

She coughed to get the dust out of her throat and lungs and wished she had packed three canteens of water instead of just two - but then again, she hadn't counted on crossing the desert by foot. The dust caked on her clothes, hands and face, and created an eerie sight of a pair of baby blue eyes squinting out between thick layers of sweat-streaked dirt.

Jane sighed deeply and shielded her eyes while she made a sweeping check of the entire horizon. Even taking the mirages into account, she reckoned she would have to slog through the inhospitable terrain for several more hours before she would reach Francisco Sanchez' trading station.

"Damnation," she croaked, once again coughing to blow out the dust that threatened to choke her one grain at a time. Bending down, she picked up her saddle and the connected bags and flung them over her shoulders.

Though it was a struggle to put one foot ahead of the other in the heat, she soon resumed the lonely walk, accompanied by the pack of buzzards that had trailed her for the last hour, and the occasional tell-tale rattle of the coiled-up snakes that tried to hide in the very few spots of shade along the stagecoach trail.

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"Yah! Yaaaaah!" Mumblin' Jack Barnes shouted as he slapped the reins of the four horses pulling the Blaise City - Dillonworth - Guthrie - Tolliver - Princetown express stagecoach to get them to move faster.

The highly experienced stage driver sat high atop the board, keeping a firm but not tight grip on the four reins so he could control the horses without choking them. "Yaaaaah! Fer Pete's sake... what a lame pack o' inbred mules... ain't got no git-up-and-go," Mumblin' Jack mumbled into his full, unkempt beard. "Goin' so damn slow the wheels is draggin' on the sand... yah!"

When the ride became even bumpier, Jack moved his right leg away from the long brake lever and pushed it against the buckboard to sit a bit tighter, but even so, he was being shaken around like a big buckskin-clad, long-bearded rag doll.

The old but solid stagecoach from the Milligan Stage Company creaked, squeaked, rolled and groaned as it rumbled over the uneven, rocky surface of the desert trail.

Inside, the four passengers were rocking back and forth, constantly knocking into each other while trying to keep their mouths closed so they wouldn't inhale too much of the massive amount of dust that was kicked up by the hooves and the large wheels.

After the stagecoach had practically leaped over a large rock, it finally got to be too much for one of the passengers. A bare-faced man in his early thirties wearing a pale brown shirt, pale brown pants, a tin star and a mean scowl to go with it got to his feet and leaned out of the window on the right-hand side of the vehicle. "Dammit, driver... are you aiming for the bleedin' rocks?!"

"You're wasting your vocal cords... he can't hear you, Deputy," another of the passengers said.

Deputy Sheriff Matt Osterling sat back down on the thin cushion and growled at the passenger who had dared to speak to him, an elegant, mustachioed fop in a black penguin suit and the kind of vest favored by gamblers. "I don't recall askin' for your opinion, Sir," he said to end the conversation before it could begin.

Herbert Gregg held up his hands in time-honored resignation. Pushing his derby down over his eyes, he resumed looking out of the window on the left hand side of the stagecoach.

The two men were joined by two women who couldn't be more different: One was the forty-four year old spinster Lucille Monahan whose ankle-length prairie dress and weather-beaten appearance showed that she was no stranger to the relentless conditions on the plains and the deserts.

The other was a far younger, much frailer-looking woman whose pale skin, harried eyes, unkempt hair and tattered prison-issue dress hinted at an entirely different fate.

For the entire three-hour duration of their drive, Lucille's steel gray eyes had been transfixed on the sturdy metal manacles covering the younger woman's wrists, and she caught herself wondering repeatedly what kind of crime the redhead could have committed. Feeling thoroughly intrigued, she finally wet her lips and leaned forward. "I say, Deputy... your prisoner there... what has she done? Are you taking her to the hangman?"

Matt Osterling scowled at the spinster and ground his jaw for several seconds before answering. "Well, Ma'am..."

"Yes?" Lucille said, moving to the edge of the bench seat.

"Ain't none of your business," the Deputy growled and shoved his elbow into his prisoner's side.

Lucille Monahan huffed in a highly insulted manner and made a big number of turning away from the man and woman sitting opposite her.

The Deputy's elbow had scored a direct hit on Mathilda Brown's ribs, but the twenty-two year old with the pasty pallor and the lifeless green eyes had learned from her three years in prison that any sign of weakness would be exploited mercilessly, so she bit down and swallowed the pain.

Herbert Gregg noticed the pained look on the young redhead's face but knew it wasn't his place to make a comment. Instead, he pulled out a fancy silver watch from his vest pocket and studied the time. "We're just passing the halfway point now," he said, pointing at a rock formation they were going past. "We're making good time. We should be at Francisco Sanchez' trading station within the hour."

The Deputy merely growled, but Mathilda's eyes welled up when she caught a glimpse of the silver pocket watch that was attached to the gambler's vest by a long metal chain. "My Pa had a watch like that," she said in a croaky, thick voice. "He gave it to me but-"

"Shut up, prisoner!" Deputy Osterling barked and gave Mathilda a new shove.

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Twenty minutes later, Mumblin' Jack Barnes put all four reins into his right hand so he could use his left to rub his eyes - he hadn't been seeing things: a tall, lone figure was shuffling along the trail three hundred yards ahead of the stagecoach with what looked to be a saddle across the shoulders.

"Well, I'll be a possum's..." he mumbled and put his foot near the brake lever.

As the stagecoach came closer to the figure, he whoa'ed the horses and gently applied the brakes when he was able to tell they weren't about to be ambushed. Soon, the team of four slowed down to an easy walk before coming to a dead stop next to the figure who had put down the saddle.

Predictably, Deputy Osterling leaned out of the window and barked: "Why the hell are we stopping, driver?"

"We' just pickin' up a new passenger, Deperty," Mumblin' Jack said loudly as he took in the sight of the horrendously dusty six-foot frame of Jane 'Blackie' Durham. "Well, well, well... hey, Blackie. Y'all look like a ghost, ya know," Jack said, eyeing the Colt Peacemaker that was hanging low on Jane's hip on a leather belt.

"Feel like one, too. Hey, Mumbles," Jane said and tried to wipe some of the sticky, pale brown grime off her face.

"Fancy meetin' you here... are them buzzards up there friends o' yours?" Jack said and pointed up into the sky at the four large birds that circled around slowly.

"No friends o' mine, but they've kept me company for my afternoon trot."

Jack cackled into his unkempt full beard and pushed his battered Boss Of The Plains hat back on his head. "Kinda hot ta be takin' a walk, ain't it?"

"Yeah. You goin' to the Sanchez place?"

" 's right."

"Got a seat for me?"

"Sure thing, Blackie. Hop onboard. Ya can put yer yannigans up top," Jack said with a broad grin as he patted the shotgun seat next to him, creating a small dust storm in the process.

Walking around the team of horses with her saddle and her bags, Jane Durham spotted an angry-looking man wearing a tin star who was leaning out of the door. Scoffing at the impatient look on his youthful, beardless face, she climbed up on the left side of the board and flung her belongings up on the roof next to the other suitcases.

"Driver! I insist we get a move on... now!" Matt Osterling barked, underlining his words by slamming his fist into the door.

"Yeah, yeah... hold yer hosses, fella... Yah!" Jack said and set the team of four in motion by slapping the reins. As the team of horses slowly gained speed, he looked at the woman next to him and laughed at her filthy exterior. "Golly, you need a good soakin'. Les' hope the Sanchez' got a well deep enough for ya, eh?"

Jane chuckled dryly and took off her low-crowned hat to fluff her hair. The sand that came out of it proved that Mumbly Jack was right.

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Twenty minutes later - with nary a word said between them since Blackie got onboard - Mumbly Jack couldn't rein in his curiosity any longer and briefly leaned into his passenger's side. "So... when ya gonna tell me why ya was walkin', Blackie?"

"Long story, Mumbles."

The stagecoach rumbled on for another few hundred yards before Jack turned back to his passenger. "We ain't got nuthin' but time..."

Jane chuckled and adjusted her gun belt so the barrel of her Peacemaker wouldn't knock against the bench every time they hit a rut or a rock. "Weeelll," she said, drawing out the word like she was getting ready to relay an epic adventure.

"Yeah? Aw, c'mon... do'n keep an old man waitin'!"

"My horse fell into an unsighted hole and broke his right front leg. Had to put 'im down."

"An'...?"

"And nothin', Mumbles. That's what happened."

Mumblin' Jack stared at his passenger before letting out a long stream of mumbled curses at Blackie's cheekiness. When the curses finally died down, he shot her a scathing look. "But where did ya come from an' where was ya goin', woman?"

"Came from Tolliver and goin' to Princetown."

Jack sighed and rolled his eyes. He knew he wouldn't be able to squeeze anything out of the taciturn woman so he just concentrated on driving the team. After a little while of thinking about Blackie's words, he slowly began to connect the dots in his mind. "Ya ain't hooking up wit' Quint Connors, are ya? He's in Princetown, ain't he?"

"What if I was, Mumbles?"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, lassie..." Jack said and steered around a cluster of large rocks that littered the trail. "Quint Connors is as savage as a meat axe... he's a plum rotten piece o' meanness! A dirty, low-down, good-fer-nothin' rat of a human bein' that... that would sell his mama for a bottle o' shine!"

"So I've been told."

"So ya is gonna hook up with 'im? Ya can't be serious!"

Jane Durham narrowed her blue eyes and shot the stagecoach driver a hard glare. "Leave my business to me, Mumbles. Safer for ev'rybody," she said in a voice that had suddenly changed from warm to ice cold.

"All right, all right... Good Lord almighty, it was nice knowin' ya... hookin' up wit' Quint Connors... ya gotta be outta yer pretty skull," Mumblin' Jack mumbled under his breath.

Four miles down the road, Jane felt her sixth sense ringing in her ears and she began to look around for the trouble she knew was out there - unfortunately, the plumes of dust kicked up by the horses and the large wheels lingered in the baking hot air for so long that it was difficult to see if they were alone in the desert, or if anyone was following them.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Blackie?" Jack said, taking time out of the driving to scratch his long beard.

"Nothin'... yet. Have ya had any bandit trouble recently?"

"Are ya kiddin'? 'Course we have. Quint Connors is in town after all," Jack said with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"He ain't the only bandit around, ya know."

Jack laughed out loud and shot his passenger another cheeky look. "Oh, I know. Hell, lassie, I done seen 'em all, from Jesse James to Black Bart to the Pecos Kid.... the Kid's Ma, too! She wus so ugly a mud fence would look like a world class dame next ta her! Ugliest hag west o' the ole Miss, lemme tell ya!"

Chuckling, Jane reached behind her to pull her saddle closer. Once it was near enough, she rose from the bench and pulled out her Winchester 1873 from its holster on the side of the saddle to make sure it was fully loaded. She started sitting down, but reconsidered at once and took the rifle. "I was figurin' ya could need another pair of eyes, Mumbles. Better safe than sorry is what I say," she said and put the rifle across her lap.

"Yeah, but..." Jack said, briefly eyeing the rifle - and Jane's shapely legs - before concentrating on the trail. "But if them bandits see ya they might think we're haulin' valuables or som'thin' an' come fer us..."

"True," Jane said and worked the rifle's action.

"Uh-huh."

"Anyway. Who ya got back there, Mumbles?"

"Oh, jus' the regular kind o' folks... mostly. A nurse, a fancy fella an' a Deperty wit'his female prisoner... a real scrawny gal. Got that scared look in her eye, ya know?"

"Mmmm."

"Nothin' but skin an' bones that gal. Too bad, too. I'll bet she used ta be real perdy."

"Where'd ya pick 'em up?" Jane said, once again looking over her shoulder. In the far distance, a plume of dust that hadn't been there before had suddenly appeared. She couldn't quite figure out how far back the plume was, but she reckoned it wouldn't be too long before they'd find out for sure.

"The Deperty an' the gal? In Dillonworth. I think they came in on the connectin' stage from up north."

"Mmmm," Jane said, looking hard at the plume of dust in the far distance. Even as she was watching, the plume changed directions and came closer to them, revealing they were being followed by two riders, not just one.

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Inside the rumbling, creaking stagecoach, Deputy Osterling sat with a fierce scowl on his face as he tried to remember if he had seen any Wanted posters for Blackie Durham in the Sheriff's offices in any of the towns he and his prisoner had come through.

In all prisoner transfers - even when they involved non-dangerous inmates like the demure woman he had been saddled with - the Deputies throughout the Territory had been given orders to check in with the local Sheriffs en route to their destination, even if it meant they'd miss a connecting stagecoach.

Growling to himself, he realized that he couldn't remember seeing any posters, but he was certain an outlaw of her stature would have one.

"Deputy, who was that woman we picked up?" Herbert Gregg asked, snapping Matt Osterling out of his thoughts.

The Deputy looked up and pinned the fancy-dressed gambler to the wall with a fierce glare. "What?"

"I said, who was that woman we picked up? She was no nun, I know that much," Herbert said, chuckling and smoothing down his wide mustache.

"She's nothin' but an outlaw... nothin' to concern yourself with, Sir."

That news made Lucille Monahan move to the edge of the seat and put her hands over her mouth. "An outlaw? We have a female outlaw on our stagecoach? Can't be too many of those!" she said, barely unable to hide the excitement in her voice.

Matt Osterling sighed and looked at the two interested passengers across from himself and his prisoner. After a few seconds, he shrugged and wet his lips. "Yeah. Jane Durham... also known as Blackie Durham."

The name registered at once with Mathilda Brown who briefly looked at the Deputy with wide eyes. Slowly, she looked back down, but her eyes remained wider than usual.

Lucille gasped and put a hand to her bosom. "I know that name! I... I... I know that name! She was... oh, Good Lord!" she said and began to fan her face.

Herbert Gregg cast one glance at the scandalized woman next to him and dug into one of his vest pockets to find a dainty handkerchief. "Here you go, little lady... a little something to get some fresh air."

"Thank you, my good man!" Lucille said and quickly wiped down her sweaty, dusty face before handing back the handkerchief.

At first, Herbert stared at the filthy cloth with a resigned expression on his face, but he soon overcame his mortification and shoved it into his pants pocket so it was out of the way. "You're welcome. Now, would you mind filling me in on this famed outlaw? I'm new to the Territory and I haven't heard many tall tales yet."

Through all this, Mathilda had kept quiet, but for once, she knew something about the topic of conversation. After she and her fellow passengers had protected their mouths and eyes from a particularly insistent spraying of dust that came in through the open windows, she took a deep breath and leaned forward. "She's the one who singlehan-

"You shut up!" Deputy Osterling barked and thumped Mathilda hard across her bony shoulder, making her whimper in pain.

Lucille Monahan gasped again and shot Matt Osterling a dark glare. "Deputy, is it really necessary to use so much force on her? She's just a scrawny, little thing..."

"Ma'am, may I suggest you leave the law enforcement to me?" the Deputy said with a dark squint that matched the nurse's glare. "Young, contrary kittens like her need to learn some discipline."

The passengers fell silent for several minutes but it didn't take long for Lucille Monahan to begin shuffling around on the bench seat, clearly agitated to share what she knew of the outlaw. Grunting, she decided to let uncouth Deputy be uncouth Deputy and leaned in towards Herbert Gregg. "Sir, I don't know much about Blackie Durham, but I do remember hearing her name in connection with a shooting incident down south," she said, touching the well-dressed man on the arm.

"I see...?" Herbert said, cocking his derby the other way so he could look at the nurse without catching an eyeful of the scowling, mean-spirited Deputy on the other side of the stagecoach.

"Yes... from what I know, she was involved with a gang led by the Grogan brothers. The law-"

"Oh, I've heard about Hiram and Linus Grogan, all right," Herbert said, nodding. "They were very active further south a few years ago."

"Yes, yes! Where was I... oh yes, a posse had caught Blackie Durham after a bank robbery and was already preparing their best hanging tree, but her fellow bandits returned and sprung her loose. They swept the town like locusts... when they left, the dead outnumbered the living..."

"Good Lord!"

"Yes, indeed!"

Herbert Gregg nodded somberly and began to dig into his pockets to find his cigarillos. "Well, the Grogan boys finally met their fate. They're six foot under now," he said quietly as he put the brown cigarette in his mouth and looked for his matches.

"Yes, but Blackie Durham is on this very stagecoach!" Lucille said so low it was almost a whisper.

Finding his matches, Herbert held one ready but stopped to ponder Lucille's comment. "Shocking, my good lady."

Lucille opened her mouth to reply, but she didn't get very far before Matt Osterling tapped the heel of his boot twice onto the floorboards and pointed at the sign hanging on the wall above Herbert and Lucille. "No smoking in the presence of ladies," he said gruffly.

Grinding his jaw, Herbert craned his neck to look at the sign that presented a full rundown of the rules employed by the Milligan Stage Company: "If ladies are present," he said as he read the fourth rule out loud, "gentlemen are urged to forego smoking cigars and pipes as the odor of same is repugnant to the gentler sex. Chewing tobacco is permitted, but spit with the wind, not against it."

Lucille put a comforting hand on Herbert Gregg's arm and winked at him in a very supportive manner. "Oh, but that's perfectly all right, Sir. My dear father smoked the pipe all day long and twice on Sundays... I'm quite used to it. Please, Sir, go ahe-"

"No," Deputy Osterling said strongly. "A rule's a rule."

Herbert scrunched up his face and put away the cigarillo. Still looking at the set of rules, his eyes skimmed down the long list until they reached the last one. "Ah, how about this one, Deputy? Gentlemen guilty of unchivalrous behavior toward lady passengers will be put off the stage. It's a long walk back," he read, trying to stifle a broad smirk.

"If you're referrin' to my prisoner, I can assure you that I'm quite safe. She's never been no lady," the Deputy said, once again shoving his elbow into Mathilda's side.

The repeated brutality was beginning to grate on Herbert Gregg's good manners but the things he had planned to do in Princetown couldn't stand up to the law's scrutiny, so he nodded curtly and turned back to the window. *'How odd... there's a genuine, full-blooded outlaw on this stage, and yet it's the man wearing the star who's the real scum,'* he thought, smoothing down his mustache.

Mathilda looked down at the pair of ill-fitting prison-issue boots she was wearing and tried to get her breath back. The last blow to her ribs had hurt her more than she cared to admit, and when she tried to fill her lungs with the dust-laced air, a stinging pain shot up from her abused side.

She was no stranger to pain - the three years of her life she had lost rotting away in the Jerome Norris Correctional Institution for Wayward Women had seen to that. During her stay in prison, she had been kicked, beaten and caned so often that her spirit had been all but broken. If the blows hadn't been delivered by her fellow inmates, they had come from the brutal guards; sometimes they had worked in unison, especially when she was still a fresh-faced youngling who had yet to learn her place in the perverted prison hierarchy.

When the gambler and the nurse had spoken earlier, she had wanted to add that she knew every single story ever told about Blackie Durham. In the prison, the exploits of the incomparable outlaw had been the stuff of legend, and if reality hadn't proven sufficiently colorful, things had been made up - like her alleged insatiable lust for fair-haired maidens, or the fact that she had once killed nine men in a single gunfight. Of course, the first time Mathilda had heard that particular story, it had only been four men.

She knew they were soon to make an overnight rest at the Sanchez Trading Station, and the mere thought of actually seeing the woman who had been her imaginary companion during countless lonely nights made her cheeks burn. She realized she'd never get to speak to her, but a few gazes at the supposedly endless legs and swelling bosom would mark a very good start indeed to her new life outside the oppressive cell walls.

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Jane scratched her filthy nose at the sight of another plume of dust joining the two that had been following them for a while. Earlier, the plumes had been behind them, but now, they had moved ahead of the stagecoach though she had not yet been able to see the actual riders who were responsible for kicking up the dust.

Recognizing the terrain they were going through, she knew they didn't have long to go before they reached the Station, but she also knew they'd enter a perfect site for an ambush at the very crest of the gentle incline they were travelling on.

By shielding her eyes, she was quickly able to spot the rock formation that framed the trail some distance ahead: a pair of enormous, sixty-foot tall boulders that looked like someone had simply left them there when they had grown tired of playing with them.

"Whas'on yer mind, lassie?" Mumblin' Jack asked off the dark look on his passenger's face.

"McNear's Boulders up ahead."

"Yeah, I know..." Jack said and worked hard on getting the four horses to keep the speed going up the incline. "Hey, have ya ever used them boulders for holdin' up someone?"

Jane's only answer was a shrug and a crooked smile.

"Uh-huh... I oughtta know better than ta ask ya such a dumb question."

"Never stages, though," Jane said almost as an afterthought.

Almost unnoticeably, the tired horses began to slow down as the incline became steeper. Before long, they were merely walking at a canter, unable to give any more despite Mumblin' Jack's best efforts with the reins and the occasional crack of the whip. "Awwwww, c'mon fer Pete's sake..." the driver said imploringly. "Ya only hafta go over that damn crest... then ya can freewheel down the other side all the way ta the Sanchez place... ya remember the Sanchez place, don'tcha? They've got fresh hay there... an' plenty of it!"

"I don't think they can do it today, Mumbles... it's been too hot," Jane said and put away her rifle. With an athletic maneuver, she jumped off the board and landed safely on the loose sand where she quickly went up to the lead horse.

While the stage had been traveling at speed, the wind had helped the two people high atop the board to stay cool, but with the pace reduced to a walk, the heat returned with a vengeance. Jane could feel the murderous sun beating down on her as she patted the lead horse's flank and neck, and the foam on its sides proved that it was suffering, too.

"Naw, they gonna do it! Hell, they hafta do it! I ain't gonna be spendin' no night out here! No Sirree, not with Elpidia Sanchez' chili beans so close I can smell 'em!" Jack roared - for once - and cracked his whip again.

Instead of using brute force that would only make the horses less willing to help her, Jane tried to coax the lead horse into responding by taking its tack and guiding it along up the incline. Eventually, she was able to get it to loosen up, and soon, they had regained a modest forward motion.

Step by step, foot by foot, yard by yard, they continued up the sloping incline until they were a hundred paces from the boulders that marked the crest.

Jane felt her sixth sense really give her a kick up the backside, so she reached down to loosen the strap holding her Peacemaker in its leather holster. Looking ahead, she could almost smell the unwashed bandits waiting for them - though in reality, the strong scent coming from herself and the horses overpowered everything else around her.

Predictably, they weren't going quickly enough for Deputy Osterling who promptly opened the door and leaned out of it. "Driver! Why are we going so slow? We need to be at the Sanchez Trading Station before nightfall!"

Mumblin' Jack considered using the whip to draw stripes on the youthful Deputy's back and rear but decided it would be better for his future employment and retirement plan if he didn't - instead, he mumbled incessantly into his full beard and ignored the impatient lawman completely.

Through plenty of coaxing and just the tiniest application of muscle, Jane and the four-in-hand finally reached the crest between McNear's Boulders. Ahead and below, the bleak, desolate desert changed into a greener, more fertile terrain with plenty of vegetation, water and shade.

The Sanchez Trading Station was roughly two miles ahead down the trail; the three low buildings looking very much like a fenced-in oasis in a sea of green cacti.

"Phew," Jane said and removed her hat to wipe her sweat-streaked face. At that exact moment, a shot rang out from somewhere above her and zinged past her ear. "Son of a bitch!" she roared, jumping back and whipping her Colt out of the holster.

