?" Victoria Lynn said, gently leaning into her hostess' body.

"I have a gift for you," Emily said and suddenly stood up from the chaise longue. In two brief steps, she was at the shrine where she put her hand on the Bible. Her face betrayed the storm of emotions brewing inside her, but she eventually took the Bible and held it to her bosom. "I gave this to Clarence when he asked for my hand. I'd like you to have it," she said and held out the Bible.

"Holy cra- uh, I mean... goodness me, I can't accept that, Emily," Victoria Lynn said and shuffled into the center of the chaise longue to put her fingers on Emily's hand that held the Bible.

"Please, Vic... I want you to have it. It took me a while to discover I had fallen for Clarence... it took me but a single morning to discover I had fallen for you."

"You wh- what?" Victoria Lynn croaked hoarsely, jerking back from Emily. The words tore through her mind, ping-ponging back and forth between the walls of her skull. When they finally seemed to settle down, they took off again like an unbroken, bucking bronco. "Talk about a bolt from the blue, Emily... I... I don't know what to say," she croaked, shaking her head slowly.

"I have been..." Emily started to say, but her voice broke and she had to clear her throat so she could start over. "I have been living a lie for thirty years... thirty years where I haven't dared to voice my true desires. Thirty years where I needed to play the good wife and physically please the men I was married to... though after a few years, Clarence understood my plight, bless his soul, and sought companionship elsewhere. But I could not. The one time I tried, everything was so hideous and wrong it could not have been made right even by the touch of an angel."

"Oh, Emily..."

"That was why I was so surprised to hear there were other women like me in Princetown. I just didn't think there were. And I was even more surprised to hear that... that one of them happened to be in my home. You. It says in the Holy Scriptures that carnal desire should only occur between a husband and a wife-

"Screw the Holy Scriptures," Victoria Lynn growled under her breath.

"-but I say, if two women... or two men for that matter... share a love so strong they want to extend it to encompass physical love, how can it be wrong...? Isn't that what love is all about?" Emily said and wrung her hands. The carefully constructed facade she had kept in place for decades crumbled and fell, and she started to cry though she tried to hide it by covering her face with her hands.

"Wrong? It ain't wrong, Emily. The only wrong is not pursuin' your heart. You... you-" Victoria Lynn said and struggled to get up from the low chaise longue. "Oh, dammit, I can't get up," she growled and thumped her fist into the ruby red fabric.

Emily chuckled through a sob and put down the precious Bible before she took Victoria Lynn's hand and pulled her erect. The two women briefly looked at each other at arm's length, but were soon holding each other in a tender embrace that was meant to soothe Emily's fears rather than add to her confusion and discomfort.

"Thank you for confidin' in me," Victoria Lynn whispered. "I know how difficult that was for you. I promise I'll take it to the grave, unless you want more people to know."

"I d- don't know... not at first. I'm worried that I may not be able to keep my job at the hospital if... if they find out about me."

"That's a risk, I must admit," Victoria Lynn said, sighing into Emily's graying corkscrew curls. "Even though there are at least five of us in Princetown, some still think of us as an abomination to the old, bearded fella in the sky."

"Five?" Emily said through a sob.

"You and me, my dear old friend Mathilda and her new honey-bunny Blackie Durham. The fifth is Karla Stuart who's a ranchhand out at Circle Y. There are one or two more in town that I suspect share our preferences. I'll never force them into admittin' it, of course."

Emily nodded silently, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Look at me, weeping like a child over something I've known for years. B- but, Vic, I feel like I've only just seen the light."

"Aw hell... I was only happy to help, Emily," Victoria Lynn said with a chuckle.

"Vic... will you lie with me tonight?"

Victoria Lynn drew such a sharp intake of breath that a large glob of saliva went down the wrong pipe. Hacking, coughing and spluttering, she moved away from Emily and bent over to get everything back out. Putting her hand on her knee, she coughed so hard she nearly turned purple.

"Oh dear, I should have found another way to say that," Emily said, thumping her fist down onto Victoria Lynn's back.

"Uh... I've never" - *cough, cough* - "been offered it" - *cough, cough* - "quite like that before..." - *cough, cough* - "God... Emily, I..." - *cough, cough* - "I don't know what to say... again."

"Well, you don't need to-"

"Oh Emily, I'm not a object of desire now," Victoria Lynn said in a voice that was tinged with bitterness. "I am but half a woman... a cripple without an arm... with a bum leg and a-"

"Strong heart and beautiful eyes," Emily said while helping Victoria Lynn upright yet again. A deep blush spread from her cheeks until it enveloped her entire face and neck - even out to the tips of her ears.

Looking dazed, Victoria Lynn cleared her throat several times to get the last frogs out of her throat. "Thank you, but... it's because I'm watercombed, ain't it? I can't explain it otherwise."

The joke broke the tension and made Emily bury her face in the nook of Victoria Lynn's shoulder and snicker like a little girl. "Oh, I can't keep any secrets from you, Vic. Yes, it was the watercombing."

"Mmmm, thought as much."

Unnoticed by either woman, they slowly gravitated towards the bedroom door, and before they knew it, they were standing next to the bed with their hands wrapped around the other's waist.

"Oh, look where we are," Emily breathed.

Victoria Lynn licked her lips and looked around the bedroom where she had already spent one night after her drunken tour of the town. "Emily, if I may offer a suggestion... I think we should take this one step at a time. I would hate for you to find out halfway through that you dislike what we're doin'."

Emily let out a long sigh, but nodded affirmatively at Victoria Lynn's words. "Maybe you're right. What do you suggest?"

"That we undress and lie together. That we simply hold each other for a while. If you enjoy it, we can go on. If you feel uncomfortable, we can try something else," Victoria Lynn whispered, running her fingers up and down Emily's flushed neck.

"I'd like that very much... there is one thing I'd like even more, though. And that is to kiss you... right now. Will you let me kiss you, Victoria Lynn?" Emily said in a tiny voice.

The former Deputy grinned and nodded at the shy request. "I'll do one better... I'll kiss you first," she said, moving in so deep that her nose was gently caressing the slightly taller woman's cheek. Little by little, she moved her lips towards Emily's mouth, leaving a line of pecks and nibbles in her wake.

When their mouths finally came into contact, Victoria Lynn started by brushing her lips against Emily's to get them accustomed to the new sensations, but she was soon back for more, offering her new, dear friend a proper kiss that melted their soft lips together in a sweet embrace.

Once they separated, Victoria Lynn reckoned she had done a pretty good job of it, but she was shocked to see tears forming in Emily's pale blue eyes.

The tears soon streamed down her face, and suddenly, Emily broke down in a howling cry. Burying her face in her hands, the crying woman sat down on the bed and rocked back and forth.

"What in the world...? I know for a fact I ain't that bad a kisser," Victoria Lynn said, grimacing at the sight of Emily's shoulders shaking with her tears.

"No... it's not that," Emily said between sobs. "That kiss... that kiss was everything I had hoped it would be..."

"Oh. Ohhh... yeah, I do have that effect on women," Victoria Lynn said with a cocky grin.

The former Deputy knew the time was right, and she kicked off her boots and began to unbutton her shirt. She paused briefly to look at the empty sleeve, but knew in her heart they'd be all right.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

An hour later, distant gunshots interrupted Victoria Lynn's and Emily's exploration of each other. At first, the shots were few and far between, but it didn't take long for others to join the party. The shots were mostly fired from six-guns and rifles, but on occasion, the characteristic hard, booming sound of scattergun blasts mixed with the others.

Then shouts, rebel yells and drunken singing reached the small house on Madden Lane and the two naked women who lay entangled under the covers.

Victoria Lynn sighed and moved away from caressing Emily's mature breasts with her tongue. As she leaned back to hear better, she accidentally ran her fingers down Emily's cleavage, a move that earned her a husky snicker.

When there seemed to be a lull in the ruckus, Victoria Lynn snuggled back down to the naked woman beside her. Moments later, a shot was fired right outside the house, quickly followed by a drunken, angry outburst and the sound of a bottle shattering against a wall.

