



Title: HOUSE OF USHER

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Character: Cort, The Quick and the Dead

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## CHAPTER ONE

He was back in purgatory.

And the worst of it was, he knew he deserved it!

Cort lay sprawled face-down in the desert dirt, exactly where he'd fallen hours before. At least it felt like hours: it might only have been minutes. He had no way of telling. Time had passed though because it was getting cold and last time he'd opened his eyes it was dark. He'd smelled food cooking and his empty stomach had growled in response but he was too tired and sick to eat, even if any of it should happen to come his way, which he doubted. He was too exhausted even to move and, since moving hurt like hell anyway, it was easier to stay put. He drifted in and out of sleep – which might have been unconsciousness – the only thing he could smell now was the blood and sweat on his own body.

Something large but relatively soft hit his cheek and he heard it thud away into the sand. He didn't really care what it was, only that it hadn't hurt much, but a sudden painful jerk of the manacles on his wrists and Ratsy's nasal whine of a voice, slurring slightly, soon informed him.

"There's your supper preacher, eat it before it goes cold!"

They both had a good laugh at that, Ratsy and Foy, and he finally forced his eyes open and raised his head just enough to look over at them. It took a while to focus but he eventually saw what he'd expected – his two tormentors sitting around a campfire chugging from a bottle of whisky. The other end of the long chain attached to his shackles, his own personal leash, was in Ratsy's fist and he hoped to God the bastard didn't keep yanking on it. He didn't think his arms could take much more abuse. But he knew that as they got drunker they'd dream up increasingly creative ways to hurt and humiliate him, he'd found that out last night, and he was bone weary of being their object of recreational violence. Cort glared, loathing the sight of them, wishing he had a gun in his hand right now...

Foy glanced across at him, caught the look and his face hardened.

"Quit staring like that preacher, I ain't in no mood for fire and brimstone."

He lumbered unsteadily to his feet and lurched over. Cort braced himself, waiting for another blow to land but instead Foy stooped to retrieve something then dropped a hunk of bread into the dirt next to him.

"Don't you go dying on us y'hear? Mister Herod needs you alive."

He couldn't eat, not now, and it was one of the few things they couldn't force him to do. Maybe he'd try later. Right now the physical effort of lifting his head had set it spinning and pounding again; a wonderful little combination of concussion, heatstroke and dehydration. It made it hard to think straight, hard to remember just how he'd arrived at this sorry, Godforsaken place. Did he even want to remember?

He stumbled around in a chaos of scattered thoughts before spotting the elusive recollection and he grasped at it before it could flutter away. And once more he saw the vision he knew he'd never forget as long as he lived. Which might not actually be too much longer, all things considered...

The mission, *his* mission, his home for the past three years, burning before his eyes as he lay in the mud, chained like a dog, Ratsy's boot between his shoulder blades and a shotgun aimed at his head. Ratsy and Foy were laughing, complementing each other on a successful night's work. They'd been laughing as they'd beaten him almost senseless too, clearly enjoying it and Cort cursed himself for not putting up some kind of fight. Even though he was unarmed, even though they were carrying pistols and shotguns, even though they'd taken him completely by surprise, even though he'd sworn to renounce violence... If he'd known they were going to torch his church he would have died trying to protect it. It was the only thing he'd ever really cared about...

He'd spent much of the next two days wishing he really was dead. The butt of Ratsy's shotgun slamming into his left temple finished his view of the burning chapel and he'd finally woken up to the heat of a desert morning, with the headache from hell, tied across the saddle of a horse with a blood-streaked flank. He'd thought the animal was injured until he'd come to realise the blood was his own... Once Foy and Ratsy saw he'd regained consciousness they'd decided his horse needed a rest and told him he could walk for a while. Actually they'd made him walk most of the day, on the end of that long chain, and the pace was always too fast to be comfortable. More often than not he'd been dragged along, shoulders aching with the constant strain, the iron manacles twisting and chaffing on his wrists, sweat and sand rubbing them raw. A few times Ratsy found it amusing to kick his horse into a fast canter, seeing how long Cort could keep up before falling over. It was never long...

So ended Day One; chained to a dead tree with half a loaf of stale bread and a cup of water to nourish him. Ratsy and Foy entertained themselves by throwing bits of their own supper at him and, later on, stones and rocks. If he forgot to grunt or moan when they hit, or if he fell asleep long enough not to notice, one of them would come over and kick him, making sure he was still alive. As they got drunker the blows got heavier. It didn't stop until they'd drunk themselves to sleep.

Day Two wasn't much of an improvement and it was still another full day's ride – or walk in Cort's case - to Redemption. Whatever John Herod had lined up for him there would probably make this little trip seem quite pleasant...

Something smacked against Cort's head, pitching him out of the not-so-pleasant reverie. It seemed as though Foy and Ratsy had begun their evening's sport. He remembered to moan, to let them know he'd felt it. It was better than another kick in the ribs or guts. Now his head was hurting even worse than before and the welcoming chasm of unconsciousness was yawning before him. He fought it, didn't want to fall all the way in. God only knew what might befall him while passed out. He was now only dimly aware of anything beyond pain, discomfort and utter exhaustion, but suddenly it seemed like there were new voices in the camp. Opening his eyes was beyond contemplation so he strained his ears, certain he must be either imagining or hallucinating them. But there they were again. Foy and Ratsy's unmistakable tones and two, perhaps three others. He heard his own name mentioned, heard Ratsy's voice rise in some kind of protest, but he couldn't make out any of the conversation. Footsteps approached him and he tensed, waiting for the blow which didn't come. Finally he had no choice but to open his eyes and try to figure out what was happening. He got a bleary look at a man standing over him and then the stranger squatted down, reaching out a hand. Cort flinched away but the man smiled.

"Easy son, I'm not gonna hurt you."

The man was holding something but Cort wasn't looking at that, he was transfixed by the man's eyes, the kind of eyes you didn't forget in a hurry. Ice cold, blue eyes which seemed to be boring right into his soul. Hard, calculating eyes which right now seemed tempered with compassion and something else he couldn't quite read.

"You look like you could use a drink, my friend."

Cort finally focussed on what he was holding. It was canteen of water and right now it looked like heaven on earth. He rolled onto his side and managed to prop himself up long enough to reach awkwardly for it. The damned chains made every movement difficult but all he cared about was getting at the canteen. He drained its contents in one long, breathless draught and handed it back to the stranger with a pang of guilt.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to take it all, but I can't remember the last time..."

The man smiled and patted his shoulder.

"You're welcome Cort. It's the least I can do. I'll pray for you son."

Cort frowned, how could this stranger know his name? He'd never seen him before. He opened his mouth to ask but the man was already striding back to the campfire, over to Foy and Ratsy. This time Cort could hear his words clearly and they didn't sound friendly.

"That's a man of the cloth you've got there, you should treat him more kindly..."

Ratsy's snivelling voice, protesting: 'But hell mister we only got..."

The man took a step closer, silencing him. "If you don't, I'll come looking for you, understand?"

The threat was unmistakable and seemed to register even in Ratsy's whisky-addled brain.

"Whatever you say mister." Ratsy looked over at him and scowled. Cort could see the fear and disappointment written clearly on his face.

He smiled then instantly regretted it. It made his jaw ache.

## CHAPTER TWO

An almighty crash brought Cort rudely to his senses and he spat out a blasphemous curse. Groggy and disoriented, his words were automatic, unthinking, out of his mouth before he'd really registered what he'd said. But a couple of smart looking middle-aged ladies, passing in the street below the hotel porch got an earful; two pairs of distinctly unimpressed eyes swivelled in his direction.

"Well, I never heard a preacher use language like that!"

She said it loud enough for anybody else passing to hear and Cort felt his face redden slightly. While he was certain they'd both heard a lot worse, probably from their own husbands, the part of him that had once been a priest was embarrassed at having taken the Lord's name in vain; so easily and so crudely. He inclined his head slightly towards the woman who'd spoken.

"My apologies for the outburst ma'am, but I'm not a preacher any more."

"More's the pity, young man! You should keep your manners in mind, 'specially when there's ladies around!" She eyed him severely for a moment then grabbed her friend's sleeve and they shuttled off towards the general store.

Cort watched them go, knowing they'd spread their latest unsavoury findings all over town, then glanced around for whatever had woken him from his unplanned evening siesta. It looked as though somebody had thrown a heap of wood down from the roof of the blown-out building opposite and he relaxed slightly, it was nothing that needed his intervention right now. He took a reflective sip of beer from the bottle beside him on the porch and rubbed at the scabs on his wrists; the dream still clear in his mind. He could remember every damned detail of that interminable journey, when all he wanted to do was forget, but it didn't look like that was going to happen anytime soon. It had taken the best part of three weeks but his body had pretty much gotten over the damage inflicted by Ratsy, Foy and the varied ugliness associated with the shooting contest. Cort flexed his right hand, his gun hand. It still hurt a little but he could use it just fine which was fortunate. Redemption was currently an oasis to every outlaw, drunk, undesirable and opportunist for miles around. With John Herod gone they figured it was open season, but they'd reckoned without the presence of the new, able but not entirely willing Town Marshal.

Cort thought about going inside the hotel to get another beer. He'd been drinking too much lately and he knew people were starting to gossip. Well if they didn't like it they could shove it. It wasn't stopping him doing the job – in fact sometimes it helped - and it wasn't as though he was actually getting paid for it anyway. Sure he'd been promised a decent wage, eventually, but right now the town was flat broke and he was living on the charity of the people, reliant on them for meals and a bed while running up sizeable tabs in the saloon and liquor store. Cort wasn't even sure why he'd agreed to become Marshal, sometimes it seemed to him an act of certain suicide. He was totally on his own here; no backup, no deputies, not even a cell to lock up the worst offenders, and more of them seemed to arrive with every passing day. He'd gotten by so far on reputation, rapidly revived and heavily exaggerated following Herod's death. 'Cort the Killer', John Herod's most ruthless deputy, still the fastest gun in the state, currently masquerading as a lawman... It was like a rallying cry for every desperado within earshot to come try his luck. One day Cort's own luck was going to run out.

The jailhouse was in the process of being rebuilt – having lain in ruins for the longest time – and Cort looked forward to the day it was done. At least then he'd have a home of sorts. Then perhaps he might stop feeling so restless, disjointed and abjectly alone. It was like everybody in Redemption was keeping him at arm's length; afraid to let him go but even more afraid to accept him into their society. He supposed he could understand it – the people of this town, the decent ones at least, had lived in terror for so long they found it difficult to trust anybody who hadn't suffered the extended reign of tyranny alongside them. While Cort had visibly suffered too, and the whole damned town had watched it happen, nobody had lifted a finger to help him then and nobody really wanted to know him now, except when they were in trouble. He supposed he understood that too.

To hell with it, he was getting another beer. He brought it back out to the porch and resumed his evening vigil. He liked to see who was coming and going in town, and it was usually around sundown that anybody intent on causing trouble would head towards the saloon. The hotel porch was a good vantage point, offering clear views to both ends of town, and if things stayed settled he could sit out here, quietly drinking until he was sure he could sleep, then it was only a short stagger to his room upstairs.

His peripheral vision caught movement in the street and he tensed, his hand moving instinctively to the Colt 45 on his right hip, but it was only Foy, slinking over to the bordello. He turned his head and saw Cort watching, then scuttled inside even quicker. Cort scowled after him. He'd known that bastard was still in town but, with his boss and best buddy in the ground, Foy had been keeping a low profile, avoiding the new Marshal like his life depended on it. Seeing him again reminded Cort of something he needed to do... He'd just finish this beer then maybe he'd go do it.

His mind returned to the dream, always the same one over and over; half dead in the desert with only the promise of more pain and humiliation to come. The man in the dream, that stranger with the piercing blue eyes had pretty much saved his life that night, but Cort wasn't even sure he was real... He was convinced he hadn't imagined it though, because that final threat had put the fear of God into Ratsy and Foy, over-riding even John Herod's grip of iron. They actually did treat him better afterwards too. They'd let him sleep that second night, all of the night, and in the morning they'd fed him properly and given him water, again at noon, and they'd let him actually ride his horse rather than dragging him behind it. Of course it all went straight back to ratshit as soon as they hit Redemption, but he was at least better prepared to deal with it.

Was that recurring dream some kind of warning? Or premonition? The man had known his name and it bothered Cort, though the fact he seemed respectful of the church bothered him more. Is that why he saw those eyes every time he closed his own? Was he being accused of something? Or summoned? Was he being called to account for his many failings, crimes and murders? Is that why the man offered to pray for him? Was he some kind of earthbound collector and was 'Cort' the next name on God's list?

He wouldn't be surprised. God had every reason to bring down punishment on the loyal and devout subject who'd casually turned his back on religion as soon as somebody put a gun into his hand again. The man who'd watched his own mission burn but hadn't bothered praying as it happened; who'd only bothered praying once since that day. Even out in the desert, nearly dead, all he could think about was himself. The Old Testament of the Bible had more resonance for Cort than the new because he feared that God, and it surely that vengeful God who was seeking him now. He could almost hear the plague of locusts buzzing on the evening breeze...

Cort was no preacher, he knew that, and the past three years of his life had been nothing short of a lie. Worse was the fact he'd lied to other people, to his congregation, and God surely despised him for it. At least as much as Cort despised himself. The blood, fire and screaming which defined his other dreams, when he wasn't passed out dead drunk, were showing him something fundamental. Cort was headed for purgatory, and there wasn't a single thing he could do about it.

Except maybe one.

He jerked back to the here and now and sighed. He'd need to get royally drunk tonight!

He stood up and made his way over to the bordello. He'd not set foot inside since Ratsy had dragged him there nearly three weeks ago, and he wasn't entirely comfortable going in now. He'd been no stranger to this kind of place back in the bad old days with Herod and the gang, but afterwards there had been the three year vow of chastity... It had slipped now and then for sure, and he wasn't proud of that, but each and every time had been with honest, clean, decent young women who always came to him first and he'd always been too weak to resist. Those experiences had pretty much put him off ladies of easy virtue but Madam Rachelle seemed pleased enough to see him. She greeted him with a huge, knowing smirk and poured him a glass of whisky.

“Well if it ain’t our new Marshal dropped by to pay his respects. The girls been taking bets on how long they’d wait before the pretty preacher showed up!”

Cort’s face was burning with embarrassment and he lowered his head, looking through his hair to scan the room for other occupants. Fortunately it was empty. He headed over to the bar and drained the whisky in one shaky draught. Rachelle filled him up again.

“I’m not a preacher ma’am, uh... not now, and I’m not here for, um, services or... I’m here because, er...”

She misunderstood him; took his mortified stammering for coyness. She flashed him a wicked grin.

“Easy Marshal, we all heard how it is right now. Anything you need is on the house y’hear? Anything you like! Now Kitty’s a sweet young thing, she’s sure had her eye on you a while...”

Cort blushed deeper and tried to find a way to dig himself out of this hole. But his silence sent another errant message.

“Kitty!” Madame Rachelle’s voice almost deafened him as she bellowed up the stairs. “Get down here now sweetheart. Somebody here to see you!”

He chugged the second glass of whisky and finally managed to pull himself together long enough to explain to her.

“Ma’am, I didn’t come here for a lady. I’m here because I need to speak to Foy and I know for a fact he’s up there in one of your rooms”.

Her face dropped, clearly disappointed.

“It’s Room Four Reverend... er... Marshal. But he’s busy right now. Might not take kindly to being...”

Cort interrupted her, smiling.

“I’m counting on it ma’am.”

He took the stairs two at a time, just needing to be out of her sight. One of the whores was waiting for him on the landing. Rachelle was right, she was a sweet little thing, but he wasn’t interested. He brushed past her with a rueful grin.

“Sorry honey, maybe some other time.”

Room Four was just along the passage from the staircase and he stood outside the door for a moment, listening to the sounds of action inside. Foy was making enough noise that Cort had no trouble following the story. He waited for the pace to quicken, for Foy’s unintelligible grunting to raise in volume, waited until just before the crucial moment before banging on the door with all his strength, shaking it in its frame.

“This is the Marshal Foy. Get out here right now and talk to me.”

Foy’s groan of utter frustration was unmistakable and Cort smiled. Perfect timing!

“For Christ’s sake Marshal, I’m right in the middle of something now, can’t you come back later?”

“Now Foy, or I’m coming through that door!”

A few moments later the lock turned and Foy was standing there, a sheet wrapped around his midriff, glaring at Cort like he was about to kill him.

“You sure got lousy timing Preacher. I sure hope nobody ever comes calling on *you* like this when you’re entertaining.”

“Stow it Foy” he retorted. “I’m here for some answers and I figure three weeks is long enough to be waiting on ‘em.”

Foy’s bravado evaporated and he suddenly looked ready to crap himself. Cort spotted the whore through the open door, watching the scene with wide, curious eyes and he motioned her to get out. He pushed Foy into the bedroom and closed the door. Foy obviously thought he was about to die because he started babbling.

“C’mon Cort you know I didn’t mean none of it. I was only doing what Mister Herod said and if I hadn’t he’d have killed me for sure anyways... I read the bible once and it said how you should turn the other cheek and you being a preacher and all I figure you should know about forgiving me and since I ain’t even got a gun right now I reckon you’d be...”

Cort had heard enough. He shoved Foy in the chest, hard enough to send him stumbling back onto the bed.

“Shut up Foy. I’m not here to kill you and I’m not here to listen to your excuses either. All I want to know is who that man was, out in the desert that night.”

Foy’s eyes narrowed and he looked shifty.

“Don’t *you* remember him Marshal?”

Cort shrugged. “I thought I might have imagined him since I couldn’t see or even think straight. You know why that was, don’t you Foy?”

Foy at least had the grace to look ashamed.

“I can’t take any of that back Marshal, but you didn’t imagine him none. He was real enough.”

Cort’s pulse quickened. He didn’t know if this was good news or the absolute worst he would ever hear.

“Who is he Foy?”

Foy’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

“That’s Henry Usher. Don’tcha know him?”

Cort shook his head, he’d never heard the name, never even seen the face until three weeks ago and then only briefly.

“I’ve been out of circulation for three years Foy, remember? Who is he?”

It seemed Foy still couldn’t quite believe his ignorance.

“Hell he’s only the most powerful preacher in the state, and he sure wants to get his hands on you, Cort!

## CHAPTER THREE

The sun was just dipping below the horizon and its final, blood-red rays splashed directly across the little graveyard on the outskirts of the town called Redemption. As Benedict Carter rode past he turned his head to take in the scene. It seemed to him that the slightly unnatural tint was fitting - this place had obviously seen some major and unprecedented activity of late. There were a lot of recent graves, many of them with no markers, and the original plot had expanded well beyond the rickety fence which had once served as its perimeter. Ben noted a few gaping holes in the ground – new graves waiting to receive their unlucky tenants – and he wondered how many more bodies were backed up in the town. He bet that right now it didn't smell too good at the undertaker's...

He caught movement on the far side of the graveyard and reacted instinctively; his right hand moving directly to his gun. He glanced over to determine the cause and relaxed when he saw a dirty looking fellow stumble out of a shack, scratching at his crotch and pulling on a bottle of something. Smoke had begun belching from a hole in the roof of the makeshift shelter, and Ben guessed the man was a gravedigger, kept busy enough right now that it was easier to live on site rather than keep shuttling back and forth to town.

Ben didn't want to ride into town in full daylight so he slowed his horse for the final part of the journey. He could see the sparse, almost skeletal outlines of Redemption's buildings approaching, still a mile or so away, and he wondered what he might find there other than a bath and a decent bed for a couple of nights. He'd met people on the road over the past few weeks, many of them heading here to try their luck, and none of them seemed especially savoury. Like many travellers Ben had given Redemption a wide berth while it was owned and controlled by John Herod. Nobody wanted to mess with that bastard and the smarter ones didn't want to attract his attention in any way at all. Now he was gone the rumours were rife and opportunities for the immorally-inclined seemed limitless. Ben imagined some kind of wild, lawless, chaotic free for all where a man was lucky if he survived a night without getting a knife stuck in his ribs.

He was used to places like that - rough living and even rougher towns. His life for the past six months had consisted largely of skulking around frontier settlements, crossing the borders frequently, riding alone, drawing little attention to himself. It was safer that way and while it made for a lonely kind of life, right now it was still the smartest way to stay alive. Once his money ran out he'd have some reconsidering to do. Despite his best efforts that day seemed to be fast approaching.

He entered the north end of town at dusk and he could see candles and lanterns blinking in windows and out on porches. It looked kind of homely. The first building he came across was the Marshal's office, clearly uninhabited since the place looked like it was still being built and a load of old wood and debris was dumped in the road outside. They had four walls up, a porch out front, a roof on top and the Marshal's sign hanging above the door, but there was no glass in the windows and the inside was dark as pitch. Ben wondered what kind of message it was trying to send out; was it an advertisement for men with the right kind of death wish to come tender for the Marshal's job? Were the townsfolk hoping it might serve as some kind of deterrent? Whatever the reason they'd sure got it up fast – Ben could see a couple of other buildings which were just blown out shells and nobody seemed in any kind of rush to rebuild those. One persistent rumour he'd heard on the road was how half the town had blown up. That was obviously a major exaggeration and he reckoned it was only one of many.

He carried on down the street, scoping out the whorehouse and saloon, looking around for any signs of a church or chapel, relieved to find none. He hadn't honestly expected Redemption to have gotten religion, not with Herod running things; and for Ben it was one of the town's major attractions. But right now he was intent only on finding a cheap hotel and getting settled for the night. The town seemed oddly calm, not what he'd been expecting at all. No fistfights in the street or rampaging, drunken gangs intent on causing a riot, no smell of gunpowder on the air... There were even a few people sitting out on their porches, enjoying the cool of the evening, and he could hear scratchy music in the distance. It made Ben nervous – too many idle eyes about for his taste...



As he was hitching his horse to the rail outside a halfway-respectable looking hotel he heard footsteps approaching and turned – not too quickly – to check out their owner. The man looked as though he might have come across from the saloon, though he wasn't weaving about like any kind of drunk. He was about 20 feet away but even at that distance Ben could see that the eyes he encountered now were anything but idle. This man's eyes were sharp, evaluating, dropping slightly to the Remington on Ben's hip, scudding sideways to the horse and the two Winchester rifles in the saddle holsters, finally coming to rest calmly but briefly on Ben's face. There was no challenge or reproach in those eyes, but their purpose was unmistakable and Ben knew he was being gauged. The man moved with confidence and an easy assurance which seemed to have little to do with the Marshal's badge pinned to his waistcoat; he nodded as he passed and Ben tipped his hat, then turned to watch him head up the steps and into the hotel.

The Marshal had disappeared by the time Ben got inside himself and he felt a little prickly as he negotiated himself a room for a couple of nights and stabling for his horse. He had nothing to fear from the regular law but those eyes, so obviously reading him, seemed to have been doing so from the inside out, as though they could see everything that made him tick... Ben shook his head and smiled as he led his horse to the stable behind the hotel and got her settled for the night. He was imagining things was all. It was easy to get twitchy after so long on the run.

It was just the Marshal of some insignificant desert town, and he hadn't been the only one sizing-up out there in the street either. Ben figured he had to be pretty new to the job – John Herod wouldn't have stood for any proper law enforcement in his town - and he was the most raggedy-arsed looking lawman Ben had ever seen. Young, no more than 30 or 32, but tall and kind of rangy, like he didn't eat too good. He hadn't bothered shaving in a while and his hair was long and flopping all over his face. His clothes, while clean enough, were worn, patched and ill-fitting, like they'd once belonged to a much bigger man. Even the Colt 45 on his hip had seen better days... There was nothing flash or showy about that Marshal, but Ben wasn't fool enough to judge a man on his appearance, or underestimate him because of it. Everything about that fellow's demeanour indicated that he could look after himself and that he meant business.

Ben slung his saddlebags over his shoulder and headed up to his room. It was small and spartan but clean enough and, most importantly, the bed was soft. After ten days camping out in the desert he was looking forward to a comfortable night's sleep. He dumped his stuff on the bed and checked his pocket watch. It was after 8pm and he realised the bathhouse would be shut and he'd have to wait until morning to get cleaned up. Well no matter, he'd go downstairs and see about getting some supper.

An hour later, his belly full, he took his second bottle of beer out onto the porch. He was feeling a little sleepy and hoped the fresh breeze outside might wake him up a bit. It was dark out here and he felt around for one of the chairs and sat down, sipping his beer, enjoying the cool of the desert night and surveying the town. It was still quiet, but not that tense, itchy kind of quiet that usually precedes a fight, this was just... quiet, peaceful even. He liked it.

"If you need something more lively, try the saloon."

The voice was soft, the words delivered in a laid-back drawl but Ben was startled and he stared around urgently for its owner. He'd thought he was alone out here and it took his eyes a few moments to adjust before he saw the silhouette of a man, sitting alone at the other end of the porch. Ben was nervous and his words came out a little more hostile than he'd intended.

"Do I know you friend?"

A match flared, a candle guttered on a table and abruptly he found himself looking at the raggedy-arsed Marshal. As before the man's eyes were calm, appraising and this time slightly curious.

"Most newcomers head straight on over to the saloon, or the whorehouse."

Ben nodded. "Well I prefer to take things more relaxed. I'm here for a few days, there's plenty of time for all that."

The Marshal cocked an eyebrow.

“What’s your business here in Redemption?”

Ben figured it was best to answer than one honestly. As honestly as he could, anyway. “I’ve been on the road awhile and, well, there’s been a lot of talk about Redemption, about what happened down here recently so I figured...”

The Marshal interrupted, sounding a little weary.

“I’m sure you heard a lot of lies, rumours and exaggerations along the way, but the truth is we’ve got law here now, so if you’re looking to make trouble then you may as well...”

It was Ben’s turn to interrupt. He was more than a little irked by this stranger’s assumption that he was only in town to cause a nuisance.

“Listen mister, I’m heading down to Mexico and this pisshole town just happens to be on the way. I figured there might be some opportunities here, *honest* opportunities, so I stopped by for a few days. If that’s more than you feel *the law* here can handle...”

To his surprise the man smiled.

“Relax, I didn’t take you for a gunslinger.”

“What did you take me for?”

“I’m not sure yet.” The smile vanished as quickly as it had arrived. “What’s your name?”

“Benedict Carter. Most folks call me Ben.”

The Marshal nodded and Ben watched the cogs ticking over in his mind.

“You won’t find me on any wanted lists. I’m not an outlaw.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Ben. There’s too many names on that list already and half of them seem headed for Redemption. It’s enough to run a man ragged.”

The side of his mouth pulled up in a wry, lop-sided grin and he took a swig of beer from the bottle in front of him. Ben found himself smiling back. He’d only known this man the briefest time but he thought, in a different universe, he could probably get to like him.

“Well you’ve got my name, it’s only fair I get yours.”

“Cort.”

The word set a bell ringing deep in Ben’s subconscious, like he might have heard it somewhere before, but he quickly dismissed it. He was sure he’d never clapped eyes on this man before.

“Is that it? Just Cort?”

“If you need more you can always call me Marshal.”

Ben laughed. On impulse he hitched his chair back and walked over to Cort’s table.

“Mind some company?”

Cort motioned to the empty chair beside him and Ben sat. He saw instantly why the Marshal had chosen this spot – it afforded a clear view of the saloon a few doors down. He noticed an odd, multi-tiered structure in the road out front – a few sputtering candles were dotted haphazardly about on top of it and Ben frowned. It looked like some kind of shrine, though he didn't want to know what kind of deity they might be worshipping in a Godforsaken town like this one. His attention returned to the saloon – some wretched music was tinkling out of it but things seemed pretty peaceful over there. Cort seemed to read his mind.

“Things can start up quick. It pays to stay close.”

Ben nodded. “You got a couple of deputies over there? Keeping an eye on things?”

Cort snorted. “Right now the only thing standing between this town and total carnage is me.”

Surprised, Ben looked over at him. This close he could see how tired Cort looked – an ingrained sort of weariness which spoke of long days, longer nights and not too much in the way of sleep or relaxation. He noticed a couple of other things too – a long, livid scar across his left temple and, as Cort reached for his beer, a fading, green-purple bruise which covered most of his right hand and a thick band of scabs around his wrist. Ben had seen marks like that before and was willing to bet there was something similar on Cort's other wrist. This man had been shackled, quite recently, and for a long period of time. Maybe beaten or tortured too. Ben opened his mouth to ask a question but stopped himself just in time. That wasn't his way. Showing too much interest only got people showing interest right back.

“Not pretty is it?” Cort's voice was soft, almost inaudible, and it took Ben a moment to realise he'd followed his gaze to the shackle marks. “But it's done now.”

The tone of his voice said otherwise and as Ben raised his head, curious again, the briefest flicker of sadness in Cort's eyes reinforced his suspicion. It occurred to Ben that whatever had happened to him, however long ago, he was still hurting bad. He was sure Cort hadn't intended him to figure that and, embarrassed, he changed the subject back to the saloon.

“How do you keep order here, Cort? I mean, if it's just you and all...?”

“Reputation, mostly.” It was a calm statement of fact, with none of the usual bragging or bravado attached.

“You been in law enforcement long?”

That lop-sided grin again. “About three weeks. I had to learn real fast.”

Ben knew it could take a lifetime to build a reputation fearsome enough to keep a town like Redemption at bay, but he also knew this man wasn't bullshitting him.

“How'd you get that sort of reputation in three weeks, Marshal?”

“I wasn't always a Marshal.”

Every time this man answered a question, about ten more popped into Ben's head. He didn't understand Cort and that bothered him, since he'd once made a career out of reading men quickly and accurately then using it against them. Cort was an enigma; a mess of contradictions and Ben was determined to find out more about him. A few quiet questions around town would get him what he needed, he'd once been good at that too. Right now he was thinking about turning in and was just about to bid Cort goodnight when the evening calm was shattered by the sounds of glass breaking and shouting. Inevitably the noise was coming from the saloon.

Cort was out of his chair like a bullet and running towards the saloon as three men piled into the street, cursing, punching and kicking each other. It looked ugly and Cort was heading right towards the centre of the brawl. Ben followed, wanting to get an eyeful of the fight and curious to see how the quietly spoken Marshal

with the badass reputation handled himself. It seemed like half the town also wanted to see; people were spilling out onto the galleries and porches on both sides of the road, attracted by the noise, shouting and jeering like a mob at a bullfight. But not one of them was prepared to back up their Marshal.

Cort was doing pretty well for himself though. He waded into the group of men, punching one of them hard in the face, knocking him down and elbowing a second man in the teeth, sending him reeling backwards. The third man was on his knees, hurt or winded but as Cort leaned down to grab him he came up fast, a bottle in his hand, and smashed it into his forehead. The impact knocked Cort sideways and he stumbled and hit the deck, fetching up on his back in the dirt. Suddenly the axis of the fight had changed completely.

The fighters regrouped swiftly and suddenly they all had their pistols drawn. They gathered around Cort, aiming directly at his chest, and the town went deathly quiet.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Cort couldn't see, and it seemed he'd gone deaf too. A moment before the air had been alive with shouts, screams and the more immediate noise of the fight, now there was only pounding silence and ringing somewhere deep inside his left ear. He was disoriented, confused and it took him a while to figure out he was flat on his arse on the ground, and that it probably wasn't the best place to be right now. A voice above him:

"Shit Jake, you wasn't supposed to kill him!"

At least that meant his ears still worked.

Another voice, closer. "He ain't dead. Wake up preacher!"

Something slammed into Cort's ribs, forcing a grunt of pain out of him.

"You see? Now go get some water!"

For a second he thought he was back in the damned dream, a different part of the dream, the part where he was chained to the town fountain for days on end and at the mercy of every sadist who passed him by. But Cort knew this was no dream. It hurt too much to be a dream...

Something was running into his eyes, making them sting. It smelled like whisky and his brain finally made the connection. One of the men had clubbed him round the head with a bottle and he sure as hell hadn't seen it coming. It seemed like there was something he should be doing right now, he just couldn't quite remember what it was.

He was shocked back into the real world by a torrent of cold water hitting him directly in the face. He spluttered and cursed, forced his eyes open and tried to make some sense of his situation. It didn't take long. The three men he'd been fighting only minutes ago were suddenly best buddies again and they were standing over him, close together. Three guns were pointed his way.

This was it then, the moment of truth, the moment he'd known was coming ever since he took the Marshal's job. Cort glanced beyond the men, seeking some way out of this. The upper galleries of the nearby buildings were undulating slightly, not completely in focus, and he could see they were thronged with people. So he was going to die in front of a crowd, for their entertainment and pleasure, and he knew damned well they weren't going to help him. After all, wasn't this pretty much the same mob who'd lined up to watch Herod's annual shooting contest?

But he wasn't going to die flat on his back like a whore. Cort managed to sit up but it was a struggle. His balance was shot and his head was pounding fit to bust.

"You want us to say a prayer for you preacher?"

The persistent reference to his former calling bugged him more than the fact he was about to die.

“Stop calling me that. I’m not a preacher!”

The same voice, goading him. “Then I guess God won’t be providing any kind of miracle!”

They laughed and he scowled up at them. Water was running into his eyes now, and they were stinging again. He scrubbed at them with the sleeve of his shirt, squinting at the man he took to be the leader, the one called Jake. He was leaning in closer, a look of mock concern on his face.

“Don’t go bleeding to death before we get to shoot you, preacher!”

Cort didn’t understand; until he glanced down at his sleeve and saw it streaked with blood. It seemed he’d been hurt worse than he’d figured, though it hardly mattered now. And he was sick of being toyed with like this; it was like Foy and Ratsy all over again. Part of him wondered if Foy was up there in the crowd, watching. The bastard would be getting a real kick out of this little scene, that was for sure.

“If you’re going to kill me then quit talking and get on with it.” Cort’s head felt so heavy he just hung it down and watched blood and water dripping onto his pants.

“We ain’t gonna shoot you down there. Get up and face us like a man.”

He sighed. That meant having to try and stand. He watched as the gang holstered their weapons and took several steps back, spreading out in a line. The sight was almost comical. They wanted him to get up just so they could gun him down again, just so they could pretend they weren’t cowards. With his wits about him Cort could have taken all three of them easy. He remembered facing five men once - only one managed to even get his gun clear of its holster before he died...

