

# **Dead Man's Hand**

## **The Assassin, #1**

**by Tim Lebbon, 1969–**

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DEATH RODE OUT OF THE DESERT on a pale horse. He came on the fifth day of the rains, and although his mount was caked in mud and his clothes were sodden, I could still smell the sweet stench of decay. It takes more than water to wash that away.

“Looking for someone,” he said, pausing at the outskirts of Deadwood as if waiting for permission to enter. He did not look down as he spoke. Rain dripped heavily from his wide hat, making much of his face difficult to see. He stared on into the town, the quagmire streets and timber buildings a uniform shade of grey as if the rains had washed all colour into the ground.

“That someone got a name?” I asked. Still he did not look, but his hand moved up and rested gently on his thigh, a hand’s width nearer to his revolver.

“Looking for Temple.”

I pressed back against the wall of my store, wishing the timber would give way and let me retreat some more. I felt myself at the confluence of all this stranger’s senses. If I breathed the wrong way, twitched at the wrong moment, he would put a bullet through my head.

“Temple,” he said again. His voice was quieter now, barely audible above the downpour.

“I don’t know any Temple,” I said.

The man rose slightly in his saddle and looked up at the sky, sniffing, and that was when I saw his face. The shadows moved away from beneath his hat and rain struck his nose, his cheeks, his forehead, running in rivulets along the deep scars etching his visage with unknown histories. One eye socket filled quickly with water, a liquid memory of its absent occupant. He opened his mouth and flicked out his tongue, catching rain, gulping it down, sighing and slumping in his saddle. Then he turned and looked at me with his one good eye, and his threat faded away into sadness.

“He’s here,” the man said, and suddenly I wanted to leave, flee the town to let the future have its way.

He kicked his heels, and death rode into Deadwood on a pale horse.

I stood for a few minutes watching the horse, the man, and wondering how I knew that a change had come. I was not a man immune to change—in my short life I had already been a farmer, a gravedigger and now a shop owner—but its influence usually cast over my life without me inviting it in. One day I worked the fields and the next I dug graves, and the transition had never been something I dwelled upon. It was unimportant because it was merely a part of existence. But in this disfigured man’s shadow there lingered the promise of chaos. I saw it pecking at his horse’s hooves, heard it in the sound of his coat moving on the horse’s hair, smelled it in his wake. Deadwood would not sleep easy tonight.

I waited outside my shop for a few minutes after the stranger had passed by. There was no one else out in the street. It was almost dusk, and the rains had been keeping people indoors most of the past few days. I felt suddenly alone, abandoned by my friends and neighbours, left in Deadwood to face whatever the next day would bring. But I saw lights on in the barbershop across the street, and vague sounds of drunken revelry came from the saloon a few buildings down from my own. Suddenly feeling the need for company I locked my store and made my way there. I kept to the timber walkways as much as possible, but at one point when I crossed a stretch of waterlogged muck I glanced down and saw strange footprints still filling with water. The rains would eventually wash them away, the light was fading, and perhaps I had only imagined it... but for a second or two I could have sworn that those prints held echoes, like ghost shadows with a life of their own.

“Howdy, Doug!” a voice called as I entered the No. 10 saloon. I waved over to Jack. He had drifted into Deadwood a few weeks earlier, trailing a bad

reputation behind him like a nasty smell. He was a buffalo hunter, so they said, and the skins and leathers he preferred to dress in seemed to testify to the truth in that. He was a couple of years older than me, and he had lived so much more. He'd started talking to me at the bar a couple of weeks before, relaying jumbled accounts of his exploits, the sense of excitement and adventure distracting me from the fact that he was obviously something of a scoundrel, though mostly harmless with it. He had bought me drinks and told me more, and most evenings in the saloon he would gravitate towards me, always ready with another story and another beer. I did not question where his money came from, though he appeared not to work. I tried not to think about it. I was naive and green, I knew that, but Jack's personality had already won me over.

I glanced around as I approached Jack's table, wondering whether the one-eyed man had slipped in without me noticing. The usual suspects were already here, drinking or playing cards, laughing, silently nursing their drinks. I saw no strange faces, but that was little comfort.

"Hi, Jack," I said. "Another shitty day."

"Yep, but it'll end soon," he slurred. "Get a glass and help me finish this damn bottle." The whiskey bottle was already half empty, and Jack's normal squint had turned into a cross-eyed grimace. "Did I ever tell you about the Comanche raid at Red River?"

I shook my head, stood and grabbed a glass from the bar. The barman threw me a cautionary glance, but I shrugged and turned away. Who I mixed with was nobody's business but my own.

When I sat back down Jack had already forgotten about Comanches and was carefully pouring more amber fluid into his glass.

"Saw a stranger ride in just now," I said.

"Another one?" His head swayed as he stared over both of my shoulders. How the hell he could ever shoot straight with eyes like that, I had no clue.

"How do you mean?"

"Another stranger. Old Man Newman's already got one ready to bury."

"How'd you know that?" I asked.

"I was over there yesterday, looking for work. Figure I should settle somewhere, sometime. Newman was out back, doing whatever ghoulish stuff he does to those bodies. This dead guy looked like a real hard case, covered in scars, all bloodied up. Face like leather."