"Goddamn, it's started," Victoria Lynn barked and spun away from Emily. "Naw, I'm sorry, baby... I gotta check that out," she said and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She quickly hopped into her bloomers, but when she grabbed her pants, she had a bit of trouble getting her bad leg down them.

"Dammit..." she growled, angry at wasting precious seconds with that kind of nonsense.

"I don't think that bottle was smashed against my house, Vic," Emily said, pulling the blanket up to her chin.

"Naw, it sounded like it was next door, but still," Victoria Lynn said, having finally managed to get her legs into the pants. Grunting, she got up from the bed and swiftly put on her shirt so she was less exposed.

They had left a kerosene lamp burning in the living room, so she hobbled across the floor to grab it. Thus equipped, she went over to the windows and pulled aside the lace curtains. "Two fellas... drunk as skunks... tryin' to fight... hell, all they're doin' is punch holes in the air, those morons. Payroll Friday, all right. Hell!"

Outside, one of the fighters got in a lucky shot and landed a right hook directly on his opponent's chin. The other man spun around on his axis and went down hard.

The sounds of shooting from Perry Street had increased and were now a steady wall of noise. Clouds of cordite smoke were billowing down Madden Lane, and Victoria Lynn could even smell it standing at the

window. Crinkling her nose at the stench, she put down the kerosene lamp on the table and padded back into the bedroom.

"Baby, I'm sorry..." she said and put her hand on her hip. She took a few deep breaths while rationalizing why she should venture out into the madness instead of staying under the blanket with a beautiful, sexy woman who was most eager to learn, but discovered that for once, her sense of justice was winning over her libido. "Baby, I'm sorry, but I gotta go. People may need me. I can't let this go on without... without at least tryin' to do somethin'."

"But I thought you weren't a Deputy anymore...?" Emily said, pulling the cover even further up.

"I ain't. But a star is just a piece of tin. It's what's in the heart that's really important. Naw, I gotta go," Victoria Lynn said and reached for her boots.

"Oh God, please be safe, Vic!" Emily said strongly and jerked upright in bed. The sheet covering her naked, mature breasts fell down, but she didn't do anything to hide herself. "If anything were to happen to you now, I'd lose my mind... I know I would!"

When Victoria Lynn didn't reply, Emily swung her legs over the side of the bed, got up and pulled her new, dear friend into a crushing hug.

Victoria Lynn's ears were burning at the expanses of wonderfully bare, mature flesh that was wrapped around her, and she cursed the fact that they had only found each other on payroll Friday. "I'll be careful, Emily. Ya have to promise me the same. Don't open the door for anyone but me... stay away from the windows. Ya better turn off the kerosene lamp as well... if somebody sees a light, he might get curious."

"I promise.... Vic, please take the Bible with you... it'll protect you from evil."

"Aw, Emily..."

"Please!" Emily said and almost smothered Victoria Lynn with a bruising kiss.

Once they separated, Victoria Lynn wiped her brow with the back of her hand - and broke out in a wide grin. "Well, if you put it like that..."

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Four minutes later, the former Deputy hobbled along Madden Lane, intent on going through the alleyway between the Golden Wings and the all-day bakery to get to Perry Street. The air was thick with shouting, sounds of breaking glass and plenty of gunfire, and she was hunched over so she'd be an even smaller target in case someone mistook her for a prize turkey.

She came to a sudden halt when she realized that a man carrying a rifle on his back was busy with one of the ladies of the night against the wall of the Golden Wings Saloon. Not wanting to actively seek out problems so soon, Victoria Lynn turned around and hobbled back down the alleyway and onto Madden Lane.

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A few minutes later, she hobbled along the building housing the Princetown Bugle on Main Street. As she turned the corner onto Perry Street, she had to lean against the wooden wall to catch her breath and to massage her stiff knee.

When she noticed she was leaning against a billboard frame with an advertisement for Saturday's issue, she couldn't help but chuckle out loud at the headline that screamed "Payroll Friday! Will anything remain standing? Read all about it if we're still here!" in all-caps and extra-bold.

Looking up, she caught a glimpse of Alfred Beardsley, the printer who had helped her with the flyers she had distributed the same afternoon. The man was standing just inside the storefront window with a scattergun in his hands, ready to protect the Bugle with force if anyone was drunk enough to attack it. She quickly tipped her Stetson to Mr. Beardsley before hobbling along Perry Street.

As expected, the scene was chaotic. Several cowboys were already lying face-down on the street; some were sleeping, some were bleeding, and some were plain old dead.

Clouds of gunsmoke hung heavily over the street, and the random gunfire made it into a gruesome obstacle course for those who were foolish enough to try to get from A to B - not that any regular folks had ventured out into the hellish night.

Victoria Lynn growled out loud as she hunched over and hobbled along the sidewalk. Outside all three saloons, it was worse than pandemonium, and worse than the former Deputy could remember seeing it in all her years working for the law in Princetown.

A loud, crunching crash quickly followed by a gruff cheer behind her made her turn around and look back down the street. A group of men had smashed the window in Sofus Mikkelsen's gunshop and were stealing some of the items he had on display. Running around aimlessly, the drunken men were soon playfighting with several old Sharps rifles and even a few vintage muskets.

"Oh, damnation," Victoria Lynn growled and began to hobble down to the shop. Before she could get there, Sofus ran out onto the street with a six-gun in his hand to threaten the men, but they were too many for him and effortlessly clobbered him from behind.

Victoria Lynn was close enough to see that the man who had coldcocked the owner of the gunshop was Enrico Gomez, one of the new Deputies. The man with the heavy mustache shouted something to his fellow rowdies that she couldn't hear, but there was no mistaking the fact that he stuck several revolvers down the waist of his pants before taking off up Perry Street.

"Those miserable sons of bitches," Victoria Lynn growled, clenching her fist.

Sighing deeply, she waited for the cowboys to disperse before hobbling across the street to check up on Sofus Mikkelsen. He was out cold and he had a nasty cut on the back of his head, but he was still breathing.

As the drunken shouting and the random gunfire increased at the other end of the street, Victoria Lynn drew a deep breath and looked at the wide open gunshop where weapons and ammo of all kinds and makes were readily available. "I'm a cripple without a star... but what the men have ruined, the women gotta rebuild. It's time to take back Princetown," she said out loud and hobbled into the shop.

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The bandits hadn't bothered to go into Sofus' gunshop after smashing the storefront window so the store itself was in perfect order.

Victoria Lynn knew Sofus was a staunch traditionalist, so she wasn't surprised at finding a drawing of President Hayes on the wall next to another man she didn't recognize.

Dozens of handguns of all types were hanging on the wall behind the counter, sorted after popularity, which meant the Smith & Wessons seven-and-a-half inch Cavalry revolvers were first, followed by the Colt .45s, the Remingtons and finally the Merwin-Hulberts.

Victoria Lynn didn't have time to go shopping, so she hobbled behind the counter and took a bog-standard revolver of the type she had always used, a four-and-three-quarter inch Colt Single Action Army, better known as the Peacemaker. Cocking it open, she quickly sniffed it to find out if it had been cleaned and oiled recently, and checked how easily the hammer and the drum moved. Once she had established that it was a solid revolver, she grunted and hobbled back around the counter to get the ammo that she knew Sofus kept in the backroom.

A brief while later, she came back out with three cardboard boxes of .45 cartridges weighing down her pockets quite considerably, and she had problems keeping her balance as her jacket flapped back and forth for each step she took.

Hobbling back behind the counter, she put down the revolver and took a pencil that was lying next to a notepad - Sofus had apparently used it to keep score of something she couldn't read. "Borrowed a Colt and some ammo. Victoria Lynn Cooper," she mumbled as she scribbled on the notepad.

"Yeah, that'll hafta do," she said and took one of the boxes of ammo. She quickly cocked open the Colt and held it under her stump while she loaded it with six cartridges.

Once it was full, she closed it with a metallic click and cocked the hammer in the safety setting. Grunting, she hobbled through the store and peeked out onto the street.

Sofus Mikkelsen was still lying where he had fallen, but he had moved his arms so he couldn't be all bad, Victoria Lynn thought.