But he couldn’t do it now, not like this, though it seemed he had little choice in the matter. He struggled to his knees, hearing renewed laughter and more jeering from his soon-to-be killers; jeering which was being picked up by some of the jackals on the balconies.

Then there was somebody behind him; hands sliding beneath his armpits and hauling him upright, something soft pushed against the wound in his head, making him wince. A voice close to his ear:

“Keep it pressed tight, it’ll stop the bleeding long enough to take these bastards out.”

Cort recognised the voice. Ben Carter, the young fellow he’d been talking to on the hotel porch. That conversation seemed like a lifetime ago now. He grunted his understanding and raised his left hand to keep the cloth pressed in place. Now at least he could see what he was doing. Ben’s voice again, still behind him and still quiet.

“Go for the one on your left, I’ll take the others.”

Cort nodded, trying to comprehend the fact that somebody in this godforsaken town was actually prepared to help him out. The gang seemed to be thinking along the same lines however, and Jake was looking at Ben suspiciously.

“If you think you got business joining this fight then help yourself. You can die right alongside the Marshal here.”

“Just making it more even, mister.” There was contempt in Ben’s voice. “Where’s the glory in three of you killing a man who can’t even see who he’s shooting?”

“I don’t see that’s any of your business son, unless you’re his deputy or something?”

Ben shook his head. "Just passing through." He backed up towards the saloon but his eyes were on Cort and he nodded almost imperceptibly.

Cort turned to face the line of men, his heartbeat racing. Adrenalin pumped through his body and suddenly he felt like he was 20 years old again. This was just like the bad old days - the good old days - just him, his wits and his gun against ludicrous odds, nothing but his reputation and his life on the line. He used to do this kind of thing for fun; it used to make him feel alive, invincible, like he could look God right in the eye and laugh...

He dropped the bloody cloth in the dirt, drying his fingers on his pants. He only had a few seconds before that damned cut started leaking again, but that's all he needed. He could take them, all three of them, and he wasn't about to let them make the first move either. They'd had their chance.

Cort drew, got off two shots clean on target before they'd even had a chance to move. The man on his left staggered backwards, a bullet between his eyes and the leader, Jake, fell to his knees with one through the heart. Cort swung towards his third opponent and realised, belatedly, that this man's gun wasn't only drawn and aimed, but he was also pulling the trigger. Cort fired anyway, he was off balance and knew the shot would go wide, but another gun roared from off to his right and then the man was staggering sideways. Cort felt something sear across his right bicep a moment before the man fell over Jake's body and crashed to the floor. He didn't move again.

There were a few seconds of absolute silence and Cort looked over at the saloon to where Ben was holstering his Remington. Somebody in one of the galleries started a slow handclap and the sound got progressively louder as more spectators joined in. Suddenly the whole of downtown was a cacophony of screams and wolf whistles; people were shouting Cort's name like he was some kind of hero and it made him absolutely furious!

He emptied his gun into the eaves of the building where most of the noise was coming from. People ducked as the bullets whistled over their heads and Cort was sorry he hadn't hit a few of them. Blood was running into his eye again but right now he didn't care and he knew they didn't either. He had something to say and his words boomed and echoed around the buildings.

"Is this all I am to you people, cheap entertainment? Did you hire me as Marshal just to watch me get killed? Or is it amusing to watch a former priest gun men down in cold blood? If you think that it's God's will, that God is still on my side, that it somehow makes me invincible then you're wrong. I hurt and I bleed like anybody else and I won't be a martyr for this town's amusement! I was dragged here in chains, forced to fight for my life, nobody lifted a finger to help me then and nothing's changed. I stayed in Redemption because I thought you needed protecting from men like John Herod, I thought I could make a difference to your sorry lives, I thought there were people here decent enough to be worth the effort but I was wrong. There are plenty more John Herods waiting to move in on Redemption and you know what? That's all this town deserves."

He wanted to say more but he'd only be repeating himself so he just spat on the ground then shouldered his way through the silent group gathered around the three dead bodies. He needed to be alone and he grabbed a bottle of whisky from an old hobo, who looked ready to pass out anyway, then stomped up to the other end of town, the quiet end. He threw himself down on the steps of the Marshal's office and tried to calm down. He was cold and realised he had the shakes – maybe due to the head wound - but Cort knew it was more than that. Killing men, even men who were determined to kill him first, didn't rest easy on his conscience. There *had* to be a better way to live than this and he'd tried so hard to do it, but it hadn't worked. It never worked. It seemed no matter what he did, how decent and moral he tried to be, there was always someone who thought violence was a better idea and, somehow, Cort kept getting dragged right back into it.

He wished there was a church or chapel in town. Right now he wanted to light candles and try to pray for the souls of the men he'd just killed, though he'd never have the nerve to pray for his own. That was a lost cause. Not for the first time since the dreadful night in Hermosillo Cort felt a great emptiness in his life. It was the space where faith used to be, would never be again. He usually filled that space up with alcohol...

He took a mouthful of whisky, vaguely aware that tipping the bottle hurt his arm, and wondered what he was going to do with himself now. The only thing he'd ever been really good at was shooting a gun, killing men, and he'd proved that to himself tonight. He could never again be any kind of spiritual leader, had no wish to be, but as Marshal he'd imagined the people of Redemption as some kind of surrogate flock, done his best to help them, and this is what he got in return. Alone, hurt and bleeding while the town celebrated a great night's free sport and another door was slammed in his face. He scowled, raised the bottle and this time he couldn't ignore the pain. Belatedly he remembered getting shot. He glanced down at his arm, at all the extra blood on his shirt and cursed. It would never wash out and he didn't have a spare.

"You should get fixed up. You're bleeding like a stuck pig."

He looked up, startled. He hadn't heard anybody approaching but since he was still mostly deaf in his left ear it wasn't surprising. Ben Carter was ambling towards him, hands stuck nonchalantly in his pockets and he was alone. Cort was actually glad to see him right now. Maybe it would help take his mind off things.

"I'm okay. It's nothing serious."

"Booze doesn't replace blood, Cort. The Doc says get your sorry arse downtown."

"He can wait a while. You want some of this?"

Ben hunkered down on the step beside him and reached for the bottle of whisky. Cort still didn't know what to make of this fellow, but actions spoke much clearer than words ever could.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you Ben. You saved my life back there

Ben frowned. "I've stayed in some mean places, but this one takes the biscuit". He sounded genuinely perplexed. "What kind of town stands around and watches its Marshal die in a fixed fight? You know some of those drunk bastards were even taking bets? They were all betting against you."

That nugget of information stung Cort to the core and he tried not to let on. "Doesn't surprise me."

"Maybe you should have stuck to preaching?"

Cort shook his head, watching droplets of blood splash out onto the sand. "I'm done with God, and he's sure as hell done with me."

"What happened?"

Cort grabbed the bottle and took a couple of gulps. "John Herod happened. Seems like his was always the most powerful church anyway..."

"Are you going to quit?"

"I don't know. I can't keep law in this town, not on my own, and it's pretty clear how little people value my life."

"I don't think everybody feels that way Cort, there was a whole bunch of them at the Doc's office worrying about you... But you could sure use some help around here, buddy."

Cort shot him a sideways smile. "The job's yours if you want it."

Ben shook his head. "I'm just passing through."

.....

The Man hiding in the shadows across the street smiled. Tonight's test had gone so much better than he'd hoped. Actually it had gone like a dream! Sure those men had got drunk and stupid enough to think they could take *Cort the Killer* in a staged shootout, but they'd learned the error of their ways. Even hurt and compromised Cort had been formidable; The Man was sure he would have killed his final opponent, if somebody else hadn't decided to interfere.

Now here he was lounging on the steps of the Marshal's office, bleeding into the dirt and drinking whisky like it was just another slow evening at the saloon. It was remarkable! Cort possessed so many qualities that The Man wanted, qualities that might take his various enterprises to a whole new level... All he had to do was show Cort where his best interests lay and, after the verbal tirade he'd witnessed downtown, he didn't think much persuasion would be needed.

And that fellow sitting next to him just happened to be the icing on the cake. Benedict Carter! It had been a long time since The Man had seen him, and he was eager to make Ben's acquaintance again.

The Lord had answered all his prayers and delivered everything he wanted, into his lap in one neat package. The Man was anxious to get this business settled so everybody could be on their way, but there were a few things that needed setting up and putting in place first.

And he had another little test lined up for Cort.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Blue eyes, cold as ice. Boring into him, reaching deep into his soul, finding it devoid of anything decent or worthwhile and liking that. A smile, grim as the reaper, silent words promising damnation. Blood and flames. Red eyes now, burning his conscience, searing his head. Pain that will never cease... because purgatory is eternal.

Cort started awake, for what felt like about the twentieth time. His heart was racing, he was sweating and disoriented and it took him several long moments to realise he'd been dreaming again. Dreaming and sleeping was all he'd been doing recently, and he was still too damned tired to move.

His head was aching like a bastard and he poked at the bandage wrapped around it, wincing as his fingers made contact with the huge lump and stitched up cut beneath. Even raising his arm hurt - there was a bandage there too - so he let it flop back onto the bed and cursed his own weakness.

The door creaked open and Doc Wallace stuck his head into the room. He looked anxious.

"You okay son? I thought I heard you call out."

"Sorry Doc, I was dreaming again."

"How you feeling Cort?"

"My head's hurting fit to bust. You got anything for that?"

The old doctor moved in closer to the bed and squinted at him appraisingly. "That's one hell of a shiner you got there, you're damned lucky that bottle didn't crack your skull open. I got some chloroform, that'll knock you out for a while."

Cort shook his head and instantly wished he hadn't. "I was thinking of something more sociable, like maybe whisky."



The expression of distaste on the old man's face warned him exactly of what was coming.

"If you're thirsty there's water on the table right next to you. I reckon you drunk enough whisky last night to last you a lifetime, and that's mostly why your head's hurting. Now do you need anything *sensible* while I'm here? Food or a piss?"

"What I need is to get out of here, Doc."

That generated some emphatic head shaking.

"I'll decide when you leave. Right now I need you close so I can watch you."

Then he was gone, closing the door softly behind him and Cort sighed. He knew the old man was right, he was in no state to look after himself right now. And last night he'd been in no condition to argue when the Doc decided he should stay here a while.

Cort's eyes flitted around the observation room, no more than a boxroom really. The walls were painted terracotta orange, not much different to the colours of the desert outside the window, and all it contained was a narrow bed, a rickety table and a crucifix hanging on the wall above him. Cort considered how many times this bunk might have served as somebody's deathbed and the thought made him squirm.

There wasn't much in here to occupy a patient except thoughts of getting well and getting the hell out. Maybe that was the point of it. Cort wished he knew what time it was but his watch was in the pocket of his pants, and his pants had disappeared along with most of his other clothes. He wondered if the doc planned on releasing him back into Redemption wearing only his drawers...

He glanced over at the window. It was getting dark outside which meant he'd been laying around here on his arse for the whole day. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had the luxury of doing that.

Ben Carter had pretty much carried him here to the doctor's house last night. Cort had suspected that whatever old Wallace was going to do would hurt even worse than getting clubbed and shot, so he'd got drunk and reckoned without the effects of blood loss and shock. When he'd tried to stand up he'd fallen over and by the time Ben got him here he was pretty much unconscious. He didn't remember his wounds being stitched up and dressed, and now he reckoned it might have been smarter just to have endured the pain of the needle. That way he wouldn't be struggling with the hangover from hell...

When he opened his eyes again it was full dark and he blinked around, surprised. Not because he'd fallen asleep without realising – he'd been doing that a lot lately – but because of the absence of nightmares. He was cold and fairly quickly realised it was because the bedclothes were gone. He felt around in the pitch black but they weren't on the bed so he rolled gingerly onto his side and began groping on the floor. His hand banged against something and then there was a crash and the sound of glass breaking.

"Shit!"

He heard the scrape of a chair being pulled back in the next room – the doc wasn't joking about staying close – and a moment later he was standing in the doorway with a lamp.

"What the hell was that?"

Cort didn't really need to explain. The bedside table was over on its side and there was glass and water all over the floor. "I'm sorry Doc, I was trying to find the blankets."

"Why didn't you just holler? I'm right next door."

He turned the table upright and set the lamp down on top of it.

“Guess I shouldn’t have left you in the dark like that, but I figured you’d be mostly sleeping.”

He located the blankets, laying in a heap at the foot of the bed, rolled Cort over onto his back and spread them over him.

“You probably kicked ‘em off, you squirm around something wicked when you’re asleep. Those dreams of yours must be pretty hot...”

Cort thought about the flames of purgatory and he couldn’t help smiling. “They’re hot as hell.”

The sudden talk of his persistent nightmares made him realise he might be able to get a few answers here. He waded right on in.

“Tell me Doc, you ever hear of a man called Henry Usher?”

“That preacher fella? Everybody’s heard of him.”

“Not the folks in Hermosillo. What do you know about him?”

The doctor scratched at his beard, considering. “Well, let me see...”

He shuffled out of the room and Cort felt all of yesterday evening’s frustration return. He’d been down this route with Foy in the Bordello and, right after, Horace the barkeeper over at the saloon. He’d got no satisfying information from either. It seemed everybody knew Henry User was some kind of big shot preacher with a veritable army of devout soldiers at his disposal. A man who worked out of Tucson, delivered on his promises and travelled a lot, but no more than that. He’d hoped an educated fellow like Doc Wallace might be able to shed a little more light but now he wasn’t so sure.

The doc returned with a broom and a mop and began cleaning up the mess on the floor. He wasn’t talking and the silence stretched out. Cort suspected he’d forgotten the original question.

“Henry Usher, Doc?”

Abruptly the old fellow piped up, as though he hadn’t been asked the same question only minutes before.

“I sure remember him. I been to one of his meetings over in Bisbee once and it was an illuminating night. That fella knows how to preach the bible without boring people to sleep or scaring ‘em senseless with talk of fire and damnation. You should’ve seen all the donations afterwards too, I never seen so much silver in my life and not a single button in that pot! He’d be a rich man if he didn’t pile it all back into that ministry he’s got. He gets into godforsaken places and builds churches for people who’ve only know bloodshed and violence, turns them places right around too. When a town gets religion it starts to clean itself up, and clean towns bring in decent folks and decent business. Even the railroad sometimes. Redemption could sure use a man like Henry Usher.”

Whatever Cort had expected, it wasn’t this. Henry Usher had been visiting his nightmares for so long he’d started to think of him as some kind of a demon. But there was absolutely no basis for it other than his own mind, twisted by guilt, fear and alcohol, playing tricks on him. After all, hadn’t his only real experience of Henry Usher been one of kindness and compassion?

“Why are you so interested in him Cort? Thinking of asking for a job?”

Cort frowned. “He found me in the desert, pretty much stopped Foy and Ratsy killing me. Yesterday Foy told me how he’s looking for me and I’m trying to figure out why.”

The doc grinned. “Maybe he’s gonna offer *you* a job?”

Cort shook his head, relieved that it didn't hurt so bad this time.

"All I'm good for is taking lives, not making them better."

"Don't be so hard on yourself son. You did what you needed to do last night. You can't expect to be town Marshal without shooting a gun now and then."

Cort pulled himself up in bed and leaned against the headboard, eyeing the doc, considering what he'd said. Did he even want to be Marshal any more? Until now he'd not been alert enough to give it any serious thought and last night he was too damned angry to even think straight. Doc Wallace was looking at him with a quizzical expression.

"I reckon you've got some figuring to do Cort, there's a world of difference between the church and the law."

"I don't know about that Doc, it always comes down to belief doesn't it? I believed the people here in Redemption appreciated what I was trying to do. No-one talks to me much, and I've never felt especially welcome, but I thought I was making some kind of difference to their lives and I thought that was enough. Last night it all changed. How many people do you reckon were watching that gunfight? A hundred? More than a hundred? All they cared about was watching me die and you know what the worse thing was..."

He was too choked up to finish the sentence. Tears were pricking at his eyes and he hung his head down so the doc couldn't see. A moment later the bunk shifted slightly as the old fellow sat his meagre arse down. A hand on his wrist, squeezing gently, offering support. It made the tears come more freely and he felt hot splashes on his bare chest.

"You weep if you need to son. I figure an ex-preacher who's still wearing a cross round his neck is gonna hurt bad when he has to take life."

Cort glanced down at the cross. He honestly didn't know why he still had it on – it wasn't like it meant much anymore. He wore it mostly out of habit.

"It's not just the killing Doc. Ben told me there was folks taking bets on that fight and they were all betting against me."

He managed a weak smile. "I guess everybody gets to be a Judas when the odds are right."

That got an unexpected reaction. The old fellow tightened his grip on Cort's wrist and leaned forward, almost skewering him with the ferocity of his gaze.

"You listen to me now Cort, and listen good. Most of the decent folks in this town were in their homes when that gunfight started up. The ones taking bets mostly came from the bars and whorehouses and they aren't worth jack shit. If it's of any interest to you son, about 20 of those sons of bitches left town today of their own accord and a bunch of townsfolk got together and ran out more of 'em. Folks have been banging on my door all day long asking after you and some of 'em brought gifts too. The women took your clothes away to clean them up and that fella down at the liquor store has written a letter to the US Marshal, demanding they send you some backup and damned quick. We all signed it."

Cort stared at him, stunned. The doctor smiled.

"People here appreciate you Cort, though they might not show it so good. They've been working up at that Marshal's office all day. I think they've gotten the glass in now."

"Some folks might call that closing the stable door when the horse has bolted, Doc."

The doc shrugged. "Maybe.... You've got some thinking to do son, but it'd be a pity if you decided to leave."

He stood up and Cort heard his knees creak.

“I can bring you some stew if you like? Seems like you’re feeling a bit better now?”

“Stew sounds good.”

The doc nodded and was just leaving the room as an almighty banging started up somewhere outside. Cort’s reaction was instinctive, he jumped out of bed and looked around for his gun. Of course it was gone, along with the rest of his stuff.

“Where’s my fucking gun, Doc?”

Doc Wallace was staring like he’d gone mad.

“Calm down son, it’s only someone paying a visit.”

“At this hour?”

“What hour Cort? It’s barely nine o’clock.”

It had felt like it was much later and now Cort felt stupid for over-reacting. He sat back down on the edge of the bed, his face burning.

“Seems I’m a little twitchy.”

“I heard that son.”

The doc shuttled out. He was gone a long time and Cort started to feel tired again. He lay down on the bunk and pulled the blankets over himself, wondering if he should blow out the flame on the lamp. Just as he was beginning to doze off he heard footsteps and then Doc Wallace was back in the room.

“You need to wake up son, right now.” He sounded on edge and once again Cort wished his gun was at least in the same room.

“What’s the matter?”

The doc’s eyes were bugging out and he was white as a ghost.

“You remember that fella we were talking about earlier?”

“Which fellow?”

“That fella Henry Usher! Well he’s sitting in my parlour drinking bourbon and he wants to talk to you.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Doc Wallace scratched at his beard, a habit brought on by pressure and concern, and he was surely worried about the man in front of him. His young patient had appeared to be dozing but, when he’d heard how Henry Usher was waiting, he’d jumped out of bed like he’d been stung, a wild, scared look in his eyes like it was the devil himself come to visit. The doc had been seeing that look a lot lately – something was tormenting Cort bad enough to have him writhing and moaning when he was asleep, cagey and withdrawn when awake. Sometimes he’d just stare with a blankness that was downright unsettling and the doctor wanted to assist but he didn’t feel equipped for the job. Sure he could patch up Cort’s body – he’d been doing that a lot lately too – but whatever was hurting his soul needed a more specialised kind of help.

Cort was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands and unmoving. He'd been like that for several minutes and the doc's mind turned to the visitor in his parlour, who might be getting impatient.

"If you don't feel up to it I can tell Mister Usher to come back?"

Cort twitched but didn't raise his head. The doctor wondered, not for the first time, what it was with Henry Usher that made his patient so nervous. He'd just spent twenty minutes talking with the man himself and it seemed there was nothing to fear. Usher was courteous and polite; he'd donated ten dollars for the bourbon he was drinking and another twenty for the doc to keep his mouth shut about tonight's visit. He'd invited him along to his next church meeting and asked a lot of questions about Cort. The doc hadn't seen any harm in answering them – Usher could just as easily have got the answers he wanted in the saloons or hotels - though this way they were mostly free from embellishment. He'd made enquiries about Cort's injuries and prognosis for recovery and the doc had told him straight, but nothing Usher had said or done had given any cause for suspicion or alarm. It seemed like he had only Cort's best interests at heart, though Cort seemed to think different. And he still wasn't moving.

"Look at me son, so I know you're listening at least."

Cort finally raised his head. His eyes were red, his hair was sticking up all over the place, and there was that blank-eyed stare again, like his mind was in another place entirely. A dark and bleak place for sure.

"Your body's strong as an ox, Cort. You heal quick and you'll be out of here tomorrow, but I figure there's some other part of you that's broke and hurting and no amount of medicine's going to fix that. You hear what I'm saying, don't you?"

Cort just kept staring.

"Son, there's a man sitting right here in my house and he's a man of God. Whatever's bugging you, I reckon he can help."

Cort shook his head. "He'll only tell me what I already know. My soul's cursed doc, damned to purgatory. Nobody can help."

"Well now you're just talking shit son. I ain't no preacher but even I know God forgives folks who sin, just so long as they realise they've done wrong. Isn't that what's eating you up right now? You want me to bring Mister Usher in here to see you?"

Finally he got a reaction. Cort pulled a blanket from the bed and wrapped it around himself, glaring.

"Hell no, Doc! I don't want him seeing me in a sickbed. It was bad enough that night in the desert..."

"You'll talk to him then?"

Cort nodded wearily. "Do I have a choice?"

.....

Cort's legs were wobbling as he headed towards the parlour. He tried to blame it on lack of food, blood loss and injury but deep down he knew the real reason. He was scared, and he felt ridiculous for being frightened over something like this. Yesterday he'd stood before three gunslingers intent on killing him and whatever was going through his head then, fear certainly hadn't been part of it. But the idea of coming face to face with a representative of the church was shaking him to pieces.

He approached the closed parlour door and stopped, rubbing at his face, trying to pull himself together. He clutched the blanket tightly around his shoulders, embarrassed at having to face Henry Usher without even the benefit of proper dress, but his clothes were gone, nothing in the skinny old doctor's wardrobe would fit, and he'd had to make do with this.

He felt the doc's hand between his shoulders, propelling him closer to the door.

"Just get it over with son. Holler if you need me and don't go drinking any of my whisky while you're in there. It won't do you any good!"

Cort opened the door cautiously, his heart racing. The room was acrid with odours of parchment, mothballs, dust and chemicals and he wrinkled his nose, trying not to sneeze. The walls of the parlour were lined with old books and there were a couple of glass cabinets containing phials and bottles full of various fluids. It was warm – a good-sized fire burning in a grate - and a couple of ratty old armchairs were pulled up close to it. Cort could see a man's form in one of them, stretched out casually, a glass of bourbon in his hand. He wasn't sure if Usher knew he was here, wasn't sure what to say, so he took a step into the room, closed the door quietly and cleared his throat.

The man stirred and got lithely to his feet, turning to face him. He was smiling.

"Do forgive my manners, I guess I got too comfortable there with the fire and the bourbon."

He walked forwards, hand outstretched, still smiling and Cort took in his finely tailored three-piece suit, the fancy shirt, thick silver watch chain and expensive looking boots. He automatically dropped his eyes to the man's waist, seeking out the gunbelt, but of course Usher was unarmed and he felt a little guilty for even looking. Then the man from his nightmares was standing right in front of him, shaking his hand with a warm, firm grip. Usher was a big man; taller than Cort by a couple of inches, heavier by at least 40 pounds and looked to be in his early 50s, his age only belied by silver streaks in his finely coiffed hair. He exuded style and confidence and his smile seemed genuinely friendly. It reached all the way to his eyes – the same ice blue eyes Cort remembered from his nightmares and the desert – but these eyes were warm and sympathetic.

"Well Cort, it seems to me you're not much better off than last time we met."

Cort pulled at the blanket, wishing it was bigger. "At least I had clothes then."

The smile didn't falter. "You go sit by the fire son, don't want you catching cold." Usher strode away to a table in the corner of the room and Cort sat in the other armchair, watching him pour whisky into a glass. His heart had stopped pounding so hard, and he was reassured by the warmth and apparent sincerity of Usher's greeting, but he couldn't let his guard down. He still didn't know what this man wanted from him.

The glass of whisky was pushed into his hand. "The doctor's worried about you."

Cort smiled. "All he's worried about is me drinking his booze."

He took a gulp of the liquor. It was good bourbon and he relished the slow burn as it slid down his throat and into his belly. Usher sat down in the other chair and suddenly he was serious.

"What happened to you Cort?"

Cort frowned, unsure what Usher meant."

"Uh, if you mean John Herod and all, I..."

Usher interrupted. "I know what happened after they dragged you here and I know what John Herod made you do. I'm asking what happened to your faith Cort. When I met you in the desert you looked half dead but I was pretty sure I was looking at a man of God. Now, barely a month later, I find you trying to keep law in a town which doesn't know its meaning, getting drunk every night and dreaming about purgatory."

Cort was startled. "How the hell do you know all that?"

Usher shrugged. "Like I said, the doc's worried about you and you didn't answer my question."

Cort eyed him. "Any reason why I should, Mister Usher?"

Usher's smile was back. "None at all, though it might help you some. And you can call me Henry, no need to stand on ceremony here."

Cort thought about it for a moment, not sure he should say anything. But this man had pretty much saved his life and he owed him something for that at least. He didn't have much to lose and it was mostly academic now anyway.

"Well then... Henry... you'll probably reckon I'm making excuses but the truth is John Herod stole my faith and a lot more besides. My soul always belonged to him more than God, and the bastard knew it. Renouncing violence was easy enough in Hermosillo, but he always knew the minute he put a gun back in my hand and stuck me in a gunfight I'd pull the trigger." He shrugged. "So I killed a man for the first time in three years and then I knew I was done with preaching. I was never much good at it anyway."

Usher shook his head. "That's wrong..."

"I know it's wrong. I should have stood there and just let the injun shoot me, but I was too much of a coward. My belief in that gun was stronger than my belief in the church and I wasn't convinced I was going to heaven so I killed him before he killed me. That was the day I turned my back on God, and God turned his on me."

Usher was still shaking his head but there was a smile tugging at his lips. Cort wondered, with irritation, what he was finding so damned amusing about the whole sorry affair.

"I got to Hermosillo two days after Herod's men came for you and I spent some time talking to the people. They sure were sad you'd gone and most of the women were crying, thinking you were dead. Some of them were real pretty too... They loved you Cort, kept telling me how much they enjoyed your services, how you brought the Bible alive, how you always knew the right thing to say or do to help them, how much better their lives were... Now, how do you figure that to be lousy preaching, boy?"

Listening to Usher talk about his old congregation was a wrench, and Cort could picture those well-remembered faces, twisted with grief and concern. But surely not for him, he didn't deserve the respect or compassion of decent, hardworking people like those.

"Everything I ever did in Hermosillo was a lie. I deceived that town and I sure as hell deceived myself for a while. I'm just a killer, pure and simple, and no amount of remorse or guilt or confessing to a priest is going to change that. I've been shown exactly where I'm headed Mister Usher, and there's nothing I can do about it. Now, why don't you tell me why you've been following me?"

Usher's face darkened. "What's wrong with you Cort? You of all people should know how God grants forgiveness to those who truly seek it. The Bible isn't a lawbook son, it's a guide to morality and if you've taken life and you know it's wrong, God will forgive you. But if you don't have the courage to even ask that favour then you might as well swill around in torment for all eternity. You'll only have yourself to blame."

He got up and walked back over to the cupboard in the corner of the room, snagged the bottle of bourbon then came back to refill Cort's glass.

"I'd be glad to hear your confession Cort, any time you like, son."

Cort watched the whisky flow. He didn't actually recall drinking the first glass but he was grateful for a second. Suddenly it felt like he was on pretty thin ice.

"I'll think about it Mister Usher, and you haven't answered *my* question."

Henry Usher was the picture of tranquillity as he topped up his own glass, sat down and folded his hands across his belly. He levelled a peaceable kind of gaze in Cort's direction.

"I'd been hearing stories about you for years, back when you rode with Herod and his gang. I confess I didn't much care for what I was hearing, but it was mostly *you* people were talking about, not your boss, and that made me wonder. So I dug a little deeper, found out more about the fast kid with the fast gun who followed Herod like a dog but carried out his business with something you might almost call compassion. Seemed like you wasn't so keen on hurting and killing people for sport, like the rest of them were, seemed like you stopped a lot of ugliness wherever you could, and folks remembered that."

Cort shrugged. "It makes no difference if I had a conscience or not. The fact is I did everything Herod asked of me, and I killed more men than I can remember."

"I'm not saying it was right son, but I'm not here to pass judgement either. When I stopped hearing your name in those stories I got curious again, but nobody knew what happened or where you'd gone. Then, six weeks ago I got word you'd set up some kind of mission in Hermosillo, that you'd found God, and that's when I figured I'd come pay you a visit. Unfortunately I was too late and by the time I'd caught up you were John Herod's property again. I sure wasn't going to mess with him."

Cort nodded. It explained why Usher had simply left him in the desert that night.

"I want to thank you for what you did back then, Mister Usher. You probably saved my life, though it might have been kinder just to let me die."

"I figured you *were* dead Cort. I figured as soon as you got to Redemption John Herod was going to kill you. I can't tell you how happy I was to discover you'd survived all that unpleasantness."

Cort was beginning to feel the effects of the bourbon and hoped the next part of this conversation might be over with quickly. The narrow bunk in the little orange room was starting to seem very pleasant indeed. ..

"Are you going to tell me what you want now, Mister Usher?"

"I heard you were smart, son, haven't you figured it out for yourself yet? Do you think I followed you halfway across the state for my health? I came to make you an offer, Cort, a man with your talents deserves more than a crappy Marshal's job in a hole like Redemption!"

"What kind of offer?"

Usher shot him another of those warm, embracing smiles.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm offering you employment."

Of all the possible motives Henry Usher might have had for hunting him down, this one had never crossed Cort's mind. If he hadn't just heard the words come out of Usher's mouth, he would never have believed it possible. He still didn't believe it, actually.

"Mister Usher you're a man of God, a *real* man of God, and I know something about your church and the good it does in this state. What possible use would I be to you?"

Usher sipped at his bourbon, an appraising look in his eye. Cort didn't like being studied like this and picked at the blanket nervously.

"I admit I was going to ask you to join us as a priest. My ministry is expanding so fast I can barely keep track and I need good, charismatic preachers in my churches. Men who can make religion mean more to folks than just being bored for two hours on a Sunday morning. It seems you're not ready for that yet Cort, but since you've taken a liking to the law, perhaps a job in security might suit you better?"



Cort frowned. It might have been the whisky scrambling his brain, but he honestly had no idea what Henry Usher was talking about. He'd suspected some kind of religious offer was coming, and been ready to turn it down, but how did security fit into the church?

"I'm not following..."

"It's quite simple son. My churches make a lot of money from donations. We use them to build more churches and bring the word of God to towns which need us most. Towns like Redemption for example. That money piles up fast and it needs protecting until we can get it to our banks in Tombstone and Tucson. I'm sure I don't need to remind you about the number of outlaws and gangs on the roads these days..."

Cort smiled. "So you want me to kill in the name of the church?"

"No son, I want you to be a deterrent!" Usher spoke slowly, like he was explaining something to a small child. "You might not realise but you've still got a fearsome reputation. I reckon most outlaws would think twice about robbing coaches carrying church money if they knew John Herod's old deputy was in charge of the guard."

Cort's head was starting to throb. The doctor was right, whisky was no good for him right now. And Henry Usher, for all his charm, intelligence and conviction seemed to be missing a fundamental point. He tried to focus his thoughts and explain coherently.

"That reputation you mention will draw out every desperado in the state. Even if they don't care about the money, which is unlikely, they'll all want to pit their guns against mine so see who's fastest. If I was guarding your money you'd wind up with more interest in it than you could handle. If you want proper security I suggest you go visit the Pinkertons.

Usher didn't seem to be giving up and his persistence was tiring.

"You're an easy target here, Cort. Redemption's a town in chaos and you're killing yourself trying to control something one man should never be expected to. They're paying you exactly how much to put your life on the line every day?"

"You seem to know plenty about me, Mister Usher, so I reckon you know how much."

Usher nodded. "I'm offering you a job where you'll get to own more than one set of clothes. You shouldn't have to sit around in a blanket whenever your shirt gets soiled."

Cort felt his face redden. "I'll get it back tomorrow."

Usher pressed on. "Church money will always be a target but my ministry doesn't make itself vulnerable, and most outlaws are getting that message. I'd appreciate it if you'd at least think on it awhile? We haven't even discussed pay yet."

Cort was pretty sure Henry Usher had made a fundamental miscalculation here.

"Money's not important to me these days. I lived for three years in Hermosillo on the grace of God and the hospitality of the people. Right now I'm living on the charity of the folks here in Redemption and I figure as long as they need me enough to keep me fed and give me a bed then I'll do whatever they need in return."

Usher laughed, but there wasn't much humour in it. "I saw something of Redemption's charity last night. The whole town turned out to watch you die in a gunfight and took bets on the outcome. That's a fine, Godly kind of charity and no mistake!"

Cort just wanted to lie down and sleep. Usher didn't seem to be getting his message so he tried to make it as clear as possible.

"Mister Usher, tonight you've made me realise I might still have business with God, but it's something I need to work out with him directly. I don't think the actual church is going to figure in my life for a while yet, so I'd like to thank you for your kind and generous offer, but I feel Redemption's the best place for me right now."

Usher nodded and stood up. Cort noticed how all the warmth had gone from his eyes. Now he was faced with the cold, penetrating stare so well remembered from his nightmares.

"Maybe something'll happen to change your mind, Cort, and I'll surely be praying for a miracle. I'll be around for the next day or so, if you need me."

He headed towards the door, slapped something down on the arm of Cort's chair as he passed.

"Courtesy of the church. Buy yourself a new blanket, son."

The door closed and Cort glanced down at what he'd left. It was a hundred dollar bill.

.....

Henry Usher moved quietly among the back alleys of Redemption, avoiding the lights and knots of drunken revellers spilling from the saloons and hotels. Redemption didn't need to know he was here, not just yet. His men were camped a mile outside the western edge of town and right now he had to get back to them quickly and adjust their orders.