"And who was he?"

Jack suddenly changed. From pleasantly drunk and loose-tongued, he flipped quickly to aggressive. He stood, sending his chair tumbling, and the atmosphere in the saloon thickened. Hands dropped beneath tables. I heard more than one metallic *snick* as guns were drawn and cocked.

"Mind your own!" Jack shouted, pointing at me with his forefinger, thumb raised like a pistol's hammer. "Just leave Temple to me, and mind your own!" He turned, staggered into a table, and two men pushed him away so that he stumbled out of the bar. The doors swung shut behind him and the silence went on for a few long seconds. Heads turned to look at me. I kept my eyes on the saloon doors, reached out slowly and poured more whiskey into my glass.

Slowly the atmosphere settled, but the place held an undertone of trouble now, and an hour later I tried to ignore the smirks as I stood and left.

A one-eyed man riding into town looking for an already-dead stranger. I wondered how this Temple had died, how the disfigured man had lost his eye, and just what the hell had driven Jack to rage like that.

It was dark outside, still raining. The street was empty again. And although lights shone behind a few curtained windows, as I walked away from the saloon it felt as though I were leaving civilisation behind.

I had no idea why he chose me. Perhaps it was because I was the first Deadwood citizen he saw. Maybe he thought I looked like someone who would help. Or perhaps that madness, that desperation in his one good eye, was genuine. With what came later I can truly believe that . . . but who am I to judge?

It was warm and humid the next morning. The rains had stopped and the heat was already baking the waterlogged ground. As I made my way to the store I saw a dead horse lying in the street, still fixed up with saddle and gear, half sunk into the mud. It was a pale horse, and I knew who had ridden it in. I paused, not wanting to approach any closer, standing there on the boarded sidewalk as if waiting for the corpse to float across to me. Anyone watching must have been suspicious as to why I did not check out the dead animal. It wasn't something we saw every day in Deadwood, yet it was not a complete surprise either.

My decision was made for me when I saw the blinds moving inside my store window.

I moved quickly across the street, hand stealing inside my coat to wrap around the handle of the pistol I kept in there. It was a one-shot powder and cap gun, but I had always figured that if I ever got into any of that sort of trouble, one shot was all I would be allowed. On the opposite sidewalk I edged past the deserted building next to my store, standing by the window and breathing deeply as I prepared to go inside. The dead horse had attracted some attention. A well-dressed man, who Jack had told me was a riverboat captain on the Mississippi, had paused nearby and was glancing from the horse to his feet and back again, obviously not keen to muddy up his grand footwear. As he looked across and saw me pressed to the wall I turned to the store door.

The keys made a hell of a noise, but I unlocked the door as quickly as I could and threw it open. I think even then I knew who I would find inside. He was propped against the counter, head slumped to his chest, gun in one hand, another in its holster on his left hip. Blood leaked from his hollowed eye socket like fresh tears, and his breathing came in rasping sucks. I did not know whether he was asleep or dying.

Stepping inside the store, I nudged the door shut behind me. I should have gone for help. I should have shouted along the street, run across to the sheriff's office, fled the scene and left that stranger to his own business. But already the situation had grabbed me—this man's mysterious appearance yesterday, and Jack's strange reaction to the other stranger lying dead in Newman's mortuary. I was only a shopkeeper, but it was in my nature to want to know more.

I approached the man, hand still on the butt of my pistol. I kept my eyes on his own drawn weapon, one of two beautiful Colt Peacemakers that was already

catching the sun's first rays through the front window. He would be able to lift it and shoot me before I saw it move, I knew that, it was obvious from everything I had imagined him to be. The stranger was a gunfighter, and he sought Temple to kill him. Whether I should be the one to inform him that his quarry was already dead...

He stirred. Snorting, shivering, he lifted his head and fixed me with his eye. I could only stare at the wound where his other eye had been. My hand tightened around the stock of my pistol, so hard that my fingers ached.

"I could get you before you even know you've decided to draw," he rasped.

"I know," I said. "I'm not here for that." Carefully, slowly, I let go of my pistol and withdrew my hand. His shooting hand did not move at all, but he kept his gaze firmly on my face.

"I need food," he said, "and a drink."

"This is my store," I said. "I want you out."

He laughed. The sound surprised me so much that I laughed along with him, and when he stopped suddenly I found myself chuckling into silence. "You're brave and a fool," he said. "But don't worry, I'll leave you alone soon enough. I needed a place to stay without being seen or known. I'll pay you for the broken window out back."

I glanced through the door into the back room. The glass was intact. "There is no broken window."

"Well," he said, "whatever damage I did getting in, I'll pay you." He looked away from me, down at the Colt in his hand. In a flash he shifted the gun and holstered it, flexing his fingers as if they had been moulded around the handle for a long time. "You'd have run screaming if you had a mind to," he said. "You'll not give me up. I'm grateful for that, but that decision is in your best interests too."

"I'm intrigued, is all."

"Then intrigue me with some food. And water. I'm starving, and I'll need strength for what's to come."

I thought of Jack raging the previous evening, warning me to stay away from the dead man Temple, mind my own. I went to speak but thought better of it. I felt that if I had to bargain for anything—my money, my store, my life—then that information could be very valuable.