There was plenty of mayhem and hubbub to choose from on Perry Street, but the sight of two cowboys running across the street chasing a half-nude soiled dove who didn't look like she appreciated the attention made Victoria Lynn growl out loud and leave the gunshop.

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By the time she made it up to where she had seen the three people - the alleyway between the Town Hall and the undertaker's - they were long gone, and she clenched her teeth and looked back out onto the street.

"Tarnation! Damn this stiff knee to hell," she growled, longingly thinking back to the old days where she had been able to run like the wind up and down Princetown's uneven streets for hours on end.

A group of cowboys from the Circle Y ranch rode past, whooping and firing into the air. When they saw her, they all saluted her with resounding rebel yells and by tipping their Stetsons.

Victoria Lynn smiled and put her gun hand to the brim of her hat. "Howdy, fellas. Don't be drinkin' too much now, ya hear?"

"Aw, that's prolly a bit too late, Deperty!" one of the men slurred, grinning so broadly that Victoria Lynn could see that there were more gaps than teeth in his mouth - then they were gone, headed towards Main Street.

"Well, they'll be goin' down to the Old No.4 for sure," Victoria Lynn said and hobbled further up Perry Street to get to Sullivan Street.

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As she came past the Velvet Garter, she could see that the painted ladies who were standing on the balcony overlooking Sullivan Street weren't exactly starved for choice - down on the street were what appeared to be half a regiment of drunken admirers, all waving their hats and blowing kisses at the women.

Sullivan Street and Ballentine's Trail were surprisingly quiet, so Victoria Lynn turned around and hobbled back down toward the saloons.

At the sidewalk in front of Roscoe's Watering Hole, a group of cowboys had collapsed in each other's arms, and only the toughest of the bunch was still erect, drinking from a bottle of whisky and singing a bawdy song at the top of his lungs.

Just as Victoria Lynn walked past, he raised his arm to take another swig but collapsed onto his mates before the liquor could reach his lips. As the bottle rolled away from his limp fingers, the caramel-colored whisky ran out and seeped down between the floorboards in the sidewalk.

A woman squealing giddily behind her made her turn back around and stare down the alleyway between the bank and the undertaker's. Even though there were two torches at the mouth of the alleyway, they were too dim to penetrate the darkness, but she thought she was able to see someone heading towards her, carrying something over the shoulder that could only be a woman.

"Halt, stranger, and let 'er go!" Victoria Lynn barked, cocking the hammer on her borrowed Colt to the firing position and aiming it down the alley.

"And there ya go again wi'that 'Halt, stranger!' business," a very familiar velvety female voice said. "D'ya get paid a nickel ev'ry time ya say it or what, Deperty?"

Grinning, Jane Durham came out of the mouth of the alley with a half-nude, all-giggling woman perched in a fireman's carry across her broad shoulders.

"Oh... hi, Jane. Ya been out bird huntin'?" Victoria Lynn said and lowered the hammer.

"Yep. I saw a couple a' no-good bums chasin' this here nice lady an' I thought to mahself, Blackie, this ain't never gonn' end good. For them. And it did'n," she said and slapped the dove's rear end, earning herself another wild squeal and a little wiggle.

"Did ya kill 'em?"

"Naw. Punched their lights out. What's up over here?" Jane said, pointing at the group of slumbering men.

"Nothin' much," Victoria Lynn said, squinting up and down Perry Street. To their right, the festivities at the foot of the Velvet Garter had turned nasty with a couple of the admirers slugging it out with a third man who was losing quite badly to their combined strength. "Well, except that Enrico Gomez clobbered Sofus Mikkelsen and stole several guns from his store. But other than that we're just honky-dory here in Princetown."

"Gomez? Ya sure?"

"Yep. Saw him clear as day. Look, why dontcha dump that bird at the Garter and come back out and help me sweep the town, Jane? I mean, you already got the star an' everythin'."

Jane looked at the former Deputy and furrowed her brow. After grinding her jaw for a few seconds, she nodded and let out a short sigh. "Yeah. All right. Just gimme a couple a' minutes to get ev'rythin' sorted. Yeah?"

"Works for me, Jane. I'll be at the Bull Rider," Victoria Lynn said and briefly touched the outlaw's arm.

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At the Bull Rider Saloon, hardly a single chair was in one piece; the poker tables and the bar counter were in a similar poor shape. The drunken rowdies had even demolished the wooden staircase that went up to the dancer's rooms on the gallery above the saloon, leaving a dancing girl stranded up there with no way to get down. The only thing that had been left untouched was the upright piano, but the way the untalented player was pounding the keys, it might as well have been flattened.

"Holy crap," Victoria Lynn mumbled, standing in the doorway and peeking over the swinging doors.

A handful of the bruisers were wrestling on the floor among the remains of the furniture, and just as Victoria Lynn was watching, one of them took a large piece of a table and sent it sailing through the air - the amputated tabletop was on a direct collision course with the large mirror behind the bar counter, and predictably, the already battered mirror exploded into a dozen shards of glass that flew everywhere.

"Jesus. I'm glad I ain't gonna clean that mess up," Victoria Lynn mumbled, backing away from the carnage.

Just then, a drunken cowboy who had snuck up on her mistook her for a lady of the night and pinched her rear end quite rudely. She jumped a foot in the air and let out a yelp, but it only seemed to make the cowboy's smile broader.

"Hey there, li'l lady... wanna dance?" he slurred, stretching out his arms and puckering up his lips.

Victoria Lynn could see that the man was just an average Joe, a cowpuncher with a pocketful of wages and a gutful of whisky, and as such not one of the men she wanted to stop, but the foul smell that emanated from him and his clothes was enough to make her stomach churn. "Not right now, fella..." she said and deftly evaded his clumsy arms.

"Awwwww!" the cowboy said and tried to turn around, but a few seconds later, his inebriation had already made him forget what he was doing. Shaking his head in confusion, he staggered into the Bull Rider instead.

Victoria Lynn hobbled out into the middle of Perry Street and looked around for Quint Connors' fake Deputies. "Hell, that's just typical... in the daytime, they're everywhere, but now that I'm ready for 'em, they ain't nowhere in sight!"

The words had barely left her mouth when she saw three of the star-adorned goons run into the Sheriff's Office. "Oh! Gotcha, ya sons o' bitches," she growled and began to hobble down towards it.

Before Victoria Lynn could make it all the way there, one of the men came back out and spotted her at once. He shouted something to his fellow Deputies that she was unable to hear through the racket, but the burning hot lead that suddenly zinged past her ears from his Colt needed no interpretation.

"Goddamn!" she barked and fired off two quick shots at the man standing in front of the brick building housing the Sheriff's Office. The first shot ricocheted off the metal bars in the window, and the second dug itself into the door right next to the head of the second Deputy to come out.

When a third man appeared and began to shoot at her, she felt a little too exposed and dropped down onto the street. Groaning from the pain that flared up from her bad knee, she aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger at the last of the three men - and scored a direct hit. "Nailed that critter!" she shouted triumphantly, but she was unable to celebrate for long as the first Deputy fanned his revolver which sent a barrage of lead in her direction.

Her situation was complicated by a cluster of whooping riders suddenly barreling down Perry Street headed directly for where she was lying. She knew she wouldn't be able to get up in time, and shrieked in terror at the sight of the many hooves that came straight for her.

At the very last moment, the cowboys noticed the obstacle in the street and steered away from it, shouting curses at the fool who had chosen the worst possible place to take a nap.

Shaking to her core, Victoria Lynn peeked out from under her hat at the horses that all managed to evade her. "Thank you, God... I guess Emily's Bible worked after all," she croaked. "Oh, man... I think I need a clean pair o' bloomers..."

Heavy, running steps behind her made her look over her shoulder, but it turned out to be Jane Durham back from the Velvet Garter. "Whaddahell ya lyin' there for, Vic?!" the outlaw cried, having drawn her Peacemaker.

"I'm in the middle of a Goddamn gunfight, outlaw!" Victoria Lynn shouted and pointed the gun at the Sheriff's Office. Just then, the first Deputy came back out and fired a potshot at the two women that went nowhere near them.