He was puzzled and disappointed. He'd gone to Doc Wallace's house believing that recruiting Cort would be easy, convinced the outlaw-turned-priest-turned-Marshall would follow him willingly. He'd been certain that a man living on a moral knife-edge and tortured by dreams of damnation would do anything to redeem himself and not once considered the possibility of rejection. He couldn't understand Cort's motives, couldn't fathom why somebody who so obviously believed in God, so desperately needed the forgiveness of God, would choose the law over the church.

Henry Usher wasn't used to being denied and he sure didn't like it, but he tried to remember how the Lord placed every obstacle into his path for a good reason. He needed to accept this new challenge and find a way to show the Town Marshal how the law of the church was stronger than the law of the land.

He'd got lucky with the original test. The three drunken bums who'd tried to outgun Cort had been cheap, stupid, dispensable labour, but next time his own men would be involved and he wasn't taking any chances with their lives. He realised now that the second test he'd planned wouldn't work; Cort was just too damned stubborn. But it only needed a little adjustment and he reckoned it would be just as effective.

He lengthened his stride as he cleared the last of Redemption's outbuildings and covered the mile or so back to his camp quickly. By the time he spotted the campfire and three men hunched around it, the new plan was clear in his mind.

His deputy, Jack Bellows, saw him approach and came striding over. He looked relieved.

"You okay sir? You've sure been gone a long time!"

"I'm fine. We just got a small change of plan is all..."

"Anything I can help with Mister Usher?"

"What's the word on Ben Carter?"

“The two fellas in town are keeping real close. Last I heard he was having some fun in the bordello.”

“Good. You ride into Redemption and tell them to stay alert, I don’t want that bastard sneaking off in the night. Tell them we’re taking him tomorrow at sundown.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Ben Carter tossed his cards onto the table; his third losing hand in a row and he figured he should quit before he got drunk and while he was still a few dollars up. He’d been playing stud in the saloon for a few hours with some of the townsfolk – store keepers mainly – but now he was getting hungry, and his luck seemed to have deserted him completely. He scooped up his meagre winnings.

“Deal me out fellas, I reckon I’m done here for today.”

They tried to coerce him into playing another hand and he was almost tempted. He liked the company of these people, decent, honest, hardworking men all of them, but he wasn’t a brilliant stud player, not in a clean game anyway, and he didn’t have enough money left to waste on gambling.

“Maybe tomorrow. Right now I’ve hardly got enough cash to eat.”

Charlie Barton, the liquor store owner, was grinning.

“Take that Deputy’s job and you’ll have a little something to spend on fun!”

The other men all nodded their agreement and Ben marvelled at their persistence. His act of charity in saving their Marshal’s life seemed to have backfired somewhat. Two nights ago he’d been a stranger in town, wanting only to remain anonymous and move on quickly. But yesterday and today he’d been treated like some kind of hero. Everybody knew who he was, he’d been plied with complementary booze and girls in the bordello, and they’d all gotten it into their heads that he needed to stay in Redemption and help keep the law.

He’d thought about it too. Ben was tired of running, weary of a life that comprised nothing but long miles, fear and loneliness. Life on the road was hard, his money was nearly gone and he had precious few skills that would lend themselves to regular, honest employment. What if he did stay on here? He was good enough with his fists and guns to keep order, and when he talked people tended to listen. He’d have no problems working with Cort either. He liked the young Marshal, admired his skill with a gun, respected his courage and tenacity and couldn’t help but worry about what was going on inside his head. He wasn’t alone in that either. Many people in town seemed to feel the same way but nobody talked to Cort much and he didn’t appear to have any close friends. Ben reckoned he had a pretty good idea why that might be. People were feeling guilty.

Cort hadn’t made much sense on the steps of the Marshal’s office two nights ago. He hadn’t seemed aware how much he was bleeding, but was guzzling whisky regardless. Ben had tried his best to follow the rambling, tortured dialogue but Cort was only really coherent up to the point where he’d offered Ben the Deputy’s job. He’d got drunk real quick and Ben had pretty much carried him down to the doctor’s house, getting blood over his own clothes in the process, and the Doc had asked him to stick around and help out. What he’d really meant was help restrain Cort should it become necessary, though he’d been passed out by the time they’d lifted him up onto the table in the surgery and got his shirt off. The cut on his head wasn’t deep; all the blood had made it look worse than it really was, and the wound on his arm wasn’t serious either since the bullet had only winged him. Cort moaned a couple of times as the doctor stitched him up, but he’d done a pretty good job of anaesthetising himself and he didn’t move.

It wasn’t the recent injuries that bothered Ben so much as the number of nearly-healed bruises, lesions and weals that covered the rest of Cort’s body. He noticed three much older scars which he recognised as bullet wounds; Cort had been pretty badly shot up at some time, but the shackle marks on his wrists were evidence of recent and far more insidious violence.

“What the hell happened to him Doc?”

The old fellow looked up from his needlework, surprised. “You were there weren’t you?”

“I mean all those other marks, how’d he get them?”

The doctor gazed at him quizzically. “You’re new in town so I guess you haven’t heard, but most of this was John Herod’s work.”

Doc Wallace rattled off the story of how Cort had ridden with Herod’s gang, left to pursue a better life then been dragged to Redemption four weeks ago and forced to participate in a shooting contest.

“They beat him pretty bad, near enough broke his hand, kept him chained up for days... Hell, they even tried to hang him in the saloon one night!”

Ben’s mouth dropped open.

“Some folks in this town acted like he was only there for sport. They treated him worse than a dog, tormented him something wicked... A man of the church too, they should be ashamed!”

“Nobody tried to help him?”

The doc shook his head. “They’d only have gotten shot by Herod’s guards.”

“And he still stayed on as Marshal?” Ben was having trouble comprehending it. Why the hell would Cort put his life on the line for a town which had treated him like shit and continued to do so? The doc was watching him, reading his thoughts.

“I don’t know why he’s still here, son; Redemption doesn’t deserve somebody like Cort. But he’s a decent young fellow, he’s got a kind heart and I guess he sees the good in people. Ratsy and Foy burned down his mission in Hermosillo so he doesn’t have too many places to go.”

Nowhere to go. Ben knew the feeling well and right now, standing on the steps of the saloon and watching the sun drop lower in the sky, he wished he didn’t have to leave so soon. Cort might be staying because, for better or worse, Redemption was the closest thing he had to a home, but Ben didn’t even have that. He’d had no home for six months and, unless he changed his lifestyle soon, he’d never have one again. He gazed around at the town, a lot quieter since so many undesirables had left or been run out, and wondered how it would feel to be going home to a wife and family right now, rather than a solitary supper and a lonely bed at the hotel. He reckoned it would feel pretty good.

As he was crossing the street he saw Cort coming out of the doctor’s house and he smiled and waved, getting a similar greeting in return. He was glad to see Cort. He’d tried to visit a couple of times over the past two days but the doctor was adamant that nobody was to disturb his patient. One of the reasons he’d stuck around in Redemption was because it didn’t feel right to leave without saying goodbye to the Marshal. They arrived outside the hotel at the same time. Cort stuck out his hand and shook Ben’s warmly.

“I thought you might have sneaked off while the doc had me in solitary confinement.”

Ben grinned. “I couldn’t save a man’s life then leave before he bought me a drink.”

Cort laughed. “I’ll get us some beers.”

Ben followed him up the steps and took a seat on the porch as Cort went inside. He looked better for his two-day recuperation at the doctor’s, though he had a bandage around his head and he’d arranged his hair in a lousy attempt to conceal it. He was wearing the same clothes as when Ben first met him, but they were clean, pressed and there was a new patch on the arm of his shirt where the bullet had torn the fabric. There were no

blood stains at all and Ben considered the amount of work somebody had put into that particular cleaning task from hell.

Cort came out with two bottles of beer and sat down, running a hand through his hair. Ben realised it was wet. “Sure felt good to have a bath and get all that blood out.”

Ben sensed a change in Cort and it wasn’t anything physical, though he looked a lot less tired now.

“How are you feeling, Marshal?”

Cort smiled and his eyes were almost gleaming. “This morning I prayed for the first time in weeks and I think God might even have listened.”

Ben wasn’t religious himself; he’d seen enough of how the church worked to put him off for life, but he knew this was important to Cort.

“You’re a good man. God would be stupid not to see it. You think you might go back to preaching?”

Cort took a gulp of beer. “Me and God have got some catching up to do. I figure I’m more use here right now.”

“They’ve pretty much got the Marshal’s office ready.”

“So I hear.”

Ben had been up there himself today. He wasn’t sure why but he was curious to see the place in daylight. The outside was finished, the glass in place and inside they were halfway through getting up some bars for a cell. It was light and big with plenty of living space alongside the working space. Cort would be comfortable there; he’d have a home...

“You thought any more on that offer, Ben?”

The question took Ben by surprise. He was amazed Cort even remembered asking him. He didn’t want to admit that it was pretty much the only thing he’d been thinking about recently.

“If I took a job here I’d bring more trouble on Redemption that it could handle.”

“Redemption’s used to trouble. I never figured this for an easy ride.”

Ben nodded, considering. Cort’s courage impressed him. The man knew he was a target, knew his reputation as a gunslinger would always attract the wrong kind of people, but he stayed here anyway. Ben’s own situation wasn’t much different, but would he honestly have the guts to stay in one place, wait for the devil to arrive, and fight him when he did?

“Whatever you’re running from Ben, it’s not smart to just keep going. There comes a time in every man’s life where he has to take stock of his situation and try to make changes.”

“Who says I’m running?”

Cort smiled. “You learn to read the signs. I spent enough time running to know.”

“I heard about that. I thought your name sounded familiar first time we met. Never reckoned you to be *Cort The Killer* though.”

Cort flinched, like he’d been slapped in the face. “Don’t call me that. It was a long time ago.”

Ben felt a pang of guilt. He didn't like to see Cort hurting; the poor bastard had been through enough without adding to his burden.

"Supposing I stay here, supposing I decide to work with you, what makes you think I'd be any good at law keeping?"

Cort looked at him, appraising. "You've got a sense of fairness, Ben; that goes a long way. You've got courage, you can handle a gun and you're smart. Only four weeks ago I was preaching the word of God to a small town in Mexico and if I can make the adjustment then I figure anybody can. Besides, it'd be nice to have somebody in town I can talk to."

Ben smiled. "Like a friend?"

Cort just gave him the lop-sided grin then cursed as he realised his bottle was empty. He stood up.

"You want another?"

Ben nodded and Cort headed back inside. Ben watched him go. He reckoned a friend like Cort might be okay. Hell, he couldn't even remember the last time he'd called anybody friend and actually meant it...

He glanced up and down the street, mentally taking note of the early evening activity. He'd learned this from Cort, only two days ago. Part of him was already switched on to law keeping and he wasn't comfortable with it. He noticed four men on horseback entering the west end of town, their clothes drab and covered in dust. Their horses were loaded like they were on a long journey and they hitched up outside the saloon and went inside. They didn't look like trouble but Ben knew appearances counted for jack shit and when Cort came back out with the beers he figured the Marshal should know.

"Four new faces just hit town. They're in the saloon."

Cort glanced over, taking in the tethered horses. "Travellers?"

"Reckon so."

"We should head on over, take a look."

Ben glanced at him. "I ain't wearing that badge yet, Marshal!"

Fifteen minutes later the beers were gone, the sun was setting and Cort decided to check out the saloon. Ben tagged along, figuring somebody needed to watch the Marshal's back, but nothing much had changed; the horses were still outside and everything seemed quiet. Cort went in first and a lot of friendly greetings were called to him from around the room. The place was busy and as they headed towards the bar a whole forest of hands were stuck out to shake Cort's. People were glad to see him, asking how he was, offering him a drink. Cort was distracted by all the fuss and Ben glanced around, scoping out the room. The four newcomers were sitting near the door, playing cards and drinking beer. None of them looked up at the disturbance and Ben figured that was okay. What the hell did they care about this town anyway?

A glass of whisky was pushed into his hand, compliments of somebody and he ended up standing by the bar, right next to Cort who was deep in conversation with Charlie Barton from the liquor store. A well-dressed fellow sat down to the beat up piano, began tinkling out a tune, and a few people started singing along. Ben smiled. This was almost pleasant.

Two of the newcomers stood up. They collected their empty glasses and headed for the bar. One of them pushed in next to Ben, the other one between Cort and Charlie Barton. He thought nothing of it, just thirsty men needing a drink, but a second later something hard jammed against his ribs, right over his heart. A voice in his ear, quiet and calm:

“Take off your gunbelt and drop it, Ben Carter.”

He stared at the man, startled. He didn't know him, he'd never seen him before in his life, but that didn't really matter right now. He glanced down at the pistol in the man's hand and then across at Cort. The look in Cort's eyes told him his own situation wasn't much better.

Ben had little choice but to comply. He watched the other two men heading over from their table as he fumbled at his gunbelt buckle and dropped the entire rig to the floor. Nobody else in the room seemed to have noticed what was happening, they were still busy singing along to the piano.

“Get down on your knees. Put your hands behind your head.”

He looked at the man again, met a pair of eyes which were clear, focussed and determined.

“Do it now or I'll shoot you through the heart.”

Ben obeyed and the gun was immediately pressed against his left temple.

Above him he could hear an exchange between Cort and the other stranger. Cort didn't sound co-operative but then the two extra gang members arrived, grabbed his arms and slammed him hard into a nearby pillar. Their comrade pulled his Colt from its holster and stuck it into his own belt. Cort struggled and swore and the man punched him in the guts.

There was suddenly a lot of shouting as the saloon regulars woke up to current events but the unmistakable roar of a pistol silenced them. The man standing above Ben spoke up.

“You people play nice now, you hear? We've come for Ben Carter and you don't need to get involved.”

Ben's heart was racing. His past had just caught up with him, fast, and he'd honestly never expected it to happen in a place like this!”

Cort had stopped struggling. Now he was just glaring.

“That goes for you as well Marshal. Don't give us any trouble!”

“Then you'd better tell me why you want my Deputy so bad. That way we'll avoid a lot of unpleasantness.”

“Your Deputy?” The man laughed. “It might interest you to know that your *Deputy* robbed the church to the tune of thirty thousand dollars.”

Ben was wondering when he'd become Cort's Deputy, though he had to admit that using the title was pretty effective, but this latest revelation chased the thought clean away. That was one piece of information he'd never intended Cort to know, never planned on telling him, but Cort wasn't even looking his way.

“You represent the church?”

The man nodded. “The name's Jack Bellows. I heard you used to be a preacher, reckon you could have used a cash investment like that.”

Cort frowned. “I'm still trying to figure out how faith got so tied up with money. Stealing from the church isn't right but if that's what Ben did then the US Marshal should handle it.”

“I don't work that way. Ben Carter did wrong and the church wants to give him a chance to repent.”

Ben's stomach tied up in knots. He knew what that meant. “It's kinda hard to ask forgiveness with a rope pulled tight round your neck!”

Jack Bellows punched him hard in the mouth, knocking him to the floor. “Nobody asked your opinion, boy.” Ben tasted blood and a moment later Bellows was squatting over him with a length of rope. He bound Ben’s wrists tightly before him then pulled him to his feet.

Ben looked at Cort, saw frustration and confusion in his eyes.

“Is that true? Are you going to hang him without any kind of trial?”

Bellows shook his head. “Don’t go believing the words of a lying, cheating thief, Marshal. Like I said we only want to help him, let him put something back into the church to replace what he took.”

“So why have you got him tied up like that?”

“Because otherwise he’ll run away.” Bellows said it slowly, patronisingly, spelling it out like Cort was an idiot. “We’ve been after this man for six months and frankly our church doesn’t have the resources to waste on him.”

Cort wasn’t buying it and he started struggling again. Ben figured he was about to get another fist in his stomach when Charlie Barton stepped up.

“Why don’t you tell us which church you’re from, Mister Bellows?”

Bellows smiled. “We work for Henry Usher’s church, I’m sure you know it.”

Ben heard a sudden buzz of excited conversation in the room as the patrons all picked up on the name, but Cort reacted like he’d been sucker punched. He went dead still and was staring at Bellows like he was some kind of ghost. Bellows nodded at him, the smile a little smug now.

“I see *you*’ve heard of it Marshal. Now, do you reckon you can let us leave quietly?”

Cort continued to stare. When the men holding him let go of his arms he just stood there, leaning against the pillar like it was the only thing keeping him upright. Ben couldn’t begin to imagine why Henry Usher’s name had affected him like this, but it seemed he’d just lost his only ally. He glanced around the saloon, wondering if he should run for it. He’d certainly get shot in the back but it was better than what Henry Usher would do to him. Bellows was right next to him and he braced himself, about to give him a hard shove before taking off, but then Cort spoke up.

“I can’t let you take him, not tonight anyway. Why don’t you bring Henry Usher along to my office tomorrow and we’ll talk about this sensibly.”

Bellows shook his head. “He’s slippery as an eel. If you keep him here tonight he’ll be gone by morning, I guarantee.”

Cort strode over and grabbed Ben roughly by the arm. There was something fierce burning in his eyes and it made Ben nervous.

“I can explain all this Cort, if you just give me a...”

“Stow it Ben, this isn’t the time or place”

Cort turned to Jack Bellows. “I’ll take good care of him. He’s not going anywhere!”

“I appreciate your intentions Marshal but I’ve got my orders. Ben Carter’s coming with us now and I don’t reckon you’ve got much choice in the matter.”



“If Cort wants him to stay then that’s how it’s gonna be.” That was Charlie Barton again. “You can’t just walk in here and take a man by force, ‘specially when we’ve only got your word he’s done anything wrong. You ain’t the law and you ain’t got that right.”

“Well that’s true.” Bellows scratched at his cheek. “But I don’t see how you’re going to stop us.”

“You might be holding a gun mister, but do you reckon you can shoot everybody in this saloon before we shoot you?”

Ben glanced around. A few men had got to their feet and their hands were hovering near their guns. He watched as more got up and suddenly the whole saloon was watching and ready. Jack Bellows took it all in calmly and Ben felt the Marshal’s grip on his arm tighten.

“I’m sure we can work this out to everybody’s satisfaction”. Cort’s voice was quiet and reasonable, but he sounded weary. “Tonight I’ll listen to Ben’s side of the story, and tomorrow Mister Usher can come by and explain the other side. Then we’ll decide what to do.”

“He’ll just fill your head with shit Marshal. By tomorrow you won’t be able to make any kind of fair decision.”

Cort smiled. “Then you’d better hope I’m not as stupid as you seem to think I am.”

Jack Bellows thought on that for a moment and then holstered his gun. His comrades followed his lead. He raised his voice and addressed the whole saloon.

“I’ll give you people something to consider overnight. Mister Usher’s thinking about building a church in this town, bringing a little hope and good fortune to Redemption. What I’ve seen here tonight ain’t too promising though. Our church is based on trust and belief, and if you don’t trust Mister Usher to do the right thing with Benedict Carter, then maybe he’ll think again.”

“We trust Cort too!” That was Horace, hollering out from behind the bar. Ben looked over and saw he was cradling a shotgun in his arms. “Right now Henry Usher’s just a name and a lot of hot air. We’ll decide if Redemption needs his church or not!”

There was a rumble of approval from the rest of the saloon and Bellows nodded.

“Do what you need to, but don’t get too comfortable folks. We’ll be back.”

He headed for the door and his comrades trailed behind him. Cort stopped one of them, retrieved his Colt 45 from the man’s belt then followed them out onto the porch. He dragged Ben along and didn’t let go of his arm until the gang had mounted their horses and were two hundred yards down the road.

“When were you planning on telling me?” Cort was still watching the men but his voice was hard and he sounded angry. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

Ben was annoyed and a little disappointed. “You’ve already decided I’m guilty then, Marshal?”

Cort swung round to face him, his eyes blazing. “Tell me I’m wrong, Ben. Please!”

Ben shook his head. “I stole that money like they said. But there’s more to it than you think.”

“I hope to God there is, and you can explain it over at the hotel.”

Cort gave him a shove in the right direction and it wasn’t friendly. Ben was pretty sure that right now he was Cort’s prisoner instead of his buddy.

“You going to at least untie me, Cort?”

“The hell I am.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

A day could sure go to shit fast!

Cort stood on the hotel porch with his head resting against a post, trying to compose himself. He was angry and confused and the two feelings were so mixed up right now that he couldn't think straight.

It had started to rain and he heard the distant boom of thunder. It looked as though the storms were heading back to town. The rain had cleared the street but he could see a group of people milling about on the porch outside the saloon, no doubt discussing tonight's excitement. Cort was still trying to figure out what had happened there, how everybody in the room had suddenly decided rally round. Two days ago no-one would have lifted a finger to help him and he pondered how people's minds had turned around so drastically... But right now that was the least of his worries.

He was having trouble believing the gang of men had been working for Henry Usher. They were hard, brutal, professional gunslingers and he couldn't imagine them in church on Sunday morning, singing praises to the Lord. What troubled him more was the fact he'd been offered a job by their employer which probably involved doing pretty much what he'd witnessed tonight. Cort reckoned he'd made the right decision in turning Henry Usher down, he couldn't treat people like dogs no matter how much they might deserve it, but he needed to keep an open mind; not let his personal feelings get in the way. He'd chosen to live on nothing for three years in his pursuit of faith, enjoying that dependency on God, but he'd also made absolutely no difference to people's lives in that time – unless you counted a few folks in Hermosillo. Henry Usher seemed to bring change on a grand scale and Cort knew it was impossible to work at his level without hiring protection. It wasn't the way he would personally choose to do God's work, but that didn't make it wrong.

Something far worse was bothering him though, and it had everything to do with the man he'd locked in the cupboard under the stairs. He really needed to go talk to Ben Carter, couldn't leave him cramped up in the dark for much longer, but he wanted to be calm when he did it. He was angry with Ben but it was just a part of something deeper. Cort felt betrayed. He'd liked Ben, seen a lot of similarities between them, begun to consider him a friend and hoped he'd stick around so they might work together... He hadn't known much about the man, hadn't bothered finding out either, and now he felt like a fool for putting his trust in a common thief. Was he really so desperate for company?

He wouldn't condemn Ben for stealing the money, not when he'd committed a far worse crime against the church, but he was disappointed Ben had chosen to keep it quiet. He'd noticed the expression on Ben's face when Jack Bellows announced his crime to the saloon. He'd looked horrified and he'd been looking right at Cort.

Cort didn't understand that reaction. Ben had seemed to know all about John Herod and the bad old days, so he surely knew Cort spent years as an outlaw, robber and worse, but everybody had a right to change for the better and Cort wasn't about to judge him for a crime he knew nothing about. And why should Ben have confided in him anyway? They'd only known each other two days and there had been plenty of hints dropped along the way. Cort knew Ben was on the run, but since he wasn't fleeing the law he'd figured that was okay, that together they could deal with anybody who might show up with a grudge. He sure hadn't expected that grudge to come from the biggest church organisation in the territory!

Nagging at the back of his mind was something Ben had said before he got punched in the mouth. Cort didn't want to believe that Henry Usher, a man of God, would deal with wrongdoers by stringing them up without trial but Ben had looked terrified, like he honestly believed that's what was going to happen. Since Cort had once been in that unfortunate position himself and wouldn't wish it on anybody else, he needed to get to the bottom of things. Only Ben Carter could help with that.

He sighed and headed inside the hotel to the welcome desk, collecting a lamp, the key for the room he called his office, a bottle of whisky and a glass. On impulse he went back and got another glass. Ben could probably use a drink and in spite of the disappointing outcome to the day, Cort still owed him his life.

He unlocked the door to the office. It was a room where they usually kept cleaning materials, and it still smelled of soap and polish. It was too hot in the daytime, chilly at night, and there was only enough space in there for a desk and a couple of chairs. He lit the lamp, unloaded the whisky then headed back to the stair cupboard. It was a pretty crappy excuse for a cell, but it had a sturdy door with a stout bolt and it was all he'd been able to come up with at short notice.

Ben Carter was hunched in the corner, surrounded by mops and brooms, and he swore and shielded his eyes as light from the parlour hit him in the face. It looked like he'd been trying to get free of the ropes, unsuccessfully, and Cort could see blood on his wrists. He felt a little guilty for leaving Ben tied up so long, and he reached forward to help him stand. Ben shook off his hand, scowling.

"We ain't friends Marshal, so don't go acting like you care."

Cort was a little stung by the words but Ben was right. They were currently lawman and suspect and friendship had no part of it. "We need to talk Ben, so you may as well come out."

Ben walked stiffly ahead of him. He was tense, angry and Cort figured he might not untie him just yet. He didn't fancy a full-scale fight in the cramped little room. Ben paused at the office door and Cort pushed him inside.

"Sit down and don't give me trouble."

Ben sat and continued scowling across the desk as Cort took a seat behind it. He poured a glass of whisky for himself.

"You want a drink?"

"What I want is to get these ropes off. They're so tight I can't feel my hands."

"I'll cut them when I'm sure you won't go acting stupid."

"What do you think I'm gonna do Marshal? My gun's still in the saloon."

That was true enough. There was a knife in one of the desk drawers and Cort reached across and cut the ropes. Ben hissed with pain and Cort could see why. He'd made a pretty bad mess of his wrists – they were bruised and bleeding.

"Hell Ben, why'd you do that?"

Ben was flexing and flicking his hands, bunching his fists, trying to get some circulation going. He glared at Cort.

"Because you've already judged me Marshal, and tomorrow Henry Usher's gonna take me away. If you had any idea what that bastard will do then you'd be trying to leave too."

"What's he going to do?"

Ben shook his head. "What's the use in telling you? I stole from the church and you were a preacher. There's no way you can see things straight."

"Maybe you should have a little faith in me."

“Why? You and Henry Usher have got way too much in common for my liking.”

Cort could understand Ben’s belligerence and distrust. If he was sitting in that other chair he’d probably be suspicious as hell too. He tried a different tack.

“Henry Usher paid me a visit last night, he offered me a job and I...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish. Ben shot to his feet and kicked his chair across the room. He looked both furious and scared shitless.

“I fucking knew it, you two are working together! What’s the plan? Keep me hanging around in Redemption long enough for Usher to get back here?”

“Think about it Ben, if I was working with Usher I wouldn’t have stopped his men taking you tonight.”

“*You* didn’t stop them and I reckon you just wanted to look good in front of the townsfolk, make yourself look like a real Marshal and not just some broken down preacher with nowhere better to go.”

Ben was worked up and getting more agitated and irrational by the second. Cort reached for his gun then thought better of it. He didn’t want to draw on Ben; that would only make the whole sorry situation infinitely worse.

“Just sit will you? I didn’t take his job, and I don’t care if you took his damned money, I just want to know why he wants you so bad.”

“Stealing’s a sin and I stole from God, of course you fucking care!”

Cort shook his head. “You stole from the church, which is a lot different to stealing from God in my opinion, and I don’t have any right to judge a man on either count.”

Ben scowled. “Why?”

Cort sighed. There was no easy way to say this and although he’d confided it to a few others along the way, he still hated hearing the words come out of his mouth, always had the feeling that whatever God was doing, he’d stop and take a good look at the man speaking them.

“I shot a priest once; there was no motive or justification. John Herod gave me a choice between killing him or dying so I took the coward’s path.”

“No shit!” Ben dragged his chair over to the desk and sat down hard. “Is that why you became a preacher?”

“One of the reasons. It didn’t do much good though. Here I am back to carrying a gun and shooting men.”

“What kind of job did Henry Usher offer you Marshal? I don’t think you’d like the preachers in his churches much.”

Cort raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. But Ben seemed to be calming down and might finally be ready to talk. He poured him a glass of whisky and pushed it across the table.

“I’m not fit to be a priest and I think he knew it. He offered me a job in security, protecting church money on its way to the bank.”

Ben nodded. “He gave you the story about how great his ministry is? How many churches he builds, how many people he helps, how much money he raises?”

Cort nodded. “Most folks I’ve spoken to say the same thing?”

“It’s like that on the surface.” Ben took a gulp of whisky. “He builds churches and gets donations so he can build more. He brings faith to Godless towns and he makes life better for some folks, but there’s always others who end up in hell, and it’s always the wealthy ones. Henry Usher believes he’s doing God’s work, but he sees God as a way to get rich and anybody who stands in his way gets hurt or worse.”

He leaned across the desk, an urgent look in his eyes. “You need to understand this; if I say anything else you’ll be in as much trouble as I am.”

“You haven’t said anything substantial yet Ben, and Usher says all the money goes back to the church.”

“That’s where the donations go, and there’s plenty of those for sure, but the money from his other enterprises goes straight to his pocket. You should see the house he’s built for himself in Tucson; almost takes your breath away.”

“What other enterprises?” Cort scratched at the bandage on his head, unconvinced by what he was hearing.

Maybe Ben sensed that because he leaned back in his chair and eyed Cort warily. He considered a good long time before he spoke again. “Extortion rackets. Nobody knows about them except the men working them and the poor bastards getting robbed. They can’t exactly speak up for themselves though.”

This was getting more ludicrous by the minute and beginning to sound like the lies of a desperate man. Cort knew he owed Ben a fair shot at explaining himself but even so, he couldn’t help smiling slightly. “He robs people?”

Ben scowled. “I know you don’t want to believe me over a *churchman* like Usher, but it’s real simple. Folks admit to all kinds of things while they’re in a Confession box. They tell the priest the bad things they’ve done, looking for forgiveness, and the priest passes it on to Usher’s Collectors. If those folks have got money they get a visit from a collection gang, who expose them to the law, the newspapers or their wives if they don’t pay up. And once they’re on that path, they keep on paying forever.”

Cort was irritated and fought it down, trying to keep an open mind even though Ben was pretty much talking heresy now. “No priest would break the sanctity of Confession. How could they live with themselves, or with God?”

“I knew you wouldn’t like it Cort, cause I reckon you were a real preacher and you did it for the right reasons. The ones Usher uses are in it mostly for money, and they sure get well paid.”

“Nobody ever made a connection between the priest and the men who take their money”

Ben shrugged. “Some, but they don’t live long enough to spread it around. Most of ‘em figure it’s God’s punishment I guess.” He smiled grimly. “But no-one ever figured Henry Usher’s behind it, he’s too smart and he keeps his distance. The collection business runs independent of the ministry and has its own bosses. They take their cut and pass the rest onto Usher.”

Ben leaned forward again, looking Cort right in the eye. “That’s why Usher wants me, Marshal. Not for the money I stole but for what I know about him. He can’t let the regular law get involved because that might expose him, so he’ll drag me into the desert and kill me quietly but I tell you something, it won’t be pretty.”

Cort frowned. “You’ve been on the road for six months, who else you told about this?”

Ben shrugged. “I ain’t told nobody; who’d believe me anyway? I keep my head down and my mouth shut, that way I get to live a little longer. But Usher’s gonna assume I’ve passed all this along and you should start watching your back, Marshal.”

Cort shook his head. “I’m not afraid of Henry Usher.”

“A fast gun don’t work against him, my friend and I’ll tell you something else; once you’ve sworn faith to Henry Usher you’re in for life. The only time a man gets to leave is when he dies, or gets killed.”

The idea of corruption among priests affected Cort more profoundly than anything else Ben had told him about extortion, robbery and murder. But it also struck a chord. He didn’t want to believe it, but it wasn’t the kind of lie many men would dream up under pressure. Ben might have figured it a good way to push an ex-priest’s buttons and turn him against Usher and his ministry, but Cort didn’t think so. He could read men pretty well and if Ben Carter was making this up then he was the most convincing and creative liar he’d ever met. Ben still hadn’t answered the most important question though, and he didn’t seem about to volunteer the information anytime soon.

Cort drained his whisky glass. “Are you going to tell me how you know all of this, Ben?”

“Haven’t you figured it out Marshal? I was one of his Collectors.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Ben checked his Winchester rifles were loaded, rammed them into their holsters, gave his saddle strap a final tug then led his horse over to the stable door and opened it a crack, peering out into the torrential rain. The storm was right overhead and the roar of thunder was deafening. He could see lightening slamming into the hills out near the graveyard and hoped it wouldn’t spook his horse. Ben was a little spooked himself; he didn’t fancy riding out on a night when it seemed the devil himself had come to play stud, but he had no choice. He had get out while there was still a chance and he was twitchy as hell, staring out into the shadows, expecting to see Henry Usher’s men creeping up on him. He had no doubt they were coming, might even be here already since a storm like this was perfect cover. Visibility was down to a few yards, the thunder was louder than a gunshot and nobody was likely to be on the street to witness foul play.

And where the hell was Cort? Ben checked his pocket watch. It read nearly 10pm and the Marshal had been gone too long. Cort didn’t seem to think he was in any danger but Ben knew better; knew Henry Usher wouldn’t wait until morning to talk; he was far too suspicious and paranoid. Usher’s way was to act first, ask questions later but Cort wouldn’t believe it. Ben knew he should be grateful the Marshal had even given him the benefit of the doubt, knew how ludicrous his story must have sounded to somebody who wasn’t a part of it, and it was testament to Cort’s better judgement that he was standing here now, preparing to flee Redemption.

He’d begged Cort to ride with him, even if it was only a temporary leave of absence, just to get out of town until Usher and his men had gone. But Cort wouldn’t budge; seemed to think he could settle things with Usher in the morning and when Ben pointed out how that might be difficult with Usher’s prize long gone, he’d just shrugged and announced he didn’t have a horse. The man was so stubborn Ben felt like punching him and the profound guilt which dragged at his guts was quickly turning into frustrated anger. If anything happened to Cort he’d be to blame; he’d shot his mouth off to the Marshal, told him a lot of things he didn’t need to know just to save his own skin, and now he was taking off and leaving Cort to face the music alone. Ben punched the stable door and swore.

“One day it might punch back!”

He yelled in surprise and spun round, his hand flashing to a gun which wasn’t there, but it was only Cort standing before him, dripping wet and wearing that lop-sided grin.

“Feeling a little jumpy?”

“Hell Cort, why you sneaking up on me like that?”

“I shimmied through the window, didn’t want to be seen coming here, though who’d be fool enough to play in this weather I don’t know.”

He had Ben's gunbelt slung across his shoulder and he dropped it to the floor. Ben strapped it on hastily, checking the Remington was fully loaded before holstering it.