The first shot from above was quickly followed by a whole series of reports that sent burning hot lead screaming through the air. Two shots hit the sand next to her feet and one ricocheted off an iron brace on the lead horse's tack, spooking it quite badly.

"Aw hell, can't stay here!" Jane roared and returned fire at once, though she had no idea where the bandits were. "Jack! Get 'em going! Now!"

"We' goin', we' goin'! Keep yer bloomers on, lassie! Yah! Yahhhh!" Jack shouted and slapped the reins to get the horses to move. The gunfire and the sight of cooler, greener pastures ahead gave them a new lease of life, and they were able to get the heavy load rolling surprisingly quickly.

Just as Jane climbed up on the board, two bandits came riding around the boulders and sent a barrage of rifle shots against the sides of the stagecoach that chipped long splinters off the wooden frame.

"Damnation!" she roared, trying to get a fix on the bandit nearest to her, a Mexican on a chestnut mare. The man should have been an easy target with his white tunic, broad bandolier and floppy dark gray Stetson, but just as Jane squeezed the trigger, the bandit jerked the mare around and took off in another direction, evading the flying lead easily.

All the activity was kicking up a veritable dust storm that made it nearly impossible for Jane to see anything, and she wasted two rounds firing at phantoms - suddenly one of the other bandits rode directly into her line of fire brandishing a Winchester similar to her own.

A well-placed shot in the chest knocked the man - a white fellow in a tan shield-front shirt - clean off his horse.

"Damn good shot, Blackie!" Jack roared, but a split second later, a bullet hit him on the left shoulder, making him cry out in pain and throwing him backwards against the board. In the confusion, he lost two of the reins which fell down to the ground and started flopping around dangerously close to the front axle.

"Aw, hell!" Jane shouted and immediately ducked down to try to catch the reins before they could wrap themselves around the axle and create a catastrophic choking of the two horses they were connected to.

Inside the stage, Deputy Osterling had drawn his sidearm and was trying to return fire though he was unable to get a clear shot from all the dust kicked up by the hooves and the large wheels. "This ain't no coincidence!" he barked, "it's that damn woman... she led us here! She led us right into the grasp of them bandits! It's probably her own gang!"

"Don't be ridiculous, man! They're firing at her, too!" Herbert Gregg shouted back, covering his window with his tiny Derringer that he knew wouldn't do them any good whatsoever in an out-and-out gunfight.

"Crap!" the Deputy barked, firing off a blind shot into the dust just to show that he wasn't intimidated by the bandits - unfortunately, he should have been more careful.

The stagecoach was still rolling past the boulders as Matt Osterling fired into the dust, and the lead from his .45 ricocheted off the rock with a loud crack and came straight back for him, thumping into his chest a mere inch above his heart.

Grunting, he looked down in shock at the red rose that suddenly blossomed next to his tin star. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell backwards, knocking into Mathilda and dragging her down on the floor with him.

For a second or two, the three remaining passengers stared at the dead body at their feet, but then Lucille Monahan clutched her head and let out a fierce, blood-curdling scream.

Mathilda could hardly believe her eyes as she stared at her dead tormentor. There was no denying the blood that quickly spread over the front of his shirt, but she still felt obliged to touch his neck to check for a pulse - nothing.

The implications rolled over her like a wave, but she only had a few seconds to enjoy her newfound freedom before another barrage of lead hit the back of the stagecoach and zinged through it. One shot hit the wall directly between Lucille and Herbert, tearing the Milligan Stage Company rules to shreds and making them both jump in terror and race to get down on the floor next to Mathilda.

Another shot, then yet another came through the wooden wall of the stagecoach and chipped off a long splinter that cartwheeled through the air until it plowed a furrow across the back of Herbert Gregg's hand, sending a splattering of blood over Mathilda's face.

Jerking his bloody hand up, the gambler cried out in pain and scrambled to get out of the way of the flying shrapnel.

Up on the board, Jane whipped around, knowing she had to forget the loose reins for the time being. Climbing up on the roof, she went down on her stomach and grabbed her Winchester. With careful aim, she was able to get a fix on the bandit nearest to them - an ugly, mustachioed fellow on a white appaloosa - and squeezed the trigger.

At first, she wasn't sure if she had hit him or not, but the appaloosa soon came out of the dust cloud on its own.

Grunting, she worked the Winchester's action and began to look around for the last of the attackers, but the Mexican she had seen earlier was suddenly nowhere to be found. Moments later, she noticed a cloud of dust rapidly moving away from them toward the west, going back into the desert.

Drawing a deep sigh of relief, she sheathed the rifle into the holster on her saddle and turned around to get back to the loose reins. "How ya feelin', Jack?"

"Like I was kicked by a dagnabbin' mule! Gotta get them hosses down safe, Blackie!"

"Hang on, old fella, I'm on it," Jane said and reached for the loose reins. With a bit of effort - and a few blue words - she was able to pull them into her grasp and bring the horses to a safe halt.

After giving the reins to Mumblin' Jack, she hopped off the board in a hurry and ran back to the door to take a look at how many of their passengers were still alive.

As the stagecoach came to a stop, the body of Matt Osterling shifted and pinned down Mathilda's legs. Already frightened out of her wits by the ordeal, the young woman whimpered loudly and pulled at her legs to get them free. Her boot had snagged on the dead man's armpit, but she solved it by yanking herself free.

Shuffling back from the body with a sobbing groan, she grabbed hold of the door and lifted herself up on her knees - and suddenly found herself face to face with one of the bandits, a pistolera with black hair, a dirty face and bright blue eyes.

Mathilda did the only thing she could in that situation - she screamed loudly right into the pistolera's face. She didn't have time to figure out that the other woman was as spooked as she was before she staggered backwards and stumbled over Matt Osterling's body to end up right back where she started.

"What in Tarnation, woman?!" Blackie Durham roared and clasped a hand over her wildly beating heart. "Don't be afeared, I'm tryin' to save ya, not rob ya!"

Trying again, Jane reached for the door handle and twisted it. Once the door was open, she let her experienced eye roam across the passengers to get a feel for the carnage.

"Hey, Jack!" she said as she took a step back.

'Yeah?'

"We got one down, one hurt, an' one frightened outta her skull."

'Which is which?'

"Damned if I know..." Jane said and stepped up into the compartment. Her eyes snapped onto the frightened young redhead who was busy climbing up on the bench seat sporting a bloodied face and trembling, manacled hands.

When the young woman seemed too scared to talk, Jane turned to the other passengers. "Sorry 'bout that, folks. Looks like we had a li'l bandit-trouble."

"I'll say!" Lucille Monahan huffed and began to dust off her prairie dress that had been covered by wood chips of all sizes. "I'm Lucille Monahan, I'm a qualified nurse. Is my bag still up on the roof with the rest of the luggage?"

"No idea. I'll check," Jane said and stepped back out. After a brief peek, she came down and nodded. "Yep."

"Uh... good," Lucille said, suddenly appearing to be aware that she had spoken quite briskly to a known, and much-feared, outlaw.

Jane nodded again and looked towards the man in the penguin suit. "I'll get it in a minute. And who might you be, Sir?"

"Herbert Gregg," the gambler croaked through clenched teeth. "My hand..."

"I got eyes, Sport. Who's the terrified kitten?" Jane said, pointing her thumb at the last of the living passengers. The young woman possessed an unnatural paleness that Jane knew all too well, and she didn't have to look further than the poorly cut hair, the ill-fitting clothes and the harried look in the green eyes to work out that the frightened, young slip of a girl had been an inmate. The manacles simply confirmed her train of thought.

"We don't know her name, uh... Miss Durham," Lucille said, wringing her hands. "She was the Deputy's prisoner. He never told us what she had done, so we don't know if she's dangerous or not..."

Jane glared at the nurse with a pair of narrowing ice blue eyes. "Dangerous? Ya think she looks dangerous? Lady, ya obvi'sly ain't never seen danger... perhaps ya should pray ya never will."

Her words hung heavily in the air as she turned around and nudged the dead deputy with her boot. "Yep. Dead as a doornail. Miss Monahan," Jane said, pinning the nurse to the wall with another hard glare.

"Y- yes...?"

"I'll get yer bag now. While I help the li'l lady and dispose of this slab of pork, would ya mind tendin' to your fellow passengers? Mister Gregg and Mister Barnes need a kind touch, if ya catch my drift."

"Of- of course, Miss Durham," Lucille said and rose from her seat.

Grunting, Jane put out her hand at the young, frightened redhead who was staring at her with eyes as wide as saucers. "No need to be fearin' me, missy. I'm as demure as a bit kitten. C'mon, les'go outside. You look like ya could need a rest. And by the way, lemme find some cutters or something. Women should'n be shackled."

At first, Mathilda just stared dumbly at the tall, indescribably filthy outlaw with the penetrating eyes, but she eventually nodded and scooted off the bench seat. Just as she was getting ready to jump down from the stagecoach, the outlaw's strong hands were wrapped around her skinny waist and she found herself being swooped down onto the rocky, dusty trail.

"Golly!" Mathilda cried in a thick voice, grasping the outlaw's arms in an instinctive gesture and staring dreamily into the pale blue eyes.

"She speaks, huh?" Jane said, winking at the young redhead. "Does she have a name, too?"

Mathilda was struck dumb and mute - she had actually been touched by Blackie Durham; more than that, she had been held by Blackie Durham. Just as she opened her mouth to say her name, Lucille Monahan cleared her throat behind them.

"I say, Miss Durham... do I warrant such a thrilling ride as well?" the nurse said with a gleam in her eye.

Jane chuckled and moved away from the young redhead. "Naw, Miss Monahan, I'm afraid ya do'n," she joked in an exaggerated accent, "ya see, I need mah back in one piece fer tomorra...but I can give ya a hand..."

The moment broken, Mathilda staggered away from the stagecoach and found a shady spot where she sat down with a bump. Sighing deeply, she pulled her legs up and looked at the end result of the ambush with wide,

uncomprehending eyes. *'Blackie Durham... I can't believe it... m- maybe she can help me f- find Pa's watch... maybe...'* she thought, staring at the powerfully built outlaw dragging the dead deputy out of the stagecoach.

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CHAPTER 2

Fifty minutes later, the battered stagecoach and the equally battered passengers rolled through the open fences and into the courtyard of the Sanchez Trading Station.

Up top, Jane and Mumblin' Jack had traded places, with Jane doing most of the driving and Jack providing most of the cussing. "Hoah... hoah... hoah!" Jane said, snapping the reins taut so the horses would slow to a halt.

"Ya doin' it all wrong, Blackie... all ya gotta do is-"

"You wanna drive, Mumbles?" Jane said and shot her impatient passenger a dark glare.

"Naw," the driver said and patted the makeshift bandage on his left arm.

Once the team of four had come to a dead stop just outside the enclosure that was already occupied by six grazing horses, Jane pushed the brake lever to the forward stop with her boot and hung the reins over the side of the board. "Did'n think so. We got here, did'n we? I got us here, did'n I?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jack said and began to clamber down from the board.

Almost at once, Francisco Sanchez and his wife Elpidia came out to greet them. When they saw the many bullet holes and the injuries to the people onboard, they hurried back inside to make room in the eatery for a few bunks in case anyone needed to lie down.

Two of the three low buildings - the combined eatery and sleeping quarters and a barn stocked to the rafters with fresh hay - were made of dark brown adobe that promised a cool atmosphere on the inside. The last building was made of wood: a king-sized outhouse with room for six guests at any one time.

Jane's eyes were immediately drawn to the well in the center of the courtyard where a bucket and a dipper were ready to be used. She licked her dry lips and grimaced hard to get some of the cakes of grime and dust to peel off her face. When she wasn't entirely successful, she staggered over to the well to get something to drink.

Behind her, Mumblin' Jack opened the door and helped Mathilda, Lucille and Herbert down from the stage.

Mathilda stepped down onto the dirt courtyard and moved a bit away from the others. Rubbing her wrists that still sported two angry red lines from where the manacles had been, she slowly turned around on her axis to take in the serene environment; the white picket fences surrounding the enclosures and the Trading Station itself, the green grass by the grazing horses, the inviting adobe buildings with their small windows and decorative curtains, the tall flagpole in the center flying the colorful Milligan Stage Company standard, and finally the wonderful smell of warm food that wafted out from the open door to the eatery - all things she hadn't dared to even dream of in the three years she had spent looking at the inside of a prison cell surrounded by lice, hairy spiders, cockroaches, rats and brutal fellow inmates and guards.

It all proved too much for the fragile young woman and she broke down and started to cry. Her lithe, petite body was soon racked by sobs as she tried to purge the last three years from her heart and soul. Sob followed sob until she felt a strong, warm hand on her shoulder.

Looking up through a veil of tears, she found herself standing so close to the tall, striking outlaw that she could feel the other woman's body heat. Hiccuping badly, Mathilda began to wipe her eyes, but all the dust and filth they had been exposed to during the bakingly hot day made it impossible for her to do anything about her tears without drawing grotesque semi-wet streaks across her cheeks and chin.

"I brought ya some water," Jane said quietly and handed the young redhead the full dipper. The dipper was soon grabbed with both hands and emptied in a sequence of greedy gulps.

"Th- thank you..." Mathilda said with the last drops of the precious water dripping from her chin.

"You're welcome. You already know my name... but I never got yours...?"

"Mathilda... Br- Brown," the redhead croaked, once again trying - and once again failing - to wipe away her tears.

Jane smiled at the young woman and put an arm around her small shoulders. "Mathilda... tell ya what... why don't ya go inside an' get some grub? I gotta tend to the horses first, but I sure am hungry right now an' I'll bet you're the same...?"

"I could eat," Mathilda said with a nod. At the same time, her stomach made a rumbling sound that sealed the deal.

Standing outside the eatery, Herbert Gregg leaned in towards Mumblin' Jack and nudged the driver's good shoulder. "Look how Blackie Durham is already whispering sweet nothing's into that scrawny kitten's ear... that didn't take her long, did it?"

"Naw," Jack mumbled into his full beard. "What can I tell ya... she's an expert in them matters. Always has been."

"Must be," Herbert said and turned around to go inside.

Already present, Lucille Monahan had found herself a table and was busy gulping down a full glass of water.

The interior of the eatery was dark but far cooler than the scorching courtyard. Seven round tables with four chairs each had been placed strategically around the room to optimize the paths from the kitchen at the back of the building. The floor was covered by sand and sawdust, and spittoons had been placed next to each table to prevent tobacco-chewing gentlemen from spitting across the room.

To the right of the eatery, a long, wooden bar counter reached from wall to wall of the building, fronting several shelves of various jugs and bottles that made Mumblin' Jack lick his lips at the thought of the special brew he knew was in one of them.

Two of the tables nearest the entrance had been pushed away and replaced by a US Cavalry-issue field bunk, but since no one was badly hurt, the Sanchez' quickly packed the bunk away and stored it out back.

Right on cue, Mumblin' Jack Barnes and Elpidia Sanchez entered the eatery at the same time from different ends. The grizzled driver immediately took off his battered Boss Of The Plains and performed a graceful bow. "Boo-enas not-chess, señora!"

"Buenas noches, señor Barnes," the lady of the house said accompanied by a rich chuckle. Elpidia Sanchez was - like her husband - in her mid-forties, and although her hair had become streaked with gray and a few sun-induced lines had appeared on her bronzed face, she had lost none of the beauty she'd possessed two decades earlier when she'd been the most sought-after señorita in the southern part of the Territory. "Have a seat, everybody... supper will be served in a moment," she said, taking off the apron that had covered her dark dress.

"El fantastico," Mumblin' Jack mumbled and steered directly towards one of the free tables where he sat down at once and put his sore legs up on an adjacent chair.

Herbert Gregg chuckled at the driver's antics and found himself another of the tables. Once he had taken off his black jacket - tenderly, so he wouldn't disturb the bandage Lucille had put on his hand - and hung it over the backrest of a chair, he placed his derby on the table and began to polish it.

Mathilda came in a little later with freshly scrubbed face and hands. She looked around the eatery and found her stomach growling and her saliva running over at the smell of the food. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, her old prison instincts took hold and she slipped over to a table the furthest away from the others without drawing attention to herself.

Sitting down, she kept her hands underneath the table and her eyes on the tabletop so she wouldn't appear to be confrontational - it had been one of the first lessons she had learned as an inmate.

From the back, Francisco Sanchez came into the eatery and dusted off his hands as he observed the new group of guests. He was wearing Mexican boots, black pants and a very stylish white shirt. His ensemble was rounded off by a bolo tie that fit perfectly with his graying, pencil-thin mustache. "Good evening, everybody. Welcome to our humble abode," he said, smoothing down his slick hair that had been ruffled slightly from storing the bunk.

A chorus of 'good evening, Sir,' soon came back at him, and he smiled broadly and went up to the bar to prepare the orders he knew would come.

The rumbling of a set of wheels heralded the arrival of the kitchen wagon that carried a pair of huge, steaming pots suspended in two neatly-cut holes. With a muted groan, Elpidia pushed the heavy wagon into the eatery and took off the lids to fill the room with the delicious smell of warm food. "Supper's served! We have chili beans and onions, and salt pork stew with-

Elpidia stopped abruptly and stared at the door to the courtyard - or rather, at the tall, black-haired, heavily armed figure standing in the doorway with a pair of saddle bags over her arm and several pieces of paper in her hand.

The others all turned to look at Blackie who pushed her low-crowned hat back from her face and looked squarely at the lady of the house. "I wo'n cause you no troubles, Ma'am. I came on the stage. Ask Mumblin' Jack."

"That's right, señora," Jack said and nodded so hard that sand and dust fell out of his full beard. "Blackie Durham was a mi'ty fine help against a buncha skunks who tried ta bushwhack us up at them boulders."

Not exactly convinced, Elpidia Sanchez slowly returned to her duties by storing the lids on the lower shelf of the kitchen wagon and taking a few bowls and plates. "All right," she said pensively, "but no shooting, no fighting and no whoring. This house was blessed by Our Lord and it should stay that way."

"Of course, Ma'am," Jane said and took off her hat to show respect for the house. She quickly eyed where Mathilda was and moved over to her table with a confident stride. "Hi again," she said as she sat down.

"Hello," Mathilda said meekly, staring at the outlaw's wet hair and freshly scrubbed face.

After ruffling her hair, Jane chuckled and leaned in towards the young redhead. "Yeah, when I saw you do it, I dunked my head in a bucket of water from the well, too. I just had to get that gunk offa my rosy cheeks."

"Uh-huh," Mathilda said, transfixed by the magical transformation of the outlaw. The woman sitting opposite her was even finer-looking than her depiction in the sordid fantasies that ran freely through the prison; there, Jane Durham had merely been a knockout, but in reality, the woman was breathtaking, Mathilda thought.

"Look, I found your transfer documents. They're fine... mostly," Jane continued and held up the slightly damaged documents before putting them on the table. "I was kinda worried that the Deputy had had 'em in his breast pocket, but he was sittin' on 'em so they're just fine and dandy."

"My transfer documents?" Mathilda said with a puzzled expression on her face. Furrowing her brow, she reached for the papers and began to read them. "Oh... thank you so much... I didn't think of that at all."

"I was guessin' that," Jane said and began to pat down her shield-fronted shirt to look for her tobacco pouch - then she remembered it was still somewhere down the deep recesses of her saddlebags. "I read 'em. You'd ha' been in a world of hurt, Mathilda. Accordin' to the documents, you need to report to the Princetown Sheriff every single day for the first year past your release. Otherwise he's got every right to lock you up in his jail for the remainder of your sentence... or even to send ya back."

"Oh God, no..." Mathilda croaked and frantically leafed through the six pages to find the particular section.

The creaking kitchen wagon ended their conversation for the time being, but the look of unbridled panic in the young redhead's pretty eyes made Jane grind her jaw and pledge to work out what horrors were hiding behind the seemingly inexplicable decision to send such a scrawny little thing up the proverbial river.

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As sunset approached, Francisco walked quietly around the eatery to light the kerosene lamps while his wife was showing the passengers of the ill-fated stagecoach to their allotted bedrooms.

"Here we are," Elpidia said, opening the second door in a corridor held in dark brown colors. "Young lady, this is for you. My husband and I sleep next door so we'll be able to come to your rescue in case you need it," she continued, putting her hand on Mathilda's back.

"Uh, thank you, but-" Mathilda said, peeking into the dark brown room that was equipped with a bunk, a dresser with a wash basin and a small kerosene lamp, a chair and a small mirror.

"Oh, I insist. In you go. And for you, Miss Monahan, the next room is yours," Elpidia said and continued down the hall with Lucille Monahan in tow.

When Mathilda realized that the lady of the house was unlikely to change her mind, she sighed deeply and went into the minuscule room where she sat down on the lumpy bunk clutching her prison-issue duffel bag that had been retrieved from the stagecoach.

At first, she was all right, but it didn't take long for the walls to begin to move in on her. She clutched the duffel bag harder, but it didn't help. Even though the door was still open, the room became smaller and smaller, and she could almost hear the characteristic clink-clink-clink of the highly volatile night watch officer Gail Ehardt's hobnailed boots walking past in the corridor.

Just thinking about the officer with the crazy eyes and the reputation of delivering swift and brutal punishment with her club made Mathilda's chin tremble and she could feel tears sting her eyes - but this time, she had a choice: the

were no bars across the window, no gate blocking the door, nothing that would keep her inside the room where the dark brown walls were so close they were almost suffocating her.

Choking up, she jumped from the bunk and burst into the hall. When the feeling of confinement didn't subside, she flew down the corridor and into the eatery, clutching her duffel bag to her chest.

Jane, Herbert and Mumblin' Jack were involved in a friendly game of Diamonds when the rapidly approaching Mathilda made Jane drop her cards on the floor, shoot up from the chair and draw her Peacemaker - all within the space of two seconds.

"Hoah, Blackie! I ain't been rookin' ya! I promise!" Mumblin' Jack said loudly, holding up his hands.

"I think it's got more to do with her than with you, Jack," Herbert said, pointing his cigarillo at the trembling Mathilda.

"Huh... jus' when I had a winnin' hand, too... Tarnation. Jus' mah rotten luck," Jack said and threw down his cards.

Herbert chuckled, wisely keeping to himself what he thought of the driver's so-called winning hand. "Blackie, you in?" he said, picking up the stray cards and re-shuffling the pack.

"No," Jane said and holstered her revolver. In the meantime, Mathilda had moved over to the table where she had eaten and was sitting like a frightened child, trembling all over and clutching her duffel bag to her chest. "No, there's somethin' I gotta do first," Jane continued and moved away from the gambling table.

"Oh, I bet there is," Herbert said casually, but the joke fell flat when he looked up and saw the hard, ice cold glare in the outlaw's eyes.

The unspoken threat lingered in the air even after Jane had sat down at Mathilda's table - it wasn't until she caught a glimpse of the young redhead's scared face that she loosened up. "Hey..." the outlaw said and reached out to put a hand on Mathilda's elbow. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to be alone right now," Mathilda whispered for Jane's ears only.