The gunslinger responded to the man's fire by fanning her own Peacemaker three times at the Sheriff's Office which made the goon seek cover in an almighty hurry. "That's Ira Grubb! Hey... ya hit?" Jane barked at Victoria Lynn.

"Naw, just takin' a breather... I need a hand!"

Jane quickly reached down, grabbed the former Deputy under her armpit and pulled her to her feet. "Ups-a-daisy," she said with a grin.

"Thanks. I got one of 'em before... which means there are five left of Connors' bandits," Victoria Lynn said and made a complete three-hundred and sixty degree sweep to make sure they weren't about to be jumped from behind.

"Six left," Jane corrected. "Do'n ferget 'bout me."

Victoria Lynn grunted but chose not to counter Jane's comment. "Anyway, we can- look out!" she suddenly barked and shoved Jane aside just as Ira Grubb came back out to send a lethal hailstorm at them.

The bullets were zinging past terrifyingly close to the two women, and Victoria Lynn was sure one of them had hit her, but when the immediate danger was over, she was still standing. "This bullshit's gotta stop!" she shouted and began to hobble ahead as fast as she could.

Soon, the two women were leaning against the wall of the Sheriff's Office. They could hear Ira Grubb barking commands to the other Deputy who was with him, but there didn't seem to be much enthusiasm on the second man's part.

*'Get yerself together, Smokey!'* Grubb said while rummaging around with something. *'It's only them two bitches out there firin' at us! Them other cowards here ain't got the balls to fight back!'*

*'The cripple kilt Merton with'er first shot, Ira... she shoots like the devil!'*

*'Buncha crap!'*

Jumping over the bandit Victoria Lynn had nailed before, Jane looked down and nodded her appraisal at the accuracy of the bullet that had struck him down. "Straight in the heart. Could'n ha' happened ta a nicer fella," she said and gave the dead Deputy a kick with her boot.

"Huh?" Victoria Lynn whispered from the other side of the door.

"That's Kevin Merton. He wus a mean sonovabitch... and a cheat. Always cheated in poker, he did. Lemme see..." Jane said as she fluttered his sleeve from which two cards promptly fell out. "Yep, a pair o' aces... an' an eight. Now ain't that poetic justice?"

"Typical," Victoria Lynn growled and shifted to the side to get herself more comfortable.

"Vic, the other fella Ira's got in there is Rafael Ortega... a kid, but mi'ty quick wi'the ol' brandishin' iron."

"Uh-huh?" Victoria Lynn took a deep breath and shouted: "Ira! Ortega! Throw out yer guns! We've gotcha covered... there ain't no-"

A salvo of lead aimed out of the door proved that Ira Grubb wasn't about to give up just yet. *'Ya can have mah gun when ya pry it from mah dead fingers, ya crippled bitch!'*

Victoria Lynn chuckled dryly and looked at Jane. "I think he means it."

"Oh, there ain't no doubt 'bout that," Jane said and fired two potshots into the office in rapid succession. Through a miracle, loud groans were heard from the inside, though they were soon drowned out by a return volley.

Behind Jane and Victoria Lynn, three cowboys from the Bar J ranch came riding down the street, whooping loudly and shooting into the air. The three men dismounted right outside the Sheriff's Office and left their horses unattended while they strode towards the Bull Rider, completely unaware of the stand-off that was taking place right next to them.

"That's why I hate payroll Friday!" Victoria Lynn growled and put the revolver under her stump while she reloaded the drum. "Nothin' but drunkards everywhere!"

"Weeeelll," Jane said and flashed Victoria Lynn a cheeky grin. "I seem ta recall a former Deperty who had one helluva brick in her hat just the other day... what was her name...? Oh yeah, was'n it Vic-"

"Ha ha, smartass. Concentrate on shootin' at them bastards inside. We're in the middle of a firefight here, ya know!"

"Yes, Ma'am," Jane said and fired two more shots into the darkness. This time, she didn't hit anything, but the salvo they got back from Ira Grubb was still as heated, and it created plenty of mayhem on the street as the three horses all got spooked and bolted, whinnying loudly as they tore down towards Main Street.

When Jane pulled back slightly to replenish her six-gun from her ammo belt, she kept a sharp lookout to all sides so she wouldn't get ambushed. She happened to glance across the street just as one of Quint Connors' Deputies was dragging a woman into the alleyway between the Princetown Bank and the Golden Wings Saloon. "Cripes, I'll bet my bottom dollar that was Wally Shaye," she said quietly to herself.

"Ya need to speak up! I can't hear a damn thing through all this racket!" Victoria Lynn said just as Ira Grubb fired another shot from the inside which struck the window she was hiding under. "God-DAMN, I hate his guts," she continued as she wiped shards of glass off her hat. Getting up, she stuck her gun in through the broken window and fired into the darkness without hitting anything.

"Wally Shaye just took a dove into the alleyway over yonder," Jane said louder, pointing across the street with the barrel of her Peacemaker.

"Who the hell's Wally Shaye?"

"I told ya 'bout him... he's the rotten bastard who kilt the whore down at the Velvet Garter. Looks like he's got 'nother bird to play with now!"

"Crap..." Victoria Lynn said and tried to look through the clouds of gunsmoke that hung heavily over Perry Street. When she couldn't even see past the middle of the road, she growled and fired again through the broken window just to get even. "Jane, go after him. I'm gonna take down Grubb and the other fella."

"Naw, it's too damn dangerous for ya," Jane said and shook her head vehemently.

"I'm the flippin' law around here, you ain't! I know what I'm doin'!"

"Did'n say ya did'n. Aw hell, y'all better be alive when I get back here, Vic! Mathilda's gonn' string me up by my tits if ya ain't!" Jane said got moved away from the door.

"Yeah, yeah. Git!" Victoria Lynn said and once more cocked open her revolver to reload it. Looking up, she could see the tall outlaw hustle across the street, running between two of the spooked horses that had returned to the place they had been dumped.

Closing her revolver with a metallic click, Victoria Lynn gulped and took several deep breaths. "I doubt anyone up there will listen to a crippled sinner like me," she said, looking towards the heavens, "but this seems like a good time to ask for some protection... I already got the Bible in my pocket. Thank you in advance."

With that, she moved towards the door and tried to listen. She could hear Grubb and the man Jane had called Ortega whisper to each other, but she couldn't make out any words. Shouting wildly in her best rebel yell, she dove in through the door and fired twice at the two dark shadows at the other side of the room.

Her landing was ungraceful - and painful - and she had only just made it up from the dusty floor when her Stetson was torn from her head, the victim of a slug from a .45 at nearly point blank range. "Holy crap!" she howled, thinking that if her head had been two inches further up, she would already have been standing in line for her set of angel wings.

Blindly firing her Colt twice at the dark figure ahead of her, she was mightily relieved to hear a throaty groan rapidly followed by a metallic clang from a dropped gun, and finally a rumbling bump that could only come from a human being falling onto the floor.

Looking to her right, she suddenly noticed a pair of boots lying in a pool of blood behind the desk. As she crawled along the floor, the boots began to wiggle around, but the blood made it clear the owner wasn't going anywhere.

Peeking around the corner with the Colt held high, Victoria Lynn locked eyes with one of Quint Connors' Deputies, a young, bare-faced Mexican that she presumed was Rafael Ortega. He had been hit low in the shoulder and was bleeding quite badly. His bronzed face was ashen and it looked like he could hardly keep his eyes open.

"Where's Grubb?" Victoria Lynn whispered hoarsely.

Ortega was in too much pain to speak and simply nodded towards his right.

Victoria Lynn knew that if she had only clipped Ira Grubb, the time she was wasting at the young man's side would enable her other opponent to regroup and possibly attack her, so she continued crawling around the desk on the dusty, blood-soaked floor.

She finally found herself face to face with a fellow who was most decidedly dead. She had hit Ira Grubb twice; once in the chest and once in the gut. His graying circle-beard was glistening with blood, giving his body a surreal look.

Victoria Lynn released the breath she had been holding and struggled to her feet. There was no point in looking for a pulse, so she simply reached down and ripped the Deputy Sheriff tin star off Grubb's blood-soaked chest.