"How are things at the saloon, Marshal? You were gone so long I figured you'd hit some kind of trouble."

Cort scrubbed rainwater off his face and slicked his hair back. "It's quiet. The rain drove most folks out. Seems like the whole town's locked down, pretty much."

Ben's stomach twisted. This scenario was just too perfect. He gave it one last shot.

"Usher's men are out there, sneaking around in the storm, and when they can't find me they'll come looking for you, Marshal. They'll kill you for what you know, but first they'll beat the shit out of you for letting me go. I know how this works, I've seen it happen and if you're too damned pigheaded to listen then I'm staying right here in Redemption. I won't have your sorry life on my conscience."

Cort eyed him evenly, not even remotely rattled by the words. "I can look after myself Ben Carter and I'll tell you something else, I *want* to talk to Henry Usher. I *want* to hear his side of the story. I'm letting you go because I don't appreciate strong-arm tactics and I won't put the town at risk should those men try and take you again. I reckon you should get out before I change my mind."

Ben snorted with frustration. "You are one stubborn son of a bitch Marshal. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Cort smiled and stepped forward, his hand outstretched. They shook warmly.

"Where you headed, Ben?"

"No idea buddy, just getting the hell out of Redemption."

Cort pulled the stable door open as Ben mounted up. The rain hadn't eased at all and he braced himself, tipping his hat to the Marshal as he nudged his horse forward, spurring her into a fast gallop as soon as they cleared the building, heading east. He didn't look back. He stayed off the main street, pounding and splashing along the back of the town buildings, through the water and mud, glancing left and right for signs of trouble, finding none. He was out of Redemption before he knew it and he slowed his horse to a walk. She was steaming and blowing in the moist, chill air and he finally turned in his saddle and checked for any signs of pursuit. It was hard to tell, since the rain was still falling down like a sheet, so he took cover behind a large rocky outcrop and waited to see if anybody passed. Fifteen minutes later he was still there, soaked to the skin and his horse was getting impatient, stamping her hooves and tossing her head. Ben decided that nobody was coming for him, not tonight anyway, and as the fear and panic subsided, so did the adrenaline which had kept him warm. He shivered and urged the horse forward.

He tried not to think about Cort, back there in town and too damned obstinate to see how vulnerable he was. Ben had such a bad feeling about tonight it was almost palpable, like the grim reaper itself was lurching along ahead of him in the dirt, grinning over its shoulder. But what could he do? If he went back and tried to help they'd probably both wind up dead. It was conceivable Cort might come to an agreement with Henry Usher but Ben doubted it. Usher was not a reasonable man, especially when things didn't go to plan, when people didn't roll over and do as he commanded, and he never played fair. He was a ruthless, devious, manipulative bastard and only a few people had ever gotten to see that side of him. Ben was one of them.

His horse was walking so slowly she'd almost come to a standstill. Ben didn't notice – he was too caught up in the moral battleground which currently comprised saving his own life at the expense of another's. If Cort was killed on his account he'd never be able to forgive himself. He already had one terrible death on his conscience, and he really didn't need another.

Tonight's little scenario in the hotel had put a temporary hitch into his feelings towards Cort, and he would forever resent the Marshal for locking him in a dark, stinking broom cupboard, but he understood why those things happened. Cort was doing his job and he'd stepped well outside the authority of his office by releasing

a suspect – one who'd confessed to his crime no less – on the belief it was the right thing to do. It was the preacher in Cort which had defined that action, and he'd certainly pay for his act of kindness, might even be paying for it right now...

A bolt of lightening slammed into the ground ten yards away, illuminating the town graveyard. Thunder boomed overhead and his horse screamed with fright and reared, throwing Ben out of the saddle backwards. He managed to hang onto the reins and spent the next few minutes fighting the terrified animal as the storm hammered around them. He realised they couldn't continue much further, had to hole up somewhere until the worst of it was over. Seeing the graveyard reminded him of the little shack he'd spotted a few days ago. It was perfect.

He tugged the horse around the periphery of the cemetery, giving it a wide berth, mindful of the open graves he'd seen before, and approached the rear of the shelter. There was a lean-to bunched up against it, somewhere for his horse to stand out of the rain but Ben froze, cursing under his breath as he realised it was already occupied. Not by one horse, which might signify a solitary gravedigger, but five of them parked there, all packed up like they were on a long journey. Ben eyed the tiny shack, there was no way that place could accommodate five men and, dread twisting his guts, he staked his horse to the nearest stump of dead tree and moved in for a closer look. He didn't need to worry about being quiet, the storm was taking care of that, but his heart was hammering in his chest as he approached and saw smoke rising from the roof. There was somebody in there, maybe more than one, but where were the rest?

He edged down the side of the shack, listening for voices inside, hearing nothing. As he neared the entrance the graveyard itself came into full view. He hunkered down and watched as it was lit up by successive flashes of lightening but there was nobody out there. Nobody living anyway. He looked carefully in all directions, assisted by the storm, but the whole area, as far as he could see, was devoid of life.

Finally he snuck up to the door which was clumsily hinged and hanging at an angle so he could get a glimpse inside. There was a fire burning, the smell of something cooking, but he still couldn't see anybody. He backed up a few steps, about to kick the door and announce his presence forcefully when it suddenly swung open of its own accord and, a moment later, the silhouette of somebody big and obviously male was standing in the doorway, obliterating the firelight. Ben couldn't make out any of the man's features but he heard the fellow curse when he realised he had company. He reached for his gun but Ben was much faster, the Remington was already in his hand.

"Easy friend. I ain't looking for trouble, just somewhere to sit out the storm."

The man came forward, peering at Ben's face, trying to get a look at him, but it was too dark and wet to see anything much. His movement meant Ben could see right inside the shack though, and he saw it was empty.

"You should stand still mister, maybe tell me why a man on his own has got five horses out back?"

"The man took another step forward and Ben took one back. "I reckon you should mind your own business, son!"

The voice was hostile and he kept coming forward. Ben backed up again, glanced behind to see where he was going and froze as he realised he was two feet away from the edge of an open grave. The man had been pushing him that way on purpose and Ben wondered why he was so belligerent. A moment later he knew.

A particularly intense burst of lightening lit up the man's face and he recognised it in the same instant the man went for his gun. He was one of the gang members from the saloon, the one who'd punched Cort in the stomach. Usher's man! Ben's blood boiled and he'd fired before the man even touched his weapon. The bullet ripped into his guts and he recoiled, teetering unsteadily for a moment before lurching forward again, still reaching for his gun. Ben's second bullet tore into his ribs but he still kept coming like a blind ox. Ben moved to one side of the grave and the man staggered right into it, landing face down. That would be an easy job for the gravedigger tomorrow. Ben put a final bullet through the back of his head, reloaded his gun then sank to his knees, his mind whirling.



Usher's gang was still around but they weren't anywhere near the graveyard, that was for sure. The only place they'd be remotely interested in right now was Redemption. But why were there five horses and only four men? Ben was so wet and numb with cold that his brain seemed to have slowed down. One man was here so the other three had walked to town in the pissing rain. But why were there five horses and only four men? Finally it came to him.

*The fifth man was Henry Usher!*

"Fuck!" Ben leapt to his feet and raced back to his horse. He jumped into the saddle and kicked her into a flat out gallop. All his instincts had been right and he rode with his heart in his mouth and his stomach churning so badly he thought he might throw up. He was dreading what might have happened as he'd made his slow way up to the cemetery, dreading what he might find in Redemption but as he approached the edge of town he slowed down and forced himself to think straight. Charging in blindly would only get the gang's attention. They would certainly have posted lookouts and Ben couldn't take all of them at once, not head on anyway...

He tethered his horse to the same rocky outcrop he'd used on the way out, and went the rest of the way on foot. The rain was still doing a pretty good job of obscuring things but the storm seemed to be moving on and the lightening flashes were less frequent. Ben stooped close to the ground as he saw the Marshal's office coming up and he flattened himself completely as he caught movement behind the building. He squinted into the shadows, cursing the storm for giving up just when he needed it most, suddenly realising there was a dim light inside the building. A candle at best, no-one would have noticed it unless they were this close, but it meant somebody was in there and that couldn't be good.

Finally Ben got what he needed. A flicker of lightening in the distance showed him the scene and he felt like he'd been punched between the eyes. There was a solitary horse tethered behind the Marshal's office and three men were approaching it. They were dragging a fourth man between them. He was limp, his wrists bound, his head lolling forward like he was unconscious. Ben couldn't see his face but he recognised the long hair and ill-fitting clothes instantly.

It was Cort.

## CHAPTER TEN

Cort was wet, cold and disoriented. He seemed to be moving though, and he knew he was outside because thunder was roaring overhead and rain was pouring down the back of his neck and soaking his shirt. His arms and legs were like jelly and he couldn't get his eyelids to open but sensation was beginning to return. He could feel ropes on his wrists, hands clamped around his arms, dragging him along, and his ribs were hurting. His head was filled with some kind of fog, like he'd drunk a couple of bottles of whisky in quick succession, but just as he started to wonder how he'd ended up like this, it lifted as quickly as it had arrived. He could feel strength returning to his muscles but right now it made sense to play dead. Perhaps he could take them by surprise? When he could remember who they were and why he was apparently their prisoner.

He remembered Ben galloping off into the night and he'd felt a mixture of regret and despondency as he watched him go. Ben had been the closest thing he'd had to a friend in Redemption, Cort knew he'd never see him again and it hurt him deeper than he'd imagined. He'd felt more alone than ever and couldn't bring himself to go back to the hotel. He'd only sit there on his own and wish he was out on the porch with a beer, shooting the breeze with the man who'd just left town. So he'd headed over to the saloon

He'd been in ten minutes earlier to retrieve Ben's gunbelt and although the room had emptied out considerably since the storm started up, he'd still been sidetracked by a few people babbling in his ear about Henry Usher. Ben's utter conviction that Usher's men were in town and stalking them both had unnerved him slightly so he hadn't paid much attention to what they were saying. He didn't share Ben's fears but he understood them and he wanted to get back to the stable as soon as possible, get Ben on his way. He had no qualms about releasing his erstwhile captive, knew it was the right thing to do. If only one quarter of what

he'd learned about Henry Usher were true, there was no way he could leave anybody to that man's mercy. There was plenty he still didn't know, but Ben was gone so there was no point dwelling on it.

Second time around in the saloon he'd warmed up and dried off next to the wood burner in the centre of the room, drank some beer and talked with Horace the barkeep. Cort was interested to know what the townsfolk made of the incident with Usher's gang, curious about the level of feeling towards one of Usher's churches arriving in Redemption, especially in light of his recent findings. But it seemed most folks were in agreement and didn't want any part of an organisation which seemed to consider itself above the law, they'd had enough of that with John Herod in town. Cort was relieved to hear it and wondered exactly how Usher managed to convince so many other towns to follow his cause. Then he figured not too many other towns would be harbouring fugitives like Ben Carter. And what nobody knew wouldn't hurt them...

Fifty minutes later Horace hinted he'd like to close up, since they were the only two people still there. Cort knew he could get another beer at the hotel so he'd dashed across the street, trying not to get drenched again, but pulled up short when he'd seen a light inside the stable. His heart began racing and it was for all the wrong reasons. He'd thought Ben had changed his mind and come back, was in there unsaddling his horse and he'd gone charging over, unsure whether to reprimand him for being a damned idiot or welcome him back with open arms. Cort suspected it would have been the latter but it had proven academic.

Ben wasn't in the stable, but three of Usher's men were. Ben's instincts had been correct all along and Cort cursed himself for not heeding his warnings, for being fool enough to think he could deal with a gang of ruthless, organised and determined men alone. Their speed and skill was incredible and he hadn't stood a chance. He'd been ambushed from behind, disarmed, knocked down, bound and then pinned to the ground by two men he recognised from the barroom earlier. The third was a stranger and it was this man who pulled a rag and small bottle from his pocket. Cort had watched, bewildered, as he removed the stopper and debated with his companions how much of it to use on their captive without killing him. He'd started struggling, not liking what he was hearing, and the man had shaken a few drops of fluid onto the cloth then kicked him in the ribs. The pain made him inhale sharply and the rag had been clamped over his mouth. He'd felt dizzy, sick and then he'd blacked out.

Whatever they'd used hadn't lasted long and it had pretty much worn off by the time Cort got his thoughts straight. The pain in his chest was getting worse, bad enough to make him suspect a few cracked ribs, and he opened his eyes in time to see them approaching the Marshal's office. They dragged him up the steps, through the door and deposited him on the floor of the big, bare, dimly lit room. The wood against his face smelled new and fresh and he considered the irony of the situation. The first time in his new office was as a prisoner!

"Is he conscious?"

Cort knew the voice. A moment later he was rolled onto his back and found himself looking up into the gaunt, watchful face of Jack Bellows. The three men who'd brought him here were standing close, alert and ready. Two of them had shotguns pointed at him and he knew he wasn't going to get out of this, not without some kind of miracle.

Bellows squatted beside him and his voice was quiet, reasonable.

"I'll make this easy Marshal. Tell me what you've done with Ben Carter and I won't hurt you."

"Go to hell." Cort tried to sit up but somebody's foot on his shoulder forced him back. He grimaced as pain tore into his chest and Bellows grinned, cocking an enquiring glance at his comrades. The man who'd kicked him spoke up.

"Ribs, boss. On the right."

Bellows ran a rough hand across Cort's ribs, watching him intently. Cort tried his best to keep a poker face but he couldn't help wincing and cursing as hard fingers came into contact with the tender area. Then they pressed down. He grunted with pain and cursed again.

“Ben Carter, Marshal?”

“He’s gone.” Cort struggled to get the words out. “Left town hours ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“I didn’t ask and he didn’t say.”

Bellows jabbed his fingers hard against the cracked ribs and Cort’s eyes watered.

“Come on Marshal, you and him were buddies, he must have said something?”

They could probably do this kind of thing to him all night but Cort wasn’t sure he could keep up. He glared at his tormentor.

“Alright then, I’ll tell you. Just quit prodding at me!”

He dropped his voice, almost to a whisper. “He said he was going to Bisbee.”

“What was that?”

Bellows instinctively leaned in closer, trying to hear the words, and Cort jack-knifed off the floor and head butted him, feeling his forehead make solid contact, hearing Bellows’ nose crack. Bellows stumbled backwards, yelling, blood streaming down his face and Cort tried to get up again, hoping to use this moment of chaos to his advantage. No dice though. The other three men hadn’t budged and once again a foot on his shoulder pinned him to the floor, harder than before and this time it stayed there.

Bellows wrenched a handkerchief from his pocket and clamped it to his face. He lurched forward, looking murderous “You’ll pay for that, you son of a bitch!”

“Back off Jack, you deserved it. You shouldn’t toy with a man like this; don’t you remember he used to be *Cort The Killer*?”

Cort also recognised this new voice and he stared over in the direction it came from, shocked beyond belief to see Henry Usher step from the darkness in a far corner, where the bars of a cell-under-construction were casting black pools of dense shadow. Usher moseyed over like he was taking a stroll in the country.

“Let him up boys, give him some dignity.”

Hands reached down and hauled him to his feet, but they didn’t let go of his arms. Usher looked at him calmly, his cold blue eyes astute and appraising.

“Ben Carter’s gone fellas. Cort here believed everything he heard and let him go. I suppose we can’t blame the Marshal of a town like this for being a little simple minded at times.”

The men laughed and Cort scowled.

“It doesn’t take brains to see what you’re doing is wrong, Usher.”

Usher nodded agreeably. “And what might that be, exactly?”

“Last time I read the Bible I didn’t see any mention of getting rich by corrupting priests, and I don’t find it especially Godly.”

Usher smiled. "I think you and I should have a little talk, in private." He turned to his men. "You boys go outside and keep watch. I don't want anybody sneaking up."

Jack Bellows still had the handkerchief pressed to his nose and his voice sounded ragged. "You can't be alone with him Mister Usher, not like this. He's dangerous." Cort smiled at the grudging respect and Bellows scowled at him.

"He's tied up Jack, I'll be fine."

Bellows shook his head stubbornly, dripping blood onto the floor. Usher stared at it for a moment then decided. "Do what you need to."

Bellows turned to his companions, jerked his thumb towards a roof beam by the cell and they nodded. Their silence unnerved Cort and when he was dragged into the corner and saw them throw a long length of rope over the beam, he was convinced they were going to hang him. He fought with the strength of utter desperation; he threw off the men holding him and managed to kick one in the nuts, then rammed the other head first into the iron bars of the cell. But there were too many of them and a strategically-placed blow to his ribs, courtesy of Jack Bellows, sent him to his knees; dizzy, breathless and close to throwing up. They attached the rope to the bonds on his wrists and pulled on it, hauling him back to his feet, pulling his arms above his head. Bellows inspected the work.

"A little more, I reckon. We don't want the Marshal here losing interest in what Mister Usher's got to say."

The rope pulled tighter, yanking his wrists higher. The man he'd kicked stepped up, clutching his crotch and scowling.

"More." His voice was guttural; almost a grunt. "Make the motherfucker hurt!"

The third pull on the rope dragged him up onto the balls of his feet and it really did hurt like hell. His whole weight was dragging down on his arms and his wrists were burning like somebody had set them on fire. They tied it off on one of the cell bars and went outside, shotguns ready. Jack Bellows stopped to talk with Usher on his way and Cort pulled and twisted on the rope, trying to free himself, but it was useless. He was sweating with pain and something approaching panic; this was the start of something ugly and he recalled Ben predicting how he'd probably get beaten senseless before getting killed. There was nobody around to help; no-one knew he was up here and even if he shouted, the night was too wild for anybody to hear.

Eventually Usher brought a candle over, the only source of light in the big, empty room, and set it on the floor. He appraised his captive for a moment.

"You look like a scarecrow, boy."

Cort glanced down at himself. This particular set of garments had been given to him by a town widow and there was a dreadful irony in that right now. He was wearing the clothes of a dead man!

Usher pulled a hipflask from his pocket. "What did you do with my hundred dollars?"

"Gave it to the doc; reckoned I owed him for his time and care."

Usher took a sip from his flask. "You're a saint son, truly, and it pains me to see you like this. You would have been a real asset to my organisation if you hadn't gone talking to Ben Carter..."

Cort snorted. "Ben wasn't lying."

"I didn't say he was."

Cort gazed at Usher, curious. “What kind of asset did you figure me for? A priest who’d sell confessions for cash? A guard who’d enjoy extorting money with menaces? You sure as hell misjudged me, don’t you think?”

Usher was nodding, smiling. “I’m big enough to admit I was wrong. I thought a man who’d made a career out of killing and robbery could never change his ways. You’re just too damned holy, Cort, and God will thank you for your devotion soon enough.”

The words unnerved Cort but he wasn’t about to let on. He’d faced death before, dozens of times, but it had usually been in gunfights where he’d stood a better than even chance of winning. There was no winning this fight though. “You’re going to kill me?”

Usher took another sip of liquor. “It’s bad enough Ben Carter spilling his guts about the finer points of my administration, and he’ll pay for that soon enough, but now I hear the whole town’s rallying behind you, Cort. Two nights ago I would have sworn you were nothing more than a thorn in their side. Hell, I even took steps to prove it.”

Something clicked in Cort’s head, something he hadn’t wanted to believe before, and suddenly he was furious. “Those men I shot were working for *you*? *You* let me kill them just to prove a fucking point?”

Usher looked thoughtful. “It was a little more than that. They weren’t supposed to try and shoot you but I’m glad they did. You were impressive, Cort, I was glad to see that killer instinct was still strong...”

“I was defending myself, you stupid son of a bitch!” Cort wanted to punch Henry Usher and he renewed his fight with the rope. Usher ignored him.

“... But you surely disappointed me tonight. I thought you cared about the church enough to serve justice on a thief like Ben Carter. You were supposed to hand him over, son.”

Cort stared at him, stunned. The man’s delusion was frightening and he resented just how badly Usher continued to misjudge his character. He hoped to God nobody else saw him that way.

“The church doesn’t make the law, and I don’t like your ideas on justice much. All that power and money’s screwed with your brains, I reckon; when did you decide it was God’s will to take life without even trying a man?”

He gave the rope another hard yank, thinking about what he’d do to Henry Usher if he could only get free.

“You should quit struggling like that, Marshal. You’re hurting yourself.”

Cort glanced up, saw blood running down his arms but he was too angry to care. “You’d better kill me Usher, and damned fast, because I’m going to tell everybody in the territory about you and your goddamn ministry.”

Usher stroked his chin, he seemed amused. “If we’re coming down to simple threats, what’s to stop me telling *everybody in the territory* about Cortez Thompson? Who, incidentally, is still wanted for robbery in more than a dozen towns. I reckon some folks would be real interested to know he’s keeping law in Redemption and I reckon the US Marshal would be more interested than most.”

Cort froze, blinking at him in disbelief. He hadn’t heard that name in years, hadn’t used it in longer. How the hell did he find out? Usher nodded smugly.

“You left a trail boy, and it’s easy enough to follow when you’ve got the resources. My ministry is coming to town, *Cortez*, whether Redemption likes it or not. Some businessmen I know figure this to be a prime piece of territory and with you gone, I think the townsfolk will listen to reason.”

Cort shook his head. “You’re wrong.”

“I don’t think so.”

Usher crossed to the nearest window and peered through it. Rain was lashing the glass and the thunder was getting loud again. The storm didn’t seem to want to leave Redemption and Cort figured it was God’s way of telling him his time was up. There would be no last minute reprieve tonight, and nobody around to watch him die. He wondered how they’d do it. Hang him right here the Marshal’s office probably and he wished they’d get on with it. He was tired of talking, tired of hurting. He tried to remember Psalm 23 but the words of the prayer wouldn’t come.

Usher went to the street door and stuck his head outside. A moment later the man who’d busted his ribs came in, shaking water from his hat and pulling a familiar bottle from his pocket. Cort eyed it warily, not wanting that stuff in his face again. Usher noticed his expression.

“You don’t like it? I’m real interested to see how this works on a person.”

Now he was a convenient subject for Usher to experiment on. Cort should have been angry but he was too tired to feel anything except resignation. He had no choice in anything that happened to him anymore, and it was easier to just accept that. Usher seemed fascinated by the bottle though.

“They call it Ether, Cort, and I hear it’s most effective at putting folks to sleep. Beats clubbing them round the head, wouldn’t you say? And it doesn’t leave any marks.”

Cort could see how something like this would benefit Usher’s activities. “You seem to like your killings dramatic, Usher; you might find this one disappointing.”

Usher flashed him an odd kind of smile. “Shit boy, this won’t kill you!” He turned to his companion. “Use more this time, we need him quiet for twenty minutes at least.”

The man nodded and moved behind him, beyond his range of vision. Cort tried to twist round and see what was happening but something slammed into his right kidney and he gasped with agony. A cloth was pulled tight over his mouth and, for the second time in an evening, he blacked out.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

Ben Carter swore with frustration. He couldn’t get anywhere near the Marshal’s office without being seen by the four men guarding it and they’d positioned themselves astutely; one on each corner of the building, shotguns ready, all approaches covered. One had just gone inside but that didn’t help him much. Whatever they were doing to Cort, there was nothing he could do to help and it was driving him insane.

He was laying under the porch of the grain store opposite the office and he’d been here for what felt like eternity. It was dark enough that he wouldn’t be seen, it sheltered him from the rain, but he was cold and rivulets of water were running off from the street and he could feel a puddle forming beneath him. Earlier he’d watched three of the gang drag Cort inside and he’d begun creeping up, planning to sneak a look through one of the windows, but when they’d all suddenly come outside again he’d been taken by surprise and only just managed to crawl under here without getting spotted. Now he was stuck until they decided to move.

Abruptly he got his wish. The door opened, somebody stuck their head out and spoke to the man keeping guard on the porch. Ben recognised him as Jack Bellows and he had blood all over his face. Ben grinned – it seemed like Cort had managed to inflict some kind of damage in there. Bellows signalled his colleagues at the rear of the building and they all trooped inside. Ben saw his chance; he wriggled from his hiding place and dashed across the street, his legs stiff from lying still for so long. He crept down the side of the office, pulling up below one of the dimly lit windows. It was too high to see through and he squinted around for something to stand on. His saw a dark shape and his hand came into contact with something wooden and solid; it felt like a crate and he gently pulled it closer, got up on top and cautiously raised his head a few inches. What he saw made his guts churn.

They'd tied Cort to a ceiling rafter near the lockup and he was hanging limply, clearly unconscious. He'd been awake and struggling at some point though; his arms were bloody and Ben rubbed at his own wrists, smarting and raw from his experience of tight ropes earlier. There were five men gathered around Cort and, with a chill, Ben recognised Henry Usher. It had been six months since he'd last seen the bastard, but Usher hadn't changed a bit. He was talking, gesticulating and then Jack Bellows went over to the cell and cut the rope attached to its bars. Cort dropped like a stone but two others caught him as he fell then dragged him towards the street door. The others followed and Usher blew out a candle, pitching the room into total darkness.

Ben climbed down from the crate and scuttled to the rear end of the office. The horse he'd seen earlier was still there and he guessed that's where the men were headed. He felt exposed just waiting around in the alley so he shimmied into the space below the back porch of the building next door. There was a little more room to manoeuvre here and he wriggled around until he had a clear view. As he'd predicted, the gang appeared moments later and threw Cort across the horse's saddle. They tied him securely then unhitched the animal and set off at a brisk pace, heading east.

Ben was pretty sure they were going to the cemetery and he cursed as he remembered his horse was tethered a quarter of a mile away in the same direction. He had to get ahead of them, needed to be at the cemetery well in advance if he stood any chance of taking them on. The rain was hammering down now, the thunder more frequent. The storm was getting blown back towards Redemption and he took a chance, praying the weather would hide him and he could get to his horse before the lightening started back up in earnest. He bolted south, running hard for a few hundred yards before turning east, moving in a wide arc around Usher's party, fear and adrenalin spurring him onwards. He kept running, even when his lungs started burning and his legs turned to lead, and finally he spotted the rocky outcrop.

His horse whinnied softly as he approached and eyed him reproachfully; she hadn't enjoyed standing in the rain. Ben mounted up and urged her into a gallop; she wanted to run and they covered the mile or so to the cemetery in a few minutes. Ben looked around for somewhere to tether her, where she wouldn't be obvious. He spotted a clump of dried out old gorse, not far from the grave-digger's shack and staked her to a root behind it. It just about concealed her though it was so damned dark he might as well have hid her in plain sight.

As if to contradict him, lightening forked down from the sky, illuminating the cemetery. Ben caught sight of the open grave outside the shack and, with a shock, remembered the dead man inside it. If Usher and his crew saw him down there they'd realise somebody was onto them. He raced to the hovel, pushed his way inside and glanced around. The place was watertight which was surprising, given its ramshackle appearance, and though the fire had burned down to mostly embers, it afforded a little light. There was a stack of dry wood in there, blankets and a pot of beans on the floor, a bottle of hooch, a couple of shotguns and then Ben spotted what he needed – six shovels stacked against the wall. He wondered why a solitary grave-digger would need so many, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. He grabbed one and then, on impulse, threw a couple of logs on the fire. This way it might look like the occupant had gone out for a piss and wasn't lying dead in a hole twenty feet away.

Reluctantly he stepped out into the rain and over to the grave. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness and he could just about see the dead man lying at the bottom in a puddle of rainwater. There was a heap of earth next to the hole and he spent ten minutes frantically shovelling it on top of the corpse. It wasn't a perfect job by any means but it hid the evidence well enough. He returned the shovel to the shack and then squatted in the doorway, enjoying the heat of the fire on his back, watching as successive lightening strikes lit the area. They were getting more frequent and Ben's heart was hammering as he waited for the foot party to arrive. Finally he saw them, skirting the edge of the graveyard and heading his way. Ben scooted out quickly, closing the rickety door behind him, and took cover behind a nearby tomb. Three of the men led the horse behind the shack while Henry Usher and Jack Bellows went inside. They came out a moment later, shouting for their comrade who wouldn't be responding any time soon, and Ben noticed that each was carrying a couple of shovels. He frowned and drew his gun. This smelled bad.

The storm was right overhead and the lightening frequent enough for him to get a pretty good view of proceedings. They didn't suspect foul play, not yet anyway, because they just stood in the doorway talking. Their companions arrived presently, dragging Cort between them; he was conscious and struggling, but stood no chance of escape. Usher spoke to him but the rain and thunder was deafening; Ben was only ten feet away but couldn't hear any of it. The words had an impact on Cort though; all the fight suddenly left him, his shoulders slumped and he let his captors lead him to the open pit. They pushed him to his knees at the edge and he bowed his head like he was praying. Ben pulled back the hammer of his Remington, ready to move, but it suddenly occurred to him that none of the gang were holding weapons. Instead, Usher and Bellows were handing them shovels. Ben couldn't figure it – weren't they going to shoot Cort and tip him into the grave? That's how it usually worked...

He realised this was a different scenario when Jack Bellows placed his boot between Cort's shoulders and shoved him forward. Cort fell headfirst into the hole and the rest of them went over to the dirt pile and began shovelling it on top of him. All except Henry Usher, he just stood with his hands folded, watching them work. Ben saw Cort try to scramble out, a look of terror on his face, and Bellows clouted him round the head with his spade, knocking him backwards. They all started shovelling again and it finally dawned on Ben what was happening. The fuckers were going to bury him alive!

Ben stood up and started shooting. He had a real advantage and he'd taken out two of them with clean head shots before the others even moved. He saw Henry Usher turn and bolt towards the shack but Bellows and the remaining gang member were drawing their pistols. Ben got off a round at Bellows, hitting him in the shoulder and knocking him down but he scrambled away, firing as he went, and the other man opened up too. Ben threw himself behind the tomb, hearing bullets thud into the stone, then it went quiet. He peered around the corner of the tomb and saw the last man running towards the horses. Ben's bullet struck him in the back and he hit the deck. He didn't get up. Seconds later two horses bolted from behind the shack; Jack Bellows and Henry Usher getting away. Ben sent his remaining shells into the night after them but he doubted either was close to being on target.

He reloaded his gun and approached the grave warily, eyeing the fallen men but none of them were moving. He peered down and saw Cort sprawled on his face, covered in a layer of mud.

"Cort? Can you hear me?"

Cort didn't move. Ben threw himself down on his belly and stuck his head into the hole. He shouted at the top of his voice.

"Say something! Make some kind of noise. You're scaring the shit out of me!"

Finally Cort stirred and lifted his head. His words drifted upwards. "This grave seems to be occupied!"

Ben barked out a laugh, which was mostly down to relief and Cort pushed himself up from the dirt, away from the dead man below him. He was moving slowly, carefully but finally he was on his feet and staring up. A flash of lightening illuminated his face. He was covered in mud but the torrential rain was washing it away in streaks and below the dirt he was white as a ghost. There was blood seeping through the bandage on his head and his expression was blank, his eyes glassy. Ben wasn't even sure he knew him.

"It's me, it's Ben. Give me your hand and I'll pull you out."

He had to repeat the command several times before Cort registered it. Eventually he raised his arms and Ben grabbed him and pulled with all his strength. Cort grunted and cursed on the way up but finally he was out, on his knees, clutching at his chest and breathing hard.

"Shit man, what did they do to you?"

"Bust my ribs." Cort stood up carefully and winced, "Used some kind of drug to knock me out, you know the rest." He rubbed at the grimy bandage on his head and squinted at Ben. "Am I bleeding?"



Ben nodded. "A little, mostly your wrists though."

"Untie me, please!"

Ben led Cort into the shack. He was shaking badly and Ben was careful not to cut him as he sawed through the ropes with his pocket knife. Cort eased them gingerly from the raw wounds below and his breath whistled sharply through his teeth. Ben knew from experience exactly how painful this was.

"Sit by the fire and get warm, okay?" He grabbed the bottle of hooch and sniffed at it; there was whisky inside and he pressed it into Cort's hand. "I'll be back soon."

It took him a while to check on the men he'd shot, all of them dead, and he took their guns but decided to hold off looting the bodies properly until morning. Then he went to the gorse bush to get his horse. She was even less amused to see him this time and she tugged and resisted as he led her to the shelter and tethered her with Usher's four remaining horses. They were all carrying rifles and shotguns in saddle holsters and he took those too, grinning. The animals and weapons would fetch a good price and he hadn't even gone through the saddlebags yet!

He carried his stash to the door of the shack and shouldered his way inside, ready to gleefully share this good news with Cort, but the room was empty. He dropped the weapons, cursing, and swore even louder when he saw the assortment of wet, muddy clothes scattered around the floor.

He dashed outside and couldn't see a damned thing. The storm was moving away and he had to wait long moments for the lightening to come. In the few seconds of light he scanned the graveyard and saw a figure by the tomb he'd used to hide earlier. He strode over. Cort's face was upturned to the violent heavens and he was wearing nothing except bandages, drawers and a cross around his neck. He was drenched and shivering.

"What the hell are you doing, Cort?"

He grabbed Cort's arm and tried to lead him back to the shelter. Cort resisted and Ben pulled harder, fear making him rough and impatient. Tonight's experience might well have unhinged Cort's mind and he had no idea how to deal with a madman.

"Do you want to catch fever you crazy son of a bitch?"

Cort shook his hand away, glaring. "I'm not crazy, Ben! I'm trying to get clean!"

There was a certain logic there, though Cort hadn't been very successful in his efforts. His hair was full of mud and the rain was washing it in streaks down his face and body.

"You're as clean as you're gonna get tonight, buddy. Come inside where it's warm, you're shaking like a whipped dog."

Cort considered for a moment then nodded, following Ben into the shack. Ben pushed him down by the fire and offered him the whisky again.

"Drink. You need it."

Cort took a couple of slugs and Ben watched, his eyes drawn to the livid bruising across his ribs.

"You reckon they're broke?"

Cort glanced at him. "Huh?"

"Your ribs, are they broke?"

Cort shrugged. "Cracked I think. Still hurts like hell though."

Ben grabbed a couple of blankets from the floor and threw them around Cort's shoulders then picked up the guns he'd taken and stacked them against a wall. He couldn't help grinning at the richness of this bounty.

"Well Marshal, there's a definite upside to all this; you and me get to keep four of Usher's horses, these fine guns here and whatever else those men were carrying. Even split, wouldn't you say?"

Cort was frowning. "What happened to him?"