Jane sighed and scrunched up her face. Under other circumstances, she would've had no qualms about spending a night frolicking with the pretty young woman, but there was too much unsaid baggage for it to be proper. "Listen, Mathilda... I-"

"Please," Mathilda said and grasped Jane's hand. "I need to talk to someone who... who won't turn around and use it against me. Please..."

The look in the young redhead's eyes, the sound of her trembling voice and the strength of her grip convinced Jane that doing anything but help her would be very improper, indeed. "All right, but... uh... le's go to my room down the hall. Elpidia is in the kitchen and I do'n want her suddenly appearin' in the doorway with a fryin' pan," she said, trying to lighten the mood - it worked, judging by the faint smile that creased Mathilda's bloodless lips.

As the two women went out of the eatery and down the corridor, Herbert Gregg shook his head and re-lit his cigarillo. "It took her all of two minutes..." he said as the grayish-blue smoke wafted up past his squinting eyes. "I'll be damned. Sometimes, I can't even get a dancin' girl to look my way without bribing her, but Blackie Durham just slides over there, talks for a few minutes and... damn."

"Maybe she's jus' got sumthin' you ain't, Herb," Mumblin' Jack said and cackled into his full beard.

"Here, I'll... uh, put it down on the floor. Have a seat," Jane said and shoved her extra pair of denim pants down from the bunk. When Mathilda was reluctant to follow her offer, Jane smiled and patted the space next to her.

Mathilda looked around the small room - even though it was identical to the one she had tried to be in further up the hall, it felt different. Some of it was the cigarette smoke that lingered on Jane's clothing, but she knew it couldn't be the whole reason. Sighing, she put her duffel bag on the floor and sat down next to the tall, imposing outlaw. "My story isn't pretty... but I need to... to tell it to someone," she said quietly after a few seconds of silence.

"I understand, Mathilda. Go on... please tell me," Jane said and wrapped her arm around the young redhead's shoulder. When she felt the petite body tremble from her touch, she removed her arm at once, afraid that she'd misread the signals completely.

"No..." Mathilda said and reached for the arm. "It feels so comforting..."

"Okay," Jane said with a broad grin.

Mathilda sighed. She looked down at the angry red lines on her wrists and wondered if any of it was really true or if she had finally snapped and was living an endless, vivid fantasy.

In her dreams, she'd spent many a sizzling night bunked up with Blackie Durham, and she could scarcely fathom that the feared outlaw was with her now, sitting next to her with an arm draped over her shoulder. The surprisingly tender touch from the outlaw's arm was another surreal element, but in the end, she decided she didn't care whether it was a fantasy or not - she was determined to enjoy it while it lasted.

Sighing deeply, she cleared her throat and began relaying her tale: "I used to be a dancing girl in the Bull Rider Saloon in Princetown. The girls were all living above the saloon, and one night after closing, a young man I had always considered a Gentleman came to my room. Henry Wilkinson Junior was his name."

"I see," Jane said, rubbing Mathilda's back.

"It turned out Henry mistook my profession for that of a whore and wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Hmmm! Wouldn't be the first time some fella thought with his lower head."

"I suppose. We struggled. The struggle left my room and went onto the gallery above the saloon... eventually he fell down a flight of stairs and was injured. I believe he broke his arm. When he left, he cursed me and said I would regret treating him so poorly."

"Hmmm. But why-"

"I'm just getting to that, Miss Durham..."

"Sorry," Jane said with a sheepish grin. "Go on. Don't let me stop ya."

Mathilda squirmed on the bed and sighed again. "Well... less than a quarter of an hour later, my door was kicked down by Sheriff Cutler and several Deputies, among them a woman I had believed to be a very dear friend of mine, Victoria Lynn. You see, Henry was the son of Princetown's magistrate, Chief Justice of the Peace Henry Wilkinson Senior."

"Son of a bitch!"

"I know. I was arrested, and that same night, I was put on trial by Justice Wilkinson who convicted me of bodily harm and of treating his son disrespectfully. I was sentenced to four years in the op Jerome Norris Correctional Institution for Wayward Women up north. The very next day, they shipped me off on the stagecoach with a Deputy by my side... and I wasn't allowed to say goodbye to my friends or my colleagues... or even to go back to my home to get a few of my belongings, I- like my Pa's silver pocket watch," Mathilda said in a voice that trailed off into nothing. When no more words came forth, she sighed deeply and leaned against the warm body next to her.

"What a buncha stinkin' rats! They should be pleased I wa'n there 'cos that woulda been swift an' nasty," Jane growled and punched her fist into her thigh.

A few tears ran down Mathilda's cheeks but she did nothing to stop them. "Jane," she suddenly said, "will you help me get back my Pa's watch? He gave it to me on his deathbed. There's an inscription inside that says 'From James Lawrence Brown to Martin Brown'. It's all I have left of my Pa, and I... I so dearly want to get the watch back. Will you help me? Please?"

Jane grunted and squeezed the young redhead's shoulder. "Just try to stop me, Missy. We'll get your Pa's watch back... rest assured."

"It c- could get bad... Sheriff Cutler and the Wilkinsons are... are tough."

"Many tough men have tried ta kill me over the years... many," Jane said in a dark tone. "Only a few are breathin' today."

The thinly veiled threat of sudden, messy death made Mathilda's breath hitch, and she couldn't stop a small hiccup from escaping her lips.

"Them sweet peas catchin' up with ya, huh? No wonder... I do'n think I ever saw anyone chow down three bowls o' salt pork an' sweet pea stew before," Jane said and bumped her shoulder against Mathilda's.

"I was hungry..."

"Bet you were... tell ya what, why dontcha try to catch some shuteye now? I promised the fellas I'd play some poker a li'l later on, but after that, I'll stay here and watch over you all night long. How's that sound?"

"Oh, I can't ask that," Mathilda said and started to move away, but Jane just shook her head.

"Sure ya can. But ya do'n hafta, 'cos I'm doin' it outta my own free will."

Mathilda narrowed her eyes and studied the weather-beaten - but still gorgeous - face of the outlaw to try to gauge whether or not Jane was sincere or if she was simply looking for the easy route to get laid.

During the three years she had spent inside, she had experienced time and time again that there were always hidden agendas or ulterior motives hiding behind seemingly innocent suggestions. She had been fooled once and the result had been painful - she wasn't about to be fooled again.

On the other hand, she was still too raw to have her last illusions shattered, so she decided to save the question of why the infamous outlaw Jane 'Blackie' Durham was doing this for a simpleton like her for a brighter day.

Instead, she nodded and let out a long sigh. "Thank you. It helped me a lot to talk to someone friendly," she said quietly and got up from Jane's bed.

"You're certainly welcome. Hey... where' ya goin'?"

"I need to visit the outhouse. Once you're done playing with the fellas, would you... would you mind knocking before you enter?" Mathilda said with a wistful smile as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Grunting, Jane reached into her pocket to get her tobacco pouch so she could roll herself a cigarette.

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By the manner in which the conversation between Mumblin' Jack, Herbert and Francisco died down when Jane entered the eatery, she guessed that the topic of the debate had been one six-foot, black-haired, blue-eyed outlaw who went by the name of Blackie Durham.

Thick clouds of cigarillo, cheroot and pipe smoke drifted upward and swirled lazily around the kerosene lamp above the table where the three men were playing cards. Several bottles containing liquids of varying colors had been uncorked and the contents had been distributed evenly between three glasses.

Smirking, Jane put her freshly rolled cigarette into her mouth and went over to the table. She put her hands on the backrest of one of the chairs and let her experienced eye glide across the pot and stakes at the center of the table to decide whether or not to join the game in progress.

The pot only amounted to a few dollars - and Herbert Gregg's pile of stash was largest - so she decided to wait a round, and dug into her pocket for her matches instead. With a flick of the wrist, she struck the match on the back of the chair she was leaning against. Once she had lit up and thrown the spent match into the nearest spittoon, she strolled up to the bar to help herself to a bottle of liquid entertainment.

All through that little show, the three men had been conspicuously silent, and Jane noticed they were all squinting at her through the smoke, no doubt wondering how much she had heard and if they needed to sign their last will and testament right then and there.

"Relax, fellas," she said, making her cigarette bob up and down in her mouth. "I did'n hear nothin' so you do'n hafta fill your breeches just yet."

A collective sigh of relief was heard from the table, prompting a husky chuckle from Jane as she took a bottle of whisky and a glass from the counter. Once she made it back to the table, Herbert and Francisco moved their chairs aside to give her room to sit down.

"Much obliged," she said and put the bottle on the table. Sitting down, she poured herself a drink and held the glass with the amber liquid up against the shine from the kerosene lamp. "Gentlemen, your health... my wealth," she said and emptied the contents in one gulp.

The bold statement made Herbert Gregg chuckle and present his winning hand, earning himself a pair of deep groans from Jack and Francisco as they slapped down their own worthless hands. "You can talk, but can you play, Blackie?" he said as he scooped up the pile of dollar bills.

"We just gonna hafta find out, wo'n we?" Jane said and poured herself another shot.

A few minutes later, Mathilda came back in from the outhouse and crossed through the eatery without drawing attention to herself. It wasn't until her red hair was lit up by a cone of light from one of the lamps that Jane noticed her young friend had returned.

The outlaw looked up from the game of Texas Hold 'Em they were playing to send Mathilda a reassuring wink that was responded to by another wistful smile.

Herbert caught the exchange but chose not to say anything. Instead, he puffed on his latest cigarillo and briefly locked eyes with Mumblin' Jack in an attempt to signal that he had been right all along about the outlaw and the prisoner.

Jack just scoffed at the gambler and concentrated on playing his hand.

Many hands later, the four players had seemingly engaged in a fierce competition to see which of them could produce the widest yawn. The excessive yawning threatened to take the focus off the real game, and after a particularly impressive example of the species, Mumblin' Jack folded his hand and put his cards on the table. "Naw, that's it fer me. Gotta get some shuteye or I'll never get up at the crack o' dawn," he said while rubbing his face.

"Blackie?" Herbert said, putting down his own cards.

"Nah. I'm done, too," Jane said and chucked down her final whisky.

Herbert's pile was the biggest of the three, and as he began to count it, he nodded politely at his fellow players. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, lady and gentlemen. If you feel like losing more money, I'll be your huckleberry."

"Speakin' o' berries," Jack said and got up from his chair, "I think them whistleberries we had for supper would like ta make a statement." - With that, he cocked his leg and let rip a thunderous chili beans-and-onions fart that cleared the poker table in an almighty hurry.

"Jesus, Jack!" Jane hissed and stepped away from the vile stench that burst from the cackling driver.

Francisco hurried over and opened the door to get some refreshing evening air inside. "That wasn't nice... that wasn't nice at all, Mr. Barnes," he said, waving his hand in front of his nose.

"Jack's mah name, jack's mah game," Mumblin' Jack said, grabbed the bottle of the special brew Elpidia had made for him - applejack - and staggered towards the door to get to the outhouse.

Once the air had cleared sufficiently for the poker players to return to the eatery, they bid each other a good night and went to their rooms down the corridor.

As promised, Jane knocked on her own door before entering. She hadn't quite worked out if Mathilda wanted to spend the night in her own room or in Jane's, but she felt it was more prudent to be safe than sorry. "Mathilda?" she whispered as she held the door ajar.

The rays of moonlight that came down from the window above the bunk illuminated the pale, delicate flesh of a female thigh. The sight - which wasn't unusual in the least for Jane - made her chew on her cheek and shut the door softly behind her.

Walking in quietly, the outlaw looked at the sleeping figure on her bunk. She was no stranger to having women occupying her sleeping quarters, but they were never as fragile as Mathilda Brown. Something stirred inside Jane

that she knew wasn't lust - at least, not pure lust - but that she didn't have a word for. A term called maternal instinct rummaged around her brain, but she scoffed at that ridiculous notion.

'Why am I even doing this?' Jane thought as she studied the sleeping woman. *'There's no money in it... and I doubt she'll ever let me quench my thirst in her lap. Maybe it's a chance to get back at the law dogs who sent her up the river... maybe she's just a lost, lonely kitten who'll-'*

Even while Jane was contemplating her motivations, Mathilda began to whimper and jerk around in her sleep. She gripped the quilt with her fists and looked like she was trying to push an imaginary opponent off of her. "No... no... get away from her... get away..." she mumbled in a thick voice that was only one notch above terrified.

After hearing the terror in Mathilda's voice, Jane didn't need to be motivated any further. At once, she knelt down and put her hands very tenderly on the whimpering woman's shoulders. "Hush, Mathilda... hush... it's all right. You're free... you're safe... ya ain't in prison anymo'... hush..." she chanted quietly.

The chanting seemed to work as Mathilda's whimpering and frantic actions slowed down and eventually came to a stop. Her eyelids fluttered open and the two women who couldn't be more different shared a brief but tender moment.

"Oh... Jane... God, I was..." Mathilda said, but her voice trailed off.

"'s all right," Jane said and pulled the young redhead into a comforting hug. "You was havin' a nightmare."

Mathilda's chin began to tremble, but she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand which seemed to settle it down. "I was back there..."

"I know. You should'n talk about it. It'll only make it worse. Hush now, okay?"

Jane sat down on the wooden floor and made herself comfortable. Sitting on the floor meant that she was more or less at eye-level with Mathilda, and she used it to send her a silent message of support that the young redhead accepted willingly. "You told me your story earlier... d'ya wanna hear my story? Mmmm?"

"I'd like to, thank you," Mathilda said, grateful to get a respite from the nightmare that had seen her return to one of the worst days in her life as an inmate; the day she had witnessed a young woman gutted like a fish with a homemade knife for addressing the wrong prisoner.

"Okay," Jane said and shuffled around to find a soft spot on the hard floor.

"Wait, come up here..." Mathilda said and quickly swung her bare legs over the side of the bunk. When the outlaw didn't follow but seemed to stare at the pink thighs that were immediately in front of her nose, Mathilda swept the quilt over her legs and moved to the side. "There's plenty of room," she added almost as an afterthought.

"Okay," Jane said again, grinding her jaw. Shrugging, she got up into the bunk and moved under the quilt, purely for the sake of keeping warm. "Now... where was I? Oh yeah... I guess ya could say I've had a colorful life. My folks were killed in an Injun raid on their wagon train when I was only a scrawny li'l thing... knee-high to a grasshopper, ya know. I was the only survivor. I guess them Apaches missed me 'cos I was so small or somethin'. Anyway, a scoutin' party sent out to find the wagons realized that I was all that was left and took me back to my new folks. They gave me my name... Jane 'cos I was a girl and Durham for their own last name. The Blackie part came later," Jane said and fluffed her long, black hair.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Mathilda said and reached around the outlaw's waist underneath the quilt.

"Uh... why?"

"Because you never knew your real folks. That's gotta be awful."

"Well, uh... I s'pose, but the folks who reared me were good people... mostly. My new Pa flogged me regularly, but eh... I was happy. Spent most of my youth as a guttersnipe who got in trouble with the law and... ya know. When my tits burst outta my chest, I learned I kinda liked them girls, that was fun. Then I learned I was a quick draw. Killed my first fella at fourteen. I ain't never looked back since."

"My God, Jane... how can you be so casual about it?" Mathilda said and shied back from the outlaw.

Jane sighed and shot the young redhead a sideways glance. "That first one had it comin' 'cos he was'n just askin' about gettin' on my dance card, ya know... he was drunk off his caboose and wanted to take me by force behind Ma's woodshed. Ain't that why you resisted that Henry fella you was talkin' about?"

Mathilda blinked a couple of times and eventually nodded solemnly. "I guess," she said and moved back to the outlaw.

The closeness of the half-undressed young redhead suddenly got to Jane and she felt her temperature rising to dangerous levels. She wanted to call it a night before she did anything stupid, but she knew it would be very improper to just leave Mathilda hanging, especially when she had promised that she'd look after her.

"What's going to happen tomorrow, Jane?" Mathilda said and leaned her head on the outlaw's shoulder.

The contact made matters worse, and Jane sighed and looked towards the heavens to ask any higher power who'd listen for guidance. When nothing came, she shrugged and moved her arm around the slim waist of her companion. "Not sure. We still got forty miles to go until we're in Princetown. Them bandits we chased away might come back. But anyway, when we get there, you need to see the Sheriff at once, ya hear? Promise me you won't forget..."

"I won't, Jane, I promise."

"Good," Jane said and pulled Mathilda into a sideways hug.

A few seconds of silence went by before Mathilda scrunched up her face and shot the outlaw a puzzled look. "Wait... you're not coming to Princetown with the rest of us?"

"Was'n my plan, no."

"But why not?"

"Les'say I need to speak with someone that peaceful, law-abidin' citizens like your good self should stay the hell away from, Missy."

The fact that Blackie Durham was still an outlaw at heart seemed to surprise Mathilda, and she let out a brief, slightly disappointed grunt. A wide yawn took control over her being and she snaked a little under the quilt to get the sleeping fleas to turn over. "Thank you for the bedside talk, Jane. I think I'll try to get back to sleep now. Will you still be here when I wake up tomorrow?"

"Oh, sure I will. I'm like a boil on yer ass... impossible to get rid of," Jane said with a broad grin. As she looked at the young redhead, she asked herself why she hadn't even tried to kiss her yet.

'Hell, I've bedded women I've known for a shorter time than this... but I can't. Look at her. Look at those innocent, green eyes... those lips, those youthful, firm tits under that prison-issue nightshirt... Jesus, I gotta go... now,' Jane thought and bounded to her feet. "G'night, Mathilda. Don't let them nightmares get ya, okay?"

"I'll try, Jane. Goodnight," Mathilda said and swung her bare legs up into the bunk.

"I'll just scout out the Station but then I'll get back to ya. I promise," Jane said and closed the door softly.

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After scouting the entire perimeter of the Trading Station to sniff out possible bandit campfires or various other varmints, Jane came back to the main building with her Winchester over her arm.

A glowing red dot and a cloud of cheroot smoke that wafted up from the dark porch hinted at the presence of Mumblin' Jack Barnes, and Jane gave him a short wave as she came back into the courtyard.

The driver was sitting on a wooden chair with the bottle of applejack next to him, his battered Boss Of The Plains hat in his hands and a half-smoked cheroot in his mouth. When Jane stepped up onto the porch, he knocked off the ash and nodded at her.

"Can't sleep, Mumbles?" she said and put her rifle against the wall of the adobe building.

"Dunno. Ain't tried yet. Them chili beans almost gone and kilt me," Jack said and took a swig of the bottle. "You wan'some?" he continued, holding up the bottle of homemade apple cider brandy.

Jane looked at the unlabeled bottle with the slightly golden liquid and considered the offer. "Depends. You done fartin'?"

"All done. I've been on the crapper ever since I left ya."

"Then I want some," Jane said and took the bottle. After wiping the neck on her sleeve, she took a long swig and handed the bottle back to the driver. "Huh, that's the good stuff," she said as she felt the strong, rich-tasting liquor burn its way down her pipe and into her gut.

"Yep."

"Huh," Jane said again and took another of the chairs that Francisco had put on the porch. Swinging it around, she sat on it the wrong way 'round and put her arms across the backrest.

"Find anythin' out there, did ya, lassie?" Jack said and took the last, deep puff of his cheroot before throwing it out onto the courtyard where the tip continued to glow for a little while.

"Nothin'. We're all alone out here, Jack."

"Good. Don't much fancy them bandits," Jack said and touched his bandage. With a grunt, he took a long swig from his applejack.

The two people fell silent and were content with listening to the sounds of the night and looking at the dark sky where billions of stars were visible high above them. Sighing, Jane found her tobacco pouch and began to roll herself a cigarette.

"You an' me under the stars, Blackie... brings back a lotta mem'ries, don't it?" Jack said thoughtfully after a little while.

"Yeah," Jane said and took a deep puff of her new cigarette. After holding in the smoke, she exhaled slowly to let the pale blue tendrils travel through her mouth and nose.

"Can ya believe it's been so long? So long since you an' me fought in the war? You was just a young slip of a girl... well, hell, you was already taller than me, but... ya know. I still don't understand how the hell you was able ta get in."

" 'Cos I could ride and shoot as well as any of the boys, and I knew what I was doin' out there in the wilderness. Yeah... Company A, Confederate Arizona Rangers," Jane said with her cigarette hanging loose in the corner of her mouth. "And the bugle corps. Well, signal corps, I never could play that damn horn. Sounded like someone skinnin' a cat."

"That it did, Blackie. That it did," Jack said and let out a cackling chuckle. "But you was a natural with them flags."

"Yeah. I always was colorful."

"Yeah," Jack said and took a long swig from the applejack. "D'ya ever meet any of the boys?"

"No. Listen, it's not that I do'n like the company, but I better get some sleep. We got a hard day ahead of us tomorrow," Jane said and stepped off the chair. Stifling a yawn, she stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette on the wall of the building and put it into her breast pocket.

"I know. G'night, Blackie... again. If them bed bugs bite, bite 'em right back," Jack said and staggered to his feet, clutching his nearly-empty bottle of cider brandy.

"I will. 'Night, Mumbles."

Just as Jane put her hand on the door handle to her own room, a pleading, whimpering, heartfelt cry for help carved through the nighttime quiet like a knife through butter. *'Help... help... me...'*

The sounds had barely reached Jane's ears before she had her Colt Peacemaker out of its holster and had barged in through the door.

The lock was intact, the window was closed, the floor was empty and no one was hiding in the shadows - in short, Mathilda was alone. Alone and suffering from another nightmare that had the young redhead whimpering in terror and trying to reach for someone with both hands.

"Sweet Jesus, that poor child," Jane groaned as she holstered her revolver. Rubbing her face, she thought about waking Mathilda up for a second time, but found that she needed a better and more permanent solution.

With a grunt, she locked the door and began to undress.

A scant two minutes later, she slipped under the quilt - only wearing bloomers and a thin undershirt - and moved up against Mathilda's tormented, writhing body.

Almost at once, the young redhead relaxed into Jane's touch and let out a long sigh that warmed the outlaw's chilly skin. Jane got comfortable on her back and chuckled quietly at the sight of the sleeping Mathilda following her over.

Soon, Mathilda was breathing evenly with her head firmly ensconced in the nook of Jane's shoulder, and her right arm draped across the chest just below the outlaw's breasts.

"Sleep tight, li'l one," Jane whispered, smiling into the darkness at the thought of the crazy day she had just lived through.

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CHAPTER 3

The rumbling, creaking, groaning sounds that emanated from the battered stagecoach as it made its way from the Sanchez Trading Station and further east, towards Princetown, could do nothing to stop the naughty scenes that kept playing in Mathilda's mind.

Over and over, she saw and felt herself being ravished by the tall outlaw, felt her lips kissed, felt her nipples pinched, felt her skin feasted upon, felt her most private area tended to in a way she had never dreamt possible - but in reality, all she had done was to wake up in Jane Durham's arms and blush like a crazed bobcat when she worked out what was going on.

'I'll never forget waking up draped across her... never,' Mathilda thought, slowly shaking her head to get back to the real world. *'My God, that body... those eyes... Good Lord... and they say it's perverted and a wretched sin for a woman to lust after another woman... they've never met Jane Durham.'*

On the opposite bench of the stagecoach, Herbert Gregg chuckled under his breath as he observed the young redhead's brightly colored cheeks. He turned to look at Lucille Monahan to see if she had noticed anything, but the nurse was leaning against the outer wall, appearing to be asleep. *'I should have bet a few dollars on how long it would take Blackie to deflower that young kitten. Heh... would have been easy money.'*

His eyes briefly met with Mathilda's, but the young woman looked away in a hurry.