The interior of the Sheriff's office had been turned into a pigsty by the new management. The Wanted posters that Orin Cutler had always kept in meticulous order on the wall behind the desk had all been torn down, no doubt to protect the mates of the new Deputies. There were empty bottles of whisky in every corner of the room, and the men had mistaken the table top and the dark green blotting pad for an ashtray as there were burn marks and cigarette butts everywhere.

The lower of the two desk drawers had been removed completely, and the top one was empty, apart from a torn cardboard box where the spare tin stars were kept. There was a kerosene lamp on the desktop that had miraculously survived the shootout, but the glass was cracked and Victoria Lynn didn't dare to ignite it in case the hot oil would spill over.

A groan and a bump from one of the cells beyond the office made her cock the hammer of the revolver and stare into the darkness. "Who ya got in there?" she whispered to Ortega, but he was in no condition to answer. "Hell... I better check it out."

Victoria Lynn hobbled back from the dead body of Ira Grubb, careful not to slip on the blood that had painted the floor dark red. Peeking into the corridor, she could hardly believe her eyes when she saw Tyree McFadden lying on a cot in the first cell, beaten and bloodied. "What... the... hell... Tyree?!"

While she regained her composure, she walked back out to Ortega. "You miserable bastards! Why'dya beat that young kid to a pulp? He ain't done shit to you! I have a mind to blow y'all to hell right this minute, but I ain't gonn' do that 'cos I ain't gonn' waste a bullet on varmint like you. I'm hereby puttin' ya under a citizen's arrest for crimes against the population of Princetown. Ya don't look like ya can walk too far, so I'm gonna go over to the hospital and say you're here. They'll deal with ya and Tyree."

Rafael 'Smokey' Ortega couldn't do much but cough, but he bared his lips in a grimace that Victoria Lynn interpreted as 'Damn.'

"Looks like ya got beat by a cripple, son," she said as she picked up Ortega's gun and threw it further into the office in case he had a change of heart. Pausing briefly, she reached down and tore the tin star off his shirt.

"All right. That's three down and three to go... plus Jane. Aw hell, that's gonna give me a headache before the night is over. Man!" she said, picking up her battered hat and slapping it against her chest.

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Victoria Lynn hobbled along the sidewalk past the grassy enclosure where a bonfire was burning merrily, built using a pile of saddle blankets and a ten-gallon Stetson.

A drunken cowboy was standing next to the bonfire, drinking from a bottle of rye and reciting some kind of love poem into the ether. On occasion, he spun around with his arms flailing in the air and spit out a mouthful of liquor onto the fire which flared up into the dark sky.

"Been there, done that... though it would be easier to buy her a buncha flowers, fella," Victoria Lynn said, chuckling at the sight.

When she reached the corner of the brick building housing the hospital, she leaned against the wall and massaged her stiff knee. Shaking her head in disgust at her frailty, she resumed hobbling along and went into the hospital.

"Hullo! Anybody in here?" she said loudly as she put the Colt into her pocket, feeling the Bible Emily had given her. Almost at once, crying and cursing in equal measure reached her ears from the operation room down the hall, and she set off at a slow pace to avoid stressing her bad leg. "Hullo?" she said again, knocking on the doorjamb.

The scene inside the operating room was quite chaotic: Doctor Cosgrove's white lab coat - and even parts of his white sideburns - were covered in blood as he was tending to a man who had lost two fingers on his left hand, and Lucille Monahan was trying to stitch a cowpoke's eyebrow, but the man was so intoxicated he simply couldn't hold his head still.

Working at a table at the other side of the room, Emily Mason had donned her white-and-pale gray uniform and her starched, pale gray cap, though neither had retained their original color - instead, they had turned red, tainted by the blood that seeped out of an unfortunate man who was lying bare-chested on the bunk.

Hearing somebody knock, Emily looked up with a harried expression on her face. The stressful look turned to one of pure, unadulterated shock when she saw Victoria Lynn standing in the doorway with a right sleeve that was completely soaked in blood and sporting a frayed bullet hole. "Vic! Oh, God!" she howled, unceremoniously dropping the metal tools down onto the chest of the man she was working on.

"Uh... what?" Victoria Lynn said, looking over her shoulder to see if there was anything going on behind her that she should know about. She didn't even have time to look back ahead before Emily had jumped at her and had pulled her into a crushing hug.

"You've been shot!" Emily said in a trembling voice, staring at the blood and the frayed hole in the right sleeve.

Flabbergasted at that piece of fairly surprising news, Victoria Lynn looked down at her ruined sleeve. "I have? What in the world...? Where the hell does that come from...?"

Emily tried at once to take the jacket off, but it was so heavy from the Colt, the Bible and the boxes of ammo that she couldn't get it over Victoria Lynn's shoulders. "We'll have to cut it off you!" she said and hurried back to the bunk to take a pair of long scissors.

"No, no, no, no, Emily! This' the only jacket I got! This ain't my blood... my arm don't go that far down no more, look," Victoria Lynn said and wiggled her stump - the bullet hole was a good five inches below the lower edge of her arm. "I dunno where the hell the blood's from, but... oh yeah, I do," she continued, thinking about when she had crawled past Rafael Ortega.

"But...!"

"Hang on, perdy..." Victoria Lynn said and put her good hand in the air at the scissor-wielding nurse. "I only came to tell ya that there are two people in the Sheriff's Office who need your help. Tyree McFadden has been badly beaten, he's in the cells. And one of the new Deputies has been shot in the shoulder or the chest... he's on the floor, bleedin'."

Doctor Cosgrove looked up from his bloody task and nodded at Victoria Lynn. "Thank you for the news, Miss Cooper. It's nice to see you up and about."

"Thanks, Doc," Victoria Lynn said with a grin.

"But..." Emily said again, wringing her hands.

"I'm just fine, Emily. Dontcha worry 'bout me. I gotta get back out there. I'll come here once the bad guys have been dealt with. Okay?"

"Well... all right."

"And hey, the Bible has already helped me," Victoria Lynn said and shot Emily a quick wink.

Doctor Cosgrove coughed politely to let Emily know that she already had a patient who was in dire need of her attention, and the nurse nodded jerkily and hurried back to the man on the bunk.

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Stepping back out onto the street, Victoria Lynn took the Colt from her pocket and cocked it open to see if she needed to reload - she didn't.

The conditions on the west end of Perry Street hadn't improved much since she had been there last, but at least Sofus Mikkelsen had been moved from his precarious position outside the burgled gunshop.

Two men were fighting in the middle of Main Street outside the Birrell Hotel, but what initially seemed to be a regular fistfight was prematurely ended when the man on the losing side drew a hunting knife and buried it into the gut of his opponent. A split second later, the knifed man had his six-gun in his hand and delivered swift, burning hot justice, shooting the other fellow in the throat at point blank range - then they both fell down and stopped moving.

"Damnation, this town is goin' to hell in a reed basket... there's gonna be plenty o' free cots at the ranches tomorrow, that's a fact," she mumbled as she turned around and hobbled down towards the two fallen men.

A pot-bellied man wielding a scattergun suddenly stepped out onto Main Street and began to yell commands at someone else further up the street. When his words weren't obeyed, he raised the scattergun

and emptied a barrel in the air - the tactics worked as the others dispersed faster than Victoria Lynn could spell her middle name.

"What the hell... I do declare I know that round figure," she said out loud, hobbling down the street to assist the scattergun-wielding man. "Good evenin', Sheriff Cutler!" she said loudly once she was close enough, quickly stuffing her gun into her pocket so she could wave her hat in the air.

"Good evenin', Deputy Cooper," Orin Cutler said with a big grin. "I was wonderin' when you'd show up."

"When \*I'd\* show up? I been here the whole dang evenin', Sheriff!"

Orin chuckled and cracked open the scattergun to reload it. "I was sittin' at home and listenin' to the gunfire and the shoutin'. Then I re-read the flyer you had shoved under my door earlier, and I was thinkin', Orin... this is bullshit. Ya need to be out there, fightin' those crooks... it's time to reclaim Princetown."