"Usher? He got away. Bastard ran faster than a jackrabbit when I started firing. Jack Bellows went with him but I know I shot that fucker."

Ben squatted by the fire and put the pot of beans in the embers to warm. "You hungry? These smell good."

Cort just gazed at him and Ben got twitchy. Just like the first time they'd met, he felt like he was being read from the inside out.

"What made you work for a man like Henry Usher?"

Ben shrugged. "I was young, stupid, didn't know any better... What made you ride with John Herod?"

"Pretty much the same thing."

Ben felt like he owed Cort a better explanation. "I didn't know what he was really like until I was in way too deep. I told you before, nobody gets to leave his ministry except when they're dead."

"But *you* left, Ben, and you knew he'd come after you. Why did you do that?"

Ben felt the familiar guilt and regret bubble up inside him and he fought it down. He wasn't ready to share that sorry story with Cort. Not just yet; maybe not ever. "A man's entitled to try and change for the better, isn't he?"

"Surely." Cort was watching him intently now. "It took shooting a priest to show me the error of my ways. What changed *your* mind, Ben?"

Ben picked up a stick and poked at the beans. "This ain't a confessional, Cort, and you ain't no priest. Pass me that bottle."

Cort handed it to him, still watching and Ben felt as though he already knew the truth, had somehow read his mind. He took a gulp of whisky. "You want some beans?"

Cort wouldn't leave it. "Why did you come back tonight?"

He snorted. "Because you wouldn't listen to sense. I told you Usher was coming, didn't I?"

Cort shook his head slightly. "That's not what I meant. Why did you come back to help *me*? Why did you risk your life to save mine?"

"Shit Cort, I don't know. What's with all these damned questions anyway?"

Cort scratched at the bandage on his head then suddenly pulled it off and stared at the blood which was soaked into it. "I never figured my life was worth much but you saved it, twice. I'm wondering why you'd do that."

Ben felt a little awkward and he took another gulp of whisky. “It’s no big mystery. I like you and I think your life’s worth a hell of a lot more than you figure.” He felt his face redden slightly and he kept his head down, poking at the beans.

“Am I bleeding, Ben?”

He glanced up and Cort was smiling at him. He seemed touched by the words and Ben felt even more awkward. Blood was trickling from the two-day old cut on Cort’s head. A couple of stitches had been knocked out by Jack Bellows’ shovel but it didn’t seem serious.

“You’ll live, Marshal.”

Cort mopped at the wound with the soggy bandage. “This isn’t the end of it you know. Usher won’t stay gone for long. Redemption’s got something he wants and he needs you and me dead. More than ever now, I reckon.”

Ben nodded. It was the truth. “Are you going to run?”

“The hell I am!” Cort’s eyes were blazing. “I’m going to tell everybody in town about that bastard, what he tried to do tonight and we’ll fight him together. If you want a part of that fight then be my guest. I still need a good deputy.”

Ben could see the sense in uniting against Usher; would he really be fool enough to take on a whole town? Ben didn’t know but he sure as hell wanted people around him right now, didn’t want to get buried alive in the desert with no-one around to help. Cort seemed to sense his crumbling resolve and pressed on.

“We’ve got horses, Ben, we’ve got a whole damned arsenal sitting in that corner, we’ve got a jailhouse that’s ready to use, we’ve got the support of the town...”

Ben interrupted. “We?”

Cort smiled. “The only thing I can’t give you right now is a badge, and wages’ll have to wait a while, but the townsfolk will provide anything you need. Food and such.”

That reminded Ben he hadn’t eaten since noon and the beans cooking under his nose were making his stomach growl. He looked around for something to eat with, found a spoon and dug in.

“If you want some of these you’d better holler.”

Cort shook his head. “I kind of lost my appetite. I’ll have some of that whisky though.”

Cort watched him eat, taking an occasional pull from the bottle. The silence stretched out and he realised the Marshal was expecting some kind of decision. Ben thought about it hard while he finished the beans. Finally he put the pot down.

“Alright, I’ll do it. I’ll be your deputy but don’t go trying to boss me around, you hear? And don’t go thinking you know best all the time. You might be the town marshal but I saved your life so remember that whenever you get any damn fool ideas.”

Cort smiled. “I owe you Ben. I’ll never be able to repay you.”

“Don’t be so sure. Who knows what kind of hell Henry Usher’s gonna bring down on us.”

Something occurred to Ben, a thought which had crept into his mind, now and then, for six months. He usually ignored it, had never been in a position to act on it, but things might be different now...

“We don’t just have to sit here, you know? There’s another way, but you might not like it.”

Cort gazed at him quizzically. “Try me. Right now I’m not feeling especially charitable towards Henry Usher.”

“How about we take the fight to him, in Tucson? Make him hurt like he hurt you tonight? I reckon I know how to do it.”

## CHAPTER 12

Cort woke to the smell of fresh coffee and meat cooking. It took him a while to figure out where he was – not in the hotel that was for sure – but when he opened his eyes and saw the rough thatch above him realisation hit home, along with some deeply unpleasant memories from last night. He rolled his head to the side and saw the fire blazing; there were a couple of skinned rabbits on spits hung across it and a beat-up coffee pot steaming in the embers. His stomach growled.

Ben Carter was squatting on the floor nearby, totally absorbed in counting a pile of money. The door was standing wide open and sunlight was streaming through. It was too hot, the sun high in the sky and he threw off his blankets, wondering how long he’d slept. Long enough for his bladder to be almost bursting, that was for sure, and he knew he’d have to get up soon. He wasn’t looking forward to it – a night on the hard desert floor had not been conducive to his injuries; his ribs were hurting, his right kidney was aching, his wrists were stinging and he hadn’t even moved yet. He took a deep breath and sat up, eyes screwed shut and cursing at the pain. Ben heard him.

“Get used to it. Ribs take weeks to heal.”

Cort opened his eyes and scratched at his head, throbbing slightly from the whisky he’d drunk last night. His hair was sticky, full of grit and his skin was itchy and dry. When they got back to Redemption the first place he’d be visiting was the bathhouse. He squinted at Ben, still immersed in his money counting. “What time is it?”

“A little after eleven; I figured I’d let you sleep as long as you needed. If you’re hungry the rabbits are nearly done, and I made some coffee.”

“Where did all this stuff come from, Ben?”

Ben looked up, grinning. “Well I shot the meat but the rest is courtesy of Henry Usher. Those men of his were carrying close on two thousand dollars between them; their pocket watches, trinkets and clothes will fetch more, then there’s the horses and all the stuff in their saddlebags...”

Cort got gingerly to his feet and looked at the pile of money. He couldn’t see why Ben was so excited.

“That must be small change to a man sitting on thirty thousand dollars.”

The grin vanished from Ben’s face. “I’m flat broke, and I never had thirty thousand to start with.”

A warning bell started ringing in Cort’s head. Yesterday Ben had openly confessed to stealing that amount. He frowned, about to make a challenge, and Ben noticed his expression.

“Relax Marshal, I didn’t lie to you. I stole thirty thousand but I only kept five for myself.”

“Where’s the rest?”

“With someone who needed it more.” Something flashed in Ben’s eyes. Cort had seen that same look last night, when Ben was trying to evade his questions. Regret or pain maybe? Whatever it was, Ben didn’t want

to talk about it. “Your clothes are outside. I laid ‘em out to dry but they’re covered in mud and shit. There’s another set that might fit you better...”

Cort laughed. “Hell Ben, looks like I got myself a wife as well as a Deputy.”

Ben scowled. “Don’t get used to it Marshal, it’s only ‘cause you’re hurt.”

Cort went outside and looked around at the graveyard. It was so peaceful in the morning sunshine that it was hard to believe what happened here last night. The air smelled fresh and the usual terracotta and burnt umber shades of the desert were broken up by patches of brilliant green as wild grasses sprang up, nourished by the rain. Cort smiled, feeling the sun on his skin. It was good to be alive.

He went round the back of the shack to relieve himself and saw Ben had unsaddled the horses and staked them where they could nibble at the fresh new growth. Their places in the shelter were taken by four dead men, wearing only their union suits. Cort considered pissing right on top of them but thought better of it and turned away to empty his bladder. He noticed blood in his urine, which was a little unnerving, but he connected it to his abused kidney and reckoned it would clear up soon enough.

He found his clothes spread out on top of a tomb full of bullet holes; they were almost dry but also filthy – covered in blood and grime. There was another set there, obviously stripped from one of the corpses out back, and he felt the shirt and pants; they were slightly damp but made of good quality fabric and the tailoring looked expensive. Their last owner clearly had money to spend on such luxuries and he pulled them on quickly, along with a waistcoat that matched the pants. Ben was right, they were a good fit and he liked the colour. There was a coat which he didn’t need right now so he bundled up all the garments, figuring he’d get his own clothes washed back in town, but glad he finally had a spare set!

As he turned towards the shack his eye was caught by the open grave nearby; the grave which had so nearly become his own. He walked over and gazed down at the empty pit, memories of last night surging into his mind. He remembered kneeling on this very spot, knowing he was going to die, trying to commend his soul to God while praying desperately for a miracle he was sure wouldn’t come. He wasn’t ready to go, wasn’t prepared for it. Henry Usher had told him it wouldn’t be clean or easy, and he was almost numb with terror.

But God *had* answered his prayers, delivered a miracle in the form of Ben Carter and Cort knew, without doubt, that he’d been sent a message. His life had been spared for a reason; there was work for him to do and it all made sense when Ben mentioned going to Tucson and fighting Henry Usher head on. *That* was his mission! Usher was a stain on God’s landscape, a blight on his church, and God wanted him brought to justice. Cort raised his head to the clear blue sky and gave thanks to the Lord for granting him life, promising him he’d succeed in this task. He was interrupted by Ben yelling at him.

“Food’s ready. Come and get it.”

Ben disappeared back inside the hut as he approached. He followed him in, dumped his armful of clothes on the floor then strapped on his gunbelt. He looked around for his Colt, saw it lying in the corner with the stash of weapons, holstered it, then pinned the Marshal’s badge onto his new waistcoat.

Ben was watching him; grinning broadly, a part-eaten rabbit in one hand and a tin mug in the other. “You look almost presentable, Marshal, though your hair could pass for a haystack. You might even get a few gals looking your way now.”

“To hell with girls, I’ve got a wife.”

Ben scowled. “That ain’t funny.”

Cort poured himself some coffee and reached for the remaining rabbit. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten and his stomach felt hollow. He dug in, gnawing every shred of meat from the bones, wishing there was more when he was finished. Ben was peering over the rim of his mug.

“You remember that plan we cooked up last night?”

Cort wiped the grease from his fingers on his muddy shirt. Hell, it was getting washed anyway. “Are you saying that getting beat up, drugged and almost killed might have affected my mind?”

“Not exactly, but you sure drank some whisky.”

Cort smiled. “I remember the conversation, Ben. It’ll take some planning and some luck; and we don’t have much time either, but... I’m in.”

Ben looked relieved. “Well then, we’ve got exactly twenty four days to work it out. I reckon that’s time enough.”

Cort didn’t want to talk about Tucson right now; there were more pressing matters at hand. He needed to get back to Redemption and call a meeting for one thing... He stood up and finished his coffee.

“Let’s get back to town. I need a bath!”

Half an hour later they were loaded up and underway. They walked their horses slowly, leading the other three and Cort was pre-occupied with thoughts of Henry Usher and his plans for Redemption. He needed to find a way to instil upon the townsfolk just how dangerous the man was, not sure the evidence of his most recent injuries would do the job. They were so used to seeing him hurt and bleeding he doubted it would have much effect.

Ben suddenly started cursing and it yanked him out of his reverie. He glanced around and immediately saw what was bothering his deputy. They were approaching a large, rocky outcrop and there was a man’s body slumped against it. His clothes were covered in blood but Cort immediately recognised Jack Bellows and his stomach lurched. The part of him that wasn’t a priest, which was the biggest part these days, hoped to hell he was dead.

Ben was out of his saddle like a bullet and leaning over Bellows. Cort dismounted gingerly and reached them just as Ben stood up and took a few steps back, drawing his gun. Cort grabbed his arm.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Ben shook his hand away. “The bastard’s still alive, I’m putting him out of his misery.”

“You’re going to put your gun away and remember you’re a lawman now. That’s an order, deputy.”

Ben scowled but did as he was told and Cort moved in to get a closer look. Bellows’ breathing was shallow and his face looked grey. Both of his eyes were blackened, his nose swollen, but Cort couldn’t find any remorse in himself for inflicting those injuries. All the blood was coming from a shoulder wound and there was way too much of it; Bellows must have been lying in the rain for hours. If blood loss didn’t kill him then fever surely would, but Cort couldn’t just leave him here to die. He glanced over at Ben.

“Help me get him on a horse. Let’s see what the Doc makes of him.”

Bellows didn’t regain consciousness as they hauled him over a saddle and covered the last quarter of a mile at a fast canter. It was past noon as they entered town - lunchtime, and people were coming out onto their porches to eat. Cort knew they were causing a stir and there were plenty of questions shouted his way as they trotted down to the doctor’s house, but he ignored them. They could wait until later.

Ben banged on Doc Wallace’s door and the old man took an age to open it. He finally appeared, holding a tea cup, and Ben jerked his thumb at Bellows. “Someone to see you, Doc.”

Cort saw the old man's gaze swivel in his direction, "More than one, I reckon. What the hell happened to you Marshal? You spend the night in a mud pit?"

Cort scowled. "Something like that."

A group of people had followed them along the street and Cort didn't see any reason to strain his aching body more than necessary. He motioned to a couple of the younger men.

"You boys help this man off his horse. He's dangerous so stay with him until I get back."

They were keen enough to help; they unslung Bellows and took him inside. The doctor was still standing at the door; Cort saw him eyeing the wounds on his head and wrists.

"You come back here quick now Cort, you hear?!"

He nodded then beckoned Ben over. "Get the horses settled then go up to the Marshal's office. Tell them we've got a prisoner and we need that cell finished today. Tell anybody you see there's a town meeting tonight, eight o'clock in the saloon, and tell the undertaker he's got customers at the cemetery."

Ben frowned. "What are *you* going to do, Marshal?"

There was a clear challenge in the question and Cort reckoned it might take a while to adjust to this new relationship. Ben was a man used to looking after himself, doing as he pleased; suddenly he was taking orders from somebody no older, wiser or necessarily more experienced than himself. He looked Ben square in the eye.

"I'm going to speak to Horace at the saloon, then I'm going to visit the store keepers, then I'm going to take a bath. That okay with you, *deputy*?"

Ben scratched at his head, he seemed a little embarrassed. "I was just wondering..."

"So if you need me, you know where I'll be."

Cort headed towards the saloon. He figured the quickest way to spread word about the meeting was to tell Horace, and it was only polite to inform him that his bar was going to be hosting it. Some of the Bordello girls were out on their porch drinking beer and they all started giggling and whispering as he approached.

"Heading for the bathhouse honey? You mind some company?"

"I sure hope you're this dirty in the boudoir, Marshal!"

"No need to blush sugar, we don't bite. Unless you like that kind of thing..."

Cort's face was burning and he wished they'd stop taunting him like this, every damned time they saw him! Couldn't they see he wasn't interested? He was about to keep on walking when a thought struck him. The whores were as much a part of Redemption as anybody else; they lived and worked here, and they would surely suffer if Henry Usher's iron fist descended on the town. Reluctantly he went over and accepted the bottle of beer which was thrust towards him.

"Ladies, I'd like to inform you that, er.. there's a town meeting tonight in the saloon at, uh... eight o'clock. I'd appreciate it if you might um.. put business on hold for an hour and join us."

"You're a true gentleman, you know that Cort? Who else on this earth would think to invite creatures like us?" Cort blinked over at the woman who'd spoken and recognised her. It was the one called Kitty, the one he'd rejected a couple of days ago. Looking at her now he felt a familiar longing, a familiar stirring. She was

young and pretty; Mexican-looking with dark skin, big eyes and full breasts. She saw him staring and ran a seductive tongue over her lips. "I'll be there, Marshal and maybe afterwards we'll have some fun?!"

One of the other whores seemed outraged by the words and she puffed herself up like a turkey. "You'll just wait in line, you little bitch!"

They all started yelling, arguing about who was going to have him first and Cort hurried away, embarrassed beyond belief. He couldn't understand why those women wanted him so bad but right now he felt like he surely wanted Kitty. Maybe it took a near-death experience to rekindle his lust? He tried to get the feeling under control – now was definitely not the time to get sidetracked by carnal desire.

He finished his beer and shovelled down a bowl of stew as he put Horace in the picture about the meeting, urged him to put out the word, then called into every store and invited their owners and patrons along. Folks were intrigued and a few of them commented on his appearance and latest injuries, wondering if there was a connection. Cort reckoned more people would turn up if there was some sense of mystery so he gave them no information except place and time.

Finally he headed to the bath house and spent half an hour in the warm water, which quickly turned the colour of mud. The heat helped ease the ache in his shoulders and back and he was a lot more relaxed as he walked back to the Doc's house. All he needed now was an afternoon nap and he might feel human again...

Jack Bellows was bandaged and still unconscious in the observation room when he returned. Ben was sitting in the parlour with a rifle across his lap. He looked alert and ready.

"The jailhouse is done, they're just moving in furniture and you can have the key tomorrow. Some of the boys were wondering how all that blood got on the floor but I figured you'd want to tell 'em tonight. I didn't know what to do with all the guns and shit so I stashed it in my room."

Cort nodded and Ben watched him, considering. "Anything else you need me to do, Marshal? I reckon I could use a bath too."

"Actually there is, Ben. You can use some of Henry Usher's money to settle my tab with Horace and Charlie Barton; they've kept me drunk for the best part of a month and I think they'd appreciate the cash. Then go get a bath, I'll be here a while..."

Right on cue Doc Wallace arrived, hauled him into the front room and ordered him to undress. The examination was thorough, not especially tender, and the Doc confirmed cracked ribs and an inflamed kidney. He cleaned and bandaged Cort's various wounds and he was frowning.

"This is getting to be a habit, son!"

"It's not happy about it either, doc."

The old man gazed at him. "Ben Carter told me what happened. I'll be at that meeting tonight and if any of those jackasses make things difficult, I'll tell 'em straight!"

Cort smiled. "I figure I'll need some help tonight."

"You should try and get some rest. You'll need your wits about you."

Cort shook his head. "Jack Bellows is dangerous, I can't leave you alone with him."

To his surprise the Doc started cackling. "You think I got to be this age without learning how to shoot a gun, sonny?" He crossed to his desk and pulled out a well-cared for Schofield. "I doubt that man will last the night, but if he makes some kind of miraculous recovery while you're gone, I'll shoot the fucker right between the eyes!" He jammed the pistol into his belt and grinned. "Now go get some rest. Doctor's orders."



Cort conceded defeat, relieved he didn't have to spend the next few hours sitting in the Doc's stuffy parlour. He headed over to the hotel, thinking how good a soft bed was going to feel, and went to collect his room key from the welcome desk. Mrs Linton, the hotel owner's wife, came to attend and shot him a severe look as she handed it over.

"Somebody here to see you, Marshal." She sounded even more prim and prudish than usual and she inclined her head sharply towards the window. Cort looked over and saw Kitty sitting in one of the over-stuffed armchairs, almost swamped by the size of it. She winked at him and Mrs Linton inhaled sharply. He turned back towards her.

"It's not what you think ma'am. I didn't invite her over here and if you'll give us a moment in private, I think I can take care of this."

She threw him a fierce glare then swept out of the room, her skirts rustling. Cort went over to the chair and gazed down at Kitty. She sure was pretty and for the second time in a few hours, he felt real desire. Again he tried to fight it down.

"Can I help you miss?"

"I was figuring I might be able to help *you*, Marshal."

"I don't need that kind of help right now."

She giggled and her eyes dropped to his crotch and the bulge in his pants. "You're not a very good liar."

He shook his head, feeling himself get red again. "I don't have any money."

She stood up and moved in close, pressing her ample bosom against his chest and running a hand through his damp hair. "This isn't business Marshal. I'm here on my own time and I surely ain't gonna charge for pleasure."

Cort was running out of options. She smelled so good it was almost intoxicating. "My ribs are busted, I can hardly move..."

She leaned forward and breathed into his face. "All you need to do is lay still, honey. I'll take care of everything else."

Suddenly her tongue was in his ear, her fingers brushing across his crotch and he growled with hunger. He was so horny he felt like he might erupt any second now. She felt his predicament and pulled back a step.

"I think you'd better show me to your room, Marshal."

He gazed at her for a moment, considering, but it was a lost cause. He grabbed her hand and pulled her up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

## CHAPTER 13

Ben Carter checked his pocket watch. It read 7.30 pm. Down the street he could see a steady stream of people pouring into the saloon. Word of the meeting had spread and it seemed like half the town was already inside. However, there was still no sign of the man who'd actually called them there. Ben knew Cort was up in his room, had been for over five hours, and he also knew the Marshal had not been alone for some of that time. He'd seen the whore named Kitty slink out of the hotel at around four, a satisfied expression on her face and she'd winked and grinned at him as she'd passed. Ben had grinned back. God knew Cort needed a little fun in his life, and if he was still asleep right now then it wasn't altogether surprising. Ben figured a wake up call might be in order.

He banged on Cort's door several times before he heard movement inside. Cort opened it with a sheet wrapped around himself, wearing nothing else except a scowl.

"Where's the damned fire?"

Ben gazed at him. "You mean the one you lit over at the saloon? It's full of folks, Cort, and pretty soon they'll be waiting on you."

"What time is it?"

"A little after seven thirty."

"Shit! I've got to get cleaned up. Wait for me."

Ben watched more people arrive at the saloon while Cort got ready. Some of them were forced to stand out on the porch and there were still more coming. The place was literally busting at the seams. Twenty minutes later Cort came downstairs; he looked agreeable in his new set of clothes and he'd combed his hair so the bandage around his head hardly showed. He was limping slightly and Ben grinned.

"Hope you didn't over-exert yourself up there, Marshal."

Cort's head whipped round and he glared.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Ben shrugged. "I saw Kitty come out. She looked real pleased about something."

Cort smiled and his face reddened a little. "You keep that piece of information private, you hear me, deputy?"

Ben laughed and they made their way over to the saloon. It was so jammed they soon realised they'd never get in, so they headed round to the back door and went through the kitchen, almost scaring the wits out of Horace when they appeared at the bar behind him. He was bright red and pouring with sweat, rushed off his feet, and Ben looked around the room. All the tables were taken and people were standing, shoulder to shoulder, in every available space, upstairs and downstairs, even on the staircase. It was hot, smoky and stuffy, the atmosphere alive, and the din of voices was so loud he wondered how Cort was going to make himself heard. He spotted Doc Wallace and Charlie Barton and then he saw Kitty, standing apart from a group of whores who were talking with their heads close together and throwing her dirty looks. Ben reckoned he knew what that was about and the thought made him chuckle.

"I didn't think the whole damned town would turn out."

Cort sounded nervous and Ben glanced at him. He was sipping at a bottle of beer and staring out into the crowd.

"You were a preacher; pretend it's a Sunday service."

Cort shook his head. "There's no believers here."

"Sure there are. Just tell 'em the truth, show 'em those marks on your body. They'll believe you."

The noise was beginning to subside as people realised Cort had arrived. Horace spoke to him.

"Reckon you should stand where people can see you, Marshal."

He jerked a thumb towards the top of the bar and Cort considered for a moment then pulled over a crate. He looked at Ben.

“You as well.”

Ben’s stomach twisted. He had no desire to get up in front of all these people. It went against all his instincts, not to mention six months trying to stay invisible. “You don’t need me.”

Cort grabbed his arm and boosted him onto the crate.

“I won’t find a better time to introduce my deputy.”

Ben climbed onto the bar reluctantly, hearing the noise die off even more as he reached down to help Cort. By the time he was up there, swearing softly and clutching his ribs, the room was quiet. Ben gazed around at the sea of faces, reading a multitude of expressions there: curiosity, trepidation, excitement, fear, suspicion, plain drunkenness... Cort cleared his throat.

“Uh, you’re all wondering why I brought you here tonight, and I’ll tell you soon enough, but first I want to introduce Ben Carter, he’s the new deputy marshal of Redemption.”

That got some definite approval. The saloon exploded into riotous applause, cheers and whistles, and it took an age to die down. When it was quiet again, Cort continued.

“Is anybody in this room unfamiliar with the name Henry Usher?”

There were rumblings and mutterings, a lot of head bobbing, but nobody spoke up. Cort continued.

“Then I’ll take it that you all believe him to be a man of the church; a man dedicated to spreading God’s word and bringing change to towns in the territory that need it most.”

More rumblings, and they sounded approving. Ben figured what was coming next wouldn’t go down well. Cort glanced across and he nodded his support.

“Last night, during the storm, Usher and four of his men jumped me. They beat me, drugged me and took me up to the cemetery. Then they tried to bury me... alive. Ben Carter saved me; if it wasn’t for him I’d be lying in an unmarked grave right now and...”

He couldn’t continue. The room erupted again but this time it sounded ugly. Everybody seemed to be shouting opinions and questions at once, not even prepared to listen to the explanation. Annoyed, Ben drew his gun and fired a shot into the ceiling. That got their attention.

“Just listen to the Marshal, you damned fools. If you’ve got questions then ask them after!”

Cort threw him a look of gratitude and ploughed on. “You’re wondering why he’d do that and I’m trying to tell you. Usher wants Redemption; he smells money here, most likely from the railroad, and that’s going to put us all in danger. Building a church and bringing God sounds just fine but it’s only a front for how he really makes money, which is extortion, blackmail and murder when things don’t go right. Anything you confess to his priests gets passed right along and if you’ve got something to hide and money to spare, you pass that along too or he goes public.”

“Bullshit!”

The voice came from a corner of the room and Ben looked around sharply, trying to spot the man who’d called out.

“It ain’t bullshit!” He recognised this voice as belonging to Charlie Barton, and he sounded irate. “There was plenty of us in this saloon yesterday when Usher’s men came. They tried to take Ben away by force, like they was above the law, and they promised they’d come back.”

“Maybe they were just giving a thief and liar what he deserved!”

That generated another buzz of speculation and Ben’s heart sank. Word had sure got around fast. He heard Cort’s voice, quiet in his ear.

“Reckon it’s your turn, Ben.”

Cort had known all along he’d need to tell his story, that’s why he’d gotten him up on the bar. He signed and raised his voice to shout above the noise.

“It’s true I stole money from Usher but it wasn’t from church donations, it came from the rackets he’s running. I knew how to do it because I used to work for him. I was one of the boys who’d go in and blackmail hardworking folks and their families, make their lives hell because somebody slipped up in the eyes of God and regretted it enough to confess to a priest. I ain’t no believer but I can see the wrong in that.”

“You stole from a robber? Still makes you a thief in my eyes.” This time Ben spotted the owner of the voice, a burly, middle-aged man with a silver moustache and a fancy hat. He recognised the type as well; he’d spent plenty of time around them. Men with just enough money to make them pig-headed and arrogant, and he’d watched most of their money vanish into Usher’s pockets. He grinned insolently.

“You look like somebody who’d regret his time in Usher’s confessional, mister.”

The man smoothed his moustache with a forefinger, cool as a cucumber. “I’ve got nothing to fear from God, or Henry Usher for that matter. Thirty thousand dollars is a hell of a bounty though, son, must’ve made you feel real special for a while.”

Ben’s face burned with indignation and the words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to consider.

“That money was for somebody else, you son of a bitch. It didn’t mend all the lives torn apart by greed, but it helped make them a little easier.”

“Sounds like a guilty conscience to me, boy!”

“Damned right! Usher’s a curse on this territory and he’s coming to Redemption. I know too much about his organisation and your Marshal knows it too. He’d like us both dead but if we spread the word, write letters and tell everybody we know about him, pretty soon there’ll be too many of us to kill without folks noticing.”

He looked at the man squarely, then took in the entire room.

“Redemption doesn’t need Usher’s church or any of his other crap, and that’s a fact. All you’d be getting is another John Herod, though at least Herod was honest about his business in my opinion. If the town’s right for the railroad’s then it’s gonna come anyway, and you already got a priest standing right here. He might not wear the collar but he’s a man of God and I’ve seen him hurt bad for this town, for a bunch of cowards who don’t even have the guts to believe what he says.”

More rumblings and Ben thought the tide might be shifting. He shot a glance at Cort. “Show ‘em your bruises.”

Cort shook his head. Ben scowled at him and pressed on.

“Anybody remember that gunfight four nights ago? Those three men who tried to shoot the Marshal were working for Usher. That’s his idea of playing fair.”

He turned to Cort. "Show 'em goddammit. Don't lose the moment."

Cort shook his head more fiercely and Ben was about to grab him when Doc Wallace stepped into the fray.

"Anybody who don't remember how he suffered can talk to me. I've spent weeks patching him up and these past few days more than ever. We're both tired of it."

"It looks like a horse kicked him". That was a woman's talking and Ben knew who'd spoken before he met the eyes of Kitty, who had spots of colour blazing in her cheeks. He saw the other whores glaring at her but she was oblivious. "Whoever did that sure had a sick mind!"

A raucous, drunken voice yelled out. "Kicked by a horse then riding on a filly. I'm impressed, Marshal!"

There was a roar of laughter. Ben glanced over at Cort and saw him go red. He lowered his head, hanging his hair down so the whole town wouldn't see his shame. Ben snarled in his ear.

"Just fucking show 'em Cort, this ain't nothing to laugh about!"

Reluctantly Cort pulled up his shirt, exposing the livid bruising on his ribs. The room quietened down and some of the women gasped. Ben grabbed him and turned him round, so they could see the mark over his kidney. "He's pissing blood; that okay with you folks? You still think Henry Usher's a good bet? He sees the Marshal here as your leader, that's why he needs him dead. With him gone he figures this town will roll over and do anything he asks, and he's probably right. So you'd better decide right now if you can stand to back the only man who's gonna help you!"

That might have been the clincher and Cort seemed to sense it. He tucked his shirt into his pants and Ben saw a change in his composure and expression, suddenly got an inkling of what Cort the preacher might have been like. His eyes were blazing, his presence filled the room and he immediately had the full attention of everybody in it. Even the drunks shook themselves half awake and listened.

"I believe in Redemption enough to defend it from ugliness and evil, even if it means getting hurt or maybe even dying." Cort's voice was measured but utterly commanding. "But I can't fight Henry Usher alone and I won't. If you don't believe what I've told you and what I've shown you, if you're not prepared to help me then I don't see any reason to risk my life here. You need to make a decision, folks; you get behind me or take your chances with Henry Usher. I'll be over at the hotel; let me know when you decide."

He got down from the bar and Ben followed him out through the kitchen, leaving a cacophony of raised voices behind. He reckoned the decision might be some time coming but he was glad to get out of the hot, sweaty saloon and feel the cool evening air on his face. He wasn't sure what to make of the meeting, wasn't sure they'd succeeded in their mission, but Cort didn't seem bothered either way. He strolled over to the hotel, calmly helped himself to a beer from behind the bar, then sat in a chair away from the windows and put his feet up on a table. Ben grabbed a beer for himself and approached cautiously.

"You reckon we won 'em over?"

Cort glanced up at him, the picture of nonchalance. "Let's see what the breeze blows in."

"They'd be damned stupid not to see the truth of it."

Cort cocked an eyebrow. "Just what is the truth Ben? You've been skirting around it for days now."

"You don't need to know Marshal, and it won't change anything."

Cort took a sip of beer. "Like you said I don't wear a collar anymore, but I'll still hear your confession."

Ben shook his head. "I got no time for the church, and I don't believe there's anything above me except sky, so what's the use in confessing?"

Cort gazed at him, measuring him. "Then maybe you'll confide in a friend?"

Ben thought about it. He'd never told a living soul about the events which finally drove him out of Henry Usher's employment, but getting things out in the open might help ease the terrible burden of guilt. He trusted Cort, who'd willingly shared a terrible secret of his own, and knew he wouldn't be judgemental. Finally he sat down and took a bracing gulp of beer.

"You ever hear of Gregory Furnell?"

"No."

Ben wasn't surprised. Cort didn't seem to have heard of anybody important in the past three years.

"He was mayor of Bisbee – only a young feller but he had a lot of good ideas and people liked him. He had a pretty wife, two young kids and another on the way, and when Henry Usher wanted to bring his ministry to town, he welcomed him with open arms...."

He paused. Cort was looking like he already knew how this story panned out.

"Furnell had money, power and influence, and he always caught the eye of other ladies. I guess one night temptation got too much and he cheated, then he was fool enough to tell one of Usher's priests. You can guess the rest, I reckon."

Cort nodded his head. "How did you fit into it, Ben?"

"I lead the gang Usher put onto him, and we milked him dry. A night of fun with another woman don't sound like much, but he was a public figure and if would have finished his career. So every month we'd go down there and take his money, easy as you like, and every month I saw his wife and family hurting worse. They didn't know what was happening, and he never told 'em, but it was ripping them apart. One mistake wasn't worth all that suffering and then Furnell started running out of money and getting desperate. I told Usher to back off and leave 'em be but he wouldn't listen. The last time I went down there his wife was wearing black and holding a newborn baby. Furnell had put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. That family was left with nothing and Bisbee was robbed of a good mayor. The bastard they've got running things now is friends with Henry Usher, wouldn't you know?"

He took a gulp of beer. Cort was watching him intently, his eyes dark. "That's what changed your mind?"

Ben nodded. "On that day I knew I couldn't work for Usher anymore. I couldn't be a part of ripping any more lives apart. Stealing the money was easy. I just waited until we'd finished our work in that area, and there was plenty of folks to visit, then I rode off with it one night. I knew it would hurt the fucker bad, and I knew he'd come after me, but it was worth it. I broke into that widow's house and left most of it on her kitchen table, then I ran like hell."

A group of people sauntered into the bar and Ben glanced at them, wondering if the meeting was over. Cort didn't move and his eyes never left Ben's face.

"You never felt like telling her what that money was for?"

"Think about it Cort. If I'd put her in the picture about Henry Usher then I doubt she'd be alive today. Last I heard they'd moved to Colorado, which is far enough to be safe, I reckon."