Outside, the vegetation changed again. Clusters of tall three- and four-armed cacti began to appear as the terrain slowly moved from the greener fields surrounding the Trading Station to a dustier, rockier desert environment.

It was still early in the morning - a quarter past seven according to Mumblin' Jack's official Milligan Stage Company clock that he had on a chain inside his buckskin jacket - but the sun's rays were already powerful and were beating down on the dusty trail with a fervor that seemed to outdo even the previous day's efforts.

Up on the board, Jane was handling the reins and the brake lever while Jack was cussing at her for not doing it tenderly enough.

"Naw, Blackie... fer Pete's sakes, lassie. Ya gotta keep them steeds in good order. Ya can't force the second row ta move faster than their leader. They gotta follow him, see?" Jack said, gesturing at the way Jane was holding the four reins.

"Oh, I see all right, Mumbles..." Jane growled. Even though she was busy with the driving, she turned to shoot the driver an icy glare that made him put up his good hand and shy away.

Turning back to the trail, Jane grumbled a few curses of her own and shook her head to get her long tresses out of her eyes.

"Rock!" Jack mumbled into his full beard and pointed at the trail ahead, but there wasn't enough time for Jane to steer clear of the obstacle - as a result, the large wheels on the right-hand side of the stagecoach hit it dead on and bounced over it with a force that nearly unseated the two people on the board.

Once the vehicle was stable again, Jane let out an embarrassed chuckle and looked at Jack with an apologetic smile on her face.

Mumblin' Jack Barnes just mumbled into his full beard.

Several hours later, the stagecoach went past a wooden sign that read,

Princetown

Princetown County

Az. Territory

Population 423

"Yeeeee-haaaw!" Jane shouted as the stage barreled past the bullet hole-riddled sign and into the outskirts of the town.

Like most towns in the area, the wealth and the splendor in Princetown were clustered around the central parts; Main Street, the connecting Perry Street, the off-shoot Sullivan Street and the ratty herding track called the Ballentine Trail. The further away one got from the three major arteries, the less shiny the buildings became, and the alleys between the flea-infested houses at the south end of Sullivan Street - in a zone known as the Rat's Nest - weren't safe for anyone who weren't prepared to fight for the contents of their pocketbook.

The stray dogs and children in tattered clothes that came out from a cluster of rundown, wooden sheds to greet the stage as it came in from the desert created an obstacle course unlike any Jane had ever experienced, and she was more than happy to relinquish command over the team of horses to Jack who was far more experienced in navigating around such hazards.

"Jesus," she said quietly as the stagecoach rumbled past a low adobe hut with a plate roof from which four small, barefoot children were waving at them. "I thought Princetown was supposed to be rich... look at 'em."

"Princetown is rich, Blackie..." Jack said with his eyes glued to the road ahead of the horses. "You ain't spent much time in them towns recently, have ya? It's like this ev'rywhere nowadays."

Jane looked down at the side of the stagecoach and noticed that two young children were running next to it, holding out their hands to the passengers to beg for coins. "No, I have'n. I prefer my own company outside of town to be honest."

Inside the stage, Lucille Monahan had borrowed the small handkerchief from Herbert Gregg and held it to her mouth. "Oh, Good Lord, how horrible. Such poverty... I didn't expect that. It's not like this up north where I come from. Something should be done about it!"

"I agree. Torch the whole damn thing and rebuild it from scratch," Herbert said casually, looking with disdain at a row of barking dogs that had been chained to one of the adobe huts.

"Sir! I object!" Lucille said and promptly slapped the gambler's arm with the handkerchief.

Adjusting his penguin jacket, Herbert shot the nurse a sharp look. "Object all you will, Ma'am, but that is my opinion. There's nothing out here worth saving."

Mathilda kept out of the discussion, content with looking out at the desolate outskirts of Princetown. Soon, the adobe huts gave way to one-story wooden houses that were in much better condition than the ramshackle buildings further out.

A few minutes later, the stagecoach came to a gliding halt outside the plush three-story Birrell Hotel on the corner of Main Street and Perry. Almost at once, the double doors opened and the manager and several bellboys swarmed out to greet any potential customers and to retrieve the luggage from the roof of the stage.

Once the horses had come to a full stop, Jane pushed the brake lever all the way to the forward lock and looked over at Jack who was tying the reins to the board. "Did li'l ol' me do that all right?" she said with a grin.

"That part, yeah," Jack said and cackled into his full beard. "Nah, jus' pullin' yer leg, Blackie. If ya ever seekin' a new line o' work, jus' apply ta the Milligan Stage Comp'ny. O' course, you'll be shovelin' ma-noor for six months before they'll let ya get anywhere near one of them stagecoaches, but..."

"It was nice workin' with ya again, Mumbles," Jane said and put out her hand. "Stay safe, yeah? Get that shoulder looked at. Gangrene ain't no fun for a man your age."

Mumblin' Jack chuckled and shook Jane's hand. While he was still holding onto it, he looked her in the eye and furrowed his brow. "If ya really is serious about hookin' up with Quint Connors, I can only tell ya the same thing, Blackie. Boot hill ain't no fun fer no one, period."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mumbles. Thanks for the ride," Jane said and climbed up on the roof to get her saddle and her two saddlebags.

By the time she made it down to the covered porch outside the hotel, Herbert Gregg had already been whisked away by the manager and Lucille Monahan had left on her own, walking up Perry Street to get to a saloon. Jane cocked her head when she realized that Mathilda Brown was standing all alone next to the stagecoach with her prison-issue duffel bag clutched to her bosom and an unreadable expression on her face.

"Hey," Jane said, holding the saddlebags over her arm and balancing her saddle on her other shoulder.

Mathilda smiled wistfully at the tall outlaw but quickly averted her eyes. "Hello."

"They did'n offer ya a room?"

"No. Mr. Royce, the manager, brushed right past me to ask Mrs. Monahan and Mr. Gregg. Then they all left."

"Mmmm." Jane took a step back and studied the young redhead. "Les'see about that," she continued, put her hand on Mathilda's shoulder and steered her towards the double doors.

"No wait, Jane... please. I can't pay for it... and you said you had things to do. I don't want to cause you so much hassle," Mathilda pleaded quietly.

"One, I'll pay, and two... hassle? Mathilda, if ya was hasslin' me, you'd know about it pretty dang quickly," Jane said with a wink. "C'mon, les'get ya a room. Eh?"

Mathilda sighed but eventually shrugged and went into the hotel, closely followed by the tall, imposing outlaw.

On the other side of the busy Main Street, a man in his mid-forties wearing a dark gray Western Suit and a white Stetson that sat so low his eyes were barely visible observed the two women with great interest. Lighting a cheroot, he crossed the street and made a beeline for the hotel.

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The lobby of the Birrell Hotel was lavishly decorated with white walls, intricately carved ornaments depicting little seraphs, thick red carpets on the floor and up the grand, curving staircase, a lounge with no less than four opulent wing chairs and a smoking table in the center, and finally a long, highly polished counter with a guest book and a small bell.

Standing at the counter waiting for the hotel manager to come to them, Jane felt her sixth sense give her a kick up the backside, and she turned around almost unnoticeably and squinted around the lobby to see what had triggered her inner alarm.

Her eyes met with those of a ruddy, slightly overweight man in a dark gray Western Suit who was leaning against one of the four support pillars that framed the armchair lounge. Looking down his rotund figure, she noticed that the man wasn't armed - at least, not that she could see. The sneaky look on the man's meaty, rosy face suggested that he had a concealed weapon somewhere inside his suit or up his sleeve, most likely a Derringer, Jane surmised.

Her train of thoughts was interrupted by the return of Edward Royce, the hotel manager.

The elderly man - with a salt-and-pepper mustache, water-combed hair, a black suit and a military posture to go with it - took one look at Mathilda's forlorn figure and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Ma'am," he said to Jane in a voice that held no pretense of being friendly, "this is not a hotel you can rent for the hour. We do not welcome women of her ilk into our establishment. I'm sure you can find suitable accommodations elsewhere."

Narrowing her eyes, Jane looked at Mathilda and then back at the manager. "Wait... women of her ilk?"

"Whores," Edward Royce said coldly.

"Whores?" Jane echoed, pinning the elderly man to the spot with an ice cold glare. As she looked at him, her upper lip drew back in a sneer.

Edward Royce was visually rattled by the intensity of the glare and he promptly dropped a fountain pen he had been clutching for support. "I'm s- sorry, Ma'am, but I must k- kindly ask you to l- leave... or I sh- shall call Sheriff Cutler."

Hearing the name of the lawman who arrested her made Mathilda break out in a shiver and she wanted nothing more than to leave the horrible hotel. "Jane... no... please, let's leave... let's leave now," she pleaded, tugging at Jane's sleeve.

Without speaking a word - and without worthy the hotel manager a second look - Jane put a comforting hand on Mathilda's shoulder and led her back to the exit.

Puffing on his cheroot, the man who had been leaning against the pillar nodded to the shaken Edward Royce and followed the women out. Once he was outside on the covered porch, he looked around to find them - he quickly did, spotting them further down the sidewalk where they talked in front of a highbrow coffee shop called Harvey DuBois' Cafe.

The man walked casually down the sidewalk until he was within earshot of their conversation. He was only able to pick up a few scattered words before he found himself hauled into an alleyway by his lapels with a cocked Colt Peacemaker in his face.

"That's as far as you be goin', Mista," Jane said in a dangerous tone of voice.

Mathilda kept standing on the sidewalk, staring wide-eyed at the scene and clutching her duffel bag to her bosom like it contained gold dust.

"Who are ya and why are ya followin' us? You ain't no lawdog, that's for sure," Jane continued when the man didn't appear to want to identify himself.

After a few seconds, the ruddy man chuckled and took out his cheroot to knock off the ash. "I'm Quint Connors and I'm guessing you're Blackie Durham," the man said in a lyrical Scottish accent that held plenty of short vowels and rolling R's. "Well, well, well. Tell me, does your Pastor know you like girls?" he continued, glaring at Mathilda who promptly moved away from the mouth of the alley to get out of his sight.

"Ain't none o' your Goddamned business, Connors," Jane growled and lowered her Colt. When the man didn't seem to be an immediate threat, she released the hammer and holstered the revolver.

"Now, now, let's not take the Lord's name in vain, Blackie. Since you're here, you must have received my note. But does it mean you accept my offer?" Quint said and adjusted his suit by pulling on the lapels.

Jane took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When she had received the note from Quint Connors, she had just collected a bounty from the Sheriff in Tolliver; five thousand dollars in cash and a full pardon of her own past crimes and misdemeanors in Blaise and Princetown Counties for bringing a rapist to justice, dead or alive. The man had been stupid enough to try to add Jane to his long list of victims and got a slug in the chest for his trouble - but that was then.

Chewing on her cheek, Jane looked at the empty mouth of the alley where Mathilda had been only a scant minute before.

"Well?" Quint said, once again knocking off the ash from his cheroot.

"What is it ya want me to do, exactly?"

"It's easier if I show you, Blackie."

"Yeah... okay," Jane said and pushed her low-crowned hat back to scratch her forehead. "Okay. Wait here, I just gotta..."

Grinning, Quint nodded and put his hands on his hips. "I understand, Blackie. Why don't you treat your sweet little sugar girl to a cup of coffee and some apple pie while you go with me and get up to speed? The coffee shop we're standing next to is the best in all of Princetown."

Jane gave him a hard look to let him know he should lay off the derogatory language. When the message seemed to get through to him, she nodded and walked up to the mouth of the alleyway. She found Mathilda sitting on a white

porch swing outside the coffee shop, guarding the saddle and the bags and looking even more forlorn and lost than before.

"Mathilda, I, uh... need to go with the man we just spoke to. But I'll be back, I promise," Jane said as she crouched down in front of the young redhead and put her hands on the skinny knees.

"Oh."

"The fella told me this is the best coffee shop in town, so... so, uh, here's five dollars," Jane said and dug into her pants pocket. After she had checked that it really was a five dollar bill, she took Mathilda's hand, put the bill into her palm and closed her hand. "Do ya remember this here coffee shop?"

"I remember," Mathilda said quietly. "They've always made great apple pie."

"And there ya have it, eh? I'll help ya get our stuff inside, but then I have to go with the fella. I do'n know how long it'll take, but I wo'n leave ya hangin' for too long. When I get back, we'll talk to the Sheriff like you're supposed to, and then we'll search for somewhere to spend the night. There's gotta be somethin' in this here town. Cheer up, friend... you're back home," Jane said and briefly touched Mathilda's cheek before getting up and taking her saddle and the pair of saddlebags into the coffee shop.

Mathilda felt her cheek burn where the outlaw's long, tender fingers had been. Averting her eyes from the scores of people she just knew were gawking at her, she sighed and got off the porch swing to follow Jane inside.

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Jane and Quint quickly moved across the busy Main Street and walked up the connecting Perry Street, past the office of the local newspaper, an all-day bakery, and several high-class saloons.

As they went past the Golden Wings Saloon, Jane happened to glance in through the double doors at the patrons who were standing at the counter and caught a glimpse of a short, dusty-blond woman in a coarse, dark gray outfit that was adorned with a shiny tin star on her chest.

Jane almost dropped a step behind Quint Connors, and she had to look down at the sidewalk to find her rhythm again. "Whaddahell, ya got wimmen deperties here?" she said with some degree of puzzlement.

"So?" Quint said over his shoulder. "Sometimes, a woman is the best man for the job. Right?" he continued, turning around to offer Jane Durham a slightly condescending grin.

Jane just grumbled and stored the information for later.

When the two people turned the corner of Perry and Sullivan Street and began to go south, it was evident they were walking into a poorer area of the town. Instead of the one- and two-story houses on Main Street that had clearly been made by skilled craftsmen, the low buildings at the far end of Sullivan Street were slapped together using all kinds of material - adobe, scrap wood and even reed.

'Damn, this part of town is on the wrong side of ugly,' Jane thought as she looked down an alleyway and saw two prostitutes engaged in a shouting- and shoving match.

"Here we are," Quint said and crossed Sullivan Street headed for a red two-story building made of wood that had come from an old saloon - at least, that's what Jane surmised after taking a look at the random lettering on the planks making up the facade.

A wooden staircase put on the side of the building went up to the second floor, and Quint stepped aside when he reached it. "Ladies first," he said with a smirk, gesturing up the stairs.

"Gents first," Jane replied casually, reaching down to loosen the strap that held her Peacemaker in its holster. She turned around slowly to check out the local neighborhood but couldn't see anything untoward.

"Always alert, I see. Well, all right. Follow me," Quint said and began the ascent.

Once they were at the landing at the top of the stairs, he tapped his knuckles on the glass pane in the door - first one tap, then twice in rapid succession, then one tap again.

A filthy curtain was moved aside and Jane found herself staring at a bronzed face she had already seen the previous day - the Mexican bandit with the white tunic and the floppy dark gray Stetson who had tried to rob the stagecoach at McNear's Boulders west of Princetown. "Well, I'll be a son of a..." she mumbled, placing her gun hand very near to the Colt's hilt.

Quint didn't seem to notice - he simply opened the door and stepped inside.

Jane narrowed her eyes and considered what she should do. When the interest in Quint's plans won out, she pursed her lips and stepped into the room on top of the stairs.

The room was larger than she had imagined - roughly fifteen feet across and nearly thirty feet deep. At one end, there was a desk, a chair and a large map of Princetown on the wall behind the two pieces of furniture; at the end nearest the entrance, there was an old, battered poker table with seven chairs of various designs placed around it in a random pattern.

Each chair was occupied by a fellow uglier than sin.

The men all stopped playing and turned to stare at Jane as she walked into the room. Hard, weather-beaten faces of white, Mexican and mixed origin stared daggers at her, prompting her to think that if the old saying was true, she would have keeled over in an instant.

As she held the men's stares and gave back as good as she got - especially directed at the Mexican in the white tunic - they lost interest in her and resumed playing poker, smoking and boozing from the many opened bottles of whisky.

At the desk, Quint Connors put his boots up on the corner and leaned back in the chair. "That was some mighty fine squinting you did there, Blackie. Most others would have run home to mama by now. Allow me to introduce you to Kevin Merton, Rafael 'Smokey' Ortega, Ira Grubb, Wally Shaye, Enrico Gomez, Phil Larson and Luis Mendoza."

"With all them bruisers," Jane said and pointed her thumb at the poker players, "what the hell d'ya need me for?"

"Oh, let's just say that a man can never have enough money, women or firepower," Quint said with a broad grin.

"Uh-huh?"

"Yes."

Quietly agreeing with that notion - only from her own perspective - Jane shrugged and moved closer to the desk. "Well, I'm here. Show me what this is all about," she said and sat down on the corner of the desk.

"This is a map of Princetown," Quint said and swept his hand across the map on the wall behind the desk.

"Yeah... so?"

"We don't own everything yet. We would like to. One way or the other." - He turned around and shot her a wide grin.

"Wo'n the law in this here town have somethin' to say 'bout that?"

"Sure it does. You know what the law says?"

"No... but I'm convinced you're about to tell me."

"That's right, Blackie. The law in Princetown says... why the hell isn't your plan working faster, Quint?"

Jane narrowed her eyes and moved off the corner of the desk. The news that the law was in cohorts with the crooks made a few things fall into place for her, not the least why someone as innocent as Mathilda Brown could suddenly be shipped off to a hellhole for three years for something that wouldn't even warrant a stern talking-to in other towns.

Quint reached into one of the desk drawers and found a bottle of rye and two shot glasses. Filling one, he offered it to Jane. "I know what you're thinking, Blackie."

"What am I thinkin', Quint?" Jane said and took the drink.

"You're thinking... your health, by the way," Quint said and emptied the glass in one gulp. Once he had wiped his lips on the back of his hand, he poured himself another shot. "You're thinking, what's the problem and what's in it for me? Right?"

"Somethin' like that." Jane didn't bother to wish Quint good health as she downed her rye. She never took her eyes off the crook in the suit as she put down the glass bottoms-up on the desk.

"Well, the problem is... look up here at the north part of town..." Quint said and pointed at the map. "You see that ranch way up there? That's 'Gentleman' George Ballentine's ranch. He's a horse breeder. Richest son of a bitch in the entire county, hell, the entire Territory. He's the key."

"He's got an army to stop you fellas, has he?"

"No, he's only got a handful of people. But he can afford to buy an army, and he's got the respect of the commoners in Princetown. And if that wasn't enough, he's best buddies with our magistrate, the so-called most esteemed Chief Justice of the Peace Henry Wilkinson, senior. They came up through the ranks together or some such sentimental nonsense," Quint said and waved his hand disrespectfully.

"Mmmm. And what's in it for me?"

Quint grinned evilly and reached into the desk drawer again. "I knew you'd see things from my point of view, Blackie. This is ten percent. Don't spend it all at once on cheap booze and cheaper women, you hear?" he said and threw Jane an envelope that she deftly caught in mid-air with her left hand - her right was still close to her Colt.

Looking inside, she found four one-hundred dollar bills. "Hmmm. Okay, I'm in," she said and put the four hundred dollars into her pants pocket before crumpling up the envelope and throwing it on the floor.

"Excellent!"

"But I need to tell ya somethin', Quint. Last night, I prob'ly killed two of your men out at McNear's Boulders west of the Trading Station. They was tryin' to rob the stage I was on. That Mexican with the fancy white shirt and the floppy Stetson down there was with 'em."

"Doesn't bother me one little bit, Blackie. If they didn't make it back, it's because they weren't good enough. Simple as that," Quint Connors said and got up from the desk. As he spoke the words, the mask of relative humanity he had been wearing slipped off to reveal his true, dark core. "We're done for now. When I need you, I'll find you. Where are you staying?"

"Don't know yet."

"You need a room for yourself and your sweet little thing?"

Jane ground her jaw at the crook's condescending description of Mathilda but kept it all inside. "Naw. Thanks anyway, Quint. We'll find somethin'. We only just got here."

"All right, but if you're ever in need of anything, just contact me. I can get things done," Quint Connors said and put his hands on his hips.

'I just bet ya can,' Jane thought.

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On her way back to the DuBois Cafe, Jane stopped at the Golden Wings Saloon to see if the female Deputy was still there, but she had left in the meantime.

Shrugging, Jane continued down Perry Street but soon noticed Mathilda sitting on the porch swing outside the coffee shop on Main Street, looking even more dejected than usual and holding her duffel bag, the saddle and the saddlebags close to her.

The forlorn figure in the prison-issue boots and tattered dress made Jane furrow her brow and chew on her cheek. She knew she had to make a decision sooner or later on what to do about the young redhead. Before she had met her, her objective had been clear: find Quint Connors, get hired, do whatever dirty business he expected of her and get the hell out of Princetown before the law could invite her to a hemp necktie party - but now that the stakes were higher, she had doubts her original plan was still valid. Sighing, she knew in her heart that it wasn't.

After crossing the busy Main Street, Jane waved at Mathilda who replied with a very faint smile. "Hey, that did'n take too- what the hell...? Why 'ya cryin'?"

"They threw me out," Mathilda said in a tiny voice. She reached up to wipe her eyes and the two wet lines that ran down her cheeks, but new teardrops appeared as soon as she had lowered her hands.

"Why? Do'n tell me a coffee and a slice o' apple pie gonna cost more than five bucks!" Jane said as she sat down next to Mathilda on the porch swing.

"I never got that far," Mathilda said and opened her fist to show the crumpled five dollar note. "They wouldn't let me stay in there."

"They would'n letcha stay in there?" Jane echoed and shot up from the bench. The corners of her mouth twitched a couple of times before an ice cold, nasty smile spread over her features and changed her appearance completely. "I think I'll have a word with them folks. Some just do'n know the concept of respect."

"No, Jane... please. Let's just forget it and move on."

"Mathilda, ya want me to forget they treated ya like somethin' that leaked outta the ass of a dead burro? I can't do that... hell, I wo'n do that!"

"Jane..."

"Look at 'em," Jane growled and moved up to stand at the window so she could look inside. "Look at 'em with them fancy white napkins on the tables, li'l candles, dainty spoons and forks... Goddamn bourgeois in their best bib an' tucker... an' they dare to throw ya out?"

"Jane, please," Mathilda implored, grabbing the outlaw's arm. "Let's move on. I remember another place further down Main Street. Please. I don't want to get in trouble on my first day back. You don't know the law here."

'Maybe I do, Mathilda,' Jane thought and looked toward the heavens. When the feel of Mathilda's hands on her left arm far outweighed the itch in her trigger finger, she decided that she'd been given a clear enough signal from above. "All right. But the next place we find, I'm goin' in with ya. I'd like to see 'em try and throw me out."

Ten minutes of easy strolling later, they had reached the south end of Main Street. There, the stores and houses were still of a high quality, though not as upper class as those centered around the hotel.

The south end of Main Street was dominated by a two-story livery stable, but a general store, a barber shop and a dressmaker added colorful touches to the street scene.