"There's some stew left over from yesterday," I said. "I can warm it for you. And bread. You've holstered your gun, so I assume you don't mean to shoot me."

The man's bloodied, scarred face turned my way, but he did not speak.

"Come through to the back," I said.

He moved slowly and painfully. I wondered who had dealt him such a beating.

"Nobody beat me," he said.

"What?"

"You're wondering how I got like this. Nobody beat me. I'm a wounded man, and I carry these wounds forever. Some days they're worse than others, usually when I'm near him. It's a useful gauge of how close I am, I guess, but it's a hindrance too. I'm bleeding a lot. My scars are on fire. I'm close."

"How did you know what I—?"

"That stew sounds good."

I lit and stoked the burner, stirred the stew and put it on to heat. The bread was stale by now but the man seemed not to mind. He bit in while the meal was still cooking, eating with an appetite I had hardly ever seen before. He did not look my way, did not keep a hand close to either gun. Either he perceived no threat in me whatsoever, or he had never intended me harm in the first place.

"Those wounds," I said.

He nodded and muttered, "Temple," showering me with crumbs of bread.

"So you want revenge? That's the main reason guys like you come to Deadwood, I guess. Revenge."

"Guys like me?" He had raised the eyebrow above his missing eye, and the look was almost comical.

"Well..."

"Killers, you mean? Hired gunfighters? Murderers? Kid, just because I look like a corpse that's been ridden by a buffalo, doesn't mean my heart's the same way."

"I'm sorry." I scooped out more stew and handed him a plate, and he tucked in with gusto.

As he ate I went about my usual morning routine before opening the store. He helped himself to seconds and thirds from the pot, and after a few minutes I saw him sit and relax a little, head back, staring at the ceiling. I closed my left eye for a while to see what it would be like, and a second later I bumped into a cabinet and bruised my thigh.

"It's not easy having one eye," he said. "Hurt like hell when he cut it out. Still smarts now. He wears it on a string around his neck, and when I'm close he makes it bleed. I was offered a false eye in Kansas, but I turned it down. It was black as coal. Maybe I should have taken it?"

"I don't know," I said, still disturbed at how he seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. Temple, then? Did he know I knew something about the man he sought?

"Temple is no man," the stranger said suddenly, standing from his chair and tipping it to the floor. "I need to tell you some of what this is, I guess, so you can decide whether or not to help me. What are you, just a storekeeper?"

"Yeah, just a storekeeper. That's all. I've dug graves and farmed, but this seems to suit me well."

"So then, you know this town. Know the people that live here. That's a good place to start." He strode to the window and parted the blinds slightly to look out. The sun was climbing and driving shadows down between buildings. "He's a monster," the man said. "He's killed so often before, but now he's changed his approach. Now he does it for pay. Death on commission."

"A hired killer?"

"Much more than that. That's his excuse, but he'd do it even if he wasn't paid. It's not the money, it's the enjoyment. He needs to kill. That's his twisted reason for being here." The man turned back to face me and his eye was bleeding again. "He's no man, lad. I don't use the word 'monster' lightly. He's a devil. A demon."

"Where does he come from?"

"I've never known. I only know that for all the time I can remember, it's been down to me to kill him." His voice lowered then, almost as if he was talking to himself. "Nearly had him in Scotland. Bastard cheated me at Waterloo."

I had no idea what he was talking about. “Who are you?” I asked. Temple must have damaged this man so much to have driven him onto such a quest for vengeance.

“I was damaged long before Temple ever caught me,” the man said, “and my name is Gabriel.” He came up close, smelling of filth, decay and something else I could not place. Perhaps it was the smell of madness. “Now, lad, tell me what you know.”

“I don’t—”

“His name’s in your thoughts like a sickness. I can almost smell it! Every way you turn you think of Temple, and I need you to tell me why. Has he got to you? Are you in his sway now?” Gabriel looked over my shoulder at the door and his eye bled some more. He stepped back, panting in fear, and his hand moved to his gun.

“Temple is dead!” I said. “A friend of mine told me in No. 10’s last night! I mentioned about strangers in town after seeing you and he told me there’s another, a stranger’s body at Newman’s being readied for burial.” *And then Jack went a little bit crazy*, I thought, but I did not elaborate.

Gabriel looked at me and his face seemed to break. The scars flexed and deepened, his good eye wrinkled almost shut and he let out harsh, barking coughs. It was only as he bent over and rested his hands on his knees that I realised he was laughing.

“So I guess you’re pleased.”

Gabriel looked up, crying tears and blood together. “Lad, Temple doesn’t die. There’s just too much of him.” He shook his head and sighed, wiped his face. As he stood I wondered why it had not registered before just what a huge man he was. Well over six feet tall and wide at the shoulders, his head sat like a rugged rock atop a boulder. Wounded and bloody though he was, simply the way he stood exuded strength.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. Demon? Doesn’t die? The guy was talking madness, and yet though I feared for my life he had me entranced. Day after day I did the same thing, served the same stuff to the same people. This was becoming an adventure.