More people were coming in and Cort's eyes flickered towards the bar where trade was picking up smartly. Ben wished he'd say something, make some kind of comment on what he'd just revealed. Finally he looked back over.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Ben. You played a part in that ugliness but you learned a lesson from it and you made amends as best you could. You tried to change, to make yourself better, and now you're helping me bring Henry Usher to justice; I don't think anybody would ask more of you."

Ben stared at him, remembering how Cort once shot a priest. "Do you ever stop feeling guilt?"

"Not in my experience. You just try and live with it; be the best person you can and hope that's enough." Cort stood up and smiled, put a hand on his shoulder. "Any time you need to talk I'll be ready to listen. Now we'd better go see what all these folks want."

They headed towards the bar just as Charlie Barton and a bunch of his cronies came in. He marched straight up to Cort and he was grinning. "Well Marshal, a few of them folks needed some persuading but we made 'em listen to sense and they're all behind you now. You just tell us what needs doing and I'll make sure it gets done."

Cort's face was impassive. "That's good to know. You can ask everybody to start spreading the word, but be careful about who they tell and how they say it. Tell 'em to keep their ears and eyes open too. I want to know about every new face in town and any news that comes with 'em. Tomorrow I'm moving up to the Marshal's office so I'll be easy enough to find."

Charlie nodded. "Now you've finally settled your tab Marshal, how about I buy you boys a drink? I reckon you did real well in that saloon tonight."

"Thanks, Charlie." Cort turned to Ben as Charlie elbowed his way towards the bar and suddenly he was grinning like fox. "That's a damned relief. I didn't think we'd had a hope of swinging everybody our way."

Ben was surprised at his words. Cort had seemed totally calm and composed, apparently unconcerned by the outcome of the meeting. "You were nervous?"

Cort laughed. "Nervous as hell."

Ben shook his head. "I'm never playing poker with you, Marshal!"

Charlie Barton brought some beers over and Ben got stuck in a conversation with a couple of the store keepers, but he was watching the room as they spoke. He noticed Doc Wallace come in and pull Cort aside. He spoke to him urgently and Cort frowned, then beckoned to Ben. He sauntered over.

"What's up?"

Cort was still frowning. "Jack Bellows has woken up, and he wants to talk."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cort hefted the last of the Winchester rifles into the gun cupboard, locked it and wiped sweat out of his eyes. Outside the sun was low in the sky and the cell bars were casting long, striped shadows across the floor of the Marshal's office. He was exhausted but nowhere near done for the day. He perched on a chair behind the desk he'd helped haul up from the hotel earlier today, and surveyed his new domain, almost overwhelmed by the size of it. This was more space than he'd ever had to himself in his life and he wasn't sure what to do with it all. Other than firearms, which he now had in abundance, his scant possessions and clothes didn't even begin to fill the wardrobe and dresser in his bedroom, and though there was a stove in the kitchen out back, he currently had no utensils to cook with, not even a plate to eat from. The bookcase in the parlour next door was

empty save for a dog-eared copy of the Bible, but at least the liquor cupboard was well stocked with beer and whisky.

He was restless and drifted into the parlour, grabbed himself a brew and sank into one of the tatty armchairs. All his meagre furnishings had been donated by the townsfolk, he suspected many were glad to be rid of these stuffy antiques, but he wasn't complaining. He'd used some of Henry Usher's money to buy booze and new sheets and blankets for the creaky old double bed he now owned; as an afterthought he'd picked up some well-worn bedding at a knock down price from the hotel owner. There were two cells in the jailhouse, each containing a pisspot and trestle bunk and he'd tossed a few blankets onto each bed. He'd be welcoming his first guest pretty soon and felt the prisoner should at least be warm during his incarceration, though he sure wasn't looking forward to having to cook for him...

Jack Bellows had been sitting up in bed when Cort visited him at the doctor's house after the meeting. His face was still badly bruised, his left arm in a sling, and he was bright-eyed, sweating and flushed. He was shaking, breathing heavily and Cort kept his distance, wary of catching fever, though the doctor assured him there was no sign of it. All Bellows' symptoms were down to something else entirely and as soon as he saw Cort he started talking in a low, mean voice. The man was so angry he'd have probably ripped the room apart if he'd been stronger, and all the rage was aimed squarely at Henry Usher. Cort could understand why; Bellows described, quite eloquently, how he'd given nearly five years of loyal service, the past six months of it as Usher's most trusted deputy. He'd bled for his boss, put his life on the line, broken the law, taken ridiculous risks, carried out every order, however distasteful, without question or hesitation... Then, when he'd got injured and suddenly proven too much of a burden, Usher had simply left him to bleed to death in a rainstorm. Not content with that, he'd taken his money, guns and horse, virtually eliminating any chance of survival, even if he lived through the night. Bellows had begged for mercy, to be shot dead but Usher had refused, not wanting that kind of death on his conscience.

"He's a coward and a hypocrite!" Bellows spat on the floor as he said it. "If it takes me the rest of my life, I'm going to make that fucker hurt!"

While Cort understood his sentiments, shared them to an extent, he felt it only fair to point out that Bellows was now his prisoner and wouldn't be leaving Redemption until the circuit judge arrived and tried him for the attempted murder of a US Marshal. Bellows hadn't seemed too bothered by the implication, even though he'd committed a hanging offence, he'd just gazed at Cort quizzically.

"He tried to kill you, Marshal, and I can't personally think of a worse way to die. Are you going to pretend you're big enough to turn the other cheek and let him get away with it?"

Cort had stared right back. "My plans for Henry Usher are none of your business, Bellows. Right now you should get some rest, and don't think about sneaking off in the night because I'll be right outside!"

He'd left Bellows scowling and cursed quietly as he closed the door to the little observation room, realising that he and Ben would now have to post guard. Ben hadn't been best pleased with that piece of news either but they'd had no choice but to take turns on the watch, each snatching only a few hours of sleep and as soon as the sun was up they'd left the Doctor and his Schofield on duty and relocated to the jailhouse, intent on getting it habitable before the end of the day. Ben had made a slow tour of the building, taking it all in, spending more time upstairs than was necessary and Cort had seen his eyes glinting as he'd come back down. He knew what was on Ben's mind: there were two good sized rooms up there, separated by a small washroom, and both were meant to have beds in them... Ben glanced over and spoke nonchalantly.

"Looks like you got a spare room up there, Cort, what you gonna use it for?"

He'd shrugged, equally nonchalant. "I thought maybe I'd turn it into a chapel. A room for personal prayer and such, you know?"

"Personal prayer?" Ben's eyes narrowed suspiciously and Cort fought hard to keep from smiling. If Ben had a mind to live here then he was damned well going to ask for the privilege...



Sudden bright light in his eyes jerked Cort from his exhausted reverie and he realised he'd been on the verge of falling asleep. The sun had dropped another couple of inches and now it was shining right through the parlour window. He took a sip of beer and sighed. He needed to chop some firewood before it got dark – they were well into December and the desert nights were downright freezing with a fair chance of snow. By the time he'd finished it was dusk, his ribs were hurting and the air was chill. He hauled at least a week's supply of wood inside and stacked it near the big burner in the corner of the office; powerful enough to heat the whole building once it got going. He lit a fire and stood for a while, enjoying the heat and another bottle of beer until he realised his stomach was growling and it must be dinnertime. Tomorrow he'd buy food and items necessary to cook it; right now the hotel restaurant was the only sensible option.

He spotted Ben as soon as he entered the dining room, sitting alone at a table in the corner and halfway through a beer and giant T-bone steak. He looked up as Cort slid into the seat opposite.

"Everything shipshape, Captain?"

Cort nodded. "All ready for our guest. How's he doing?"

Ben frowned. "He's doing too well for my liking and it ain't natural. Yesterday morning we find him nearly dead and now he's acting like a mad dog. The sooner he's behind bars the better."

Cort beckoned the waitress and ordered a steak for himself. He glanced at Ben as she departed; he looked as exhausted as Cort felt. "As soon as we're done here we'll fetch Jack Bellows up to the jailhouse, then we can get some sleep and the doc can put his feet up for the night."

Ben's expression grew shifty though he didn't speak. Cort's steak arrived and Ben watched in silence as he ate. He looked like he was screwing himself up to say something but couldn't quite find the words. Eventually Cort put down his knife and fork, impatient.

"Something on your mind?"

Ben picked up his beer and took a bracing gulp. "I was thinking..."

He didn't get any further, just shut up and stared. He seemed embarrassed and the silence stretched out. Cort sensed they could be here all night, caught up in this stalemate, and he was too tired to carry on playing.

"For God's sake, Ben, if you want the other bedroom just come out and say it, but you'll have to find your own bed!"

Ben looked at him under his fringe and his face was red.

"I got it all worked out. I can fetch a bed tomorrow but tonight I figure I'll just bunk in one of the cells. It'll be a damned sight quieter than this place and I'll be close enough to Bellows.."

He took a deep breath and eyed Cort for a long moment before ploughing on. "It's not like we'd be living together or anything queer is it? It makes sense don't it? So we can guard prisoners and shit like that..."

Cort couldn't help smiling. "Is that what's bothering you, Ben? That folks might think we're queer?"

Ben blushed even deeper. "I don't give a damn what folks think. Anybody who reckons I'm queer can kiss my arse!"

Cort fought the urge to laugh out loud and his eyes were watering as he struggled to find the right words. "If people in this town want to gossip then, uh, they've lost sight of the real fight, so...make sure you remind them and uh... I reckon we should go get Jack Bellows now."

Bellows was asleep when they arrived at the doctor's house, perhaps worn out by the day's ranting, and he was groggy and silent as they led him up to the jailhouse and locked him into the cell nearest the wood burner. He lay down on the bunk and immediately closed his eyes. Cort went into the parlour for a bottle of whisky and shivered in the sudden chill – clearly it would take time for the burner's heat to penetrate the whole building and right now the office was the only habitable room. He put the bottle on his desk, sat down and watched Ben loading more logs into the fire. Now the pressing domestic issues were taken care of, he could no longer avoid the biggest problem of all.

Cort had spent the past two days trying not to think about the plan he'd hatched with Ben in the gravedigger's shack. Every time he did so his stomach twisted and his heart began pounding like a steam locomotive. It had nothing to do with fear, doubt, cowardice or any other peg he might try to hang it on, it was just excitement, plain and simple. He'd always enjoyed the adrenaline rush he got before a fight or a robbery, relished the way it sharpened his senses and honed his reactions, but right now it made him feel only shame. He'd imagined he'd moved beyond base animal instinct, thought he'd reached a higher level of understanding and control, but his body was fighting his belief and betraying him at every turn.

"You're thinking about Tucson, right?"

Ben was sitting in the chair opposite him, reaching for the whisky. "You always get that look on your face, like there's a big gunfight going on inside. Got any glasses?"

Cort shook his head, startled at Ben's perception. Was he really so easy to read?

Ben shrugged. "I'll get us some tomorrow. Until then..." He took a gulp of liquor from the bottle then raised it in a scruffy salute. "... a successful pilgrimage to Tucson!"

Cort frowned, uneasy at Ben's enthusiasm. Not least because it mirrored the part of him he was trying to ignore. He crossed to the wood burner and warmed his hands, considering the enormity of their task.

"What's the date today?"

"Uh..." Ben considered for a long moment. "December 4<sup>th</sup>, I think..."

"So we've got, uh, three weeks to find us some dynamite, ride to Tucson, scope the bank, plan an escape route which doesn't lead every posse straight to Redemption, and we've got to do it under the noses of Usher and his followers, who'll be on the lookout for us."

Ben shrugged. "You've robbed banks before, lots of 'em. Just you and John Herod most of the time... This is gonna be easy, what with the whole town being in church and all."

Cort glowered at him, unnerved by his naivety. "Nothing's easy, Ben, so don't go getting any damn fool romantic notions. Last time I robbed a bank I got shot three times and barely made it out alive. Every minute of it's like walking on the edge of a knife; one slip and you're dead in a puddle of blood. It takes courage and concentration and unless you go in thinking you might die at any time, you won't get out again. Do you understand?"

"Spoken like a true professional!"

Cort whirled round to face the source of this new voice. It was Jack Bellows, standing at the cell bars and peering into the room. He scowled. "Go back to bed, Bellows, this isn't your business."

"If you want privacy then you shouldn't talk so loud, Marshal." Bellows' voice was a casual, patronising drawl. "Robbing Henry Usher's bank on Christmas Day is an ingenious plan, I'll hand that to you, but you might find it a waste of your time."

Ben jumped out of his chair and stumped across the office to face Bellows, clutching the bottle of whisky and looking him right in the eye.

“Who says we’re robbing Usher, and who says it’s Christmas Day?”

Bellows laughed. “I got a brain Ben Carter. Exactly three weeks from now is December 25th, and why would two lawmen be setting up a bank robbery unless it’s for revenge? The only man in Tucson who’s deserves retribution is Henry Usher and if that’s what you’re planning then I want in on it!”

He clamped his good fist around the cell bars and his knuckles whitened. “I owe that fucker good!”

Cort approached the cell. “Why’s it a waste of time?”

“Give me a shot of that whisky and I’ll tell you.”

Ben glared at him. “Fuck you Bellows!” He turned on his heel and stalked back towards the desk. Cort snagged the bottle from him as he passed, took a gulp himself then handed it to Bellows who nodded thanks and took a long draught, nearly coughing his guts up right after. Ben snorted his distaste and Cort waited until their prisoner had recovered his composure before asking again.

“Why’s it a waste of time?”

Bellows’ eyes were watering but his voice was steady enough. “I’m guessing your deputy came up with the scheme, huh? Unfortunately his information is out of date. Usher moved all his money from Tucson to Bisbee, right after thirty thousand dollars of it went missing in fact. He’s nothing if not a cautious man!”

Ben whipped his head round. “You’re lying!”

Bellows shrugged. “Why would I lie? I want to hurt Usher just as bad as you boys but there’s an easier way to get his money than blowing up a safe. Hell, I can get it without even drawing a gun.”

He took a tentative sip of liquor and Cort motioned for him to give the bottle back.

“Are you planning to share the information, Bellows, or are we supposed to guess?”

Bellows eyed him for a moment, considering, then appeared to make a decision.

“For five months I was Henry Usher’s deputy and he trusted me with his most intimate business dealings, the illegal ones at least. It was part of my job to make regular deposits to a bank in Bisbee. The money came from Usher’s collection gangs but the manager believes I’m the successful owner of a real estate company. Right now Usher thinks I’m dead and I reckon he’ll be focussed on sending an army to Redemption. He wants this town bad, and he wants you boys even worse, so while he’s preoccupied we make a counter-strike.”

Cort nodded his understanding. “While Usher’s eye is fixed on Redemption we ride over to Bisbee. Instead of a deposit, you make a withdrawal, right?”

Bellows smiled. “No flies on you, Marshal! The only drawback, of course, is that I’m currently behind bars and you seem intent on making me stand trial!”

Ben came back over and he seemed irate. “Why should we believe anything you say? How do we know this isn’t some trap you and Usher have rigged? Maybe that army of his is waiting for us in Bisbee!”

Cort had to admit it was possible, and something else occurred to him. “This isn’t a get rich quick scheme, Bellows. Our only plan for Usher’s money is to give it back to the people he stole from.”

Bellows smirked. “I’d expect nothing less from a reformed outlaw and a slippery thief!”

Cort scowled at the sarcasm and Ben positively bristled. The smirk widened.

“No offence, boys. All I want is to see Usher hurting, and taking his money will hurt real bad. If you need to know where to send it, I’ll provide the names of everybody who’s fallen foul of his ministry.”

Ben took a step closer to the bars. “Prove it, Bellows. Name me twenty men right now!”

Bellows promptly rattled off a long list of names. Cort didn’t recognise any of them but Ben was nodding.

“I know most of them. There’s a few I’m not familiar with but I figure they’ll be new customers.”

“That they are.” Bellows retreated to his bunk and sat down. “Business has been brisk since you took your leave, Ben.” His eyes locked onto Cort.

“You think on it a while, Marshal. I can help you with this, but not from inside a cage.”

Cort went back to his chair. He propped his feet up on the edge of the desk and considered. His mind was whirling and not just because of the lawman’s dilemma he now faced. It was still conceivable that Bellows was lying, telling him what he wanted to hear in order to get free, but the list of names was tangible and the emotions he’d witnessed in the doctor’s office were more than genuine. Every instinct was telling him Bellows was on the level. Eventually he called over to the cell.

“How much money’s in that bank account?”

Bellows’ voice drifted out into the room. “I don’t rightly recall, Marshal. Maybe some whisky will lubricate my brain!”

With a sigh Cort walked to the cell and shoved the bottle through the bars.

“You can keep it, but you’d better start remembering!”

Bellows grinned. “At the last count, four hundred thousand dollars.”

Ben whistled.

“How long before Usher finds a new key holder?”

Bellows took a gulp of whisky. “I don’t know for sure, but it’ll take all kinds of documentation to change the name on that account. Usher’s successful because he stays separate from the collection gangs, but this time his caution might work against him...”

Cort nodded and suddenly his mind was made up. He glanced over at Ben, who was watching him intently.

“Are you likely to get recognised in Bisbee?”

Ben shrugged. “Maybe. I used to run into some of the folks I collected from but they were too scared to say anything. I don’t figure much has changed.”

“What about you, Bellows?”

Bellows shook his head. “I never rode with the gangs.”

“What about you, Cort?” Ben said it casually. “You robbed that bank before?”

He smiled. “There’s a few banks in Bisbee, but I’m not wanted there.”

Ben frowned at his casual avoidance of the question and Cort changed the subject quickly.

“We leave the day after tomorrow so start getting ready.” He turned to stare at Bellows. “If you’ve been lying to me, and if you try to cross me, I’ll shoot you dead!”

Bellows took a casual swig from the bottle. “I wouldn’t do that Marshal. Right now I’m the best weapon you’ve got.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ben shivered in the freezing wind and pulled the collar of his sheepskin coat closer about his neck. He was glad he’d invested in the garment before they left Redemption because the snow had started not long after they’d set out. It had been quite pleasant to begin with; riding through the gently falling flakes and watching the rugged landscape slowly turn white. Last night they’d camped in a cave and drank whisky around a good fire but this morning the wind had picked up, rising steadily throughout the day until now they were fighting their way through a near blizzard. The light was beginning to fail and dusk was approaching. The unusually inclement weather had hindered their progress but Ben knew Bisbee wasn’t far off and he was on the alert for any signs of life in the distance, though the snow whipping into his eyes made it difficult to see much at anything. He could just about make out the shapes of Cort and Jack Bellows ahead and he nudged his horse into a canter until he’d caught up. He didn’t want to let Bellows out of his sight; he was manacled and unarmed but Ben didn’t trust him. This whole scheme seemed just a little too convenient, and the turbulent weather was the perfect partner for a man with bigger plans up his sleeve than leading two hapless lawmen into a trap.

Cort’s hat was pulled low over his face, he was hunched in his saddle and looked half frozen. Of them all, he was least acquainted with this kind of hard slog. While he was clearly no stranger to long distance riding in bad conditions, most of the past three years had seen a roof over his head and decent food in his belly. With that kind of comfort, it was never long before a man’s body forgot the rigours of the road and grew a little soft. He hadn’t once opened his mouth to complain however, and he wouldn’t have gotten any sympathy if he had.

Once they’d agreed on their plan for Bisbee, Ben and Bellows petitioned to leave right away but Cort insisted they stay in Redemption an extra day, as he’d originally intended. He wanted to tell the townsfolk, personally, that he’d be gone awhile, wanted to be sure they were prepared should Henry Usher decide to invade. They’d put around the story of how they were taking Jack Bellows to Contention, to await the prison train for Yuma, but Ben didn’t honestly believe Usher would be coming anytime soon. He’d want to lick his wounds awhile and dream up a scheme which didn’t involve bloody gun battles on the streets of Redemption. He was a subtle man and would certainly take more care next time he visited, but Cort’s caution was understandable, if frustrating.

Ben had used the time to pick up some things for their journey, move his stuff into the jailhouse and buy the essential items Cort seemed oblivious about – cutlery, crockery, candles, oil, lamps, towels and cooking utensils for starters. He’d even purchased another sheepskin coat, knowing the marshal had nothing in his wardrobe fit for a long ride in cold weather, and Cort had grinned as he’d taken it, making another quip about gaining a wife as well as a deputy. That joke was getting real old and next time he cracked it, he was looking to get a fist in his face. Ben scowled at the memory.

“Something up ahead!”

Jack Bellows had pulled up his horse and was squinting into the wind, both manacled hands raised to shield his eyes. Nobody would have guessed he was carrying a serious injury – he’d ridden hardest and fastest of them all, always trying to lead the pack and showing no signs of weariness, pain or cold. He was one tough customer but it only made Ben more determined to keep him in check. He stopped his horse nearby.

“Bisbee?”

“I reckon.” Bellows glanced at Cort. “How about taking these chains off? Riding into town as your prisoner won’t help our chances any.”

Cort shook his head. “Not yet.”

Bellows grinned. “Don’t you trust me, marshal?”

“About as far as I can throw you!”

Ben was glad to hear it. Many of Cort’s decisions seemed based on gut instinct and occasionally they mis-led him. At least he had the measure of Jack Bellows though – a smart, slippery thug who’d shoot them both as soon as look at them. Half an hour later it was almost dark and the outlying buildings of Bisbee came into view, grey and hazy in the relentless snow. Cort halted the party while he unlocked Bellows’ cuffs.

“The bank’ll be closed now. Where’s a good place to stay overnight? Somewhere we won’t attract attention?”

Bellows considered for a moment. “The Blue Angel, I reckon.”

Ben remembered the place; a small but comfortable hotel near the edge of town, used almost exclusively by travellers wishing to keep a low profile and move on quickly. The owner and staff were discreet, well paid for their diplomacy, and the food and whisky were decent enough. Cort cocked an eyebrow at him and he nodded his agreement.

“It’s on the same street as the bank!”

It took them a while to find the building – the whole town looked different under cover of snow and visibility was getting worse as the storm progressed. They took a few wrong turns and Cort sat up straight as they approached a large chapel with a snow-laden cross on the roof, its windows spilling golden lamplight out across the snow. He swivelled round in his saddle to keep looking as they passed and Ben hoped he wasn’t getting any ideas about paying a visit. That was Henry Usher’s church!

Eventually they located the Blue Angel and led their horses into the warmth of its stable. Ben listened to the muffled howl of the wind outside, relieved not to be spending a second night in the storm. It was barely 6pm and he was looking forward to a good supper and peaceful evening by the fire with a few bottles of beer.

The hotel bar was busier than he’d expected, however, given the conditions outside. There were a few bedraggled fellows minding their business in the corners, small groups of men conducting low conversations in the shadows, but the room was dominated by a rowdy group sitting around a large table, drinking whisky and playing stud. Ben counted eight of them and judging by the volume of their voices, not to mention the pile of money in the centre of the table, they’d been here some time. The hotel owner didn’t seem best pleased and kept glancing across at them as he checked in his newest arrivals. He gave all three of them a brief but astute appraisal, sizing them up, and he seemed convinced by their sodden appearance.

“Long ride, fellers?”

Cort’s hands were shaking so bad he nearly dropped the money he’d pulled from his pocket to pay for their room. The man smiled.

“Hot bath’s a dollar extra.”

Cort nodded and fumbled another bill onto the pile. There was a sudden burst of raucous laughter from the big table and they all turned to look. The group of men seemed to be having a good time and nothing more, but the proprietor was frowning. Cort glanced at him.

“Trouble?”

The man shrugged. "They're townsfolk, not our usual clientele. They came in a couple of hours back, when the snow got bad, and they seem intent on staying."

He slapped a key down onto the desk. "Suite three. Your bath'll be ready shortly."

They'd opted for a suite of rooms in order to watch over Bellows. What they actually got was one bedroom containing two bunks and a living area, warmed by a fire in a grate, populated by a couple of armchairs and a shabby but solid-looking davenport. Its wooden arms were stout enough to run a chain through and Ben exchanged a glance with Cort. This would be Bellows' bed for the night and he scowled as he saw them looking, reading their intent.

"Do you boys honestly think I'm gonna sneak off in the middle of a snowstorm?"

Cort struggled out of his soggy coat. "I wouldn't put anything past you, Bellows, and I think you can stand to be chained up for another night. I'm going downstairs to get that bath, Ben'll keep you company while I'm away."

He was gone a long time, long enough for Ben to tire of Bellows' constant whining about their lack of trust and consideration for an injured man. He only shut up when Ben threatened to chain him to the davenport and leave him there without supper. Afterwards they sat by the fire in stony silence and Ben fought to keep his eyelids from drooping, aware that Bellows was watching him intently. He cursed Cort, figuring he'd fallen asleep in the bath, and was on the verge of taking Bellows downstairs to wake him when he finally reappeared, damp-haired and flushed from the heat of the water.

"Go get a bath if you need one, Ben."

He shook his head. Right now all he wanted was a hot meal and a beer. Bellows took it as an opportunity though.

"Ben and myself are used to life on the road, marshal. We can handle a little cold weather without freezing up like a drinking spout!"

Cort just smiled at him. "Let's see how well you handle a night on that davenport with no blankets. One more remark and you'll be sleeping on an empty stomach too!"

Bellows looked murderous but he shut up and stayed quiet throughout dinner. They ate stew and bread and softly discussed their arrangements for the morning. They intended to hit the bank early, Ben and Bellows going inside for the money while Cort posted a lookout from the hotel, which was only a few doors down. Afterwards they'd ride hard for Redemption. If the bad weather continued, however, the plan might need to be adjusted and Ben didn't fancy the prospect of more time spent guarding Bellows while pretending to be his travelling companion.

After dinner they went into the bar and sat by the fire, as far away as possible from the rowdy group of stud players, who seemed to be getting louder by the minute. Ben sipped his beer and tried to relax, though the relentless noise made it difficult. A potboy appeared and started collecting empty glasses. He was little more than 20; tall, well-built but shifty looking. His hair was long, a dirty-blond colour and he kept staring at them from under his fringe, as though they wouldn't notice. It was making Ben jumpy. Did he recognise one of them? All of them? The more he thought on it the twitchier he got and eventually he stood up, intent on getting the truth. He felt Cort's hand on his sleeve, pulling him back into his chair.

"Relax Ben, he's just curious."

"Bullshit". Jack Bellows' eyes were on the kid as he loaded spent glasses onto the bar. "He reckons he knows us. He'll be sneaking off to the Marshal's office pretty soon to claim the reward."

Cort gazed at him, bemused. "That'll be difficult when none of us are actually wanted."

Ben watched the kid turn away from the bar. He kept his head down as he approached the unruly gamblers and gathered up their glasses. He worked his way round the big table, finishing up by the loudest member of the group; a portly, red-faced man in an ugly suit with a big pile of money in front of him. He shot another look across at them as he reached for the man's glass and this time Ben was ready. He met the kid's furtive glance squarely and jerked his chin up, inviting conflict. The kid's eyes widened in surprise and he stumbled, dropping the whole tray of dirty glasses into the fat man's lap. There was a roar of laughter and the man leapt to his feet with a nimbleness which belied his size. His face was even redder now, burning with humiliation and he caught the kid across the face with a heavy backhand blow, knocking him to the floor.

"Clumsy little turd. That'll teach you to walk around with your eyes shut!"

He kicked the kid in the guts and the boy curled up tight, trying to protect himself as more blows rained down. The other members of the group were laughing and jeering, encouraging their comrade and Ben was caught in a dilemma. Should he stop the beating, at risk of drawing attention to them all, or turn a blind eye like everybody else and let this depraved scene play out...? Bellows seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the spectacle, sitting back with a big grin on his face, but Cort was out of his seat and striding across the room. He grabbed the man as he aimed another kick, spun him around and punched him in the face. The impact sent him reeling and he landed hard on the floor, wheezing; all the breath and bluster knocked out of him.

The mood of his friends changed abruptly from malicious humour to indignant outrage. They all started shouting and a couple of them stood up, reaching for their guns. The Colt was already in Cort's hand, though, and he took a step closer to the table.

"If any of you drunk fuckers want a fight then let's go, right now!"

They conceded grudgingly, sat down slowly and Ben didn't like the look on their faces; there were seven of them and Cort only had six bullets. He got reluctantly to his feet and crossed to the table, letting his hand hover near the butt of his Remington. He eyed them all calmly.

"Don't be getting any ideas about out-gunning us. We're stone-cold sober and I promise we're faster than all of you put together!"

The man on the floor clambered to his feet and lurched towards Cort until his imposing gut was the only thing separating them.

"I'm an important name in this town and you just humiliated me!"

Cort gave him a contemptuous smile. "Laying into an unarmed kid? You did a pretty good job of humiliating yourself!"

The kid in question was kneeling on the floor and watching the exchange intently. His eyes were mostly on Cort, occasionally flicking across to Ben, and he looked confused. The fat man, for his part, was showing no signs of backing down.

"How about you and me settle this in the street?"

Cort laughed and Ben knew it wasn't for show. He felt like laughing himself. He raised his voice to get the man's attention.

"You must have some kind of death wish, mister. If you want to fight in the middle of a snowstorm, against the fastest gun in this territory, then I'll be happy to watch you die!"

The fat man didn't seem remotely troubled by his words.



“I wasn’t born yesterday, son. I know when a man’s bigging up his buddy.”

To Ben’s surprise, Cort holstered his gun.

“I don’t accept that challenge; not tonight. I won’t be responsible for shooting a drunk asshole with a big mouth and I sure as hell won’t freeze my butt off in that street to do it. If you’ve still got a beef when you wake up tomorrow then come find me and we’ll settle it then. Sober you might even stand a chance.”

The fat man squinted into Cort’s eyes.

“”What’s your name?”

“You don’t need my name and I sure as hell don’t need yours.”

They stared at each other for a long time and Ben saw one of the group reach furtively for his gun. He drew his Remington and aimed it at the man’s head.

“I wouldn’t do that, mister. In fact, I think all of you fellers should get out of here while you still can.”

That seemed to break the stalemate. The fat man stomped over to his chair, pulled his coat from the back of it and glared at Cort.

“This ain’t over yet. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Cort nodded. “I’ll be here.”

The man motioned to his companions and they gathered up their money, put on their coats and departed. A blast of freezing air gusted through the bar as the street door opened and closed, and the room felt big and quiet without them in it. The other occupants immediately went back to their drinking and muted conversation and Ben returned to his seat by the fire, relieved to find that Bellows hadn’t moved. Cort sat down between them a few moments later, reached for his beer and took a sip. Bellows was scowling.

“Nice work boys, now the whole damned town’s gonna know we’re here.”

Cort glanced at him. “Who were they?”

Bellows shrugged. “How the hell would I know?”

The hotel owner was approaching and it seemed like he’d overheard.

“That was Tyrone Williams and his friends. Thanks for getting rid of ‘em.”

Cort shook his head. “I reckon he’ll be back tomorrow.”

The owner frowned. “He’s an asshole and nobody pays any mind to the shit that comes from his mouth. Nobody will care much if you shoot him dead either. In fact we’ll probably celebrate.”

Bellows looked up, suddenly attentive to the conversation.

“Tyrone Williams? Seems I’ve heard that name before...”

The owner smiled without much humour. “He works for the mayor of this town and figures it makes him a big man, though Mayor Anderson is an even bigger asshole! Gregory Furnell wasn’t even cold in his grave when he arrived from nowhere, and now he’s leading this town into all kinds of trouble. Most everybody hates him...”

Ben tensed at the mention of Furnell and Cort shook his head slightly, urging caution. He noticed the potboy disappear through a door beside the bar and tried to shake off his renewed irritation. That fucker was the cause of all tonight's trouble, and he'd also put their plan at risk. He got up to follow, ready to confront him.

"Where you going?" Cort's voice was casual as his eyes were watchful.

"For a piss. That okay with you?"

Cort had no choice in the matter because the hotel owner immediately claimed the vacated chair and continued his discourse on the unpopularity of Bisbee's mayor. Ben approached the door and opened it softly, finding himself in a large, dimly-lit store room. It was full of beer barrels and he glanced around cautiously. The kid was nowhere to be seen but he had to be in here since there was no other exit. A slight scuffing noise alerted him and he peered over a nearby barrel. The kid was hunched on the floor, clutching his ribs, breathing hard and cursing under his breath. Ben couldn't help feeling a twang of pity, and most of his irritation evaporated on the spot. He stepped around the barrel and the kid jerked his head up, his expression changing from surprise to suspicion as he got slowly to his feet.

"You come in here to try and hurt me some more? Where nobody can see?"

Ben was totally bewildered by this reaction. "Why do you think I'm gonna hurt you?"

"Because that's how bastards like you work!" The kid's eyes narrowed. "Do you remember me?"

Ben shook his head. "Should I?"

Now it was the kid's turn to look bemused and every nerve in Ben's body was jangling. He'd been the subject of this boy's interest out in the bar, and he needed to know why. The kid seemed angry, jumpy as hell, and he kept his voice low and calm, trying to keep the situation under control.

"How do you know me?"

The kid just glared. Ben took a step closer but he wasn't intimidated and he didn't budge; he spoke up eventually though.

"You came by my brother's house one Thanksgiving. I was visiting him and you sure spoiled a nice party!"

Ben's stomach twisted. He'd spoiled a lot of nice parties during his time as a collector. Holidays were always a good time to catch victims off guard and Henry Usher pushed that advantage wherever possible. But he had absolutely no recollection of the young man before him now, and that bothered him.

"What's your name?"

The kid shook his head. "It don't matter."

"Give me your name, damn it."

The kid looked him right in the eye, stood up straight and squared his shoulders. All the blood drained from his face and his expression turned ugly. Ben suddenly realised they weren't much different in height or build and if his young adversary knew how to use his fists, there might be trouble. He drew his Remington and the kid sneered.

"Big man hiding behind a gun!"

Ben was getting angry. "All I want is your name, and you'd better let me have it before I lose my patience."

The kid spat on the floor and it splashed Ben's boot.

“Tobias Furnell, you son of a bitch. You killed my brother and if you’re brave enough to put that gun away, I’ll make you pay for it!”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cort had stopped listening to the hotel owner, but he was still droning about town affairs and politics. He couldn’t figure out why the man thought they needed to know about the current state of unrest in Bisbee, which sounded ready to blow at any moment, but Jack Bellows was taking an interest and asking questions now and then. This wasn’t their concern though; with luck they’d be gone tomorrow and Cort had more pressing things on his mind.