Jane looked at the various stores and let out a deep chuckle. "Olsen's Livery, Jensen's General Store, Mikkelsen's Dresses, Jonsson's Barber Shop... somehow I get the feelin' we've arrived at the Scandinavian corner o' Princetown," she said, putting an arm across Mathilda's shoulders.

When she didn't get an answer, she looked down at the young redhead and noticed that she was staring wide-eyed at the dressmaker's store - or rather, at a green and white Gingham dress with a bonnet that was on display in the store window.

"Hmmm," Jane said and broke out in an uncharacteristically broad smile. She knew the offer was too good to pass over, so she took Mathilda by the shoulders and steered her across the street - for once without protest.

The hand-painted sign above the store proclaimed it to be Anne-Mette 'Annie' Mikkelsen's Dresses For The Modern Woman, a fact that Jane Durham felt was highly appropriate for her young companion.

While Mathilda was looking at the dress in the window with eyes that were practically bugging out on stalks, a small hand-written sign in the lower right corner caught Jane's eye - it said *Room To Let, ask Mrs. Mikkelsen*. "Mathilda, do ya remember the Mikkelsens from earlier?"

"No. They weren't here when I left," Mathilda said in a flat voice, far too preoccupied with staring a hole through the store window to speak.

"And that means they do'n know you, neither... c'mon," Jane said and opened the door which provoked a small ding from a bell somewhere above it.

As expected of a dressmaker, the store contained dozens, if not scores of rolls of fabric in all qualities and colors known to man. The entire right wall was covered by stock samples, and the left wall carried an intricate system of sturdy shelves upon which the actual rolls of fabric were stored.

At the center of the room stood a large, square and completely flat table used for cutting the fabric. Jane's eyebrows briefly went up, then down at the sight of a huge pair of scissors lying on the table.

There was a peculiar smell in the store that Jane initially mistook for something less than positive but that she soon discovered emanated from jars packed with moth balls, mixed with something else that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

'I'll be right with you!' a mature female voice said from somewhere out back in the characteristic sing-song Scandinavian accent.

"Take your time!" Jane said loudly. "We ain't goin' nowhere."

Mathilda briefly looked at the many rolls of fabric, but soon focused on the Gingham dress in the window. Earlier, she had owned dresses much nicer than the one on display, but now that she had nothing, there was something so attractive about owning her own dress that she could almost hear it whisper to her.

Behind them, they were joined by a slightly plump and graying blue-eyed woman in her early fifties who was wiping her hands on a piece of cloth as she came in from the back. "Good day to you, Madams. I'm Annie Mikkelsen. How can I help you?" the woman said, cautiously eyeing her two seemingly mismatched customers.

"The green Gingham," Jane said and pointed her thumb at the dress form in the window. "How much?"

"Oh, that's a second-hand dress, Madam. Fifteen dollars this week, down from twenty," Annie said with a smile.

Mathilda sighed so hard her shoulders slumped. "Jane, it's such a beautiful dress, but... but I can't afford it. I was only given thirty dollars when I was released, and we have to eat and find somewhere to live, and..."

"Hold yer hosses, lassie," Jane said in her best Mumblin' Jack imitation. "I do'n wanna hear no whinin' 'bout no money. I have landed enough to last us fer a long time. I'll pay for it."

"You wh- what?"

Jane grinned and reached into her saddlebags. After a bit of rummaging around, she found two ten dollar bills that she handed to the dressmaker. "Here ya go, Ma'am. Keep the change."

"Thank you, Madam," the woman said and put the money into a cash register. She quickly went down to the window and reached in to take the dress form.

"By the way... there's a sign in your window that says Room To Let...?"

"That's right, Madam. It's upstairs but it has a separate entrance. It belonged to my brother, but he's left for California," Annie Mikkelsen said, pausing briefly from working with undressing the dress form to roll her eyes. "The lust for gold... men!"

"Mmmm. How much is it?" - Jane reckoned it wouldn't be constructive to mention that she had spent several long summers washing for gold in rivers in Northern California and Oregon, so she didn't.

"The room? Twenty-eight dollars a month, Madam, and I need two months' rent in advance. I know it's expensive, but it's a fully stocked room plus food and drink are included in the price if you want. The bed is comfortable, there's a writing desk, a smoking chair, a small library. It's a good room!"

Jane nodded and turned to Mathilda who was leaning against the center table with a shocked look on her face. "Mathilda? Couldya live here?"

"Uh-huh," Mathilda replied, holding onto the center table out of sheer mental and emotional exhaustion, a condition that had crept up when it dawned on her that for the first time in three years, another woman was actually physically helping her to a better life instead of blowing hot air in her ear.

"Good," Jane said and turned back to Annie Mikkelsen. "Mrs. Mikkelsen, I think ya have just made a deal on the-

Jane continued to speak but Mathilda was suddenly unable to hear it, though the outlaw's lips kept moving. She furrowed her brow when the world seemed to go black in the corners of her vision - and then her mind suffered a terminal overload from the many impressions of her first few days as a free woman, of the shock at being involved in a stagecoach robbery, the terrors of the nightmares she had experienced, the intense disappointment of being rejected at the hotel and the coffee shop, and the present, positive events at the dressmaker's.

Groaning, she keeled over and fell into a bottomless hole.

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A vile, putrid smell clawed its way through the blackness that surrounded Mathilda. At first, it didn't have much effect, but an extra strong dose of whatever it was kickstarted her brain and made her jerk around with a groan that sounded like she was about to throw up. "Jane..." she croaked, trying to reach for the outlaw with her eyes closed.

"No, it's Annie, Miss Brown," a female voice said from somewhere beyond the boundaries of the hazy blackness.

"Annie...? Who's Annie...?" Mathilda croaked and tried to touch her face. When she realized she was wearing a damp cloth across her eyes and forehead, she shifted it aside to see what was going on.

"Annie Mikkelsen, Miss Brown," the blue-eyed woman said, kneeling next to the prone Mathilda who was lying on a bottle green chaise longue with a maroon pillow under her head.

"Oh... right. Hello again, Mrs. Mikkelsen," Mathilda croaked, looking around the strange room she had woken up in. After a few seconds, she realized that she had been brought upstairs to the room Jane had said she would rent for her.

The chaise longue she was on was up against the wall and joined by so many other pieces of furniture that it resembled a carpenter's workshop more than it did an apartment.

Annie Mikkelsen hadn't exaggerated when she said the room was fully stocked. Apart from the bed, the writing desk, the smoking armchair and the full bookcase that she had promised, the room also saw a plush carpet on the floor, the chaise longue, a round table by the chaise longue, a footstool by the armchair, a square reading table next to the bookcase, and finally a nightstand by the bed.

The first thought through Mathilda's mind was '*I hope the floor is solid enough for all this stuff...!*' - the second was '*Oh! Lace curtains!*'

Sitting up, Mathilda let out a long, croaking groan that led to a few coughs. Her head was aching, though she had a feeling it was the result of whatever Mrs. Mikkelsen had used to wake her up with rather than from actually passing out.

"Mrs. Mikkelsen, where is my tall friend?" she said, running a hand across her damp forehead.

"Miss Durham went down to Jens Olsen's livery stable to buy herself a new horse, Miss Brown. She said that she'd ride to the Sheriff's office after that to speak to Orin Cutler. Look here, I've brought you a glass of water. Drink, and don't wonder about the taste," Annie Mikkelsen said and held a glass of cool well-water under Mathilda's nose.

"Uh... the taste?"

"I've added a dash of laudanum. Just a little, mind you. Drink, it'll do you good."

Mathilda stared at the glass, but eventually shrugged and began to drink. Once it was empty, she handed it back to her landlady. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Mikkelsen," she said, discreetly dabbing her lips with her sleeve.

"Oh, that's quite all right, dear. I heard your first name was Mathilda? That was my mother's name, though with an E at the end instead of an A."

"Oh, what a funny coincidence," Mathilda said with a faint smile. She looked a bit more around the room, especially at the lace curtains, the flowery wallpaper and at two drawings of stern-looking men that were hanging in wooden picture frames on the wall next to the bookcase.

"Mrs. Mikkelsen, are those men your husband and brother?" Mathilda said, pointing at the drawings.

Unexpectedly, Annie Mikkelsen leaned her head back and let out a braying laugh. "No, child! The man on the right is Rutherford B. Hayes, the President of the United States! And the one on the left in the uniform is King Christian the Ninth, the King of Denmark. That's where we're from, originally."

"Oh... I see. Pardon my ignorance, Mrs. Mikkelsen. I've never been much for politics," Mathilda said with a blush beginning to taint her cheeks.

"That's quite all right, dear. My husband, Sofus, is the local gunsmith, and he insists that we must have those drawings hanging in our homes. He's a traditionalist, you see," Annie said with a conspiratorial wink.

"I see. Oh, Mrs. Mikkelsen, there's something I would like to ask you... I used to live in Princetown earlier, b- but I've been away for a few years."

"Yes? Go on," Annie said and sat down next to Mathilda.

"When I left, I didn't get my Pa's silver Waltham pocket watch with me, and I would dearly, *dearly* love to have it back. It means so much to me. There's an inscription inside the lid that says, 'From James Lawrence Brown to Martin Brown'. It was in a hunter-case, and it had a white face and black hands... and it was in a slightly oval shape, which I believe is unusual. Have you ever seen such a pocket watch?"

"Hmmm..." Annie said and scrunched up her face. "Well, most men have pocket watches. Not all are silver, but some are. Hmmm. To tell you the truth, child, I haven't exactly been paying attention to strange men's pocket watches!" she continued, stifling a giggle.

"Of course not... I just thought you may have-"

From below, the ding of the bell above the shop door was clearly heard, and Annie got up in a hurry. "I have to mind my shop, dear, but I promise I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Oh, you don't have to-" Mathilda said, but Annie had already left. Getting up from the chaise longue, Mathilda went over to the window above the street and carefully pulled aside the lace curtains to try to see if she could catch a glimpse of the livery stable, but it proved to be out of her line of sight.

Sighing, she turned around - and suddenly spotted her new Gingham dress lying neatly folded on the reading table by the bookcase.

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At much the same time, Jane walked up to Olsen's livery stable with her saddle over her shoulder, kicking up dust with her boots and treading around the large mounds of horse droppings that were littering the street. "Now I know how them horses feel... bustin' mah back draggin' this damn saddle around ev'rywhere," she mumbled as she pulled the reluctant item higher on her shoulder.

Only one of the barn doors was open to the large, red building that housed the livery stable, and just as she was about to go through it, a Deputy came out carrying a Winchester 1873 - it took Jane all of two seconds to realize it was the female Deputy in the coarse dark gray outfit she had seen earlier in the Golden Wings Saloon.

The two women just stood there and stared at each other - one intent on going inside and one intent on blocking the path, and doing so very effectively.

"Halt, stranger," the Deputy said in a strong voice that was richer than her five-foot-five frame suggested it would be. She had a dark, floppy Stetson on her head that hid her hair, but a few strands came down the sides of her face and revealed it was dusty-blonde.

Jane squinted and took a good look at the Deputy. The woman appeared to be in her early thirties and she wasn't unpretty with a pair of smoky green eyes being the highlights of her features, though the scowl on her slightly angular face and the polished tin star on her chest gave her an air of unpleasantness that the outlaw didn't care much for. Other than that, Jane thought that the Deputy and Mathilda could be cousins, if viewed in a room where the curtains were closed.

Deciding to play along, Jane dropped the saddle to the ground and put her hands on her hips. "I'll bet ya've been dyin' to say that all your life, huh?"

"How about showing the law some respect, stranger?"

"Is this gonna take long, Deperty? I was plannin' to buy me a horse," Jane said casually.

"It's gonna take the time it's gonna take. Sheriff Cutler is speakin' to Mr. Olsen. You just gonna hafta wait your turn."

"Oh, the Sheriff's in there, too? Good, 'cos I was plannin' on talkin' to him next," Jane said and put one leg ahead of the other like she wanted to walk into the stable.

The Deputy quickly lowered her rifle and stepped even further into the barn door to block the entrance. " 'bout what?"

"Now, that's none o' your business, li'l lady."

"That's Deputy Cooper to you, stranger!" the Deputy barked, wearing an ever-deepening scowl.

Grinning, Jane put her hands back on her hips, pleased as punch that she could still rattle a Deputy's cage when she wanted to. "So you have a Cutler an' a Cooper, eh? What are your other deperties called... Cattle and Kepler?"

"McFadden," Deputy Cooper growled, swinging the Winchester around to point at Jane.

"Oh, is that a fact? Mmmm," Jane said, unnoticeably moving her hand towards the hilt of her Colt.

The intensity of the moment was defused when the other barn door was swung open to reveal a short, pot-bellied man wearing pale denim pants, a white shirt, a brown leather vest, a gray Confederate Cavalry hat and a graying walrus mustache that was a perfect match to the shining gold star on his chest. "Victoria Lynn, what in Tarnation is goin' on out here?" the man said in a booming voice as he pushed down the deputy's rifle.

"Sheriff Cutler, I was just-"

"Pointin' a rifle at a woman, I noticed. Howdy, Ma'am," Sheriff Orin Cutler said, lifting his Cavalry hat.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Jane said, lifting her own low-crowned hat and grinning so broadly that her - mostly full - set of pearly whites were exposed.

Deputy Cooper just grumbled but lowered her Winchester and put it over her arm.

Jane stepped around the Deputy and made a big number of having her hands nowhere near her Colt. "Sheriff Cutler, I was just on my way to your office to letcha know that Mathilda Brown has returned from prison. I presume you've already spoken to Mumblin' Jack Barnes 'bout the Deputy who was killed?"

"I have, yeah. He told me that Matt Osterling was killed last night," the Sheriff said, nodding somberly.

"That's right, God rest his soul," Jane said in a voice that perhaps wasn't entirely sincere. "I was on the stage, too, and Mathilda Brown showed me her transfer documents. She's to report to you ev'ry day, right?"

"Yes. And it needs to be in person," Sheriff Cutler said on his way over to a chestnut mare that was tied up outside the stables. "I need to see if she has changed her ways."

The Sheriff's words made Jane narrow her eyes and let out a dark grunt. "Mmmm. I did'n know her before, of course, but from what I can tell, she's a diff'rent person now."

"Good," Orin Cutler said and mounted the horse. "Victoria Lynn, give the Madam an apology, will you?"

"But Sheriff!" Victoria Lynn whined, stomping her boot into the dust to kick up a little storm.

The opportunity was too good to pass up, so Jane hooked her thumbs inside her belt loops and grinned at the Sheriff. "Naw, forget the apology... no skin off mah butt. But ya better watch yours, Sheriff. This Deperty here got 'er sights set squarely on your gold star... it's obvi's."

"Smartass," Victoria Lynn growled, "keep talkin' if you wanna find out how our jail looks from the inside. Didn't I see you walkin' with Quint Connors before?"

Visibly growing tired of the accusations, the Sheriff turned his horse around and leaned down to tap his index finger on the crown of Victoria Lynn's Stetson. "That's enough, Deputy. Mount up, we've got work to do. It's time for our round."

"Yes, Sheriff Cutler," Victoria Lynn said with a fair amount of teeth-gnashing. Growling at Jane, the Deputy mounted her own horse and followed the Sheriff up Main Street.

Jane kept standing in front of the livery stable for a brief moment while she looked at the two figures riding away. Grinning, she picked up her saddle and walked inside.

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CHAPTER 4

Three days later.

"Ohhhhh! The minister's wife came ta my side, asked if ah could offer a ride, ah said mah dove it sounds jus' fine, c'mon over an' we'll hump all ni'ht!" Jane sang at the top of her lungs, only stopping to empty a jug of steaming hot water on her face and chest. Once the jug was empty, she put it down next to the brass bath tub that had been set up in the backyard of the Mikkelsen house and went back to singing the second verse of the bawdy song while scrubbing her torso and her back with a brush on a stick - her long legs wouldn't fit and stuck out the bottom end of the tub.

'Jane? Jane?' Mathilda said, keeping well out of sight of the bath tub.

"Yep!"

'Are you decent?'

"I ain't been decent since I was ten years old!" Jane said, lathered up the brush and gave her thighs and calves a good scrubbing.

'It's just that I have some good news I'm dying to tell you...'

"Well, c'mon out and spill the beans, girl." - When nothing happened, Jane suddenly realized that Mathilda was too embarrassed by the nudity. Chuckling, she sunk under the waterline so only her legs and head were visible. "It's okay, Mathilda... you can't see a damn thing now!"

'Really?'

"Really," Jane said and lowered herself even further down to make her chin come into contact with the slightly murky water.

"Okay," Mathilda said and came into the backyard wearing two thirds of her Gingham dress - the shawl was too hot to wear during the day. "It's like this-"

"Mercy sakes! Ain't *you* a right toffer! Now I know why wimmenfolk always pine for them dresses... you look abser-lootin' wonderful, Mathilda," Jane said and scooped up a handful of suds that she promptly blew onto the wooden dais the tub had been placed on.

"Thank you, Jane," Mathilda said with a blush.

When Mathilda seemed to forget the news she wanted to share - and tried to look anywhere but at the hot tub and the contents thereof - Jane chuckled and leaned back against the wall of the tub. "Ya had some news you wanted to share?"

"Oh yes, the news. Mrs. Mikkelsen has asked me if I want to work for her," Mathilda said and clapped her hands in joy. "She and her husband have a little trouble keeping their ledgers and... well, I've always been good at arithmetic. It won't be much, but I can finally make my own money again, Jane."

"That's great news. Of course, my money is your money... all ya hafta do is ask. Ya know that."

"I know, but... I don't like..." Mathilda said, coming to a halt between two words, visibly looking for what to say. "Well... in my heart, it feels like I'm using you, Jane."

"Lemme tell you one thing right now, and that is, you ain't usin' me none. None whatsoever, Mathilda. My money is your money, like I said," Jane said, pulling in her endless legs and standing up in the tub.

It wasn't until she saw the young redhead's eyes bug out on stalks at the sight of the water running down the very, very naked body in front of her that Jane realized that she had skipped a cog in her thought process.

"Oh, Sweet Jesus thou art my savior!" Mathilda howled, immediately slamming her hands up to cover her face. When even that wasn't enough, she backed out of the backyard and disappeared into the store like ol' Scratch himself was on her tail.

"Huh..." Jane said and looked down at herself. "Was'n the first calico ever to call the almighty when she was with me, but... huh. Never quite like that. Eh," she said with a shrug. Stepping out of the tub, she reached for the towel she had taken with her.

Five minutes later - after relinquishing the tub and the water to Mrs. Mikkelsen who also wanted her weekly bath - Jane buttoned her shield-front shirt as she walked up the stairs to their second-floor apartment. Once at the landing, she felt that it was better to be safe than sorry and knocked before she entered. "Mathilda?"

'Are you dressed?'

Jane chuckled and adjusted her gun belt so it lined up just right. "Naw. I'm standin' here like God created me an' it's gettin' kinda chilly around my- oh. Hi," she said to the less-than-ecstatic Mathilda who had opened the door and was shooting the tall outlaw a curious look that was a cross between a sneaky interest and pure outrage. "May I come in?"

"But of course," Mathilda said and stepped back from the door.

Feeling bad for unwittingly causing her friend so much embarrassment, Jane pushed her low-crowned hat back on her head and stepped inside with a sheepish expression on her face.

Mathilda went back to the reading table by the bookcase where several very large ledgers were opened to various pages.

As Jane came up to stand behind the chair, she put a hand on the young redhead's skinny shoulder and was relieved to feel that she wasn't being rejected. "Boy, Mathilda... I envy yer skills. I could never... and I really mean never, ever do what your doin' there."

"I'm sure you could, Jane," Mathilda said and reached up to pat the outlaw's hand. "After all, you're a very smart woman."

"Golly Gee, Missy... thank ye," Jane said and pretended to swoon. "But in all honesty... I could'n do that. No Sirree. I can count to six and that's 'bout it," she continued, tapping her fingers against the metal of her six-shooter Peacemaker.

"Mmmm. By the way, I've asked Mrs. Mikkelsen to keep a lookout for Pa's silver Waltham pocket watch. She said she'd ask about it when she's shopping at the other stores today," Mathilda said while she was still concentrating on writing in the big ledger.

Jane opened her mouth to speak but decided against it almost at once. Instead, she furrowed her brow and let out a long, slow sigh that betrayed that she felt it was a waste of time to look for the pocket watch - and that Mathilda was teetering on the brink of being obsessive about it.

It was something Jane had seen happen to other former inmates; during their time inside, they had focused so intently on an item or person they hoped would be waiting for them once they got out that their marbles had begun to crack. She dearly hoped that the delightful young woman wouldn't suffer a similar fate. *'But what will happen when she realizes there's no chance of ever getting that damn watch back...?'* she thought, biting her lips.

Unaware of Jane's thoughts, Mathilda put down the fountain pen she had been working with and pushed aside the hefty tome. "It's almost time to go to the Sheriff. Will you walk with me?" she said, turning around to face her tall, imposing friend.

Jane quickly snapped out of the darkness that had claimed her and offered her friend a warm smile. "Ten horny skunks could'n keep me here, Mathilda. Les'go. Oh..." the outlaw said, squinting as she looked at Mathilda's hair.

After getting the Gingham and a new pair of walking shoes, the young redhead had been able to escape most of the prison look that had clung to her the first few days of her return to Princetown, but her hair was still a mess and a half after being cut with very little regard for appearance - or even her well-being. "Lady, I'm about to make ya an offer, and I wo'n take no for an answer," Jane said and helped Mathilda up from the chair.

"I, uh... I see...?"

Turning around, Jane put out her arm and waited for Mathilda to take it. "Before we go to Sheriff Kettle, I'd like to treat ya to a haircut... a real haircut down at Frederik Jonsson's barber shop. An' like ah said, ah wo'n take no fer an answer."

Once she had put on her bonnet and tied it below her chin, Mathilda accepted the arm with gratitude and quickly hooked her own arm inside it. "Jane... please... the Sheriff's name is Cutler. If you keep calling him Kettle, sooner or later, you'll happen to say it to his face. You know how the law is around here... they have very little patience for joking around."

'Oh, I know,' Jane thought, contemplating her talk with Quint Connors who still hadn't contacted her after their initial encounter. "I can't help it, tho... whenever we meet up with the old badger, he reminds me of a pot-bellied stove."

"Jane..."

"I promise, I promise," the outlaw said, offering Mathilda a sweet, syrupy smile that didn't quite seem to instill confidence in the young redhead.

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Half an hour later, Jane and the freshly-bobbed Mathilda left the barber shop and strolled up Main Street, arm in arm and without a care for the looks they were given by the people they met.

Walking past Mikkelsen's Dresses, Mathilda waved at Annie Mikkelsen who was cleaning her shop window. The mature woman waved back and showed her approval of Mathilda's new haircut by touching her own and smiling broadly.

"Oh, I'm so glad we came down here the first day," Mathilda said as she leaned into the tall outlaw. "We were so fortunate to find Mrs. Mikkelsen. She hasn't said a word yet about you and I living together... though I think her husband isn't too pleased about it."

"Mmmm," Jane mumbled, remembering the only time where they had met Sofus Mikkelsen. The stony silence on his part had spoken volumes. "I'm just pleased you'll allow me to stay with ya, Mathilda."