“Most don’t,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s not easy to understand, and it’s even harder to explain. Let’s just say that Temple... isn’t something you want in your town. When he came in Death followed him, and before he goes it’ll have its way with some folks here. So, your friend. What’s his name?”

“Jack. And he’s not really a friend, just—”

“Good. That’s good. Means you won’t mourn him much when he dies.”

“You’re going to kill him?”

Gabriel rearranged his coat, made sure his revolvers were safe in their holsters and fixed me with his one good eye. “He’s already dead. Now show me where your undertaker works.”

We left my store and emerged onto a street less busy than normal for the time of day. The rains had stopped, and though the sun was out the street was still a quagmire of mud and horse shit. Those who did manage to cross were muddied up to their knees, and it had the effect of slowing Deadwood to a crawl.

Gabriel's horse still lay in the muck. There was a pack of dogs worrying at the carcass, and before I could blink Gabriel had drawn his gun and shot one of them dead. Heads turned, people hurried into doorways off the street, a waft of gunsmoke drifted up to be caught and dispersed by a gentle breeze. The other dogs scampered off, whining and barking.

"Been a long way on that horse," Gabriel said quietly. "Been through a lot."

"Maybe we should get your saddle."

"Don't need it anymore." He stepped down from the sidewalk and crossed, lifting his feet high so that his boots were not sucked off. I hesitated for only a few seconds, but it was long enough for him to turn and fix me with a bloody stare. "You not coming?" I heard no alternative so I nodded and followed.

By the time I met him on the opposite sidewalk he had frozen and was staring at the sky. "Gabriel," I whispered, but there was no response, no indication that he had heard. The sun struck his face and he seemed to be staring right into it. The scars on his cheeks and chin stood out in stark relief, hiding no shadows in their knotty twists, and the hollowed eye socket caught sunlight and bled it back out. Blood dripped down his face and onto his coat, adding to old stains already there. He bled when he was close to Temple, he said. I wondered how many times that had been.

"Doug!" someone called, and Mrs. Harrison sauntered along the sidewalk in her old finery. She was a big woman and her weight crushed the timber boards down so that muddied water oozed up between them. Even her panting did nothing to stir Gabriel from his trance. "Doug," she said, "isn't the store open today? I was coming to . . ." She looked from me to Gabriel, made the connection between us and paused. "Who in Hell is that?"

"A stranger," I said. "He asked me to show him to the stables." I should have lied better than that, but my head was in a stir.

"Stranger? He's trouble, Doug. I'm talking about you!" She gave Gabriel her harsh look—Mrs. Harrison was pretty fearsome when she wanted to be, which was often—but he did not respond. She looked back at me instead. "Take care, Doug," she said. "You don't need this sort of trouble. None of us do." She obviously then changed her mind about visiting the store, because she turned and waddled back the way she had come.

"Gabriel!" I hissed. "Gabriel!"

Gabriel turned and frowned. "The timing's all wrong," he said. "It's not quite right yet. Later today, that'll be the time to face him."

"I thought you wanted me to show you—"

"I've faced the monster before, lad," he said, his body seeming to relax. "Every time he gives me a new scar. One day, if I'm not careful, he'll scar me right through. So today I am being careful. The time's not yet."

My own curiosity was stirred now, and I looked past Gabriel and along the street to the hotel and stables. Behind them lay Old Man Newman's place, and if what Jack had told me was true, there lay Temple. A dead stranger, that was all, not the weird demon-monster this one-eyed man made him out to be.

"Don't be tempted," Gabriel hissed. The sound was like a rattler kissing my ears and I shrank back, never having heard such threat in three short words. The air paused around us and movement seemed to cease, just for the instant it took for



those words to leave his mouth and reach my ears. My skin went cold in the morning sun, my mouth dried, my balls shrivelled. Gabriel said no more as he turned and walked away. His manner suggested that he did not want me to follow, and I was only too pleased to obey.

With one final glance along to the stables I turned and fled back across the mud to my store. I was not one for drinking during the day, but there was a bottle of whiskey in the back room with my name on it.

After a few stiff whiskeys I opened the store an hour late. I stood behind the counter and stared out through the windows, expecting to see Gabriel at any moment. The man terrified me, with his scars and bleeding eye and those guns, but I was entranced as well. The way he spoke, the lilt of his gruff voice, the knowledge and passion and sadness in his tone could not help but draw me in. I had seen men similar to him before—they often rode into town flashing their guns and looking for trouble—but there was something that set him apart. Not his looks, but his attitude, and the fact that he seemed so driven and sure of his purpose. Vengeance empowered him, I was sure of that, and perhaps it had driven him mad with his talk of demons and monsters.

I wondered how the confirmation of Temple's death would hit him. Perhaps it would set him free. Or maybe it would only make him more mad, but with no certain target for his insanity.

The whiskey had warmed me and gone some way to settling my nerves. Even when I saw Mrs. Harrison approaching I remained calm. She would have questions, no doubt, and she had probably already relayed news of the scarred stranger to all and sundry. Her grilling would be intensive. My head fuzzed by whiskey, I was not entirely sure that I could hold off telling her Gabriel's tale.

She stormed into the store, shaking muck from her feet onto floor and launching straight at me. Thankfully, something else had grabbed her attention.