"My sentiments exactly, Sheriff," Victoria Lynn said and leaned her head back to let out a resounding laugh, though she quickly sobered when she thought of the situation at the Sheriff's office. "Orin, I think we've reclaimed our office at least. Jane Durham and I killed three of Quint's Deputies up there."

"Blackie? I didn't think that she of all people would be a turncoat!"

"Mmmm-yeah, uh... it's complicated, Sheriff," Victoria Lynn said, thinking that she better not try to explain their special relationship. "In any case, she's one of the good 'uns now. But Orin, Tyree has been badly beaten. He's in one of the cells."

"Tarnation!"

"I've told the nurses at the hospital, but they're mighty busy right now... can you take care of him? I've got some unfinished business with a couple o' goons..."

"Sure... sure thing, Victoria Lynn," Orin Cutler said and glanced at some odd people loitering about in the shadows near the back door to the office of the Milligan Stage Company. "I'll deal with that. Dontcha worry about me."

"All right," Victoria Lynn said and quickly thumped Cutler's shoulder before hobbling back up Perry Street.

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## **CHAPTER 6**

As the hands of the clock turned past midnight, most of the regular cowpunchers - read the boozers and the brawlers - had had enough and were dragging themselves out of town and home to their ranches; in the cases of a few unfortunate souls, dragging was to be taken quite literally.

Victoria Lynn was sitting on a wooden chair from Roscoe's Watering Hole that someone had thrown into the street, panting from the exertion and rubbing her stiff knee that was giving her quite a lot of grief from all the walking she had done on the night.

Adrenaline and alertness mixed with tiredness and throbbing pain to create a strange cocktail that coursed through her veins; she was dead-tired, but she was eager to get back up and search for Jane Durham and the

man they had spotted when they had been fighting Grubb and the others at the Sheriff's Office. Even though she knew the tall outlaw was a tough dame, 'tough' wasn't enough to stop a bullet - and it had been quite a while since they had split up.

Getting up, she groaned through clenched teeth and began to hobble away from Perry Street and over towards the mouth of the alleyway between the general store and Roscoe's saloon.

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Once she was on Madden Lane, she paused briefly and looked around, straining her hearing to listen for any gunfire that sounded more serious than the scattered rounds sent into the air by the last remaining celebrating cowboys.

Madden Lane was quiet, though here and there, lights were still on in a few of the houses; most likely regular folks who had stayed up to protect their homes. With a grunt, Victoria Lynn hobbled down towards the end of the lane where Emily lived.

When she went past the alleyway between the Bull Rider and the Princetown Bank, her sixth sense made her stop and look into the darkness. Once her eyes had grown accustomed to the conditions, she could make out two people on the ground - one was wearing the same kind of low-crowned hat Jane Durham always wore.

"Goddamn!" Victoria Lynn growled and hobbled down the alleyway the fastest she could. Her fears were soon confirmed - it was Jane Durham, sitting up against the wooden wall of the Bull Rider with a bleeding gunshot wound high on her right thigh.

Hearing crunching footsteps approaching, the outlaw drew her Peacemaker and pointed it up the alleyway, but lowered the gun when Victoria Lynn ducked out of the deepest shadows.

"Damnation, Jane! Ya shoulda ducked! Is that...?" Victoria Lynn said, pointing her own revolver at the other figure who was lying face-down in a pool of blood from a ragged hole at the back of the head.

"Yep," Jane croaked. "That's Wally Shaye. He wanted ta have some fun with that dove like I predicted... nailed him first, tho. Sonovabitch had a Derringer in his vest pocket that I did'n know about... popped me in mah leg... then I blew his brains out."

"Let me see," Victoria Lynn said and got down on her knees, ignoring the pain that shot up from her bad leg.

Jane nodded and pushed her hat back from her eyes. She tried to raise her leg, but her face was quickly twisted into a mask of pain. "It hurts like a mother- ouch! Mind mah leg will ya!"

Victoria Lynn looked up and flashed her pearly whites at the outlaw. "Sorry. Ya got something to wrap around it?"

"Naw."

"Me neither, and I ain't ruinin' my good shirt on you, outlaw," Victoria Lynn said and winked several times to take the sting out of the words. "Okay... this is one of them good-news, bad-news kinda deals. The good news is that even though you've lost some blood, ya ain't badly hurt..."

"And...?"

"And the bad news is that y'all gonna hurt plenty once ya get back to your sweet little Mathilda," Victoria Lynn said with a cheeky grin plastered on her face.

"Oh... maybe it wus better if I jus' croaked here instead..." Jane said and pulled her hat back down to cover her eyes.

"Naw. The best cure in the whole wide world is a kiss from a sweet gal. She'll come around once she gets over the first eruption. C'mon, let's get ya up. We still got a couple o' bandits to deliver to the great almighty," Victoria Lynn said and clambered to her feet before putting her hand under Jane's arm.

Once Jane was on her feet and leaning against the wall of the Bull Rider, she reloaded her Peacemaker and stuck it down its holster. "Vic... I got a couple-a things I wanna say to ya before we move on, and they both got somethin' ta do with Mathilda... I did'n mean ta steal her from ya. We just sorta bonded on the stagecoach and it took off from there."

Grinning, Victoria Lynn reached out and thumped the outlaw's shoulder. "Ah... water under the bridge, Jane. I'll admit, I was jealous like a jackrabbit in heat earlier, but... well, let's just say I got no reason to be jealous now."

"How's that?"

"Ya remember the supper date tonight I told ya about with the nurse?"

"Yeah?"

"It went really well if I do say so myself," Victoria Lynn said with a crooked grin gracing her features.

Returning the grin with one of her own, Jane thumped Victoria Lynn's shoulder and hobbled away from the wall. "Way ta go, killer. So did ya...?"

"Nuh-uh, ain't tellin'," Victoria Lynn said, but kept her trap shut after that, pretending to lock it and throw away the key.

"I'm gonn' find out, ya know..."

Victoria Lynn continued the charade by pretending not to have heard Jane's comment. "ANYway, what was the other thing ya wanted to say to me?" she said, walking over to the body of Wally Shaye and giving it a hard kick in the side with the tip of her boot for killing the woman in the Velvet Garter.

Sobering, Jane shifted to get her weight off her wounded leg. "Once this night is done an' dusted, I'm gonn' turn myself in, Vic. I'm one of Quint's Deperties, too. Walkin' around freely would'n be the rightful thing ta do."

"Turn yourself in?"

"Yeah. It's either that or meet ya over the crosshairs. And Vic, that's somethin' I just ain't gonn' do," Jane said and began to hobble up towards Perry Street. "That was my reasonin' for turnin' on the people who hired me... to prevent you and me from squarin' off. If we drew on each other, no matter who went down and who kept standin', Mathilda would just die inside. And we both know she'd hate the winner like the plague for the rest o' her life."

Sighing deeply, Victoria Lynn could do nothing but agree with the feared outlaw she was now considering her friend. "Yeah. Truer words were rarely spoken. All right. But hey... let's get them last bandits before we start plannin' our weddin's. Even though I got a Bible in my pocket, one of 'em may have a bullet with our name on it."

"A Bible? Why would ya have a-"

"Long story, Jane."

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By the time Jane and Victoria Lynn reached Perry Street, a gunfight had broken out down on Main Street, and the two women hobbled down there to the best of their abilities, using each other for support.

Orin Cutler was the first to greet them upon their arrival. "Deputies," he said, tipping his Confederate Cavalry hat. "You hurt bad?"

"Stings like a sonovabitch... but I'll manage," Jane said through clenched teeth.

The former Sheriff grinned and pointed at the saloon they were standing next to. "Looks like we've got ourselves a little problem. A couple of varmints have gone into Old No.4 and we can't get 'em out."

"Who?" Jane said, drawing her Peacemaker as she moved away from Victoria Lynn.

"Some fellas by the name of Enrico Gomez and Phil Larson. Former friends of yours, I believe...?"

"Them bastards were never friends o' mine," Jane mumbled, squinting hard at the saloon.

"Naw, since you're here, I guess they weren't..." Orin Cutler said, giving the tall outlaw a pointed look that she responded to in kind.