Mathilda looked up at Jane with a highly puzzled look on her face. "Why shouldn't I? You have been so kind to me. I-

"Weeeeellll..." Jane said and made a sweeping gesture with her hand, "if the Deputy who brought you here had been all nice and frien'ly, wouldya ha' moved in with him?"

"Of course not! Don't be silly!"

"And there ya have it. Ya would'n just let anyone stay with ya."

Mathilda opened her mouth to ask what on earth Jane was on about, but couldn't even find a way to phrase her question. Shrugging, she kept going.

It didn't take long for them to turn the corner onto Perry Street. Going past the ticket office of the Milligan Stage Company, Jane looked in to see if Mumblin' Jack was there, but neither he nor the stagecoach were present. "Eh, he's prob'ly out on a drive, the old coot."

"He was a friendly old man... even if he could do with a bath. I had a feeling you knew him from earlier?" Mathilda said and gave Jane's arm a little squeeze.

"Sure did... we fought side by side in the war."

"Really? Jane, please don't take this the wrong way, but... uh, I honestly can't see you as a nurse."

"A nurse? Where in Tarnation d'ya get that silly notion?"

"Well... what else can a woman do in war?"

Jane chuckled but kept quiet. After a few paces walking past Sofus Mikkelsen's gun shop, she looked down at Mathilda and bumped into her ever so lightly. "I was in the signal corps. You know, wavin' them flags around and stuff."

"Oh... I see."

The connecting street was as busy as ever with rows of horses lined up outside the three saloons on the opposite side of the street, the Golden Wings, the Bull Rider and Roscoe's Watering Hole, and several mule trains and wagons were parked on the side Mathilda and Jane were walking on.

The cowboys - some of which were horse wranglers from 'Gentleman' George Ballentine's Circle Y ranch outside of town - were engaged in a bout of friendly bantering with their colleagues as they went about their business, loading dry goods from the general store or offloading kegs of beer to one of the saloons.

The dust kicked up by the many hooves mixed with the strong scent of the animals created an environment that was quite suffocating. Mathilda soon waved her hand in front of her nose, but the gesture made the cowboys aware of the two women.

Predictably, they all started whistling at Mathilda as she strolled up the sidewalk in her classy Gingham, but they quickly found better things to do with their time when they caught wind of the Peacemaker that hung low on Jane's hip, a sign that she was an experienced gunhand.

Chuckling, Jane put a comforting hand on Mathilda's shoulder, but she could feel that her young friend wasn't too bothered by the unwarranted attention.

Another thirty yards on and they arrived at the Sheriff's office that the town's founding fathers had erected as the first building in a connected cluster of four - next to the office came the court of law which doubled as the Town Hall, and finally the undertaker. The jail cells were behind the Sheriff's office in a low brick building with grated windows that sent an icy chill down Mathilda's spine every single day she got there.

Perhaps tellingly, the houses opposite the Town Hall were Roscoe's Watering Hole Saloon and the Velvet Garter brothel.

Jane's bath-induced good mood was soured when Deputy Cooper stepped out of the Sheriff's office just as she and Mathilda were about to go in. As always, the Deputy was wearing a scowl that sent a dark shadow across her face that would have been quite pretty otherwise.

This time, though, the scowl was swept away by another emotion - shock - that flashed across her face when she got her first look at Mathilda Brown in three years.

Deputy Cooper's shocked reaction was matched by Mathilda who gasped loudly and put her hand on her lips. "Victoria... I... I..."

Victoria Lynn immediately looked down and began to shuffle around on the spot with her pale brown boots drawing patterns in the dust that covered the sidewalk.

Jane took a step back and observed the two women. If she didn't know better, she'd say it had all the hallmarks of an awkward reunion between two old lovers - it didn't really fit with the image she had of Mathilda, but perhaps she didn't know anything at all, she thought.

"Mathilda," the Deputy said in a voice that sounded like it came from a hundred leagues away. "I'm sorry 'bout what happened that night. I couldn't do nothin' about it. They woulda come for you anyhow, with or without me. But I helped you, didn't I? Junior wanted to flog ya right there, but I stopped him, I did."

"Yes, but I thought you were my fr- friend. My dear friend, Victoria," Mathilda said quietly, emphasizing 'dear'. She reached out for the deputy but thought better of it at the very last moment and let her hand fall limply down her side.

Tears briefly welled up in the corners of the tough Deputy's eyes but she took care of them by pulling her sleeve across her face. "I was your dear friend, Mathilda. Maybe we could be that again... some day?" she said, forming it as a question.

When Mathilda didn't answer at once, Victoria Lynn looked at Jane Durham and noted the body language between the tall outlaw and the petite redhead with some dismay. "Well... I better get going. I have to do my rounds. Mathilda, I... have a nice day, ladies," she said and tipped her Stetson before leaving in a hurry.

Simply standing there in stunned silence, Jane and Mathilda turned around and watched the Deputy walk towards the pen to get her horse. A scant, completely silent, minute later, she rode past without acknowledging them.

"Well," Jane said and pushed her hat back to scratch her forehead. "That was odd. When y'all said dear friend, did it mean-"

"I'm sorry, Jane. I'm not ready to talk about it yet," Mathilda said and walked into the Sheriff's office, leaving the outlaw outside to figure it out for herself.

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Mathilda sighed deeply as she closed the door behind her and stepped back out onto the busy street. Instead of coming to Jane at once, she kept standing by herself for a little while, staring out at the street and the Bull Rider Saloon on the other side. "Jane?" she said in a tiny voice and put out her hand.

For a moment, Jane could see a glimpse of the frightened young woman Mathilda had been when they had first met shining through the thin veneer she had built up over the past few days - her face had grown pale and she looked like she could burst out in tears at the drop of a hat.

"I'm here," Jane said and stepped forward. She took Mathilda's hands in her own and gave them a little squeeze.

"Will you help me with something?"

"Anythin'."

"Will you help me ask about my Pa's watch in the Bull Rider Saloon? That's where I worked be- before. Maybe I can find someone who knows about it... the Sheriff said I was plum crazy even thinking about the watch after all this time, but I need to find it," Mathilda said quietly.

Jane sighed but gave the fragile woman's hands another squeeze. "I'll help ya, Mathilda. If nothin' else, I can do some intimidatin' while ya ask around."

"Thank you. Let's try before I lose my nerve," Mathilda said and stepped out onto Perry Street while there was a gap in the four-legged traffic.

Mathilda stopped at the swinging doors and looked inside at the place she hadn't seen since a late evening so long ago.

The Bull Rider Saloon looked the same - less glamorous than the Golden Wings further up Perry Street, but decent enough with its twenty round tables and the long, wooden counter - and it even smelled the same, a mix of stale beer, dust and whisky.

Hand-painted, bright red letters above the swinging doors advertised that the Bull Rider offered '*Dancing Girls!* - *No nudity!* - *Safe to bring your wife!* - *from Four p.m. till Midnight!*' for the patrons interested in such entertainment.

Jane chuckled as she read the advertisement, thinking about how Mathilda may have looked dancing the Can Can in a crinoline dress, heeled boots and fishnet stockings. "C'mon, let's pay this grog shop a li'l visit," she said and gave Mathilda a gentle push on the shoulder.

When the two women stepped inside, the bartender who was busy cleaning a few glasses looked up from his task and opened his mouth to greet them. A split second later, he recognized the former dancer and slammed his jaws shut.

The Bull Rider was already more than half-full despite the early hour of the day. Cowboys from several of the ranches outside Princetown were enjoying themselves, smoking, drinking and playing cards, and doing it all rather noisily.

One familiar face met Jane's eye across the smoke-filled bar room: Herbert Gregg. The gambler they had shared the stagecoach with put a finger to the crown of his derby before returning to the game he was involved in.

At one of the other tables, a cowboy from the Bar J ranch let out a resounding rebel yell and threw his hat in the air. Before it landed, he had already scooped up a large pot of green dollar bills and what appeared to be a silver or silver plate cigar case.

As Jane went over to the bar counter to get some information on the mythical pocket watch, Mathilda walked into the center of the room and stared up at the row of doors on the gallery above the saloon - the second to last door had been hers. She felt all sorts of emotions roll around inside her as she looked at the non-descript door; not least the awful sense of betrayal she had felt when none of her supposed friends had even tried to speak on her behalf on that fateful night.

The bartender eyed the tall outlaw as she came to the counter but decided to ignore her for so long that she'd lose interest or patience and walk away. Whistling through his teeth, he concentrated hard on cleaning the glasses.

"Hey," Jane said, leaning against the counter. When nothing happened, she furrowed her brow and moved down to the small wash basin where the bartender was busy. "I said, hey."

She couldn't overlook the fact that she was being thoroughly ignored, but that kind of tactic had never worked with Blackie Durham. Instead of walking away, she reached in across the counter and grabbed the bartender by the lapels of his black vest.

"Go on... make me say it again... please," she said hoarsely, shooting the man such a cold stare that he practically shriveled up before her very eyes. "You ain't much of a barkeep, friend. When someone wants to buy your watered down beer, ya nod and say Yes, Ma'am, right away, Ma'am. Ain't that so?"

"I-"

"Ain't that so... friend?" Jane said and increased her grip on the vest.

"Yes, Ma'am!" the bartender stuttered, barely holding onto the counter.

Jane looked over her shoulder to see if any of the patrons were going to come to the barkeep's assistance but it didn't appear they had even noticed. "Good. Forget the beer... now ya've made me curious 'bout yer behavior. What's goin' on in this here dump, anyhow? Why is ya bein' all sneaky-pants like this? Is it 'cos of me... or her," Jane said quietly, nodding in Mathilda's direction.

A man wearing a black suit moved into Jane's peripheral vision, and she immediately let go of the bartender and turned to face the second man with her hand near the hilt of the Colt. "I'd stop there if I was you," she growled.

The man - in his late fifties and the wearer of a well-kept Van Dyke beard that had begun to go gray in places - held up his hands and stopped on the spot. "I'm the owner of the saloon and I'm ordering you to leave at once. You and that miserable little runt over there," he said and looked at Mathilda with a look of pure disgust on his lined face.

The words were so hateful that Jane had to filter them for a second time before the true meaning came through to her. As it did, the corners of her mouth twitched and she slowly began to draw her revolver. "Is that a fact, Mista?" she said with a cold smile spreading over her face.

"Jane, no!" Mathilda said and ran between the outlaw and the owner of the Bull Rider. "Mr. Dawkins, I dearly want to find my Pa's watch... he gave it to me on his deathbed and it's the only thing I had of his. Can you remember what happened to it?"

"Get out of my saloon," Glenn Dawkins said, matching Jane's cold smile with one of his own.

"Please, Mr. Dawkins... tell me where it is. I would dearly love to have it back... please!"

Glenn Dawkins looked from Mathilda to Jane and back again. "Do you have any idea how much you cost me, you little runt?" he said with a snarl. "By refusing Mr. Wilkinson that night, it meant that he and his associates took most of their business elsewhere. I have lost thousands upon thousands of dollars because of you... and you have the guts to ask me about your Pa's two-bit watch?"

"Where is it, please...?" Mathilda said, wringing her hands.

"I couldn't care less about your wretched watch! This conversation is over!" - With that, he waved at two beefy cowboys who had been keeping a close eye on the exchange.

Jane recognized them both from the group of hired muscle that had been playing poker in Quint Connors' office when she had been there for the first time, but she didn't know if they'd honor their boss' agreement with her or not. She surmised they wouldn't. "C'mon, Mathilda. Live to fight another day. C'mon," she said and pulled the stunned woman out of the Bull Rider.

Once they were outside, the blood drained from Mathilda's face like someone had painted her white. She staggered along the sidewalk until she reached a bench that had been put up outside the Princetown Bank, the next building down the street. "Why... why wouldn't... he... Pa... I'll never find Pa's watch," she mumbled, looking like she was on the brink of falling to pieces.

Jane stood with her hands on her hips, counting to ten. When ten wasn't enough, she continued to twenty, then fifty and finally a hundred. "This town... this town is the worst hellhole I've ever been in... an' I've been in Tombstone, in Fort Griffin, in Dodge City, in Devil's Creek fer cryin' out loud! But I ain't never seen this kind o' rotten behavior. Never!"

Looking up, Jane noticed they weren't too far from Harvey DuBois' Cafe, the coffee shop that had thrown Mathilda out the day they arrived. Finally getting riled up to the point of near-explosion, the outlaw spun around and pointed an index finger at the young redhead. "Do'n go anywhere. I'll be right back."

Before Mathilda had a chance to speak up, Jane was striding down the street with determined steps.

Five minutes later, the outlaw came back wearing a grin that was almost wider than the plate of steaming hot apple pie she was carrying.

The smell was so delicious that Mathilda's stomach growled loudly, and she quickly put her hands on her tummy to stop the embarrassing sound from making an encore. "Jane... what in the world?"

"Apple pie, Ma'am... an' plenty of it!" Jane said and held the plate under Mathilda's nose.

"Well, I can see that... and smell, Goodness me! But-"

"A treat from me to you. If I may opine, ya been kicked around enough for one day... hell, for one week. It's time that somebody gave ya a li'l encouragement. Les'go home and dig into this piece of heaven before some fancy fella wearin' cowpuncher duds comes and eats it all," Jane said and helped Mathilda up from the bench.

Soon, the two women crossed Perry Street and walked south on Main to get to their home. "Jane..." Mathilda said as they walked past one of Princetown's general stores, "you didn't rob them at gunpoint, did you?"

"Nope. Ah did'n. Honest!"

The outlaw's less-than-sincere comment made Mathilda furrow her brow, but she didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth - or to look a gift apple pie under the crust - so she kept quiet.

"Ah did'n rob 'em at all. I just stood there, mindin' my own business. And stood there. And stood there... and then a couple of their other guests sorta giddy up and left all of a sudden. Ah have no idea why. But then one of them fancy people from the cafe kinda came out with an apple pie. I guess he was tryin' to bribe me to leave. It worked," Jane said, sniffing the pie.

"Oh, you scoundrel, you," Mathilda said and hooked her arm inside Jane's. "You're my scoundrel, though."

Jane just kept smiling.

By the time the apple pie had been consumed - and duly shared with Annie Mikkelsen - Mathilda leaned back in the smoking armchair in the apartment and let out a long, contented sigh. "That was wonderful. Thank you."

"Do'n thank me, thank Harvey Doo-boys or whoever that fancy fella was. I did'n have nothin' to do with it," Jane said and dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin.

Mathilda smiled briefly at the tall outlaw but it soon faded from her face. "Jane... do you think I'll ever find Pa's watch? I want you to be honest."

Knowing that it was time to leave all joking behind, Jane crumpled up the napkin and cleared the space next to her on the chaise longue. With a smile, she patted the seat next to her to show Mathilda that she should come over.

"Mathilda..." Jane said once the young redhead was comfortable on the chaise longue with her skirt folded to the side and her knees held primly together. "Mathilda, in all honesty... no. No, I do'n think we'll ever find your Pa's watch. Too much time has passed. I'm truly sorry, but that's how I feel."

Mathilda's face fell but she nodded and took Jane's hands in her own. "Thank you for your honesty. I still feel there's a chance, but... I appreciate all you've done for me. A woman of your stature... it's... I'm still wondering why you're even doing this," she said in a voice that became smaller and smaller as she went along the sentence.

"I'm doin' it 'cos ya need a friend, Mathilda. That much was obvi's from the first time we met. I ain't a good person at heart... I've killed, and killed many, Lord knows that... but I do'n like to see an innocent young woman such as yourself bein' treated so poorly, neither."

Mathilda fell silent for so long that Jane thought she didn't want to go on with the conversation. When she finally spoke, it was in a voice that was so low that Jane had to lean in to hear everything.

"I... I have to make a confession."

"Well, I ain't no Father, but go right ahead," Jane said with a chuckle.

"I'm not that innocent, Jane. I have sinned."

Jane narrowed her eyes and moved a little back from the young redhead to see if she was trying to pull her leg - she didn't appear to be. "You? How?"

"I h- have... been with a woman," Mathilda said in such a tiny voice that it was difficult to hear above the tick-tocking of the clock on the wall.

"Well, I did think ya was a bit too cool 'bout sharin' a bed with me... no, Mathilda, only some folks would call that a sin. Others would call it followin' your heart. And in this case, them others is includin' me."

"Thank you, but-"

"Was it the Deperty we ran into today? Whatshername... Cooper?"

Mathilda nodded with a faint blush covering her cheeks.

"She sorta had that feelin' about her. Mmmm."

"But Jane, I didn't want to impose myself on you. I know that you're a very experienced woman... I've... I heard stories about you in prison that would make a molly blush..."

"I'm sure only half is true," Jane said with a broad grin.

"Will you please hold me?" Mathilda pleaded, sounding so sincere that she almost made the hardened outlaw's breath hitch.

Wordlessly, Jane pulled the hurting woman into a tender hug that right from the start felt so good to both of them that it grew stronger without a second thought.

The two women held onto each other for several long minutes until Mathilda pulled back. Sighing, she wiped her leaky eyes and nodded a silent thank you.

"Mathilda," Jane whispered, running her hand up the redhead's arm. "I'm about to ask ya somethin', and if ya do'n feel like it, just say no. Okay?"

Mathilda nodded.

"May I kiss you?"

The look of shock on Mathilda's face was brief, but it was there. A wide-eyed, slack-jawed look of surprise that Jane found to be so delightfully innocent that she instinctively reached out to caress Mathilda's cheek.

"You may kiss me," Mathilda whispered, leaning in towards the outlaw. As their lips touched, she thought an entire battalion of riflemen had entered her body and was marching around inside - but then she discovered it was her heart pounding away in her chest. The lips she was kissing were soft, though not as soft as her own. The warm, glowing sensations that swelled inside her and permeated her entire being soon overpowered anything else, and she let herself be swept along by them, happily relinquishing command over her heart and soul.

She felt the outlaw's hand move from her cheek to behind her neck to pull her even closer, and she responded by moaning into the open mouth she was kissing; a sound that betrayed how much she had been looking forward to the sweet contact.

For Jane, the sound was a stark reminder that if they didn't stop soon, they wouldn't be able to stop at all. She didn't want to take advantage of Mathilda while she was in such a vulnerable state, so she pulled away from the velvety soft lips and rested her forehead against her young friend's. "Thank you for allowin' me to kiss ya. That was wonderful. Just like I'd expected it."

"It truly was the most wonderful kiss I have ever shared..." Mathilda whispered, feeling her lips tingle so badly that she had to reach up to feel if they were still there at all.

"Ya be a very spe'shal young woman, Mathilda Brown," Jane said in an exaggerated accent, "an' do'n let no one tell ya any differently. Do'n listen to them preachers, ya hear? Listen to yer heart. Okay?"

"I..."

"Shhh. Not now. I think ya should take an afternoon nap. Ya've been through a helluva lot today," Jane said and moved away from the chaise longue so Mathilda could lie down. "I'll be right here for ya. Just get some rest."

Mathilda did feel quite tired after the ordeal at the saloon, so she gladly accepted the offer. Fluffing a pillow, she put it at the top end of the chaise longue and made herself comfortable.

Before she closed her eyes, she looked up and sent Jane a clear message that the kiss they had shared wasn't going to be the only one.

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Later that same evening.

A contented silence had fallen over the small apartment with neither woman feeling she needed to speak to make her presence felt. Mathilda was sitting at the reading table browsing through a travelogue she had found in the bookcase, and Jane was quietly smoking a cigarette and looking out onto the street below.

Her sharp eye didn't miss a dark figure running across the torch-lit Main Street heading for the building housing Mikkelsen's store and their apartment. "Mmmm," she said and took the Peacemaker from the table where it had been since she had cleaned it after supper. She quickly opened it to check if it was loaded - it was, holding five rounds instead of the full chamber for the sake of safety.

"Problems?" Mathilda said, putting a bookmark into the travelogue.

"Not sure. There's nothin' for you to worry 'bout." - *'I don't think,'* Jane thought as she moved over to the door. After putting her ear to it, she clicked it open and held it ajar so she could peek out.

Being cautious paid off for Jane - halfway up the wooden staircase, the dark figure froze in place, holding something in his hand.

"That's as far as ya be goin' this time, fella... unless ya wanna take it up with my smoke wagon here," Jane said and stepped out onto the landing with the Colt trained on him, remembering to snuff out the kerosene bracket lamp on the wall just inside the door so she wouldn't be a fat, juicy target for an unseen gunman below.

"I got a message fer Blackie Durham from Quint Connors," the man said.

"Hmmm. Leave it on the steps and get the hell outta here. Now. Wo'n tell ya again," Jane growled, never taking her eyes off the dark figure.

The man did as told and was soon running down the stairs and out of the backyard. "Mathilda! Go to the winda' an' check if he's really goin'!" Jane said over her shoulder.

'There's a man in a black duster crossing the street... and... and running up towards Perry,' Mathilda said from the window.

Jane let out a grunt and walked down the staircase to get the note. Once she was back inside the apartment, she locked the door behind her and turned the kerosene lamp back on.

The note read, *'Blackie, meet me at the office when the clock strikes ten. There's something I need you to do outside of town. You'll probably be gone most of the night so you better pack some jerky and tobacco. QC.'*

"Tarnation," Jane said and looked at the clock on the wall - twenty to ten. With another grunt, she lowered the hammer on the Colt and put it into the leather holster.

Grumbling, she shoved the note into her pants pocket and put her hands on her hips while she looked at Mathilda who was still standing at the window.

The past few nights, the young redhead's nightmares had been fewer but they had still tormented her enough to make her shed a few tears on the outlaw's sleeping shift - and now, how would she cope being along for an entire night, Jane thought, scrunching up her face.

"Jane, what was it?"

"Connors wanna talk to me. In twenty minutes," Jane said. She felt a strong need to take Mathilda into her arms while she relayed the bad news, so she crossed the carpeted floor and put out her arms. Mathilda understood at once and fell easily into the outlaw's embrace. "The note said I should expect to be gone all night, Mathilda," Jane said, wrapping her long arms around Mathilda's smaller frame.

"Oh... all night?"

" 'Fraid so."

"Oh."

"If ya do'n want me to go, I'll stay."

"I remember Quint Connors from years ago. He's not a man to cross, Jane. If he has asked you to come to him, you should go," Mathilda said and took a step back but kept her hands on Jane's arms.

"Eh. You're prob'ly right."

Mathilda quickly closed the distance between them and placed a small kiss on the outlaw's lips. "For good luck. Please hurry home to me," she said and ran a hand across Jane's prominent cheekbones.

"Mathilda..."

"Yes?"

"I'll beat the storm to get back to ya," Jane whispered and leaned down to give her young friend a proper see-ya-later kiss.

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At the livery stable, Jens Olsen was less than pleased that Jane came for her bay gelding at that time of the evening, but a few dollar bills that miraculously fluttered down from the hayloft and into his open palm settled the argument before it could begin.

Equipped with her Peacemaker on her right hip, a long hunting knife in a leather sheath on her left hip, the loaded Winchester on the saddle and a fully stocked ammo-belt around her waist, she mounted the horse and was soon trotting up Main Street, waving at Mathilda when she passed by Mikkelsen's store and the apartment.