"Do you know who's in town?"

"Nope." What would she say? Temple, a monster? Temple, a dead man who can't die because there's just too much of him?

"Wild Bill Hickok!" she said. "Someone famous in this place for once, Doug! He's the Prince of Pistoliers. They say he shot his deputy, you know! And he can kill five men with one bullet, he's so quick! Do you think he's here to put on a show, perhaps? Maybe over at No. 10's?"

"Wild Bill Hickok?" I had heard the name and knew of the man, but his presence here disturbed me instantly. Yet another stranger in town, this one a gunslinger of dubious repute that had moved from killing into entertainment. I was young and green, but I still saw the sick irony in that.

"He killed a bear with his bare hands!" Mrs. Harrison said.

I had heard that, too. I imagined Gabriel fighting with Hickok and wondered whether the outcome would be as sure.

"Well, Mrs. Harrison, maybe we'll see more of him over the next few days. You know how it is, people come, people go."

"And sometimes they stay here, except underground."

"Have you heard of any other strangers in town?" I asked.

"Other than that scarred ruffian you were with earlier?"

“He came in and asked me where he could find a place to stay,” I said. “I was only being polite showing him. Didn’t want him to think we’re an unwelcoming town now, did I?”

Mrs. Harrison looked around the store, took in the half-empty whiskey bottle, and her attention seemed drawn to the place where I had found Gabriel leaning against my counter only a couple of hours before, as if he had left a shadow of himself there. “Trouble,” she said, her usually gruff voice gentle and sad. “Men like that always bring trouble.”

*You don’t know the half of it*, I thought, and I was about to ask what I could get for her when she suddenly remembered my question.

“Stranger! Yes, there is another one. Old Man Newman is preparing him for burial even now. A middle-aged man named Temple, he told me, with a face smooth as a baby.”

“Two dead strangers?” I asked, thinking of Jack’s description of the corpse he had seen.

“Only one,” Mrs. Harrison said. “Don’t be greedy, Doug! Now, can you get me some of those eggs, and I’ll look at any plain material you have.”

I spent the next few minutes serving Mrs. Harrison, all the while dwelling on what she had said about the dead man called Temple. *Face like leather*, Jack had said. *Face smooth as a baby*, Mrs. Harrison had claimed. Obviously two dead men. Maybe they’d both ridden in a couple of days before, had an altercation and killed each other without anyone noticing. It happened on occasion, though usually in a town like Deadwood death was everyone’s business.

Later that afternoon Jack came into my store. He ignored me at first, choosing instead to browse my wares, picking items up now and then as if to check them over. He was the only customer. His boots clomped on the floorboards, and occasionally I heard a hint of his fast, shallow breathing.

I remained behind the counter, my hand never too far away from the shotgun I kept on a shelf underneath. Jack’s behaviour the previous day had surprised me, and maybe I could have attributed it to drink if it hadn’t been for events since then. And if I was honest with myself, Jack was a stranger too. We had become tentative friends, but he had only ridden into town six weeks earlier, and I knew so little about his past. I believed him to be harmless, but he had trouble in his eyes.

Right then, as I watched him killing time in the store, he was suddenly more unknown than ever. Seemed there were plenty of strangers in Deadwood lately, and some of them weren’t as dead as they should have been.

My hand stroked the butt of the shotgun. I had never fired it in anger, although I’d had to threaten a couple of guys with it the year before. They’d come into my store and started acting up, knocking over shelves, generally being aggressive for the sake of it. One quick look down the barrels of a shotgun had sent them on their way, even though I was shaking, sweating, aware that I could never pull the trigger.

Since then, I’d kept the shotgun loaded.

“You here to buy something, Jack?” I asked.

He paused, his back turned to me, and I kept my eye on his shooting hand. It was clasping and unclasping, fingers flexing.

“No,” he said. “I dunno...” His voice broke and he turned around to show me his tears. “Doug, I just dunno! He talks to me without moving his lips, and it’s like standing there with my own nightmares going on around me! He opens his hand and I see... I see all my terrors, he gives them to me, and I can’t turn around and run because he’ll send them after me, and I can’t turn my back because then they’ll get me. It’s only looking at them that keeps them away!”

“Who does this, Jack?” I asked, but somehow I already knew.

“Temple.” He whispered the name as if not really wishing to hear.

“The dead guy Temple?”

“The things he says, Doug! The things he asks! He’s stealing all my secrets for himself.”

I emerged from behind the counter, not realising until I was halfway across to Jack that I’d left the shotgun behind. I glanced nervously at his pistol but there was no threat there at all. He was like a terrified kid, afraid to move in case he lost the tenuous contact he and I had already made. I paused a couple of steps from him, held out my hand, dropped it again. I had no idea what to do. “You told me he was dead,” I said.

Jack frowned, shook his head, shrugged. “Maybe he was just sleeping.”

“Old Man Newman know of this?”

“I sneak in when he ain’t looking. He’s drunk half the time, you know?”

“You sneak in? Why? If you’re so afraid of him why go back for more?”