Victoria Lynn hobbled over to the saloon and tried to peek through one of the broken windows, but only earned herself a salvo of hot lead for her effort. "Yeah, it's Gomez all right... I can recognize that mean rat's mustache anywhere. Hey..." she said, looking at Jane.

"What?"

"Your tin star... it's dull and filthy! Couldn't ya at least have polished it? I mean, ya gotta think about your responsibilities, woman!"

"Tell ya what," Jane said and took the star off her chest. "I resign. Here... ain't brought me nothin' but crap anyhow. Ya can have it. I do'n want it no mo'."

Victoria Lynn smiled broadly and took the star from the outlaw's hand. Quickly buffing it on her jacket, she pinned it on her chest, and at once, everything felt right again. "Damn, I've been missin' that little trinket..." she said, looking down at the star.

"Yeah, an' it looks good on ya, too. How' we do this, Deperty? Just go in an' kill 'em all?"

Victoria Lynn dared to peek in through the window but quickly ducked her head back down. Enrico Gomez and the other Deputy were hiding behind the bar counter with the only items visible being the tops of their Stetsons and the barrels of their six-guns. "Hell, I dunno... there's been plenty of killin' already. Hey, Orin,

remember that trick we pulled some time ago when ol' Sharkey was up to one of his usual drunken misbehavin's?"

Orin Cutler chuckled out loud and hurried over to the two women where he quickly crouched down to get out of the line of fire. "Releasin' a few skunks on him? Sure I do... but we can't get no skunks at this time of night."

"Naw, but we got somethin' just as effective... the torches," Victoria Lynn said and pointed her revolver at the torches the night watchman had lit.

Orin followed her look but scrunched up his face at the thought of what it was implying. "Victoria Lynn... you ain't gonna set Old No.4 alight, are you?"

"No... but if Gomez and that other fella-"

"Phil Larson," Jane added.

"Larson, right. If the two of 'em think we're gonna burn down the saloon around their ears, they might mosey on outta there," Victoria Lynn said, nodding vigorously. "I say it's worth a shot."

The three people looked at each other and promptly produced similar wicked grins. "Hell yeah!" Victoria Lynn said and got up from her hiding place.

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"Gomez! Gomez, I know ya can hear me!" Victoria Lynn roared, standing outside the Old No.4 in a spot where she knew the bandits would be able to hear her. "Gomez! If the two of ya don't come out with ya hands in the air, we're gonna burn ya alive! With all that liquor in there, ya know the old saloon is gonna go sky high in a matter o' minutes! This here's the cripple and ya know I'm crazy enough to do it! Whaddaya say?!"

Enrico Gomez' only answer was a salvo of hot lead that blasted through the swinging doors.

"Uh-huh," Victoria Lynn said and pulled back her arm. Aiming carefully, she threw the heavy, burning torch in through the window where it smashed the last remaining shards of glass that hadn't already been shot to pieces. It didn't take long for black smoke to billow out of the swinging doors, quickly followed by two coughing and spluttering bandits.

"Somebody put out that torch... and grab 'em!" Orin Cutler yelled, but before anyone could react, Gomez roared out loud, whipped out his gun and fired blindly at Victoria Lynn, Jane and the crowd of people that had assembled outside the saloon.

"Oh, ya dumb bastard!" Orin cried out, emptying both barrels of his scattergun directly into Enrico Gomez' bulky figure.

The tall, mustachioed bandit was struck by the devil's hand and thrown onto the ground. He wiggled around for a few seconds, but soon became still.

Victoria Lynn trained her revolver at Phil Larson who wisely dropped his own six-gun and put his hands in the air. "Ya ain't as dumb as ya look, fella," she said to the second-to-last of Quint Connors' Deputies who was wearing a buckskin trapper's outfit - with a battered leather hat to boot - and sporting a two-week stubble all over his cheeks and chin.

Squinting over her shoulder, she did a quick inventory of the people who had joined them, but everybody seemed to be okay. "Anybody got hurt back there? Jane?"

"I'm fine," Jane said, hobbling away from her position at the other side of the street. "I'll check up on the others. Do'n forget our agreement, Vic."

"I won't. C'mon, Mister Bandit. We've got a really nice and comfy cell waitin' for ya. Now git!" Victoria Lynn said, shoving the barrel of her revolver into Phil Larson's belly.

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Forty minutes later, the great, evil God of Confusion still had Princetown in his clutches - in fact, the mess seemed to have intensified around the Sheriff's Office and the cells behind the building.

Victoria Lynn's head was swimming, and she had to clench her jaw hard to get through the constant buzz of voices from the regular folks who had gathered outside the office.

Suddenly the buzz grew to impossible levels, and she scrambled from the chair by the desk - where she had tried to fill out the arrest forms for Phil Larson - to go over to the doorway.

From one end of Perry Street, Orin Cutler was bringing in Jane Durham as per their agreement, closely followed by Mathilda and Emily who were both wringing their hands incessantly, and from the other end came a group of citizens with none other than Quint Connors who appeared battered and bloodied.

"What in the world..." Victoria Lynn said as she hobbled out onto the sidewalk. Quickly glancing left at Orin and Jane, she figured they could manage on their own for the time being - instead, she concentrated on Quint who had lost all his regular bravado along with his hat and several of his teeth. "People! Settle down... one at a time, please! Where d'ya find this rotten thing?"

"In the Velvet Garter!" a man shouted from the crowd, holding up one of Victoria Lynn's flyers. "He's gotta pay! Let's hang the bastard!"

"And pay he will, tho' it ain't gonna be at the end of the hangin' tree," Victoria Lynn said and grabbed hold of Quint's arm. The rosy-cheeked man looked like he'd been given a fair beating as his dark gray Western suit had been torn to shreds, and he had bruises and scrapes all over his face. "You don't look so hot now, do ya, Mr. Connors? Nearly all your Deputies are dead... I guess ya didn't count on Princetown fightin' back, huh? All right, throw 'im in a cell and get hold of Doc Cosgrove."

While two men led the bleeding - and stone silent - Quint Connors in through the door, Victoria Lynn hobbled over to Orin Cutler and Jane. She chewed on her lips as she studied the pensive look on Jane's face, but quickly came to the conclusion that they needed to go ahead with their agreement. "You know what to do... Blackie."

"I do... Deperty," Jane said and hobbled in through the doorway, closely followed by Orin Cutler and Mathilda.

As the young redhead tried to squeeze past, Victoria Lynn stopped her by putting a hand on her shoulder. "This ain't a place for you, Mathilda. There are plenty o' bad people in there. You should stay out he-"

"Victoria Lynn Cooper, don't you dare try to stop me!" Mathilda growled, shooting green fire with her eyes before barging in through the door.

Stifling a chuckle, Victoria Lynn turned back to the next person trying to get in. "Okaaay... uh, Nurse Mason, it's all right for you to come in. We have a few casualties who need to be looked at." - Knowing the crowd of vigilantes behind them meant they had to downplay their budding relationship, Victoria Lynn leaned in closely so she could speak for Emily's ears only. "Please look at Jane Durham first. The others are nasty scum, she ain't."

Pale as a sheet, Emily looked at Victoria Lynn with wide, worried eyes. She drew a breath and opened her mouth to speak, but decided against it. Instead, she nodded and hurried into the Sheriff's office.

Victoria Lynn cursed violently on the inside at the fact that she and Emily couldn't openly show their affections like others could. She didn't care one bit about other people's opinions of her, but she knew she didn't speak for the more sensitive nurse. *'I'll just have to make it up to her once we're in private,'* she thought and slammed the door shut behind her, showing the crowd she wasn't interested in them any longer.

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Another forty-five minutes later, the angry mob outside the office had dispersed, leaving Perry Street in relative calm for the first time since nightfall. Victoria Lynn had pulled the Sheriff's chair outside and was sitting on the sidewalk, enjoying the peace and quiet and looking up at the many stars.

She rubbed her temples to try to curtail the massive headache that had rolled over her over the course of the evening, and let out a long, slow sigh that meant she was ready for the next chapter in her seemingly endless night.

As she rose from the chair, her stiff knee hurt so badly that she was worried something else had gone wrong inside it, but she needed to get a move on, so she swallowed the pain and hobbled inside.