The southern part of Main Street was a lot less busy at that time of the evening compared to the daytime, but the relative peace and quiet only lasted until she turned the corner onto Perry Street.

It seemed that every single cowpuncher - including one or two of the female variety - was in town and blowing off some steam. Piano music was heard from the Golden Wings Saloon, but it was nothing compared to the chin music played on Perry.

Two groups of twelve cowboys in total were going at it hammer and tongs outside the general store between the Golden Wings and the Bull Rider, and in the middle of it all stood Sheriff Cutler, Deputy Cooper and another Deputy and looked like they didn't know where to start.

Jane merely chuckled at it all and kept well out of the way.

As she turned the corner onto Sullivan Street, she was met by a chorus of whistles and lewd cheers from the gallery above Princetown's most expensive cathouse, the Velvet Garter, where painted ladies, soiled doves and strumpets of all ages and weight-brackets were parading their assets with very little regard for common decency.

Sullivan Street was quieter than Perry, but as Jane rode down it, she noticed one or two people lined up outside the lawyer's office that happened to share a building with the debt collectors.

Jane had very little patience for lawyers of any kind, so she kept up the pace and continued down Sullivan until she reached Connors' wooden two-story office building.

Dismounting, she could feel that the mood was far more dangerous at the south end of Sullivan, so she loosened the strap on her Colt's holster and took her rifle off her horse just in case.

Connors' office was framed by a saloon inventively named The Saloon of the kind Jane usually called a Twice On Saturday Night - for the number of men who would be carried out boots first - and a run-down two-story house where kerosene lamps in the windows proved that there weren't any panes but plenty of people inside.

Grumbling over the poor state of the neighborhood, Jane walked up the stairs until she reached the landing. She suddenly remembered that Quint Connors had used some kind of knocking-code the first time they had been there, but despite racking her brain, she couldn't remember what the code had been.

She was spared the embarrassment by the door opening, revealing Quint who was standing with a cheroot in the hand and a nasty grin on his lips. He nodded at Jane and stepped aside so she could come in.

She almost went back out when she realized the only other person in the office was the Mexican in the white tunic who had tried to rob the stagecoach. "Quint," she started in a low, dangerous growl, but Connors held up his hands and went up to the desk before she could go on.

"Blackie, I want you and Luis Mendoza here," Quint said and pointed at the other man while he sat down at his desk and put his boots up on the corner, "to ride out to 'Gentleman' George Ballentine's ranch and observe the comings and goings. I want you to see how we can get close to him. His wranglers got paid today so there's hardly anyone out there."

"I'll say," Jane said and pushed her low-crowned hat back on her head. "Perry Street is rockin' like a whorehouse on nickel night."

"Well, you'd know," Luis Mendoza said casually, rising from one of the chairs at the poker table.

Jane turned around and shot him a dark glare. The bronze-skinned Mexican had gained a slicked-down mustache since they had met the other day, but he didn't seem to have gained any sense.

Matching Jane's dark glare with one of his own, he took his floppy, dark gray Stetson that had been lying on the poker table and put it on. "I'm ready, Quint."

Chuckling nastily, Quint Connors knocked the ash off his cheroot and nodded at the two bruisers he had on his payroll. "And so is Blackie, I see. All right. Get on with it, and come back here when you've got something to tell me."

Jane cursed on the inside at the prospect of spending most of the night with Luis Mendoza, but after a very brief delay, she grunted and nodded back at Quint. "You first," she said, holding out her arm at the Mexican.

Forty-five minutes later - after riding in near-darkness almost the entire way since the moon was enjoying a hearty game of hide and seek with the scattered cloud cover - the two riders dismounted and led their horses by foot the last stretch of the way.

Having gone off the dusty trail that led to the Circle Y ranch a mile or so back so they would leave fewer tracks, Jane and Luis slogged through the dust and rocks on their way up to a barbed-wire fence that surrounded the ranch itself.

Luis dug into the saddlebags that hung across the hind quarters of his horse and found an ex-US Cavalry field telescope that he extended and used to study the buildings at the ranch - made possible by the facts that lit torches had been placed in front of three of the four buildings, and that lights were on in most of the windows on the top floor of the mansion.

"Who is this George Ballentine fella, anyhow?" Jane whispered as she waited for Luis to give her the telescope so she could do her own reconnaissance. When her companion couldn't be bothered to even fart in her direction, she scrunched up her face and shot him yet another dark glare.

Luis eventually shoved the telescope into Jane's hands and moved away from her. Grumbling, Jane put the tool to her eye and looked at the ranch.

The main building was a three-story, five rooms per floor mansion that was built in an opulent Western style with plenty of swoops, droops and assorted other decorative doodads on the front. The largest of the three remaining buildings was quite clearly the barn some way off and to the right, and to the left of the mansion were two low, wooden huts that Jane surmised were the barracks for the ranchhands and the horse wranglers.

As she was watching, three cowboys stepped out of the barracks and began to walk towards the barn, all carrying Winchesters over their arms. "I see a couple o' sentries with rifles... no big deal," she said and put down the field telescope.

When she didn't get a reply, she rolled her eyes and looked at her dour companion. "Look, this ain't no barrel o' laughs for me neither, fella, but the big boss man told us to git out here and keep our deadlights on the ranch," she said and turned towards Luis. "So why dontcha be a good boy and..."

The sight of Luis Mendoza pointing a Colt at her made her slam her jaws shut.

"You killed two of my friends the other day, puta," Mendoza said hoarsely.

"Well, they should'n ha' pointed them guns at me, now, should they... oh, hey... you is pointin' ya gun at me, too, ain'tcha? Maybe idiocy is catchin', eh?" - While Jane was talking, she let her hand creep down towards her Peacemaker.

"Get ya hand away from your gun, ya stinkin' puta. Throw it away and get down on your knees!"

"Aw, is that the only word ya have for someone like me?" Jane said, squinting to the left to see where the armed sentries had gone to in the meantime. She couldn't hear anything from the ranch so she knew she wouldn't be running a danger of getting caught by them. Complying with the command, she threw the Colt into the night and got down on her knees.

The metallic click from the hammer being cocked on Luis' Colt meant that Jane had to think fast - fortunately for her, if there was one thing she was good at, it was fast thinking. "Oh, ya just gonna shoot me like some lame coyote? I do'n think so, friend. I read all them penny dreadfuls... do'n tell me ya do'n wanna go a few rounds with me? Yeah, I betcha do. Then you will have somethin' to brag about," she said while her left hand crept down to the hunting knife she had in a leather sheath.

Since she had always kept to Luis' left, she was positive that he hadn't been able to spot the sheath against her pants, and besides, the night had been too dark to see much of anything.

"I don't. I just wanna kill you... and it's gonna be right now," Luis said and moved to pull the trigger.

Jane narrowed her eyes dangerously and clenched her jaw, fully ready for the coming struggle - or the burning hot lead to hit her bones. As Luis moved in for the kill, she reacted with the speed of a rattlesnake, pulled the hunting knife from the sheath and sent it hurtling towards the man who was holding her at gunpoint.

Just as the knife embedded itself hilt-deep into Luis' rib cage, Jane rolled to the right and performed a furious staccato with her hands as she patted the desert floor for her Peacemaker that she knew couldn't have gone very far.

A surprised, gurgling cry came from the Mexican, but his fighting spirit didn't leave him even as he was crumpling to the ground. Spasming and coughing up blood, he had enough wherewithal before he died to clench his index finger around the trigger and pull.

The shot sounded like a twelve-pound howitzer going off in the quiet of the night, and a split second later, Jane felt the hot lead from Luis' Colt carve a furrow across her left upper arm that started to bleed even before she had been fully knocked down into the dust. "Shit..." she groaned, still patting frantically for her own Peacemaker.

'*Who goes there?*' a gruff voice shouted from somewhere out into the darkness.

When she finally found her revolver, she clambered to her knees and held her breath so she could hear if the sentries had found her yet - inevitably, they had; two or three riders were already on their way into the night. "Aw shit!" she groaned again and blew the sand and dust out of her Colt in case she was going to need it.

'*You're trespassin' on private property!*' the sentry shouted.

Getting up, she took the knife from Luis' chest and wiped it on his white tunic that was slowly being tainted blood red. She shook her head at the senselessness of it all and ran over to her horse that fortunately hadn't been spooked by the ruckus. Once she was in the saddle, she looked over her shoulder and noted with relief that the sentries had started their search some distance away from her.

"Yah!" she shouted and gave the bay gelding a good nudge in the sides. As she rode away at a fair clip, she grumbled a long line of curses regarding Quint Connors' lineage and the bandits he associated with... including one six-foot outlaw by the name of Blackie Durham who needed her head checked, and who would surely have her rear end handed to her on a platter by an irate redhead when she got home.

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CHAPTER 5

The next morning, Jane and Mathilda were engaged in a two-pronged contest: to have the reddest eyes from lack of sleep and to go the longest without speaking to each other.

As Mathilda silently put down a spoon and a bowl of steaming hot oatmeal in front of Jane who was sitting at the table by the window, it was clear the young redhead was winning the second contest, but Jane still had the advantage in the first.

The outlaw took the spoon and held it ready to dig into the oatmeal. For the umpteenth time since returning from the failed mission - and getting an earful for her troubles - she tried to break the ice with a smile. "Wanna share?" she said, holding out the spoon.

Mathilda just shook her head and poured hot, black coffee into two mugs - then she sat down and began to eat of the slices of toasted bread Annie Mikkelsen had made for them.

"Suit yourself," Jane said and dug into the oatmeal.

Just as the outlaw had taken a large spoonful into her mouth, Mathilda leaned back in her seat and closed her new, second-hand house coat even tighter around her body. "I was worried sick about you... and with good reason, I learned."

"Mmmf... mmmhb..." Jane mumbled, trying to speak around the spoonful of oatmeal. She shot Mathilda a cheeky glare and chewed vigorously to be able to speak before the moment was lost and silence returned.

Since Jane had complained vociferously over Mathilda's intent to rip the sleeve off her favorite shield-front shirt to treat the wound, the outlaw was wearing her spare shirt which was already sleeveless to begin with. Eyeing the bandage on Jane's left upper arm that had seeped a little over the hours since she had applied it, Mathilda shook her head slowly and leaned forward again. "Good Lord, Jane... you so nearly got yourself killed."

Swallowing, Jane put down the spoon and reached for her friend's hands. "Yeah, but I was'n. It's gonna take a lot more than that to send this old saddlebum to hell... or wherever I'll be goin'... maybe the Pecos."

"But don't you think Quint Connors will be angry that you killed one of his men?"

"Tell ya what," Jane said and scooped up another spoonful though she didn't put it into her mouth. "Quint Connors ain't no fool. He knew exactly what was gonna happen between that fella and me. Whoever came back was gonna be the better one. I came back, he did'n. And that's about the long and the short of it, I reckon." - Nodding gloomily, Jane swept the spoon and started chewing on the coarse oatmeal that she had to chase down with a large swig of black coffee.

"But still... I can't understand what George Ballentine has to do with it..." Mathilda said and took a bite from her toast.

"Dunno neither. D'ya know anythin' 'bout him?"

"Well, he's probably the richest man in the county. He's got a daughter... can't remember her name... it was most peculiar... I believe it was French. Anyway, he sent her back east a few years ago to live on a boarding school, or something akin to that. He's breeding horses, but... that's about all I know," Mathilda said with a shrug.

"Whatever it is, there's somethin' just under the surface that I have'n dug down to yet. But I will," Jane said and put the spoon into the empty bowl.

The sound of creaking steps from the wooden staircase leading up to their apartment made both women go into a state of high alert, but Jane was able to release the tension fairly quickly. "Naw, that ain't Quint or one of his pistoleros... them heavy footsteps can only belong to Mrs. Mikkelsen," she said and got up from her chair.

Ten seconds later, the knock on the door and the mature voice saying '*Miss Brown, Miss Durham, are you decent?*' proved that the outlaw had been right.

Grinning, Jane opened the door to greet their landlady. "We are, Mrs. Mikkelsen. Good morning."

"Good morning to you too, Miss Durham," the slightly plump Annie Mikkelsen said as she stepped into her brother's old apartment. When she eyed the bandage around Jane's left upper arm, she raised a hand to touch it. "Oh... have you been hurt?"

"Just a little nick, Mrs. Mikkelsen. Nothin' for ya to worry 'bout," Jane said and closed the door behind them.

"Oh... well, if you need any Lugol's Solution, I have plenty downstairs."

"No, it's just fine, thank you."

"All right... well! Mathilda, child, I have some exciting news for you," Annie said and hurried through the room. Sitting down on the chair Jane had only just vacated, the mature woman leaned across the table and took Mathilda's hands in her own. "I think I have seen your Pa's silver pocket watch!"

"Y- you what?! Where? Who has it?" Mathilda said, jumping forward so fast her elbow knocked into the plate with the half-eaten toast and nearly sent it over the edge of the table.

"I saw it late yesterday afternoon. I discovered I had forgotten to buy something for our supper. As you know, Sofus is a traditionalist so he gets really upset if he doesn't get... anyway, I went down to the bakery on Perry Street, and what did I see on the sidewalk in front of it? A silver Waltham, slightly oval like you told me. Uh, a man was carrying it, of course, it wasn't just lying around."

"Who, Mrs. Mikkelsen?" Jane said, guessing from the red blotches on Mathilda's cheeks that her young friend was so agitated from the surprising news that she could hardly even squeak.

"Why that charming young fellow Henry Wilkinson, junior!" Annie said with a beaming smile.

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Ten minutes later, Mathilda slowly came to on the chaise longue after fainting and nearly falling off the chair she had been sitting on. Moaning quietly, she opened her eyes only to look into the underside of the damp cloth Jane had put over her eyes.

She reached up and pulled it down - and found herself looking into a pair of worried blue eyes belonging to a six-foot outlaw.

"Hello again," Jane whispered, caressing Mathilda's cheek.

"Was that a dream... or a living nightmare?" Mathilda croaked. When she reached up to touch the outlaw's hand, Jane moved slightly to ease her access, and she was suddenly faced with the sight of Annie Mikkelsen lying on the bed with a similar damp cloth over her eyes. "Wh- what in the world...?"

"She fainted too," Jane whispered.

"Good Lord..."

"Wimmen keep fallin' for me... what can ah do, ya know?"

Sighing deeply, Mathilda moved up into a sitting position and held out her hands. Jane caught the hint and sat down next to the young redhead.

"Why did Mrs. Mikkelsen faint? Because I fainted?"

"That was prob'ly part of it, but after I'd carried ya here, I felt I needed to fill her in on the details. I told her 'bout you and Henry junior. And then she went plop and I had to carry her, too."

"Oh..."

"Almost sprained mah back, ah did," Jane said and bumped shoulders with Mathilda.

Mathilda sighed again and took Jane's hand. "So it was true... Henry Junior does have Pa's watch?" she said, giving the long digits a squeeze.

"Look... we know that Junior has *a* pocket watch... an oval pocket watch, to be sure, but... yer Pa's could'n ha' been the only one like that, ya know."

"No, but... it's his. I can feel it in my heart." Mathilda looked up at the tall outlaw and pondered long and hard if she was ready to do what she was thinking about. Deciding that she was, she loosened her house coat and moved their hands up so Jane's was placed against her soft nightshirt just below her breasts. "I'm sure you can feel it, too," Mathilda whispered, not daring at all to look at Jane out of fear of fainting again.

A warm smile spread over Jane's features as she felt her young friend's heart beat soundly through the thin shirt. She knew it had been a very large step for Mathilda to take, so instead of pulling some lame-assed joke like her instincts were very typically telling her to, she leaned down until her lips were only a few inches from Mathilda's. "I can feel it. Hey... I'm sorry I got myself shot last night. It wasn't my intention," she whispered.

"I know," Mathilda whispered back and met Jane's lips at the halfway point. Out of fear they might worsen Mrs. Mikkelsen's condition if she should happen to catch an eyeful of it, they kept the kiss they shared brief, but the sweetness that flowed naturally between them more than made up for it.

Once they separated, Jane kept her face so close to Mathilda's they were breathing the same air. *'Man... how did I get so lucky...'* she thought as she studied the green-eyed beauty's delicate facial features. *'I must've spent all my worldly luck the day in the desert when Mumblin' Jack came to my rescue... look at the prize I earned that day. Damn... it's almost enough to make a believer outta me.'* - "Mathilda... I'm goin' to get your Pa's watch back from Junior," she said out loud.

"Jane, please don't do anyth-

"Anythin' stupid like killin' him? I wo'n. But I will get the watch back. That's a promise. And I'm a woman who keeps her promises."

"But how..."

"Dunno yet. But maybe it's better if ya do'n know too much 'bout what I'm a-gonna do," Jane said and leaned in to offer Mathilda another kiss, but before their lips could touch, Annie Mikkelsen stirred on the bed, and they pulled back from each other.

"Ih, du godeste... jeg må være besvimet... Sofus? Sofus, er du der?" Annie said in Danish, creating identical, highly puzzled expressions on Jane's and Mathilda's faces.

"She's calling for her husband, I understood that much," Mathilda said and started to get up, but Jane held her back.

"Naw, I got it. I'm gettin' the hang of it now," the outlaw said with a grin as she crossed the room and removed the damp cloth from Annie's eyes.

Once Jane had made sure Annie Mikkelsen was safely down into the store, she came back up and closed the door behind her with a dark look on her face.

In the meantime, Mathilda had tried to read a bit of the travelogue she had found, but the paragraphs didn't seem to be interested in getting read as they kept flowing into each other in a way the author hadn't intended. Sighing, she put the bookmark into the leather-bound tome and put it down on the reading table.

Turning around, she locked eyes with Jane who still hadn't moved from the door. When the outlaw didn't offer an opening where a conversation could start, Mathilda got up and closed the distance between them. "Jane?" she said as soon as she wrapped her arms around her tall friend's long torso.

"Mmmm?"

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Ain't worth a penny, Mathilda. I'm just thinkin' how I can accomplish what I'll set out to do without anyone gettin' hurt."

"Oh..."

"C'mon, les'sit down on the whatshamacallit. We need to speak seriously," Jane said and moved over to the bottle green piece of furniture.

Once they were seated comfortably with their arms around each other's waists, Jane grunted and looked at Mathilda. "If this had been any other job, I woulda just kilt that son of a bitch stone dead, grabbed the watch and be done with it. But becos' you're here, I ca'n do that. Sheriff Cutler ain't no fool, and neither is Deperty Cooper. They obvis'ly know you're back in town, they seen ya with me... they know who I am, too. So killin' Junior is outta the question. They'd come for ya in an instant. No, I gotta make this look like I'm just out to rob that mean bastard."

"Oh, God," Mathilda said and closed her eyes.

"The owner of the Bull Rider told us that he'd lost a buncha money 'cos Junior had taken his business elsewhere... where'd ya think he'd go? The Golden Wings?"

"The Golden Wings or Roscoe's Watering Hole," Mathilda said, nodding quietly and leaning into Jane's strong body. "Henry Junior is far too pompous to visit any of the other Saloons in Princetown."

"Yeah, I was figurin' he was one of them highfalutin' types. Roscoe's... that's in front of the Town Hall. All right. I think I'll try there first. If he ain't-"

"Wait... tonight?"

"Yeah. There's no time like now, Mathilda."

Mathilda gasped and moved away from the outlaw. She suddenly felt boxed in and got up from the chaise longue and went over to the window overlooking the street.

Pulling aside the lace curtains, it was revealed that the southern part of Main Street was as busy as ever, but Mathilda's green, worried eyes didn't see the riders coming and going to Olsen's livery stable, or the common folks who were strolling on the sidewalk with groceries, or even the children who were playing merrily in the street.

Never taking her eyes off the view - and yet not seeing anything - she took a deep breath but let it out slowly without speaking. A minute went by before she tried again. "Jane," she said quietly, turning back to the outlaw. "You could die tonight."

"The Reaper may ask me for a dance, yes," Jane said casually with her elbows on her knees.

"Pa's watch isn't worth you dying. You mean more to me now than an inanimate object ever could."

"Well, much obliged for the vote of confidence," Jane said and got up from the chaise longue. "But I ain't plannin' on leavin' this party just yet, ya know. I know what I'm doin'. I promised ya I'd get the watch back... and that means I'll get the watch back."

"Oh, Jane," Mathilda groaned in a pained voice, stretching out her arms. Almost at once, tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over to stain her cheeks.

Jane was there in an instant, pulling her young friend into a crushing embrace. "Shhh... no talkin' 'bout death now. That'll happen soon enough. Please do'n cry, Mathilda... I ca'n stand it when wimmen cry. Shhh," she said, running her hands up and down Mathilda's back.

"If you die tonight-"

"Mathilda-"

"No, let me speak... please," Mathilda said into Jane's shoulder. "If you die tonight, I won't have anything to remember you by. But, Jane... there is something w- we... before you go, will you make love with me?"

Jane's eyes popped wide open, then narrowed down into tiny blue slits. She ground her jaw a couple of times as she filtered Mathilda's words through her brain - then she needed to filter their meaning all over again because she lost all cohesion halfway through at the thought of engaging in the ancient, carnal activity with the young redhead.

"Uh..." was all she could say which even she knew was an idiotic reply.

"Jane?" Mathilda said and pulled back.

"Uh... I, uh..." - the look of uncertainty in the emerald green eyes that looked up at her blew all Jane's hesitations clean out of the water. "Yes," she breathed, leaning down to take the first step of their golden adventure.

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The day flew past as it usually does when one is exploring a new lover, and all too soon, Jane tightened the buckle on her gunbelt and made sure the Peacemaker wasn't jammed in any way in the holster.

With all the minutiae in order, she put on her black, low-crowned hat and ran her finger along the rim to make sure it was on just right, as per the outlaw code.

One look at the pink, naked thigh that was peeking out from under the blanket on the bed nearly made her rip it all off again and go back to one of her favorite pastimes - but she drew a deep sigh when she realized that there wasn't enough time for frivolous activities if she were to keep her promise to Mathilda.

As the lady in question stirred from her nap and yawned widely, Jane couldn't keep a warm, genuine smile from spreading over her features. When Mathilda's yawn was followed by a contented, moaning sigh, Jane was nearly at the point of ripping her clothes off all over again.

Instead, she went over to the bed and knelt down. "Hey," she said, running her fingers up past the edge of the blanket that covered the thigh. "Didya have a nice nap?"

"I did... thanks to you," Mathilda said, trying to smooth down her sleep- and love-tousled hair.

"Jus' doin' what ah can with what ah got," Jane said in an exaggerated accent and leaned down to claim her new lover's lips in a sweet kiss.

"Is it time for you to go?"

"Yeah. But lissen, Mathilda... I will return. That's not a promise, that's a guarantee. Do'n worry 'bout me. Mmmm?"

"Well-"

"The next time we'll meet, I'll be givin' ya your Pa's silver pocket watch. Just think 'bout that until I get back."

When Jane moved to get up, Mathilda hurriedly reached up and pulled the outlaw down for a crushing hug that took her completely by surprise. "Oh God, please take care, Jane... I... I love you!"

Toppling over with a yelp, Jane landed on top of the young redhead and lost her hat that went flying down the other side of the bed. "Yikes! Mah hat!"