His attention was focussed on the door through which Ben had disappeared. His deputy had followed the kid and while he wasn’t happy about it, he realised somebody needed to talk to him, find out why he’d been staring all night. Maybe Ben wasn’t the best person to do it though – he had a quick temper and it sometimes made him rash. Cort had a bad feeling and was listening for a certain set of sounds, hoping to God a gunshot wouldn’t be among them.

Suddenly he heard what he’d been dreading; banging and shouting from inside the room, followed by an almighty crash. He leapt to his feet, raced across the bar and cannoned through the door, momentarily disoriented by the dimness of the room he’d entered. He tried to pull up but the floor was slippery and he kept on going, colliding solidly with a barrel. The room reeked of beer and he could hear grunting, cursing and thudding nearby. He saw Jack Bellows and the hotel owner entering cautiously as he moved towards the noise and discovered the combatants.

They were on the floor, wrestling in a frothing puddle of beer beside a ruptured and overturned barrel. Ben’s Remington was lying on another barrel and Cort tossed it to the hotel owner before turning his attention to the fight. Ben and the kid were both bleeding, soaked in booze, covered in sawdust and under different circumstances it would have been damned funny. The kid threw himself on top of Ben, who jacked up his knee and slammed him in the kidney. The kid yelled and raised his fist, ready to lay a punch in Ben’s face and Cort saw an opportunity. He hooked his forearm around the kid’s neck and dragged him backwards, getting an elbow in his injured ribs for his trouble. He doubled up, cursing as pain incapacitated him and watched helplessly as the kid strode back towards Ben, who was back on his feet and beckoning him forward.

Just as they were about to re-engage, Jack Bellows got between them. He was a few inches taller than both and although a lean, stringy build, he demonstrated formidable strength. He caught the kid in a wrestler’s hold and hauled him clear of Ben, throwing him to the floor and placing a boot on his neck to keep him there. Ben made to follow but the hotel owner stepped up, the Remington in his hand. Ben froze, breathing hard, his eyes blazing and he looked about to do something foolish. Cort struggled upright and stood right in front of him, trying to keep calm though every nerve in his body was jangling.

“If you want to keep fighting you’ll have to get past me.”

He wasn’t much of a match for his enraged deputy right now, but that wasn’t the point. Ben stared at him for long moments, considering, and suddenly he backed off.

“I got no fight with you.”

Cort turned to look at the kid. He was struggling like hell but Bellows’ boot was firm across his windpipe and his face was turning purple.

“Let him breathe, Bellows!”

Bellows grudgingly removed his foot and the kid sat up, scowling and rubbing his throat. The hotel owner glared at him.

“You’d better have a damned good reason for this. Fighting with guests ain’t what you’re paid for!”

The kid, in turn, glared at Ben. “I got business with him on account of my brother!”

Bellows laughed. “He shouldn’t have sent a boy to do man’s work.”

The kid’s head whipped round. “I’ll kill you for that!”

“I’d like to see you try!”

Cort could see the situation getting out of hand again and he approached the owner.

“You should take him outside.”

The man nodded and looked severely at the kid. “If you’re gonna stand any chance of keeping this job, get out of here now!”

The kid thought about it for a moment then got to his feet. He marched out of the room, shooting an evil look at them all as he departed. The owner followed him out and the door closed softly. Cort turned to face Ben, who suddenly seemed unwilling to look at him. He was peering intently at something on the floor and the silence stretched out. It was broken by Bellows’ sardonic drawl.

“Come now ladies, kiss and make up before we die of old age?”

Cort near enough snarled at him. “Stow it Bellows!”

Ben finally looked up. “I’m sorry... I guess I didn’t behave much like a lawman but he challenged me and...”

He didn’t sound sorry at all and Cort cut him short. “And you felt like you had to accept? You’ve been looking for a fight all night but I hoped you were big enough to handle it without using your fists!”

Ben stared at him incredulously. “Like you handled that fat bastard in the bar? Inviting him to a gunfight tomorrow was real big of you, real mature!”

This was going nowhere and Cort was getting annoyed. “I think you should clean up and cool off.”

He made for the door and motioned for Bellows to get out too. They were almost there when Ben called after them.

“Before you get on your high horse you should know something. That kid is Tobias Furnell, and he thinks I killed his brother.

Cort turned and shot him a hard stare. “Well Ben, maybe you did!”

Ben recoiled like he’d been stung and Cort immediately regretted his words. It was a low blow, brought on my irritation and impatience and he opened his mouth to apologise. But Ben was stalking towards him, glowering, and he braced himself for another fight. Ben simply walked past him though, shouldering him hard as he did so.

“Damn you!” His voice was low and quiet. He sounded totally defeated. “Why’d you have to say that?”

He slammed the door as he left and Cort cursed.

Bellows was watching him, smiling. “That told him!”

Cort scowled. “Ben didn’t kill Gregory Furnell. We all know who the real killer is.”

Bellows shrugged. “Your boy there don’t seem entirely sure.”

Cort grabbed his arm and pushed him towards the door. “He’s got a conscience, Bellows; something you’d know jack shit about!”

Bellows snorted disdainfully and went directly to his chair by the fire; Cort stayed by the bar to get another beer. The hotel owner served him after a long wait; Ben’s Remington was stuck in his belt and Cort figured it was safest to leave it right there. He learned Ben was currently sitting in the laundry room, waiting for a bath and drinking whiskey. Cort sincerely hoped that didn’t spell more trouble later on, but at least he hadn’t done anything stupid like try to leave. The storm outside was still raging and if it continued, the whole town would be buried under snow come morning.

He rejoined Bellows and they sat in silence. The bar-room was quiet, mostly empty now and Cort listened to the howling wind, the cracking of the fire and tried to relax. Bellows seemed to have no problem in that department – he hitched another chair over, put his feet up and closed his eyes. Cort sipped at his beer and rubbed his aching ribs, pondering tonight’s turn of events. So much for keeping a low profile! The only redeeming factor was the weather, which would slow the spread of gossip, but they needed to move fast tomorrow and get out of town as early as possible. He and Ben also needed to patch things up if they were to stand any hope of pulling off the robbery while keeping Bellows on a leash. Cort didn’t feel he should be the one to apologise, though. If he’d spoken out of turn then Ben deserved it. After all, he’d been the one brawling on the floor like a bar-room drunk, all because some kid had called him chicken!

He heard boots on the wooden floor and looked up to see the kid in question trudging across the bar with a mop and bucket. His face was swollen and bruised but he’d cleaned up and changed his clothes. He saw Cort watching and nodded as he passed, throwing him a crooked smile. He disappeared into the store-room and Cort glanced at Bellows, who appeared to be asleep. He grabbed his beer, went to the bar and beckoned the hotel owner across.

“If that man by the fire moves to get up you bang on the store-room door, you hear? And keep that pistol close!”

The owner’s eyes narrowed. “Are you gonna give my boy a hard time?”

Cort shook his head. “I’m going to talk, that’s all.”

The kid was busy with the mop as he stepped back into the dimness of the store-room and closed the door gently. Cleaning up all the spilled beer was one hell of a job and he was cursing steadily and creatively as he worked. Cort moved closer and the kid tensed then spun round, gripping the mop like a broadsword. Cort held up his hands in submission.

“I haven’t come to fight.”

The kid looked a little rueful and lowered the mop. “I thought it was your buddy coming back for some more.”

He stepped forward, holding out his hand. “Tobias Furnell, you can call me Toby...”

Cort took it and shook. “I’m Cort.”

The kid nodded. “You’re a decent feller, Cort. You stopped Tyrone Williams beating on me and I owe you for that, but I can’t figure why you’re riding with that other asshole!”

Cort took a gulp of beer. “He might have acted like an asshole tonight but he’s a good man, and I owe him my life.”

Toby scowled. "He killed my brother and he's gonna die." He shrugged. "Sorry, but that's the way it is."

Cort couldn't help smiling at his arrogance, but the overpowering smell of beer mixed with sawdust was making him feel queasy. He crossed to the opposite side of the room and hauled his arse up onto a beer barrel, wincing as his ribs took the strain.

"Before you do that, there's some things you should know."

Toby approached, watching him suspiciously. "Ain't nothing you can say to change my mind. I saw him at my brother's house one Thanksgiving. Afterwards Greg put me in the picture as to how he was getting blackmailed by a gang and your buddy was the leader. He made me promise not to tell anyone, Vivienne most of all, but when he died I swore I'd get even..."

Cort interrupted, not quite following. "Who's Vivienne?"

"Greg's wife..." Toby paused, frowning. "His widow now. I been working this shit hole for three months, keeping my mouth shut and ears open for something that might lead me to that fucker and then he just walks on in tonight. I reckon it's a gift from God!"

"God doesn't help killers and you'd know that if you went to church!" Cort was irritated. "How old are you anyway, eighteen?"

"Twenty two. How old are you, forty?" Toby scowled and he sounded affronted. "I go to church regular, if it's any of your business, but I got no time for Henry Usher and he's the only religion in Bisbee now."

Cort's heart started hammering in his chest. "Henry Usher?"

Toby nodded. "He runs the church and I seen that preacher of his talking with some of the dirt bags who use this hotel. I'd be a damned fool to confess anything to him."

He was close to figuring it out, but Cort wasn't about to hand over the final piece of the puzzle. He didn't wasn't this kid involved in the fight with Usher. Nonetheless, he was curious.

"What were you doing before you decided to become a killer, Toby?"

Toby glared. "I ain't killed nobody... yet!"

Cort smiled, sensing the bravado. "Ben's one of the fastest draws I've seen, you reckon you can take him?"

Toby's eyes widened. "Faster than you? I never seen anyone pull a gun that quick!"

Cort took a gulp of beer. "Why are you working here? You seem smart and I reckon you could do a lot better for yourself."

"I already told you why." Toby hauled himself onto the barrel adjacent to Cort. "Six months ago I was at college, studying medicine. I was in my final year, always reckoned one day I'd be a doctor until Greg died..." He shrugged. "Maybe I'll go back someday, once things are settled."

Cort was intrigued. "How did a college kid learn to fight like a ranch hand?"

Toby grinned. "Boxing club. There was a shooting club too. The tutors were always down on me for spending more time with a handgun than studying, but I figure frontier medicine needs some backup, right?" He laughed then paused, eyeing Cort. "How'd you learn to draw like that?"

"It sure wasn't in college."

The kid gazed at him quizzically “You ask a lot of questions, mister, but you don’t answer none. What are you doing in Bisbee?”

Cort shook his head. “That’s not your concern.”

Toby’s voice sounded deliberately nonchalant. “Must be important business... Urgent enough to risk freezing to death in a snowstorm and all...?”

The conversation was sliding into dangerous territory and Cort struggled to get it back on track.

“Where’s your brother’s wife?”

Toby was briefly thrown by the sudden shift of topic, but he recovered quickly and smiled insolently. “That’s not your concern.”

Cort continued, keeping his voice casual. “It must have been real hard on her, losing her husband with three kids to look out for?”

Toby scowled. “What do you reckon, genius?”

Cort looked him right in the eye. “I reckon twenty five thousand dollars helped ease their suffering!”

Toby leapt down from the barrel, his face burning and his fists clenched. “Who the fuck are you? How do you know about that? Only family knows that!”

Cort jumped off his own barrel and took a step away, ready to pull his gun should the kid decide to attack.

“You ever wonder where that money came from? Which good Samaritan decided to help your family out of a hole?”

He spoke quickly, hoping his words were getting through.

“Ben Carter gave her the money. That’s the same Ben you’ve been threatening to kill all night, by the way. He was part of the blackmail gang, and he’ll always regret it, but he made amends as best he could. He was hunted for six months because of it; by the man who really killed your brother.”

Toby moved closer, looking mutinous. “Who is he?”

Cort gazed at him steadily. “He’s dangerous. Last week he came by my town with a posse. They beat me, drugged me and tried to bury me alive. You figure you can handle a man like that?”

“I reckon so.” Toby stuck out his chin defiantly but he seemed a little calmer now. “Why’d he do that to you? What did you do to him?”

“I learned the truth.”

Toby grinned. “And now you’ve come to Bisbee to settle the score?” His intuition was spot on but his emotions shifted and spun on the edge of a coin. It was making Cort nervous.

“It’s that fat fucker Tyrone Williams, right?” He seemed to be thinking aloud. “Or maybe his boss? Mayor Anderson’s a corrupt piece of shit and how about that preacher? He’s a shifty son of a bitch...”

Cort had a sudden, unpleasant vision of Tobias Furnell stalking the streets of Bisbee and gunning down any man who looked at him funny.

“It’s nobody in Bisbee, so don’t be getting any dumb ideas.”

Toby's eyes narrowed. "If you know who killed my brother then I got a right to know too. I reckon you came to Bisbee with some plan to hurt him, and I want in on it."

Cort shook his head. "You're just a kid. I won't put you in that kind of danger."

"I'm not a kid, goddammit!" Toby was near enough yelling. "My brother was twenty eight years old when he died, by your reckoning that makes him a kid too, but he was the best fucking mayor Bisbee ever had!"

He was glaring, breathing hard. "I reckon you've killed some people, mister. A man don't get that fast with a gun by accident. How old were you when you took your first?"

Cort didn't want to dwell on the memory of that first murder, but the kid deserved an answer.

"I was twenty years old."

Toby nodded. He didn't seem surprised. "Why did you kill him?"

"I don't remember."

He laughed incredulously. "So you shot a man over something so important you forgot, but I'm too young to hunt down the bastard who killed my own flesh and blood?"

Cort found himself in something of a predicament. The kid had a valid point but if he knew about Usher then Cort would need to keep him close, if only to keep him from doing something stupid. If he didn't tell, left Toby to his own speculation and suspicion, the consequences could be far worse...

The kid had some useful attributes: he was smart, knew about medicine and could use his fists and a gun. On the downside he had a big mouth, a quick temper and a major chip on his shoulder. Cort couldn't risk letting him in on the bank robbery, or talking about Henry Usher while they were still in Bisbee. That might well be signing his own death warrant and he searched for another solution.

"You got a horse, kid... um... Toby? You got guns?"

Toby grinned. "Sure I do. I got a bay mare in the stable and a pair of Army Colts in my room. Can't wear 'em while I'm working but they're oiled and loaded."

Cort finally reached a decision, and hoped to God he was doing the right thing. "Get out of town at dawn, if the snow's let up. Ride for Redemption and I'll meet you there. "

The kid's eyes were gleaming. "Redemption? John Herod's old town? Did you know him?"

"I knew him." He gazed at Toby. "But John Herod's dead and Redemption's a different town now. When you get there, wait in the jailhouse and keep you mouth shut. I'll only be a few hours behind."

"Jailhouse?" Cort could almost see the cogs ticking over in Toby's mind. "Does that make you some kind of lawman?"

Cort finished his beer and felt like he needed a couple more.

"I've got business in Bisbee and the less people who know it the better. When we get back to Redemption I'll tell you who killed your brother and what I plan to do with him. I'll even let you be a part of it so long as you keep your mouth shut and do as you're told. Reckon you can do that?"

Toby gazed at him for a long time, turning it over. Finally he nodded.



“I reckon, but you’d better not cross me!”

He thrust out his hand. Cort gripped it and they shook in the same moment the door to the store-room burst open. Ben Carter was standing there, wearing clean clothes and an enormous scowl. He had a bottle of whisky in one hand, his Remington in the other.

“What the fuck’s going on here?”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cort squinted through the hotel window and into the street. The storm had blown itself out just after dawn and the sun had risen in a clear sky, turning the streets of Bisbee into a glittering white spectacle. The snow had drifted in the gale and was piled high against buildings, almost up to the eaves in some cases and the hotel owner had struggled to get his front door open earlier. Now he was outside with a shovel, bundled against the cold, clearing a proper path towards the road so paying customers might enter conveniently.

The main thoroughfare was passable; there had been enough traffic over the past couple of hours to pack down the snow in a narrow central tract, and he watched Ben and Jack Bellows follow it up to the bank and disappear inside. Bellows was holding an official looking satchel and Ben was carrying a Winchester rifle in addition to his Remington, masquerading as a guard. Cort checked his pocket watch; it was a little after eleven.

They’d decided against arriving at the bank just as it opened, figuring it might seem a little eager given the prevailing conditions. While no robbery was happening in the accepted sense of the word, old instincts died hard and their horses were loaded up and saddled in the stable, ready for a quick getaway should one be necessary. Cort didn’t much fancy the idea of plunging down Bisbee’s steep, narrow streets in the snow, but there was no real reason it should be necessary. They weren’t technically doing anything wrong, not so far as the bank was concerned anyway. Bellows was a legitimate account holder in their eyes, and it was his prerogative to remove all his money if he pleased. He was planning to spin the manager a yarn about moving his business to another state and needing all that cash as start up collateral, and Ben was there to make sure he played fair, as well as providing backup should anything go wrong. They were likely to be in there a while so Cort refilled his mug with coffee. He was alone in the bar room and he sat in a chair which afforded him the best view up the street towards the bank.

Last night had not gone smoothly in any sense and when Ben Carter had burst through the store-room door, looking drunk and murderous, it seemed things were about to get a whole lot worse. Cort had reached for his gun, ready to draw if Ben decided to take proper aim with his Remington, and he knew Ben had noticed. To his surprise, though, Tobias Furnell had taken control of the situation, diffusing it before any further damage could be done. He’d marched right up to Ben, stuck out his hand and apologised for acting like a jackass. When Ben hesitated, looking suspicious, Toby explained how Cort put him in the picture regarding his brother, and how he owed him an apology. Ben had been forced to holster the gun in order to shake and he’d paused, considering, then thrust his bottle of whisky at Toby, who accepted it. Ben’s gaze travelled towards Cort and he seemed embarrassed.

“Reckon you should get an apology too. There’s more than one jackass in this room tonight.”

He stumped over, offering his hand and Cort shook it without hesitation, though suddenly doubted the wisdom of letting Ben and Toby ride together. They were a pair of hotheads, as likely to fight each other as anybody who posed a genuine threat, but he’d made a promise and Toby wouldn’t take kindly to a change of heart. He searched for a way to give Ben the news diplomatically but eventually just spat it right out.

“Toby’s riding with us. He’s coming back to Redemption.”

He’d expected resistance or argument, but Ben had simply grinned and turned to face the new recruit.

“You as good with a gun as you are with your fists, kid?”

Toby jerked his chin up defiantly but his eyes were mischievous. "First chance I get I'll show you, old man!"

Ben laughed. "Can't have no cub wearing a badge, but we need somebody to pick up round the office, wouldn't you say, Cort?"

Toby's eyes started gleaming and were suddenly focussed right on Cort. His heart sank. Why couldn't Ben keep his big mouth shut!

"I knew you were a lawman!" Toby took a swig from the bottle. "Sheriff of John Herod's old town, huh?"

"Marshal."

Toby grinned. "If I'm riding with you then I figure it makes me some kind of deputy."

Cort shook his head. "Ben's my deputy, I don't need any more."

Toby took a step closer. "Keeping law in a town like that must be tough as hell. I reckon the marshal of Redemption needs as much help as he can get!"

Cort swore under his breath. Why did the kid have to be so damned smart? He saw Ben open his mouth to say something and cut in before he could dig them deeper into the hole.

"There's some things he doesn't know yet, Ben, so keep quiet until we're home, okay?"

Fortunately Ben caught his drift and shut up and the three of them returned to the bar and shot the breeze for an hour or so, until Jack Bellows woke up and announced he wanted to go to bed. Cort chained him to the Davenport but didn't have the heart to carry out his threat of leaving him with no bedding. The living room was chilly and he'd thrown several logs on the fire and tossed Bellows some blankets. He'd nodded his gratitude and listened as Cort gave him a sketchy account of their dealings with Toby. Bellows didn't seem surprised when he learned of the latest addition to their party and just shrugged.

"He's looking for payback, just like all of us. Another gun can't hurt."

Cort had been awoken just before dawn by a persistent knocking on the door to their suite. He'd opened it to Toby who'd pointed out of the window. It was still snowing and he'd enquired what he should do. Groggy, cold and disoriented, Cort had told him to go back to bed and meet them downstairs at nine with his stuff. He was waiting when they trooped down a few hours later, wearing his guns and an eager grin. He'd joined them for breakfast, after tendering resignation to his boss, and then they'd all gone to the stable to ready their horses. Right now Cort hoped to God that Toby was obeying the single instruction he'd been given, which was to stay with the animals and keep watch. The kid had looked like he wanted to ask about a hundred questions, but he'd simply nodded and gone to stand by the stable door, his thumbs hooked into his gun belt.

Cort drained his coffee and considered another refill, or maybe a beer, then decided against either. Too much coffee made him jumpy and alcohol would dull his wits. He needed to stay alert and he scanned the street again, though there was nothing much happening out there. He pulled out his pocket watch to check the time but barely five minutes had passed since he'd last looked and he sighed, slightly bored now.

Voices outside drew his attention back to the street and he cursed as he recognised the red-faced, portly form of Tyrone Williams. The hotel owner had stopped shovelling snow and was blocking his path. He seemed to be issuing some kind of warning but Williams was smiling, shaking his head and holding his hands out in submission. The owner eventually stepped aside and the fat man hauled his bulk up the steps and through the door. Cort shifted in his chair so he had clear access to his gun, but refrained from drawing just yet. He couldn't see if Williams was armed, since he was wearing a heavy fur coat, and it was just conceivable he'd come to talk rather than fight. Cort decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, for now, but every muscle in his body was rigid.

He heard boots in the hallway and Williams marched through the door. He scowled when he saw Cort and moved closer, rubbing at the bruise on his jaw. He looked and smelled like he was still drunk, and that made him doubly dangerous. Cort kicked his chair back a couple of feet so his gun was clearly visible.

“You come to talk or fight, Williams?”

The scowl deepened. “You got my name so how about I get yours? Or do I just call you asshole?”

Cort gave him a dismissive glance. “State your business or get out. I got better things to do than trade insults with a drunk buffoon.”

Williams’ red face got even redder. “I’m an important man in this town and...”

Cort laughed. “You’re lapdog to the most unpopular mayor in Bisbee’s history. That makes you real special!”

The fat man looked as though he was about to have a fit and he lurched closer.

“You’ll pay for that!”

Cort stood up and let his hand hover near his Colt. “So we’re fighting then?”

“Not with bullets.” Williams struggled out of his coat and tossed it to the ground. He was wearing a fancy looking gun beneath it but he unbuckled his belt and threw that down too. He raised his fists. “Man to man!”

Cort considered for a moment. Williams wasn’t going to let the matter rest until he’d got some kind of satisfaction and it was better to knock him out here, in the privacy of an empty room, than shoot him publicly in the street. Williams was almost twice his size but it was all fat; so long as it didn’t come to wrestling on the floor, Cort was confident he could take him. He took off his gun belt slowly, laid it on the table and Williams smiled, backing towards the centre of the big room and motioning him forward. He raised his fists again, like a boxer and Cort followed, watching him carefully, planning his moves in advance, hoping to duck in under his guard and hit him hard in the face. Williams was still backing up, towards the double doors which separated the bar from the dining room, and Cort wondered if he’d changed his mind and wanted a food fight instead. He soon got an answer.

Williams suddenly shouted at the top of his lungs. “Now, boys!”

The doors burst open to reveal two men. It took Cort a moment to recognise them as poker players from last night, because all his attention was focussed on the shotguns aimed at him. He glanced over his shoulder to where his own gun was laying, yards away. He’d never get to it in time and he cursed his own foolishness. Williams had not only lured him into a trap, but disarmed him in the process.

“Hands behind your head, boy”. Williams sounded ecstatic. “Don’t be getting any smart ideas.”

Cort obliged; he didn’t have much choice in the matter. The fat man approached, flanked by his companions whose aim never wavered, whose fingers never left their triggers. Cort’s stomach twisted. This was going to be ugly.

“What’s your plan, Williams? Gun me down in cold blood? I reckon your buddy the mayor’ll have something to say about that.”

Williams lashed out and his fist collided solidly with Cort’s mouth. The impact split his lip and knocked him backwards, fetching up hard against a corner of the fireplace. He could taste blood in his mouth, feel it trickling down his chin and the three men kept advancing. Williams was smirking now.

“I won’t kill you, asshole, but I’m gonna make you hurt!”

A shotgun butt hammered into his stomach and the pain forced him to his knees, gagging and winded, fighting the urge to throw up while trying to brace himself against the next blow, which was surely coming. He squinted up. Williams was still grinning but his friends had lowered their guns to the floor and were leaning on them, taking in the sport and clearly enjoying it.

“Get up, asshole, if you think you can!”

Cort saw a flash of movement by the dining room doors as Williams’ boot slammed into his shoulder, sending him sprawling. A second later the room exploded into chaos. There were two gunshots, a lot of shouting and finally a single voice, calling his name. The voice was familiar, it sounded urgent and he pushed himself to his knees to see what was happening. The scene confronting him was hardly what he expected.

The shotguns were strewn about the floor, their owners were also on the ground, bleeding, and Tobias Furnell was standing by the bar with both his guns trained on the fat man. Williams was glowering and Toby glanced over at Cort, a wild look in his eye.

“You want me to shoot this fat bastard?”

Cort struggled to his feet. “Just keep your guns on him.”

His left shoulder was throbbing, his stomach was churning and he wiped blood from his mouth as he limped over to his gun belt and strapped it on. He drew his Colt and held it on Williams, nodding at Toby.

“I got him covered. Gather up those shotguns, will you?”

Toby obliged, keeping one of his guns trained on the fallen men, and Cort saw the hotel owner enter the room cautiously, holding a rifle. The last thing they needed right now was more gunfire but the man was looking at him, concerned.

“I knew that fat fucker was lying to me. Guess I should have listened to my instincts.”

Williams scowled at him. “You gotta live in this town, boy, so watch your mouth.”

The hotel owner eyed him calmly. “Don’t try and make life hard for me, Williams. Your friend the mayor has made enemies of near enough everyone in Bisbee. Don’t count on him being around too much longer.”

Williams snorted but he looked shifty and some of the bluster seemed to leave him. The hotel owner looked at Cort again.

“You want something for your mouth?”

Cort wiped more blood off his chin. “Some ice should do it.”

The man nodded. “We got that in abundance right now!”

He left the room as Toby approached with the shotguns. He dumped them on the bar then glanced over questioningly. Cort nodded towards the men on the floor.

“Search them and take any weapons you find. How bad are they hurt?”

Toby shrugged. “They’ll survive.”

He began searching them roughly and Cort watched. The kid was calm in a crisis, which was an asset, but he wondered how long it might last. The hotel owner came back and handed him a bag of ice, then stood behind

the bar, still gripping his rifle. Cort pressed the ice to his mouth, willing the bleeding to stop but his most immediate concern was getting rid of Tyrone Williams. He looked directly at the fat man.

“Are we even now?”

“Like hell we are!” Williams spat on the floor then jerked a thumb towards the snowy street. “We’re gonna settle things properly now. Outside!”

Cort’s heart began pounding. This was exactly what he didn’t want to hear.

“I’ll beat you in a gunfight, Williams, I promise you that.”

Williams snorted. “I heard it all before, son and it don’t impress me.”

Something occurred to him and his red face split into a cunning smile.

“Don’t I deserve to know the name of the man who thinks he’s gonna kill me?”

Cort considered it. Tyrone Williams was undoubtedly an asshole, but he didn’t want another death on his conscience. If the right name might help cool him off then it was worth a shot. He stepped up close and kept his voice low.

“Does Cortez Thompson ring any bells?”

Williams looked blank but it certainly rang a bell with Toby, who’d chosen that exact moment to come over, two additional handguns stuck into his belt. Cort saw his jaw drop open and he eyed him sternly and shook his head slightly, urging him to keep his mouth shut. Williams didn’t seem to notice the exchange though, just pushed past them, picked up his gun belt and glared.

“I don’t care what your name is, asshole. You won’t need it much longer!”

He stomped out of the room and Cort cursed softly. He glanced at the hotel owner.

“Lock these shotguns away. I don’t need his buddies deciding to join in.”

The man gathered them up, headed into the store room and Cort turned towards Toby, a little disturbed by the expression on his face. It seemed to be a mixture of excitement and wide-eyed hero worship. He’d have something to say about that presently, but right now Toby was the only backup he had.

“I need you to forget who you think I am and cover me out there, you understand? Are you calm enough to do that?”

Toby nodded emphatically. “You bet I am. I won’t let you down.”

Cort motioned towards his belt. “Give me one of those guns. I might need it.”

Toby obliged and Cort checked the pistol was loaded before sticking it into his own belt. He levelled a final, cautionary gaze at the kid and then headed out of the room.

It was bitterly cold in the street, a chill wind gusting from the north, and he knew he’d have to do this quickly before his hands froze up. As he walked out into the middle of the road he caught sight of the bank and remembered, with a jolt, what he was really supposed to be doing here. He hoped Ben and Bellows were still in there, but had no way of knowing or finding out right now.

The impending prospect of a gunfight had worked its usual magic. People always knew when something ugly was about to go down, like some kind of invisible telegraph was blowing through town. Although the

challenge had been issued only a few minutes ago, there was a fair sized crowd gathering, hunched up in bulky coats, their breath steaming in the icy air. Cort glanced at the bank again and watched a few customers spilling down its steps, not wanting to miss the action.

Williams' voice jerked his attention back to the street. He was speaking in a loud, pompous tone.

"Last night this asshole insulted me and now he's gonna pay for it."

Cort heard a lot of sniggering from the crowd, and some outright laughter. From the look on his face Williams heard too, and wisely elected to say no more. He backed up until he was five yards away, then took his position.

Cort had no intention of shooting to kill, no matter how much Williams might deserve it. Every moral he tried to uphold told him it was wrong and the part of him that used to be a priest was screaming in horror at what he was about to do. But the grinding pain in his stomach and shoulder, the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, reminded him that Tyrone Williams was not a man he could simply walk away from.

Williams' hand was poised over his pistol, but he didn't move. Cort watched him carefully, looking for the signals that indicated a man was about to draw. Usually it was some kind of twitch: of the eye, mouth or hand and Cort had always used it as his queue. That way he didn't betray himself to his opponent by doing the self same thing. Williams didn't play to form though, he just lunged for his weapon with no warning.

Like every gunfight he'd ever experienced, Cort felt like the world suddenly slowed down and he had way more time than he needed to act. The Colt was clear of its holster before Williams got anywhere near his own gun and he fired, hitting the fat man in the right leg. The impact of the bullet bowled him over and he hit the deck hard, sliding along a few feet in the ice.

Cort's heart was banging, adrenalin was pulsing through his veins and his head was pounding with the heady, well-remembered elation of a win. He could hear the crowd cheering and clapping as he holstered his gun, approached Williams and stood over him.

"I don't believe in killing a man just because he's stupid and you might take something from that. Are we even now?"

Williams was hunched on his side, swearing, grasping his leg and didn't seem to hear. Cort nudged him with his boot and he grunted with pain then looked up, scowling.

"We're even, asshole. Why don't you fuck off now!"

"My pleasure." Cort looked over at the bank and tensed as he saw Ben and Bellows coming down the steps. They both noticed him and there was a brief verbal exchange between them but they kept walking, turning down an alley that led in the direction of the stable. Cort knew he should join them right away and he turned away from Williams, heading towards the hotel. He'd only taken a couple of steps when Toby's voice rang out.

"He's going for his..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Cort spun round, reaching for his Colt as a bullet whistled past his left ear. Williams was still on the ground but now he was clutching his gun and it was pointed at Cort's heart. He reacted instinctively, his body over-riding his brain and he'd fired before Williams could get off a second shot. The bullet pierced the fat man's forehead and splattered blood and brains across the snow as it exited.

Cort felt numb as he watched the twitching body like it was part of a nightmare. He'd tried everything possible to avoid it but once again he'd taken life. He'd forsaken all his principles, broken all his holy vows and he could almost feel the devil's laughter rumbling below his boots. He was only dimly aware of renewed

applause from the people in the street and while he'd clearly done something to please them, he'd betrayed himself and his God in the process.

Maybe there was something he could do about that, though. Right now nothing else was important. He turned around and headed down the street, walking as fast as he dared, praying he might find some kind of salvation. Praying he could remember the way.

## CHAPTER 18

Tobias Furnell watched, bewildered, as Cort marched off down the road, moving fast in the wrong direction. The killing had caused quite a stir amongst the gathered spectators, many of whom were now clustered around the body of Tyrone Williams, their cacophony of excited conversation testimony to his unpopularity. Toby couldn't figure out where Cort found it necessary to be right now, other than the stable where they'd all agreed to meet, but he clearly had other plans. Toby had seen Ben and Jack Bellows come out of the bank and duck down an alley right before Williams decided to try and shoot Cort in the back of the head. He had a pretty good idea what was in the bag clutched in Bellows' hand, but the bank was peaceful enough and soon after the manager himself had strolled onto the porch to take a look at the action in the street.

Toby had never seen anybody use a gun with such speed and accuracy before but, having learned Cort's full name a few minutes earlier, he wasn't totally surprised. Cortez Thompson had been a regular visitor to the chapbooks he'd read, or rather devoured, in his youth. John Herod's most ruthless deputy; tall, dark and ugly, smart but cruel, dangerous as a rattler and wily as a fox, the fastest gun in the entire territory and a sadistic killer to boot... Toby was bright enough to realise the publishers of those pamphlets were all about cheap titillation and a quick buck, with no interest in accuracy, but nonetheless he'd grown up admiring men like Cort, fancying he could be just like them, though his personal circumstances tended to rule it out. As the youngest son in a wealthy, influential family he was expected to make something of himself, go to college and forge a worthwhile career. He'd chosen medicine since it would eventually afford him the chance to work in frontier towns, encounter the kind of people he'd read about and experience it all first hand. Right now he felt like he was living inside one of those chapbook stories and his heart was banging with excitement. He couldn't imagine ever going back to college now.