Taking the keys to the cells from the top drawer of the battered desk, she hobbled into the jail itself where the various prisoners had been detained. She went straight down to Jane's cell where the tall outlaw was lying on the lumpy cot that wasn't long enough for her - her long legs were hanging over the edge.

Mathilda had never left her side, and even now, she was still sitting on the indescribably filthy, straw-covered floor, holding hands with Jane while resting her weary eyes.

Before Victoria Lynn inserted the key into the lock, she studied the two women through the sturdy metal bars. A wistful smile spread over her features when she thought back to her own time with Mathilda Brown, but she knew everything had fallen into the right boxes - Jane and Mathilda were destined to be together, just like she hoped to build a future with Emily.

Chuckling at the highly confusing game called love, she inserted the key and twisted it, creating an infernal, squealing sound of metal-on-metal.

On the cot, Jane stirred and gently shook Mathilda. The young redhead sat up straight and put her hands in her lap, visible unsure of what was going to happen.

"Hey," Victoria Lynn said, hobbling into the center of the cell. She had left her Stetson in the office which revealed that the watercombed look she had spent so long perfecting was but a distant memory.

"Deperty," Jane said and nudged Mathilda's side so she had room to swing her legs over the side of the cot. Her right thigh had been bandaged with all the tricks of the trade, but the blood and the bullet hole meant that she'd most likely have to get herself a new pair of denim pants.

"What's going on, Victoria Lynn?" Mathilda said, getting up from the floor and dusting off her dress.

"Oh, lotsa things, Mathilda," Victoria Lynn said, smiling at her former lover. "One, Junior Wilkinson was here a little while ago and reinstated Orin Cutler. The old Sheriff is the new Sheriff."

"Ju- Junior is here...?" Mathilda said, visibly shaken at the news that her old adversary, the man who had sent her to prison for three years, could be near.

"Naw. He left. He didn't wanna get anywhere near ol' Quint there," Victoria Lynn said and pointed at the bruised man who was resting on the cot a couple of cells down. "Who has lost the ability to speak, or so it seems. Methinks he's brewin' on somethin'."

Jane nodded affirmatively. "Would'n put it past 'im, the crook."

"Yeah. Two, Sheriff Cutler asked yours truly to assume her old position as Deputy, but... dammit, I wanted to, but I just can't do it with this bum leg and my wretched stump. No. But he did grant me the title of Honorary Deputy which I'm usin' now. Three... that means you is free to go, Jane Durham."

Mathilda whooped and threw herself into Jane's embrace, but the outlaw herself narrowed her eyes down to ice blue slits and tried to stare a hole through Victoria Lynn. "Why?" she said quietly after a few heartbeats.

" 'Cos Mathilda needs ya. Plain and simple," Victoria Lynn said with a broad grin. "Now call me plum crazy, but I have a soft spot for that gorgeous, young redhead you're holdin' there, and... well... it would sorta make up for some of the names I've called you earlier."

"Huh. Thanks," Jane said and gave Mathilda another hug.

Mathilda sniffed loudly and pulled back from her partner. Not caring in the least where they were, she reached up and framed the outlaw's face - then she moved in for a sweet, affectionate kiss. Ten seconds later, she furrowed her brow and stared at Victoria Lynn. "The names you called her earlier? There's something you haven't been telling me. Jane?"

Victoria Lynn chuckled throatily at the harried look on the feared outlaw's face. Eventually, she gave in and helped Jane Durham upright and out of the cell.

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Stepping outside onto the thoroughly wrecked Perry Street, Mathilda couldn't get her hands off Jane. The two women were locked together so closely it appeared they were one being, and it was clear to Victoria Lynn that her friends were destined for a busy night between the sheets - Jane's wound permitting.

The Honorary Deputy was just about to get embarrassed over the outpouring of emotions when she spotted Emily Mason hurrying towards them from the hospital. After her shift, she had changed into regular clothes - a very nice dark gray dress - and Victoria Lynn thought she looked like a gift from heaven.

As soon as the nurse reached the three women, she cast a brief glance at Jane and Mathilda before she threw herself into Victoria Lynn's embrace and did her best to smother the Honorary Deputy by applying a bruising kiss right on her lips.

"Oi!" Victoria Lynn groaned around Emily's lips. "I got gunk on mah face!"

"Not anymore," Jane said with a broad grin - Mathilda was just staring wide-eyed at the unexpected sight.

When Emily was finally finished with Victoria Lynn's lips, she pulled back and ran her hands over the Honorary Deputy's flushed cheeks. She didn't say a word, but the love that was streaming out of her pale blue eyes made verbal communication superfluous.

"Well!" Mathilda said, hooking her arm inside Jane's. "I'd say payroll Friday turned out pretty good for all of us... well, more or less of course," she continued, glancing down at Jane's bandage.

"Yeah," Victoria Lynn husked, reaching out with her hand to caress Emily's brow and cheek. When the nurse closed her eyes and leaned into the touch, Victoria Lynn was overcome by a sense of warmth she had rarely felt. She wanted nothing more than to go home with Emily and hold her all night, but unfortunately-

Behind them, the ground suddenly started rumbling, akin to a dozen horses coming at them all at once. In an instant, both Jane and Victoria Lynn drew their revolvers and scouted up the street.

A two-horse open wagon came blasting around the corner from Sullivan Street and thundered towards them; the driver was standing up while whooping and cheering at the top of his lungs.

"What in the world..." Victoria Lynn said flatly, staring at the odd sight of an old, buckskin-clad, full-bearded man wearing a battered Boss Of The Plains hat that had come loose and was flapping behind him on the chin strap. "Ain't that...?"

"Sure is," Jane said and holstered her revolver.

"Hoah! Hoah!" the man said and pulled his two horses to a stop by the group of women, kicking up a cloud of dust that slowly drifted down Perry Street. "Howdy there, nice ladies! An' Blackie!" Mumblin' Jack Barnes said as she climbed down from the buckboard.

"Mumbles," Jane said with a crooked grin on her face.

Grinning, Jack Barnes took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his face. "That dagnabbin' rear axle gone an' snapped on me so I had ta fix it out in them boonies... cost me hours and hours, dog gone it. Now, I got mahself a mi'ty dry pipe so I wus hopin' ye have'n em'tied all them bottles o' whisky I heard yer wus savin' fer ol' Jack!"

When the four women just stood there and stared at him, Jack scrunched up his filthy face and scratched his full beard which sent sand and dust down onto the sidewalk. "Uh... did I miss some'in'?"

Victoria Lynn wanted to tell Jack Barnes that he had missed quite a lot more than just 'something,' but the chuckle that bubbled up from her chest and burst out of her mouth meant that she couldn't have formed a coherent sentence if her life had depended on it. The initial chuckle was soon transformed into a raging river of laughter that swept Emily, Mathilda and Jane with her over the edge and down the currents - and soon, everybody laughed like a pack of crazed donkeys.

That is, everybody but Mumblin' Jack Barnes who threw his Boss Of The Plains down on the sidewalk and looked like he had swallowed a bee.

Taking pity on her friend, Jane bit down her laughter and thumped Jack's shoulder. "Well... the saloons are all closed... but if ya drive us home, I reckon we could find us a bottle that we could be sharin', Jack."

"I s'pose I hafta make due wi'that, Blackie," Jack said and broke out into a cackle as he went down to the rear of the open wagon and lowered the tailgate. "All ready."

"Thanks, Jack. Vic, you and yer new friend are invited too."

Wiping her eyes, Victoria Lynn smiled at Jane and Mathilda but chose to pull Emily into a hug instead. "Much obliged. But I think Emily and I... uh... have other plans for the night. Right, Em?"

"Right, Vic," Emily said and buried her face in the nook of Victoria Lynn's neck.

"I know exactly what you mean," Mathilda said and hooked her arms inside Jane's. "Come, we need to give them a bit of space..."

"Yes, dear," Jane said with a grin, saluting the Honorary Deputy as she clambered up on the open wagon and pulled Mathilda up next to her.

And down on the sidewalk, Victoria Lynn Cooper and Emily Mason kissed like they had never kissed before.

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**THE END.**

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