Jack started shaking then, sweat running down his face along with the tears. He looked up with the same wild look in his eyes that had been there when he’d started raging at me in the saloon. I stepped back, glanced down at his gun, but when I looked back up his expression had changed yet again. Now he was the saddest person I had ever seen. “Cos there’s nothing else I can do,” he said. “You ever had a cut, let it scab over, then do nothing but pick and scratch at it until it opens up and bleeds again? Then it goes bad, itches like hell, and you get blood and stuff under your fingernails. It’s like that, Doug. Temple was dead, I thought, but now that he’s alive the only thing I can do is keep going back.”

“You want me to come with you?” I could not believe what I’d suggested. I had no wish to see a sleeping dead man talking without moving his lips, especially if he reduced someone like Jack—no killer, perhaps, but a guy that had seen his fair share of trouble—to this snotty, shaking wreck.

“No!” Jack said, and then that look was back in his eyes to stay. “You just keep the hell away!” he hissed, shouldering past me and barging from the store. He reached over and tumbled a stack of sacking across the floor, just to make a point, and then the door swung shut behind him.

I shut the store early and dropped by the saloon on the way home. I was hoping to see Gabriel there, though I knew his appearance would cause a stir. My heart stuttered as I walked through the doors and caught sight of a man wearing an eyepatch. His one good eye, blue as the sky, bored right through me. I recognised him from a few weeks before, one of the prospectors who had flooded South Dakota looking for gold. He wore two pistols on belts crossing his chest, and both handles were smoothed from use.

I looked away quickly and approached the bar, ordering a whiskey. Only one. I would stay there for a while, I thought, think things through, think about what Jack had said, why he'd turned so strange. He had come to my store for help, that much was obvious, but against what I could not dwell upon. A dead guy talking to him? He was insane. But then all those things Gabriel had said about Temple were insane too, and that wounded stranger had seemed as serious as could be. He had laughed when I said that Temple was dead.

Things were getting pretty weird.

I ordered a refill, leaned on the bar and looked around Nuttall & Mann's No. 10 saloon. It was still quite early so there weren't that many patrons—a card game already in full swing in the corner, a couple of farm guys sitting at a table in the window swapping apparently grand stories, the one-eyed prospector I'd seen and half a dozen more, all of them standing alone—but I knew that come dusk the place would be full. There was often trouble in here, and I rarely remained for long after the serious drinking began, but today I felt that I could face the danger. I was embroiled in something extraordinary, and although I had no understanding of what it was, the sense of mortal danger that Gabriel carried and Jack exuded had given me a brief flush of bravado.

Joe Pender came over for a chat, dragging his twisted foot behind him like a lazy dog on a leash. He'd been crushed years before in a wagon accident, and ever since he'd been known as Wheeler.

"How's it been, Doug?"

"Howdy, Wheeler."

"You see that ugly scarred son of a bitch who's hangin' around town?"

*Gabriel!* I thought. "Nope."

"Yeah, well, they reckon Gabe's in for a killing, or so Max O'Hagan said! I saw him this afternoon over behind the Deadwood Hotel and I ran a mile!"

"Hobbled a mile."

"You know what I mean." He looked down at his misshapen foot bound in leather, and I felt bad for ragging on him.

"Who's he here to kill?" I said. *He told me his name*, I thought, unreasonably jealous. I was the one he came to. Why should everyone else know about him?

"Killed fifty men!" Wheeler said. His voice rose and a few eyes turned our way. I buried my nose in the whiskey glass and drank. "Killed a whole load of Indians, too. He's got a belt of Comanche hair and a saddlebag made of the skins of guys he's shot!"

"Really?" I asked mildly. I tried to imagine Gabriel taking the time to skin the men he'd killed, but the image was all wrong. He was too driven. He'd probably leave the scene of any killing faster than the bullet he'd fired, forever on the trail of Temple.

"Yeah!" Wheeler said, smiling. "He killed a rattler by pissin' on it, too, and he has five women each night, and his pecker puts a bison to shame."

"Yeah, okay Wheeler."

Wheeler laughed and pivoted on his good foot, hobbling towards the saloon doors and hawking up a great gob of spit as he went. I watched him go, shaking my head, frowning . . . and then I realised what was wrong with his story.

“Wheeler!” I shouted, and every face turned my way. I did not care. “How’d you know his name?”

But Wheeler was through the doors and gone, manic laughter his only answer.

“So Gabriel’s here,” a voice said. I spun around but could not see who had spoken. The card game had resumed, the guys at the window were pouring another drink and the prospectors were staring away into the distance, imagining gold in the fading sunlight filtering through dusty windows.

Spooked, I drained my glass and left. I looked around for Wheeler outside but the street was deserted, home only to sunset echoes. A dog sat licking its balls on the sidewalk and I thought of the mutt Gabriel had shot.

His horse was gone. I had not even noticed its absence on the way over from my store. Someone must have come by during the day and dragged it away, along with the dead dog. I wondered where it was now, and I had a sudden image of the horse rising, the hound standing up, squatting and licking its balls as I approached to hear whatever it had to say...

I’d drunk more whiskey than I was used to and it was time to go home. But home—a place of supposed security, where Indians couldn’t reach and bandits were kept away by the notion of safety—was somewhere I would never reach again. That night, everything changed forever.