Cort was a long way down the steeply-inclined street and Toby decided to follow before he lost sight of him completely. After all, hadn't Cort's last instruction been to cover him? He set off in pursuit, adopting a fast, lop-sided shuffle which was quite effective in the snow and he reflected on the differences between fact and fiction as he walked. Cort was a lot younger than he'd expected and didn't look anything like the pictures or descriptions in the chapbooks. He was tall for sure, but fair and not at all ugly. Toby reckoned most women would probably find him quite handsome, though he could definitely use a haircut sometime soon. He was certainly smart, lethal with a handgun and dangerous when provoked, the writers had got those parts right. But the man he'd met was also kind and considerate; calm, quietly-spoken but tough as hell when it came down to it. There was a lot more to him than that too; things Toby hadn't figured out yet. Like how an infamous outlaw had become a lawman in his boss's old town, why he and his friends were really in Bisbee, and why the look on his face after he shot Williams dead was something close to despair...

Cort turned a corner and Toby quickened his pace. He pushed too hard and immediately slipped over, riding down the rest of the hill on his backside. His rudderless passage was finally broken by a huge snowdrift and his momentum sent him right into the middle of it. He floundered out, cursing and spluttering, slapping snow from his coat and pants and praying to God nobody had witnessed the embarrassing spectacle. The street was deserted though, except for Cort who clearly hadn't noticed. He was standing outside the church and gazing up at the cross on its roof.

Toby wondered if he was planning on going in. It belonged to Henry Usher and wasn't the best place to find salvation in his opinion. Nonetheless, it was the only church in town and now he found himself wondering why a gunslinger, or lawman, would have any use for it. Intrigued, he moved closer. Cort was still staring at the cross, his expression was blank and he seemed oblivious to the blood running down his chin and dripping onto his coat. He seemed to be talking to himself, his lips moving rapidly, but it was only when Toby got right

up close that he heard the murmured words of a prayer. That surprised him more than anything he'd experienced in the past few hours. He'd figured Cort for a lot of things, but never religion.

"You thinking about going in?"

He spoke quietly but Cort reacted like somebody had let off a gun beside his ear. He spun around, staring wildly and Toby knew he didn't recognise him.

"It's me, Toby!"

Cort's eyes suddenly focussed and he relaxed a little and wiped blood from his mouth.

"What are you doing here?"

"You asked me to cover you, remember? Why are *you* here, Cort? This is Henry Usher's church and I told you about that fucker last night!"

"I know." Cort looked at him directly and his eyes seemed a little red. "But it's the only church in town, right?"

His voice was shaky and Toby nodded mutely.

"Then I've got business here. You reckon you can keep watch?"

Toby nodded again, utterly baffled by this latest turn of events. Cort started up the stairs to the chapel and he called after him.

"Never figured you for the religious type."

Cort turned and offered a weak smile.

"I was a priest for more than three years, Toby, and taking life doesn't come easy now. I've got to try and make amends."

Toby's jaw dropped open. Of all the things he might have suspected, or thought he'd fathomed about Cort, a preacher didn't come anywhere close. Cort's smile disappeared.

"Shocking, isn't it?"

He disappeared inside the church and Toby considered going after him, then thought better of it. Confession, or whatever Cort was intent on doing in there, was none of his business. There was a small saloon opposite and he took advantage of its proximity, went inside and ordered a beer. Business was slow, in fact he was the only one in there, but a few more customers came in right behind him and two more arrived just after he'd taken a seat by the window. They looked like travellers with long, heavy coats, wide-brimmed hats and fancy guns. They bought drinks, sat down nearby and dealt a hand of cards. He eyed them briefly but they had their heads down, intent on their game, and he turned back to the street, reeling from Cort's most recent revelation.

Some of it made sense, he supposed. Cort's composure, his gentle and accommodating manner, his thoughtfulness and kindness were much more in line with a preacher than a ruthless outlaw. Toby could only imagine what he was feeling right now; a man of God killing somebody in the street would be hard to reconcile and Cort seemed devastated by it. Toby hoped a spell in the church would help; he'd only known Cort a short while but he respected and admired him. If he'd been anything like the character in the chapbooks Toby doubted he'd have gone anywhere near him, let alone be sitting here now and posting guard.

The street outside was quiet, the chapel peaceful, and he wondered where Ben and Bellows were right now. They wouldn't sit around in the stable for long, not with a big bag of money between them, but would they



know where to come looking? He got the feeling Ben and Cort knew each other pretty well but Bellows was an enigma. He looked like hell, with two black eyes and a busted up nose, and they both kept him at arm's length. He, in turn, took a sneering, condescending attitude towards them. It was an odd situation, an odd dynamic, but he'd figure it out eventually. He considered going back to the hotel to let them know where Cort was, but decided against it. He'd been asked to keep watch and that's what he was going to do.

That's what he'd been doing in the stable when he'd noticed three men skulking around the back of the hotel and peering furtively through windows. They'd all been bundled up against the cold and he had trouble identifying them. Only the extreme bulk of one had given him away, and it was that man who'd gone round to the front of the hotel while the others pushed their way through the back door. Toby had given them a couple of minutes then followed, through the kitchen and into the dining room, its far doors thrown open to a scene of violence. Tyrone Williams and his buddies looked to be kicking the shit out of Cort and Toby had reacted instinctively, drawing his guns and shooting the cowardly fuckers. He figured Cort must be hurting from the beating, though right now he was surely hurting from something worse than fists and boots...

Movement in the street caught Toby's eye and he sat up straight, suddenly attentive to the job in hand, but it was only the local preacher, hunched up against the cold and scuttling towards his church like a rat. Toby scowled at the sight of him; a balding, middle aged fellow with a nervous, harassed air about him. Toby had never spoken to him, never been anywhere near the church, but everything about the man needled him. He was of no immediate threat though, might even be of some help to Cort, so he settled back into his chair and kept watching. Ten minutes later not a thing had changed, though the men playing cards finished their hand and their drinks and departed quietly. He watched them cross the street and frowned as they started up the steps to the chapel. Men like that didn't belong in there!

Toby left the saloon in a rush, dashed across the road and cautiously pushed open the big door to the church. Everything seemed calm inside, though. It was a big place, the regular cruciform layout but light and airy with bright winter sunlight flooding through the windows and throwing shadows off the pews. It smelled of wood and candles, was dominated by a huge cross hung on the wall behind the Alter and it seemed totally empty; Toby looked around for the men but they were gone, and Cort was nowhere in sight either. He made his way cautiously down one side of the nave, staying in the shadows and finally he found him in the darkness of an alcove near the north transept, on his knees with his head bowed low. A small candle was burning on a little ledge in front of him and its flame guttered as he approached. Cort didn't move, he appeared deep in contemplation and Toby decided to leave him like that for as long as it took. He backed off slowly and took cover behind a wooden pillar, keeping a sharp eye out for the men he knew were in here somewhere.

It was warm and quiet, peaceful even, and Toby figured he should be using this time to renew his acquaintance with God. He'd not set foot inside a church for over six months and a part of him felt guilty for that, though he reckoned God would understand why. A sound from the other side of the church distracted him from his thoughts and he peered around the pillar. There was nothing to see but the sound came again, and again. It was familiar but he couldn't quite identify it, not until he heard a man cry out in pain, then it dropped into place. There was a beating taking place, somewhere close by and he looked over at Cort, who's head was raised now and turned in the same direction. He got slowly to his feet and Toby called out softly.

"There's two men in here, Cort, and the priest. Something bad's going down."

Cort frowned and beckoned him closer. "Stay with me and keep quiet."

Together they approached the Alter and the sounds grew louder as they neared the Sacristy. They listened for a while but the wood of the door was thick and Toby could get no sense of what was happening inside. He could hear voices, the sound of blows and somebody moaning, but there was no audible dialogue to identify who was getting beaten by whom. He glanced at Cort, who seemed none the wiser, and then a voice rang out, loud and clear.

"For the love of God, stop! I'll tell you if you stop hitting me!"

Then it was obvious: somebody inside the room was beating on the priest. Toby was of the opinion he probably deserved it but Cort felt differently. He drew his gun, kicked the door open and stormed into the room. The priest was on the ground, his face covered in blood, and the two men from the saloon were standing over him with their backs to the door. They had no time to turn before Cort cannoned into them, shoving one of them into a pillar and slamming the butt of his pistol into the other's skull. The man hit the ground unconscious as his buddy whirled around, going for his gun, and Cort's fist sent him reeling back against the wooden post. His head cracked hard against it and he slid slowly to the floor, out cold.

Cort darted over to the priest and knelt beside him. He glanced up as Toby approached.

"Find something to bind them and get them out of here."

Toby nodded curtly and hurried out of the room, casting about for something that might serve as rope. His eye was caught by some embroidered hangings on the Alter and he went over to investigate. They were held on there by sewn-in twining, which seemed stout enough, so he set to work cutting it away from the fabric with his pocket knife. It took a while and by the time he got back the priest was sitting on a stool with a cloth pressed to his face. Cort was squatting beside him, talking quietly. The two thugs were showing no signs of coming round but Toby moved quickly, dragging them from the room by their ankles, binding their hands behind their backs and securing the loose ends to a nearby pillar. He removed their weapons for good measure and went back into the Sacristy, closing the door softly behind him.

Cort and the priest were still talking but he wasn't really interested in what they were saying, figured it was just two preachers discussing God, or suffering, or whatever preachers discussed, and now he felt a little awkward. He set about inspecting the guns he'd taken, hoping they'd be done soon, and then the priest said something that got his attention. The man mentioned a name and Cort repeated it back, sounding surprised as hell. The name was Henry Usher and Toby moved closer, listening intently. Cort saw him coming but didn't say anything, and it wouldn't have made any difference if he had. The priest was talking fast, and he sounded out of breath.

"... You've got to understand that I never wanted a part of his ministry. I'm just a small town preacher trying to tend my flock but he arrived one day and announced he was taking over. He said he had the money and power to do it, if I wanted to continue my work then I had to do things his way. I'd spent over two years building my congregation and this church, giving the good people of Bisbee someplace decent to worship, and I wasn't about to leave that behind on his account, so I stayed."

He paused and mopped at his face again, breathing harder. Cort eyed him with concern. "You got any communion wine around here?"

The priest pointed to a cabinet in the corner of the room and Toby went to fetch it before being asked. He found a decanter and some glasses inside, filled one to the brim and took a couple of large gulps for himself before carrying it over, grimacing at the sickly sweetness of the wine. The priest had no such problem though, finishing half the glass in one long draught. He coughed and then looked at Cort.

"I thank God for bringing you here today, but this won't be the end of it. Usher will send more of them. Every time he thinks I'm holding out on him, this is what happens."

Cort frowned. "It's happened before?"

The priest shrugged. "One day I figure he'll quit the beatings and have me killed. That'd be easier for him; then he can send somebody who doesn't have a problem breaking the sanctity of confession; who doesn't care if decent people die because of it..."

Every nerve in Toby's body started jangling and in his mind that could be only one person. A familiar red mist began to fill his head, pushing out rhyme or reason and he stepped up close to the priest, fists clenched, almost spitting out the words. "You mean people like my brother, Gregory Furnell?"

The priest stared up at him and seemed lost for words. The mist got redder. "Say something, dammit!"

He seemed resigned but not intimidated. "I'm sorry for your loss my son, truly, but that business with Greg opened my eyes. Until then I'd been doing as Usher asked and passing along the failings of my flock. I was naïve enough, or stupid enough to think he was just curious, wanted to know the kind of town he was dealing with. Then Greg confided in me, told me he was being blackmailed by a gang for something he'd confessed months before. He never made the connection between my confessional, those blackmailers and Henry Usher, but I did. Then Greg died... On that day I swore Usher would hear nothing more from my lips."

Cort interrupted. "Even when they beat you?"

The priest smiled, then grimaced. "I'm economic with the truth, son, and I don't give him anything worthy of blackmail. I tell him God is strong in Bisbee and my congregation abide by the Bible and lead virtuous lives. I don't think it'll wash for much longer, but it's good for now..."

His words only made Toby madder. "You never told anyone? That bastard as good as murdered my brother and you never figured to help your congregation by blowing the whistle on him?!"

The man shook his head strenuously. "I've got no proof and who'd take my word over that of Henry Usher? The only man who could have backed me up is dead and I'll join him in heaven if I say anything. The best I can do is protect the rest of my flock and pray God takes care of Usher in his own way."

He carried on talking but Toby stopped listening. His mind was whirling, his heart pumping fit to bust. This priest certainly had played an unwitting part in his brother's death, but he wasn't the reason for it. Now he knew for sure who was responsible and Henry Usher was the one who'd die. He was going to ride to Tucson right now and put a bullet between his eyes! A hand on his shoulder brought him out of the violent reverie. Cort was standing beside him.

"Usher's well protected, kid. All you'll do is get yourself killed."

He shook Cort's hand off and glared at him. "I'll do as I please and I don't need a damned keeper! You ain't got a dead brother to reckon with."

"I've got memories of being buried alive, and they're not exactly pleasant." Cort sounded weary. "You go if you need to, but alone you'll wind up nothing but dead."

Toby scowled, Cort's quiet words were penetrating the comforting familiarity of self-righteous rage and he didn't like it.

"And if I stick around with you? What you gonna do about Usher?"

"We've got plans for him, and today's just the start of it."

Toby thought about the money in the bag and a flicker of understanding shot into his brain and straight out again before he could grasp it.

"Ben and myself, even Jack, we've all got reason to bring Usher down. Maybe not as good as yours, but we're looking at the same thing and together we might even stand a chance. "

Toby was beginning to calm down. Temper was his biggest fault, his mother always told him that. He reacted first and thought about it after, but he could hear the reason in Cort's words. After all, if a man like that had wound up nearly dead by Usher's hand, what chance did some college kid have? Suddenly he felt a little embarrassed.

"Reckon you're right, Cort. Reckon it's smartest to stay with you."

Cort was about to say something else but the priest got up from his stool.

“I don’t know who you are, son, but I feel God sent you to get Bisbee out of the hole Henry Usher dug for us.”

Cort frowned. “I’m no saviour. I only came here to ask God’s forgiveness for taking a life, not even an hour since.”

The priest’s face went white. “That killing in the street? Tyrone Williams... that was you?”

When Cort nodded he stumbled back towards the stool, sitting down hard and staring up with an expression of abject disappointment mixed with outright fear. Cort seemed mortified by the reaction and Toby bristled.

“You should get all the facts before you pass judgement, preacher, and this man ain’t no cold-blooded killer. Last night he stopped that fat bastard beating on me so Williams got a grudge. Today he came back with his buddies and beat on Cort, then challenged him to a gunfight. It wasn’t no fair fight either. Cort only shot him in the leg, as a warning, but when he turned his back Williams tried to put a bullet in his head. Cort did everything he could to keep from killing him, except getting killed himself...”

Cort looked astonished by the outburst but Toby carried on talking to the priest, a little more gently now.

“Cort was a preacher once and he’s feeling like hell right now. He don’t need you making it worse!”

The priest seemed stunned by the revelation and the look he gave Cort was uncertain.

“Is that true?”

Cort shrugged. “Decide for yourself, padre. Listen to the Lord.”

The priest thought about it for a long time then stood up and slowly approached. He put his hand on Cort’s shoulder. “I fear I misjudged you, my son, and I ask God’s mercy for that. I’ll gladly hear your confession and help in anyway I can. Tell me what I can do.”

Cort seemed bemused by the sudden change of heart and it took him a while to answer. When he finally did his voice was hesitant. “Pretty soon Usher will come to Bisbee in a fighting rage and he’ll be asking questions. All I ask is that he somehow learns that the answers are in Redemption.”

“That’s all? There’s nothing else?” The priest seemed aggrieved but Cort carried on talking, more urgently now.

“One day you might need to stand up and tell folks about Usher. You can’t do that if he finds reason to kill you, padre, so be discreet and don’t put yourself in danger.”

The priest indicated the door. “What about those men outside? They work for him.”

Cort considered for a moment. “What’s the law like around here? Are they in Usher’s pocket?”

“Billy Reynolds is marshal.” The priest’s brow furrowed. “He comes to church regular enough but he hates Mayor Anderson something chronic. In fact he’s the loudest voice calling for Anderson to quit, and everyone knows Anderson only got the job on account of being best buddies with Usher, so I reckon that puts Billy in the clear. Those boys he employs as deputies are loyal to him, and they keep pretty good order.”

Cort nodded. “Then let him deal with it. He won’t take kindly to them beating on his priest.”

Toby wondered where Billy Reynolds and his posse might be right now. It wouldn’t take long for word to reach them about the killing and he moved close to Cort, speaking quietly.

“We should get out of here before they come looking for you.”

Cort held his hand out to the priest. “We have to leave now, padre, and you didn’t hear my name, right?”

The priest smiled and shook it warmly.

“I’ll pray for you every day, my son. Whoever you are.”

They left the priest sipping at his wine and stepped over the bodies of the two thugs, who were showing signs of coming round. Cort strode down the aisle and Toby hurried along next to him, suddenly nervous. They’d been here too long and anything could have happened outside in that time. His worst fears were confirmed as the big street door suddenly banged open when they were barely halfway down the church. The bright light streaming in made it difficult to see anything except a man’s silhouette and Toby instantly went for his guns. He glanced across at Cort. Sure enough the Colt was in his hand but then the figure in the doorway spoke up, sounding annoyed as hell.

“It’s me, it’s Ben, dammit!”

He stalked towards them and as his face came into focus, it was clear he was furious. He was glaring at Cort.

“While you’ve been shooting the breeze with God, the town marshal’s been asking questions and now he’s started a search. If he finds you he’s gonna arrest you, so we’d better get out damned quick. I got the horses outside.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ben Carter picked his way across the frozen terrain. The full moon on the white snow made it easy enough to find his way, but there were drifts everywhere, he’d already fallen headlong into one, and he was wary of doing it again. He could see the cave in the distance, flickering yellow firelight spilling out of its mouth, and almost unconsciously he slowed his pace. He had no desire to go back in there anytime soon, even though it was bitterly cold. He’d come out for a piss and stayed out as long as possible, but now his fingers were turning numb and his lungs were aching with the effort of drawing in the icy air.

It was the same cave they’d used on the way to Bisbee, and there was enough dry wood in there from their previous visit to keep a good fire going. They had plenty of whisky and enough food to keep everybody satisfied, but while their last spell here had been amiable and relaxed, now the atmosphere was tense and edgy. It had eventually become so claustrophobic he’d had to get out for a while. It shouldn’t be like this: they had the money, the robbery had gone like a dream and they’d be back in Redemption by this time tomorrow. Hell, they should be celebrating!

But the trip to Bisbee had so nearly ended in disaster, and that sucked all the enjoyment from the occasion. Cort had come damned close to ruining everything; first killing a man in the street, in front of an audience, and then ignoring their carefully prepared plan and disappearing; spending so long in church that the marshal had nearly caught up with him. They’d got out of town by the skin of their teeth, only the treacherous conditions saving them. If it weren’t for the snow they’d have a posse on their trail right now and Ben was angry as hell with Cort for putting them all at risk. He’d made some harsh comments as they’d ridden and he didn’t regret any of them. Cort hadn’t responded or reacted to his words and that just made him madder. He was itching for a fight and Cort refused to give him one, but it wasn’t just the simmering tension which was causing problems right now.

Ben approached the cave and took a deep breath, figuring he’d drink enough whisky to fall asleep and hope things improved in the morning. The scene he found was pretty much the one he’d left: Jack Bellows was pretending to doze by the fire, chained to a convenient rock and Cort was sitting in the shadows, quiet and morose, a half-empty bottle of whisky on the ground next to him. Only the firelight glinting in his eyes as he glanced up told Ben he was still awake. His split, swollen lip wasn’t out of place in current company – all four

of them looked like hell with bruised and cut faces – and he was hunched in the posture he'd been adopting all day, whenever he thought nobody was looking. His left arm was tucked inside his coat, keeping weight off the shoulder which Toby said had been injured by Tyrone Williams. Cort insisted it was nothing serious and right now Ben didn't much care if it was.

Toby was still sat beside him, sharing the whisky and murmuring quietly. Cort nodded occasionally, said something back from time to time and it annoyed the hell out of Ben. He hadn't reckoned on any problems with Toby - the kid had seemed smart and tough enough to ride with them - but today he'd started acting strange. He'd barely left Cort's side since they came out of the church and the way he stared at him made Ben want to laugh. He couldn't figure out when or why he'd changed from righteous brother seeking revenge to hero-worshipping school kid, but he could practically see the stars in Toby's eyes. In a girl it would be nothing short of a full-blown crush but if Cort had noticed he wasn't saying.

Bellows had noticed though, and Ben could see his hooded eyes gleaming with mirth as he looked over. He hadn't said anything yet, but it was only a matter of time. Ben hunkered down by the fire opposite him, his back to Cort, and scowled.

"You got something to say?"

Bellows grinned. "Seems your buddy's got a new dog in his life..."

"Shut up, Bellows!" Ben grabbed for his own whisky bottle and took a slug, annoyed at the man's perception. That was pretty much it, wasn't it? He resented how Cort wasn't talking to him, not even to fight, but seemed able to confide in a kid he'd only known a day. He resented how Cort was hurting but wouldn't admit it and, most of all, he was missing his company. He knew Cort was in a bad place right now, knew that's why he'd spent so long in that damned church, but he couldn't forgive him for it just yet. Ben knew something more than prayer had gone down inside, but every time he asked Cort just shrugged; whenever he asked Toby, he said Cort should be the one to explain.

Ben felt caught in a stalemate and the frustration was driving him insane. He took a few more gulps of whisky, welcoming the first warm tendrils of drunkenness, and tried not to let the simmering anger get a hold of him. The situation wasn't helped by the bag of money on the floor next to him. He knew Cort wouldn't ride off with it in the night, and he had no interest in stealing it himself, but Toby and Bellows were another story. Toby had seemed sincere enough about his motives last night, and said he came from a wealthy family, but four hundred thousand dollars was more money than most people saw in a lifetime and could do all sorts of things to a man's mind. Bellows claimed to have no interest in it either, apparently still wanting only to wreak vengeance on Henry Usher. He'd been seriously aggrieved at being chained up again, arguing that he'd kept his part of the deal inside the bank, that they still needed him and should therefore start trusting him. He'd calmed down when Cort gave him half a bottle of whisky, but he had a point.

Ben didn't know what to do about Bellows. Was he still their prisoner or a new found ally? He'd behaved like a true professional inside the bank – charming the manager with small talk and banter, joking about the injuries to his face and he was so utterly convincing about his business plans that the man had barely raised an eyebrow when he announced he was withdrawing all his money. It was kept in its own private safe and he'd opened it and left the room to get them coffee while they packed the bag full of cash. Afterwards, while Ben had been pacing the stable furiously, cursing Cort and wondering where the hell he'd gone, Bellows had made a quiet tour of the hotel, taking in the aftermath of the shooting and returning with disturbing news about the town Marshal's intentions. It had been Bellows, too, who'd suggested looking for Cort in the church. Ben should have known to find him there, but he hadn't been thinking straight. Bellows was clearly a cool, dependable fellow in a crisis, somebody useful for sure, but he was yet to do anything that would earn Ben's trust. He didn't know how Cort felt, since Cort wasn't talking, but they couldn't keep him chained up forever.

Ben didn't know what to do about the money either. They couldn't keep it in Redemption, that was for sure, and they hadn't even figured out how to get it back to its proper owners. Writing letters was well and good, but those letters would take time to reach their recipients and it wouldn't take long for Henry Usher to work out who'd stolen his money. Redemption was ready for a battle, but was it ready for full-blown warfare?

Behind him he could hear Toby talking, his words inaudible, and then he heard Cort snicker with amusement. He bristled and took another slug of whisky, about to hurl the bottle at Cort's head. Bellows caught his eye.

"Whatever you're about to do, sonny, don't!" His voice was low but he sat up, smooth and fast, and moved as close as his chains would allow. "You'll only make things worse!"

"Back off Bellows, this isn't your business."

"The hell it's not. Cort's injured but that kid isn't, and you know he's gonna back him up if you decide to pick a fight. I don't know what's happened, but if the two of you can't be buddies then our plan's shot to hell and we may as well take the money back to Bisbee."

The wave of anger passed and Ben loosened his grip on the bottle slightly. "He's barely said three words to me all day, what am I supposed to do?"

Bellows shrugged. "You could try talking to him. Cort's the kind of man people want to follow, like that kid there, so you may as well get used to it. The only way you'll ever have him to yourself is to marry him!"

Something about the ludicrous remark struck Ben as hilarious and he burst out laughing, sneezing whisky all over the fire which flared and crackled as it hit. Bellows was grinning and that made him laugh harder, relishing the way it released so much pent-up tension. When he finally recovered, wiping tears from his eyes, he found Toby by the fire, scowling at him.

"What's so funny?"

Ben shook his head. "Not you. You're not that important."

The scowl deepened. "I said what's so damned funny."

Ben was about to stand, ready to give this insolent pup a punch in the mouth, but Bellows' sardonic drawl stopped him in his tracks.

"Butt out, kid. You and Cort been gossiping like schoolgirls all night and Ben didn't figure it was his business to interfere, so what makes this your business?"

"I dunno, the atmosphere's a little..." Toby seemed embarrassed. "Just wanted to share the joke, I guess."

Bellows gazed at him for a moment then motioned him to sit. Toby hunkered down without hesitation and Bellows' eyes flickered towards the rock where Cort was sitting.

"You feel like joining us, Marshal? You're a regular rain cloud on our little parade."

There was no response and Ben resisted the urge to turn his head and look. Bellows continued.

"If you fall apart whenever things don't go right, these boys ain't gonna keep following."

Now there was a rustle of movement, a sharp intake of breath, a curse and Cort stepped into the firelight. He was clutching his whisky bottle and glaring at Bellows.

"I never asked anyone to follow me, Bellows. You're all here of your own free will."

Bellows rattled his chains. "You reckon?"

Cort dug a key out of his pants pocket. "You can leave right now if you want."

Bellows immediately held out his wrists. Cort unlocked the manacles but instead of bolting from the cave, Bellows spread out and made himself comfortable. He glanced at Cort, who was frowning.

“I ain’t going nowhere. You got to start trusting me and I figure this is the only way to prove I’m not gonna shoot you, or steal that money.”

“What happens when we’re asleep?” Cort sat down by the fire, wincing and rubbing his shoulder. Bellows was still watching him, smiling.

“Have a little faith, Reverend.”

Cort took a gulp of whisky and stared into the flames, clearly prepared to say no more. Ben started getting twitchy again and he stole a few glances, trying to find a way to break the awkward silence, but the appropriate words wouldn’t come. Finally Bellows stood up with an exaggerated sigh and beckoned to Toby.

“Let’s you and me take a walk, kid. These ladies got some things to discuss.”

Toby glanced over at Cort for approval but he didn’t look up. He got to his feet cautiously and slapped his guns.

“Remember I got these, old man. Don’t be getting ideas!”

Bellows just laughed and strode out of the cave, Toby on his heels. Cort didn’t move and Ben gazed at him as the silence lengthened again.

“You’re one stubborn son of a bitch, you know that?”

No response. He tried again.

“I ain’t sorry for what I said before, so don’t be expecting apologies.”

The corner of Cort’s mouth twitched but he just kept staring at the fire.

“Damn it, Cort, you killed a man and you said a prayer and asked forgiveness. Can you let it go now?”

“I’m trying.” The words were so quiet that Ben barely caught them.

“Try harder, buddy, ‘cause you’re no use to anyone like this. If you’re gonna be boss you need to stop thinking like a preacher, get tough and make some damned decisions!”

Cort glanced at him quizzically. “Such as?”

“Such as what we do about Bellows, where we hide that bag of cash, what we do when Usher comes calling, how long we got to plan for his visit...”

“Not long.” Cort took a gulp of whisky. “As soon as he reaches Bisbee he’ll know to come looking for that money in Redemption.”

Ben stared, not sure he’d heard right. “How would he know that?”

“I asked the priest in that church to pass it along”. Cort shrugged. “It’ll stop Usher giving folks a hard time for something that’s not their fault.”

All the anger of the past day came rushing back to the surface and Ben was near enough shaking with rage. How could Cort be so damned stupid?



“So getting us nearly arrested wasn’t enough? You figured you’d tell Usher where to find us for good measure? Hell Cort, did you give that preacher our names too?”

Cort was watching him stoically. “He’s a good man...”

“He’s Usher’s priest, dammit!” Ben shot to his feet. “He’s a corrupt piece of shit like everyone else in that organisation and you just signed our fucking death warrants, you jackass!”

He kicked out viciously at a lump of rock. It scudded across the ground and collided solidly with Cort’s knee. He swore softly, put down his whisky bottle and got slowly to his feet. His eyes were burning and it had nothing to do with the fire at his feet.

“You should watch your temper, it makes you erratic.”

Ben clenched his fists. “You don’t think I got cause? I always figured you were smart, but seems to me whenever you get mixed up with the church your brains turn to shit!”

“Is that so?” Cort sounded totally calm. “Seems to me every time you get a feeling you don’t understand, you get angry.”

“Are you saying I’m stupid?” Ben took a step forward, itching to punch him in the face, but Cort didn’t budge.

“I’m not fighting you, and if you hit me there’s no going back. I won’t accept some half-arsed apology when you’ve cooled off, so be sure of yourself.”

He sounded totally sincere and Ben hesitated. This was a clear warning that any attack would end their relationship permanently. Was it worth it? Cort was watching him.

“Why don’t you say what’s really on your mind, Ben? If you’ve got some beef with Toby just spit it out!”

Ben glared at him. “I got no beef with Toby except he looks at you like you’re some kind of hero, and I reckon you like it!”

“It’s pretty much how I looked at John Herod when I was that age, though I hope I make a better example.” Cort looked a little sly now. “Are you jealous ‘cause he don’t look at you that way?”

“Like a schoolgirl with a crush?” Ben laughed and he found the notion genuinely amusing. “No, you conceited son of a bitch, you can have him all to yourself. You might find it gets tiresome after a spell.”

Cort smiled “It’ll be hell with two wives fighting over me!”

The words hit Ben like a bullet and he burst out laughing for the second time in one night. He managed to splutter out a response.

“I really need to get myself a woman!”

“Reckon so.” Cort stepped forward, offering his hand. Ben took it and shook. On impulse he pulled Cort into a rough embrace. There was no resistance or hesitation; Cort gripped him right back.

“Well ain’t this intimate!”

Jack Bellows’ amused drawl cut through the camaraderie like a cheese knife and they sprang apart.

“Shouldn’t leave two girls chattering, I guess!”

Ben whirled around, more than a little embarrassed, but forgot it instantly when he saw what was confronting him. Bellows was alone and holding both of Toby's Army Colts. They were cocked and ready, one aimed at him, the other at Cort.

His hand moved instantly to the Remington on his hip, but Bellows made a clucking noise and shook his head.

"You're not fast enough, son." His eyes flickered across to Cort. "Not even you, Cortez Thompson!"

Cort was glowering from under his fringe.

"Take the money and get out, Bellows. That's what you've been planning all along, isn't it?"

Bellows smirked. "So much for Christian charity"

To Ben's utter astonishment he disarmed the pistols and tossed them to the ground.

"I don't know what I gotta do to make you ladies trust me, but I'm hoping this is a start."

He kicked the weapons towards Cort then flopped down by the fire and spread himself out again. He reached for his whisky and took a long draught. Cort was watching him, eyes narrowed.

"What have you done with Toby, you bastard?"

"We're still not on first name terms?" Bellows grinned. "Relax Marshal, your dog's gonna have a sore head tomorrow but he'll survive."

"Cort scowled. "What did you do to him?"

Bellows shrugged nonchalantly. "Just showed him it's a man's world out there, and he's still a boy. Ben's got no problem with that, do you Ben?"

Ben shook his head in disbelief. Toby could be a pain in the arse for sure, but he'd done nothing to deserve a beating. Bellows was a callous, merciless thug and he didn't care to think what might have happened out in the snow. He turned towards the cave entrance, calling back over his shoulder.

"If you've hurt him you're a dead man!"

"Promises, promises..." Bellows' voice drifted after him as he dashed outside, his heart pounding in his chest, dreading what he might find.

Toby was lying just inside the cave mouth. His nose was bleeding and there was a dark stain on the dirt beside his head. Ben dropped to his knees beside him and shook him urgently.

"Wake up, kid."

It took a bit more shaking before Toby moaned and opened his eyes, blinking a few times to focus.

"What happened?"

Ben grinned with relief. "I reckon you learned a few things about Jack Bellows..."

Toby sat up slowly, grimacing and rubbing the back of his head. "Reckon I did."

Ben cocked an eyebrow. "Did you cheek him?"

Toby scowled. "He ain't my father and I'll cheek whoever I damned please!" He shook his head and winced, suddenly contrite.

"I been reading about outlaws all my life but Cort was the first one I actually met. He's so decent and kind I figured all bad men must be like that deep down..."

Ben laughed out loud. "You got some learning to do, Toby. Cort was never like other outlaws 'cause he's got a heart and a conscience. Sometimes he goes through hell because of it..."

Toby nodded. "I saw that today."

He shot Ben a furtive look. "I know you and him are buddies, and I ain't trying to come between you, but you can't blame me for liking him!"

Ben stood up. "I don't blame you, kid. He's a better man than you know."

He thrust out a hand and helped Toby stand.

"We're in a damned ungodly situation right now, so don't be surprised if he don't work too many miracles."

Toby nodded and shivered. Ben turned on his heel and went back into the cave. He found Cort and Bellows sitting together by the fire, talking quietly. Toby's guns were on top of a nearby stone and Cort's gun belt was lying there too. Clearly the two of them had reached an understanding. On impulse Ben unbuckled his own guns, laid them on the rock and went to join them. A moment later Toby hunkered down beside him, wiping his nose and glaring at Bellows, who picked up a bottle of whisky and offered it to him.

"No hard feelings, kid, huh?"

Toby grabbed the bottle and took a gulp. He squinted at Bellows, his eyes glinting dangerously in the firelight.

"I'll let you know, old man!"

"That's enough!" Cort sounded weary. "This isn't a contest to find out who's toughest, or who can get hurt the worst! We've all got to start working together now and any personal issues get left behind in this cave, right?"

Toby glanced at him and finally nodded. "You gonna put me in the picture now?"

Cort shot him a fleeting smile. "I promised didn't I? After that we're going to make some decisions, make a plan and work this damned thing out."

Jack Bellows smirked. "We already got one thing decided, don't we? You gonna tell them, Marshal?"

Cort sighed and took a deep breath, eyeing Ben directly.

"We got ourselves some help, boys. Jack here's just signed up as a Deputy Marshal of Redemption."