"Oooh," Mathilda said, producing a sound that was a cross between a groan and a throaty chuckle as he rubbed her upper chest where Jane's elbow had made pretty solid contact. "That's going to bruise..."

"When I get back, I'll kiss it and make it go away," Jane said as she grappled for her precious hat. Once she had retrieved it, she plonked it down onto her black locks and stole a quick, cheeky kiss right on Mathilda's lips. "And I love ya right back."

Five minutes later - carrying a special disguise under her arm that she had bought in Annie Mikkelsen's store - Jane hurried up Main Street on foot to get to Roscoe's Watering Hole on Perry Street.

Between two bouts of spirited lovemaking, Mathilda had described how Henry Junior had appeared in past years so Jane had something to look for: he would be in his early thirties with dark hair, a milky complexion, nearly always wearing a beard or mustache of some kind, always in a dark suit and white shirt, always wearing a derby and very often using a black hardwood cane with a gold knob - not because he needed it, but because he said it made him look more respectable.

By the time she turned the corner onto Perry Street, Blackie Durham was no longer - in her place stood a hunched-over, poncho- and slouch-cap wearing woman whose dirty face and hands bore witness to her long, hard life. Hobbling along, the woman crossed Perry Street to get away from the Sheriff's office on the south side and closer to the two saloons she was to explore.

The Golden Wings was first up, but it was so full of regular, noisy, rowdy cowboys that Jane couldn't see how a pompous man, like Mathilda had called him, would be spending any time in there, so she hobbled along the sidewalk to get to her other target.

As she hobbled past the Bull Rider, Glenn Dawkins - the owner of the establishment - came out on the sidewalk to look for customers. The man gave Jane's disguise a brief, annoyed look before he spat at her feet and stepped out in front of her so she had to move around him. She did, but felt like thumping him into next week instead.

She hadn't yet visited the last saloon on Perry Street, Roscoe's Watering Hole, so she didn't know if her disguise would be accepted there, but her plan was to loiter out front for a short while and then enter - but when she got there, things happened that meant she didn't need to go ahead with that part of her plan.

Just as she reached the Watering Hole, Sheriff Cutler came out of the Town Hall across the street from the saloon and held up the riding traffic to let two men through. The men, both wearing dark overcoats, dark pants and black top hats, crossed the street like only the high and mighty could - with no kind gestures of appreciation to the people who had to wait for them.

Both men used black hardwood canes with gold knobs, and both had facial hair that underlined their stature; the older man had a white full beard and the younger wore a black, narrow handlebar mustache and a pointy goatee.

Jane grunted when she realized she had just found Chief Justice of the Peace Henry Wilkinson and his womanizing, highfalutin son, Henry Junior.

Suddenly getting an idea, Jane put out her hand and said in a broken, croaky voice, "Good Sirs, can ye spare a dime?" as the two men came close to her.

Justice Wilkinson briefly looked at her, but Junior simply ignored her completely and followed his father through the swinging double doors, leaving the destitute for fend for herself.

Jane knew her disguise wouldn't be able to fool Sheriff Cutler for long, so she hobbled along the sidewalk to get to the corner of the building housing the saloon before he could take notice of her. She needn't have worried - as she turned into the alleyway between the Watering Hole and the Velvet Garter cathouse to get rid of her disguise, a carriage pulled up in front of the saloon and took the Sheriff's attention.

Once the two-in-hand came to a stop, a tall, female ranchhand hopped off the board and hurried back to open the small door in the side of the carriage. The man who stepped down onto the sidewalk was an imposing fellow in his mid-sixties with a white Robert E. Lee-style beard and wearing fancy dress boots, blue denim pants and a matching short jacket over a red shirt. He wore a pale brown Boss Of The Plains hat that he had sitting acocked like the real frontier cowboys had worn them in the years leading up to the war.

The man dug into his jacket pocket and found a coin that he handed to the female driver. "Park the carriage and grab yourself a drink down at the Bull, Karla. I'll call when I need you."

"Yes, Sir... thank you, Sir," the driver said and bowed respectfully to the imposing man before he went into the Watering Hole with Sheriff Cutler.

Around the corner, Jane was busy wiping the muck off her hands and face with the poncho while looking at the people walking into the saloon. "Well, well, well. Why do I get the feelin' I was just introduced to Gentleman George Ballentine...? Hmmm. What in the world is goin' on here...?" she mumbled under her breath.

Now clean and respectable, Jane assumed her natural regal pose and took her low-crowned hat out of her shirt. Once it was on - and she had run her finger around the rim - she walked out of the alleyway and into Roscoe's Watering Hole like she owned the place.

The interior of Roscoe Corbin's saloon looked like most other saloons she had ever been in, with close to two dozen round tables for poker and other card games to the left, a long bar counter with two bartenders standing in front of a huge mirror to the right, and a dance floor at the back of the room. The floor was empty, but a man was sitting at an upright piano, mangling one of Stephen Foster's memorable tunes.

Looking around, Jane recognized several of the younger soiled doves who had whistled at her from the Velvet Garter cathouse the previous night, and she couldn't stop a crooked grin from appearing on her face at the general behavior of the women attending the gentlemen who were sitting at the tables. She quickly sobered, however, when she remembered that she already had the best prize she'd ever get back home in the apartment above Mikkelsen's store.

The two Wilkinsons, George Ballentine and Sheriff Cutler were seated around a table at the back of the room, waiting to be served by the bartender who was already on his way over there carrying a bottle of whisky, a bottle of brandy and several glasses.

After buying a small glass of beer from the other bartender, Jane made her way towards the VIP-area, moving inconspicuously between the patrons until she found a Blackjack table from where she'd be in a perfect position to listen in on the conversation between the upper echelon of Princetown.

"Good evenin', Ma'am," an employee of the saloon said. "Bets, please."

Jane absentmindedly put two dollars down on the table and watched with half an eye as the dealer gave her two cards from a deck. Peeking at her cards, she had seventeen.

"Hit," she said without even looking at the next card the dealer gave her.

"Twenty-four. Bust," the dealer said and took Jane's two dollars. "Another game, Ma'am?"

"Mmmm," Jane said and put another two dollars on the green table, waiting impatiently for the four men to begin speaking about more important subjects than the shooting that had taken place at the Circle Y ranch the previous night - she already knew everything there was to know about that particular incident.

Twenty minutes later - and twenty dollars poorer - Jane moved away from the Blackjack table and shuffled over to the bar, none the wiser. She scrunched up her face as it dawned on her that she wouldn't get any nuggets of information from the four men. Apparently, they were treating it as a night on the town, which, she had to grudgingly admit, it probably was.

The piano player hadn't helped; what he didn't have in talent, he had in perseverance. The way he had mangled most of Stephen Foster's songs had made it near-impossible for her to pick up more than every other word of what had been said at the table, though she had found out that Chief Justice Wilkinson had been one of Princetown's founding fathers along with Robert Franklin Prince, Charles Arthur Sullivan, Chester Perry and George Ballentine many years earlier.

She had noticed that Henry Junior had looked at a silver pocket watch a couple of times, but it had been too far from Jane's position for her to confirm that it was the watch she was looking for.

The opening she needed came when Sheriff Cutler shook hands with the other gentlemen, put on his Stetson and left the table. Jane made sure to hide in the crowd while the pot-bellied man she called Kettle walked past so he wouldn't catch a glimpse of her easily recognizable frame.

'I'm just gonna have to do this the old-fashioned way,' she thought and began to look around for a pen and a piece of paper.

Two minutes later, she approached one of the painted ladies who was hanging by the bar with seemingly nothing to do. "Hey," Jane said, leaning in towards the soiled dove to be heard over the piano music, and waving a \$5 bill around.

The blonde - wearing garish makeup and a crimson red corset with slightly vulgar stockings held up by velvet garters - turned around to face Jane. At first she shied back, but the green note proved too tempting. "I'm sorry, lady. I ain't one of those people who do it with women."

"Good thing I ain't askin', then," Jane said and stuffed the bill down the dove's cleavage much to her joy. "Naw, I need ya to deliver this here message to a man who's sittin' at that table over yonder. Ya know Henry Wilkinson Junior?" the outlaw continued, holding the hastily scribbled note.

"Of course!" the dove squealed.

"Good. Just deliver it to him, if ya please. Ya understand? Can ya do that for me?"

"Sure, sure! But... why don't you just do it yourself?"

" 'Cos it's supposed to be a surprise, silly!" Jane said and waved her hand in a gesture she hoped was appropriately girlish.

"Oh! Of course... men love that sort of thing," the dove said and broke out in a snicker.

"Yeah. His old man is prob'ly gonna get upset, but I'm willin' to bet that Junior will git up and leave in an almighty hurry. Just deliver the message and I'll take it from there... literally," Jane said with a snicker that was meant to match the one the other woman had just let out.

"Oh, what a fun idea!"

"Yes... gimme two minutes to get set, okay? In two minutes, ya can go over to Henry Junior and give him the message," Jane said and put her hand on the dove's arm to prove that she was sincere. "And... if anyone asks, ya never met me... eh?" she said quietly, stuffing another five dollar bill down the woman's cleavage before handing her the folded-up message.

"You can count on me!" the prostitute said, nodding eagerly.

Predictably, two minutes later, Henry Wilkinson Junior stormed out the back door of Roscoe's Watering Hole and strode down the narrow alleyway at the back of the saloons.

"Quint?" he said in a voice that was fairer than his exterior suggested. "Quint? Where the hell are you? Quint! Don't make me chase you all over town!"

'Right here,' Jane wanted to say, but she didn't want to blow her perfect cover in the shadowy alley between the Watering Hole and the general store. The moment Henry Junior came striding past looking for Quint Connors who had supposedly sent him a message saying there was trouble in store, she knocked off his derby and coldcocked him over the neck with the hilt of her Peacemaker.

The body fell limply to the ground with a loud thump.

"Now, ya bastard, lessee if you've got Mathilda's watch or not," Jane said and put her boot on Henry's side to push him over. Once he was on his back, she tore open his overcoat and began to search his body.

It didn't take her long to find an oval, silver pocket watch on a long chain. Opening it, she found the inscription which read 'From James Lawrence Brown to Martin Brown'. "Gotcha, ya rotten piece of trash," Jane mumbled and shoved Henry in the gut.

She didn't bother to unclip the chain, she simply ripped it out of his suit with a resounding *RRRRIP*.

To make it look like a common robbery, she reached into his coat and took his pocketbook. After stealing the few dollars he had there, she grabbed the hardwood cane and flung it far down the alleyway. "Consider yourself lucky, Junior. Very lucky. If this had been any other time, you'd be dead by now. Bastard."

Getting up, she stuffed the silver watch into her pants pocket and the dollars into her own money pouch. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the familiar sound of a Winchester rifle being cocked reached her ears.

"I knew you were up to no good, Blackie Durham," a female voice growled from a dark shadow not far from where Jane had been standing. Footsteps came out of the darkness, and it didn't take long for Victoria Lynn Cooper to move into a cone of light from the nearby saloon with her rifle pointed directly at the tall outlaw. "I was in the saloon and I saw you talk to that whore. When you vamoosed and she went up to Junior, I knew somethin' was about to happen. Drop your six-iron and put your hands in the air, Blackie. Now."

"I only did what you shoulda done years ago, Deperty," Jane with her hands firmly ensconced on her hips.

"Whatcha talkin' about? You just clobbered a man... an important man, I might add. Get 'em up now, or I'll blow a hole in your gut."

Jane calmly reached into her left front pocket and found Mathilda's watch. Holding it by the chain, she let the silver watch dangle back and forth. "This here's what I'm talkin' about."

"His watch? It's kinda obvious you stole it, Blackie."

"This ain't his watch... this is Mathilda's watch. Or her Pa's, to be exact."

"Bull."

"Nope," Jane said and opened the watch. "From James Lawrence Brown to Martin Brown," she read from the inscription.

Victoria Lynn sighed deeply and let out a muted curse. After a few seconds, she lowered her rifle and shook her head.

"Now it seems to me, Deperty," Jane said and put the watch back in her pocket. "That we've got ourselves into a nice little standoff here. I ain't handin' back the watch, you ain't leavin' until I hand back the watch... what's a pair o' swell gals to do, eh?"

"Damnation," Victoria Lynn grumbled.

"If you'd acted back then... that night... none o' this woulda happened. And that's a fact."

Victoria Lynn took off her dark, floppy Stetson and angrily rubbed her forehead and hair. "You don't know a damn thing about it!" she said and plopped her hat back on her head. "You weren't there! Mathilda pushed Junior down the stairs... the Sheriff told us to go there... what did ya expect me to do! Pat Mathilda's hand and say it's all right? We had to take her in, Goddammit!"

"One, Mathilda did'n push Junior down the stairs, he fell. And two, they were strugglin' 'cos he wanted to rape her."

The Deputy growled out loud and raised her rifle in an instant. Once again training it at the outlaw, she began to move closer to get a better line of fire. "You almost had me, Blackie. Now I know you're bullshittin' me."

"I ain't. Mathilda told me."

"Bull!"

"Deperty," Jane said and let her hand creep towards the hilt of her Peacemaker. "I've only known Mathilda for a week, but in that time she's never, ever deceived me. Ain't never told me no white lies, ain't never told me no fibs... or bull as ya call it. You know her far better than me... tell me, did she ever lie to ya?"

Victoria Lynn's answer was simple: "No," she said in a resigned voice. "Never. She's too pure for that. Damnation... so Junior really was trying to rape her... dammit! She said it back then, but she was so frightened and incoherent I thought she'd been drinking. Oh, hell!"

Movement at the other end of the alley made Jane draw her revolver in a hurry. "The Sheriff's coming!" she whispered hoarsely.

Victoria Lynn spun around and saw that Sheriff Cutler and Deputy McFadden were entering the alley with their weapons up, no doubt alerted by Henry Senior that his son hadn't returned from the supposed meeting. She quickly looked back at Jane, and then down at Junior. "Jesus... I'll lose my job if they ever find out... or my life." Turning back to Jane, she promptly raised her rifle. "Run... run! Now! I'll stall 'em! Uh... take a shot... but... don't hit me, okay?"

"Sure," Jane said with a nervous chuckle. Drawing her gun, she fired into the darkness between the Deputy and the prone man on the ground. The narrow alley made the sound echo like a blast from a cannon, and the sparks that flew from the muzzle lit up like fireworks.

"Now run...!" Victoria whispered, gesturing wildly with her hands to get Jane to move. "Sheriff! Sheriff! I got him! I got him down here! Stop, you dawg!" Victoria Lynn shouted and fired two rounds from her Winchester into the air.

Right on cue, Jane took off up the alley and was soon lost in the shadows.

A few seconds later, Orin Cutler and Tyree McFadden reached the end of the alley and found the prone Junior. "What in Tarnation is going on here... holy hell, that's Henry Junior! Is he dead?"

"I haven't had a chance to check yet, Sheriff. I just happened to pass by when he was robbed by someone... a man... it was one of those inbred pigs from the Rat's Nest, Sheriff!" Victoria Lynn said, quickly kneeling down to check up on Junior.

"All right. Tyree, you go with Victoria Lynn up the alley. I'll go back outside on Perry... we gonna catch this son of a bitch or we'll all be in deep trouble with the Chief Justice!"

The pot-bellied Sheriff gave his second Deputy a shove on the shoulder before taking off in the direction he had only just come from.

Tyree McFadden was a strapping young lad, barely twenty-five, but with a good head on his broad shoulders. He quickly scratched his beardless chin before shrugging and taking off up the alley to chase after the mugger.

"I'm right behind you, Tyree!" Victoria Lynn shouted, kneeling next to Junior. Once she was alone, she leaned down towards the unconscious man and growled: "I shoulda known better than to trust you about Mathilda, you slimy prick... asshole!"

Getting up, she briefly looked around to see if she was still alone - then she kicked Junior in the ribs. Once her anger had receded, she sighed deeply and hurried up the alleyway and burst out onto Perry Street to find Tyree and the Sheriff before they could find Blackie Durham.

Victoria Lynn had only just made it onto the street when a horse whinnied wildly to her right. She whipped her head around in a panic but couldn't react quickly enough to avoid getting mowed down by a two-in-hand pulling a carriage.

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Jane stormed through the alleyways to get to the Ballentine Trail at the east part of Princetown. Once she reached the dirt road, she turned sharp right and moved hurriedly - without actually running - past the Velvet Garter and across the street to disappear into a crowd of cowboys on the south side of Perry who were all looking at something that had happened near the general store.

From there, she strolled casually down toward Main Street, past the bank and the undertaker's headed for the Town Hall and the Sheriff's office. On the other side of Perry, at the mouth of the alleyway between the Watering Hole and the general store, people were trying to get a two-horse carriage out of the way and off to the side.

Somebody screamed; then somebody shouted for the Sheriff and the Doctor, and suddenly, half the population of Princetown seemed to arrive at the same point at the same time. Jane felt a knot of worry develop in her stomach at the sight of the Sheriff hurrying back to the group of people, and after deliberating briefly with herself, she went back across Perry to see what was going on.

"Clear the street!" Sheriff Cutler said once he arrived at the scene of the accident. "Clear the Goddamned street! Lemme through!"

In the meantime, a group of cowboys from the Circle Y and Bar J ranches had forced the two horses off to the side - but in their wake lay Victoria Lynn as a broken rag doll someone had casually tossed away after growing tired of playing with it.

Jane arrived a few seconds later and let out a long, deep sigh at the sight of the prone Deputy. "Sheriff! She dead?" she said, narrowing her eyes.

"Not yet... but she's bad," Orin Cutler said from his position next to Victoria Lynn. Suddenly recognizing the voice, he jerked his head up and shot fire at Jane with his blue-gray eyes. "What the hell do you care, Blackie!"

"She's a friend of Mathilda's," Jane said truthfully.

The crowd began to stir and it didn't take long for someone to shout: "She was trampled by the horses! I saw everything! That woman over there was the driver!" - People started pointing at the tall, female driver who had arrived with 'Gentleman' George Ballentine earlier.

The driver was leaning against the carriage, clutching her head and staring at the prone body on the street. "I heard the shots an'... an'... an' I wanted to get over here in a hurry! I thought that... I didn't... it wasn't..." Karla stammered, nearly at the point of tearing tufts out of her short, black hair.

Jane knew by the unnatural way Victoria Lynn's right arm and left leg were twisted that the bones had been broken, maybe even crushed. She had numerous cuts and scrapes on her hands, body and face, a legacy of the steel shoes on the horses, and her blood was slowly pooling underneath her and seeping closer to the gutter at the side of the street.

A few moments later, the Doctor and two nurses arrived to tend to the injured woman; one of the nurses was Lucille Monahan, the woman Mathilda and Jane had shared the stagecoach with.

"Doc! It's my Deputy... and when you're done with her, Henry Wilkinson Junior is at the other end of the alley, out cold," Sheriff Cutler said, pointing down the alleyway.

The Doctor - the wearer of an impressive set of white sideburns - quickly sent one of the nurses down to Junior before he himself knelt down and began to examine Victoria Lynn.

Jane knew she couldn't do more for the severely injured Deputy so she turned around and began to walk home to Mathilda, breaking through the crowd who had flocked to watch the ghoulisn event.

Absentmindedly, she found her tobacco pouch and began to roll herself a cigarette. As she dug into her pocket to find her matches, her fingers brushed past the silver pocket watch. *'That damn thing must be possessed... the bastard Junior gets off with a headache but deputy Cooper will probably die... damn that watch straight to hell.'*

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Jane stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette on the wall of Mikkelsen's store before she slipped into the backyard and began to climb the wooden staircase.

For each step she took, she was reminded of the endless parade of things that had happened on the day: the stony silence at breakfast, the surprising news that Annie Mikkelsen had found the watch, Mathilda - and Annie - fainting again, the wonderful time she'd had under the covers with her new lover, the boring wait at the saloon, the impromptu plan, actually retrieving the pocket watch, and finally, the awful sight of Victoria Lynn's broken body.

When she was finally at the door, she was ready to pack it all in and go to sleep for a week. She had barely made it inside before Mathilda ran into her arms and laid a strong, loving kiss on her lips that made her forget all about sleeping.

"Oh God, Jane... you're back... I love you... I've been so worried," Mathilda moaned, running her hands all over Jane's face and knocking her low-crowned hat off in the process.

"Darlin', calm down... I'm here, and... and I have your Pa's watch, like I promised I would," Jane said, dug into her pocket and produced the silver Waltham watch.

Staring at the watch, Mathilda opened her mouth but couldn't get a sound past her lips. Instead, she opened the lid and looked at the inscription. With a quivering chin, she began to sniff to hold it all back, but it wasn't enough to stop the tears from coming, and soon, the floodgates burst for real and she broke out in a howling sob.

Jane let out a long sigh, thinking that at least some good had come out of the mess. Pulling her new lover into a hug, Jane reached up and ran her fingers through Mathilda's red hair. "I promised, didn't I? But Mathilda... I have some bad news..."

"Is... is Junior dead?" Mathilda sniffled.

"No. But I'm afraid that Victoria Lynn was badly injured tonight. She was run over by a carriage."

"Oh God, no..."

"'Fraid so," Jane said and pulled Mathilda into a new hug. "Mathilda... they was gonna take her to the hospital. They all gonna be buzzin' like a buncha hornets right now, but... in a little while, maybe we should go over there and pay our respects. She looked bad... I do'n think she's gonna make it."

Mathilda held the silver pocket watch to her lips and gave it a little kiss. Letting out a sigh, she nodded and put the watch on the reading table at the bookcase.

"There's another thing," Jane said and picked up her hat. "And this is somethin' you have to promise me, Mathilda... never, ever tell anyone ya have your Pa's watch back. Never, ever wear it outside this apartment. If anyone ever sees ya with the watch, the buzz will start and Junior will find out. And he wo'n be best pleased with the way the situation developed tonight, lemme tell you."

"I understand," Mathilda said in a tiny voice. "I promise. It will never leave this apartment. And I won't tell anyone... oh... Annie...! She already knows, she was the one who told us about Junior!" she continued, looking up in shock.

"I know. Tomorrow, I'll go down to the shop and bribe her into keepin' quiet. Or threaten her, dependin' on how the first attempt shakes out."

"But only villains threaten innocent people, Jane," Mathilda said, looking at the watch and thinking about all the hardship she had endured before she got it back. With her Pa's watch safe and sound, she felt she was ready to leave behind some of the awful things she had witnessed and experienced at the Jerome Norris Correctional Institution for Wayward Women, and start anew with her tall and imposing, yet tender lover.

Jane sighed, but nodded. "Mmmm. I hope it wo'n come to that. But if I need to do it to protect ya, Mathilda, then I will. Let's leave it at that."

Feeling tears come all over again, Mathilda hurried over to the tall outlaw and flung herself into her strong arms. "Thank you," she blubbered, "for Pa's pocket watch... for making love with me... and for being honest with me. I love you."

"You're welcome... no problem... mah pleasure... an' right back atcha," Jane said, feeling some of the tension lift as a husky chuckle bubbled up from deep inside her chest. The chuckle eventually escaped her lips and was joined by several more that did their best to offset the serious, even tragic, affairs that had taken place over the course of the evening.

And then Jane 'Blackie' Durham and Mathilda Brown kissed like they had never kissed before.

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THE END.

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