Gabriel came out of the dusk. His face was black with blood but his one good eye sparkled, as if catching the sunset all for itself. “You!” he said.

I was in no state to run, and I knew it would do no good. So I leaned against the wall of the livery stable and let him come to me. He moved through the shadows as if they were his own.

“I need you to relay a message,” he said.

“What message? For who?” But I already knew where I would be going that night.

“Go to Temple. Tell him I’m here. He knows already, but I need to challenge him on my terms, at a place of my choosing. Tell him... tell him I’ll meet him in your store.”

I closed my eyes and felt the world sway, not only from the effects of alcohol. Fear had me in its grasp. I had already seen what Temple had done to Jack, the madness implanted in his mind. I had no wish to go that way myself. Everything was becoming so strange.

“If I don’t go?” I said.

“You will,” Gabriel said.

I knew that I had no choice.

Old Man Newman’s place was tucked around the back of town, hidden away from the main street by the Deadwood Hotel and the stables. I guess even in a place like Deadwood people did not want the business of death in plain view.

It was dark around there. On the main street there were lanterns, and light spilled from various buildings to keep the night at bay. But behind the hotel there was only moonlight, and a faint glow from one single lit window. I looked up and wondered who was behind the glass, what they were doing. Maybe it was Wild Bill

Hickok's room and he was sitting there now, oiling his guns, practising his card shuffles, thinking about going down to the saloon for a game, dwelling on the times he had killed and all the killing still to come.

Newman's Undertaker's stank of death. It was not rot or decay or dried blood, but a more subtle smell that everyone in town associated with his business. We often saw him riding his meat wagon along the main street with another delivery for Mount Moriah Cemetery. Sometimes folks followed on behind, mourning a mother or daughter, father or son. Just as frequently there were maybe only one or two mourners, following another drifter or gunfighter to their final resting place. The smells that accompanied that sight were distinctive and redolent of Newman's profession: his groomed horse sprayed with some perfumed concoction of his own making; the whiff of flowers from those funerals where people cared; the grease from Newman's hair, a special type he had imported from Paris via my store; and on occasion a hint of the chemicals he used to treat the bodies if their family or friends wanted to say their final good-byes.

I smelled all that and more, and it reminded me of Gabriel's breath.

I glanced up at Newman's living quarters above the place of business. There were no lights on up there, and though I could not recall seeing him in the saloon that was likely where he was headed. I found the door handle, turned it and walked inside.

Sober now—the effects of the whiskey long since driven out by fear—I closed the door and tried to let my senses adjust. It was utterly silent, without even the ticking of a wood burner. The odour was worse in here and more base, the true stench of Newman's profession: rot. There was a body somewhere, and the last thing it had to give to the world was a bad smell.

I stepped forward. A floorboard creaked and it was like a gunshot in the dark. Something scurried across the floor, startled by the noise, and I held my breath until the tiny footfalls faded. My heart sounded loud to me, surely anyone in the dark would hear it too? I moved forward again, wondering just what the hell I was going to find in here. How could I give a message to a dead man? But Temple was not dead, Gabriel had told me that, as had Jack. Whether or not Old Man Newman knew the truth I would find out soon enough.

My head bumped a lamp and set it swinging on its hook. It squeaked back and forth until I reached up and held it still. The glass was warm. I found my matches, closed my eyes against whatever I was about to see and lit the lamp by touch.

"Burning bright tonight," a voice drawled, and it was a blunt blade in my brain, a sweet taste on my tongue. How a voice could inspire two such opposing reactions I did not know, but when I opened my eyes I was alone in the room.

Alone, but for Newman's corpse spread-eagled across the timber boards.

I gasped and stepped back, knocking the lamp, setting shadows dancing in rhythm. The shifting light wavered across Newman's tortured corpse like a soothing hand. But nothing could temper the look of frozen terror on his face. Shadows hid in wrinkles on his face, and his open mouth was deep and black with the dying scream he had never uttered.

"Ahh, what scared him," the voice said, and it was a statement more than a question.

"Who's there?" I hissed. "Who?" But there was no answer.

I was going to leave. I would spin around, haul open the door and flee into the safe night, away from that place of death, away from the twisted terror on Old Man Newman's face. Perhaps out there in the dark I would run into Gabriel, and he would understand, surely, he would forgive me for not delivering his message to the supposedly dead-but-alive Temple?

My indecision was resolved for me. I saw the coffin across the room, resting on a wooden table. I sensed that it was full. And as the dead grey hand rose into view, that voice spoke again.

"So what scares you?"

The hand opened.

Temple held my greatest fear up to view. I forgot about Newman's corpse, forgot about Gabriel and his message. All my attention was focussed on the face of my father where it floated above the corpse's outstretched palm. His hair was grey—it was him as an old man, just before he died—but his eyes were still cruel, their intent to hurt, the knowledge of past pains black seeds in their depths, as if the torturing of my childhood mind and body had planted new life within him. Memories flooded in, smells and sounds and feelings; his fists pummelling my ribs and the tang of my own blood; his boots connecting with my weak hips, and his grunting from the effort.

I screamed, but Temple only sat up and laughed. I fumbled for the door latch behind me, backing up, unable to tear my gaze away from my dead father's image where it floated above the coffin. And as I tore my eyes away, I saw that Temple had Jack's face.

I think I ran for a long time. Dawn was haemorrhaging across the horizon by the time I came to my senses, and I may have been running all night, aimless in the dark, hiding beneath a house; I simply did not know. I was exhausted and shaking, bloodied and bruised from falls.

I reached my store before much of the town had risen, glancing over my shoulder towards where Old Man Newman's place hid behind the hotel and stables. I was not entirely sure what I expected to see; I was uncertain, in fact, of what I had seen. Jack in a coffin? But it had not been Jack, whether it had his face or not. Those eyes had been far too old. And unlike Jack's cross-eyed squint, they had stared straight at me.

Gabriel was waiting inside. He seemed surprised to see me.

"Let you go?" he said.

"I ran."

"Even so, it's unusual."

"You expected him to kill me?"

"I'm glad he didn't." Gabriel was oiling his Peacemakers, turning them gently like newborn babies.

"But you sent me there to die?"

He looked up. In his one good eye I saw so much conflict: pain and sorrow; fear and heartache. "You were the message," he said. "You were the test. You escaped because he's still slow. He has to sleep sometimes, regain his strength. Time... it's wearing." His own haggard face testified to the truth of his words.

"He killed Old Man Newman," I said.

“An old man. Did he ask what scared you?”

“He showed me.”

“Oh.” Gabriel carried on oiling his guns. If he was waiting for me to reveal what I had seen, he was disappointed.

“He was...” I started, trying to think back, desperate not to. *He was Jack?* Was that what I was going to say?

“Temple is many faces but only two men,” Gabriel said. “Whatever you saw, he fooled you.”

“Two men?”

“He’s the Twin.” He stood then, holstered his guns, looked around the store as if browsing for something unattainable. His gaze rested on me, and for the first time a smile cracked his face. There was no humour there; history, for Gabriel, was joyless. “Thank you for your help,” he said. “I’m going to try to kill him again now.” And he left my store without another word.

I went to the window and watched him stroll slowly up the street. His long coat was tied back from his sides, making it easier for him to draw should the need arise. I thought of the trouble I had seen in this town—killings, knifings, fights in the saloon, a gun battle in this very street just the summer before which had left six men bleeding into the dust—and I realised then just how different this was. Gabriel was not here to avenge some nebulous crime, nor to hunt down a common criminal. There was much more to the fight between these two men than I could ever hope to understand.

I tried. I had a pretty good imagination, able to shift myself away from the confines of my simple existence. But Jack’s face rose to haunt me from every daydream, both cross-eyed and straight-eyed, and I knew that Temple was way beyond my comprehension. As though fear held me tight like a mouse in a rattler’s jaw, I watched Gabriel disappear around the side of the hotel knowing that I would never witness anything like this again. Things had changed last night—my belief in reality, my certainty in what was real and imaginary—and I had just let the possible answer walk away.

I ran to the counter, hefted my shotgun and rushed out into the street. I had seen plenty of trouble in Deadwood. This morning, I would be in the thick of it.

I passed several people on the way to the hotel, most of them prospectors I recognised from the saloon. They saw the shotgun and looked away. I ignored them and hurried on.

Gabriel had disappeared. I moved carefully along the side of the hotel, stepping through a knee-deep pile of rubbish that was slowly rotting into the ground. My feet kicked up an horrendous stench but I kept facing forward, eyes on the corner of the hotel, counting down the seconds until the funeral parlour came into view.

Ten seconds. A dog barked behind me, someone shouted at it to shut up. Eight seconds. A window opened in the hotel above my head, though I could not tell whether anyone was looking down. Six seconds. Something screeched as my boot crunched down. I pressed harder to hasten its end and quell its squeal. Four seconds. I cocked the shotgun. It had never shot a man.

Two seconds. One. I did not pause.



Gabriel was standing with his back to the open doors of Old Man Newman's funeral parlour, looking around, guns held loosely by his side. He saw me almost immediately, raised his revolvers a few inches, came forward and stared at my face. "No," he said, "it's only you."

And then something blacked out the sun.

The shape came from above and struck Gabriel like a sack of grain. It crushed him to the ground—I heard bones breaking, skin tearing—and rolled quickly away, a whirl of limbs and claws and mud. Gabriel groaned and tried to stand, but I had already stepped over him and levelled the shotgun. As my finger squeezed against the trigger the shape slowed, stood and revealed itself to me.

It was Temple. But not the Temple I had seen in the coffin, that impersonator of my friend Jack. This thing was everything Gabriel had described: dead but living; evil and old; the Twin. His face was insubstantial, flitting from man to boy, black to white, clear and shadowed. Each time I thought I had a feature pinned down he changed again. He had a big nose . . . but no, it was small. He had a heavy beard... but suddenly it was gone, and in its place was the pimpled skin of a teenager.

Gabriel tried to speak behind me, but his face was too smashed in.

Temple raised his hand and opened it, palm up.

Gabriel squealed.

"What—?" Temple asked, but my shotgun cut him off.

I shot a dog once, when I was a farmer and found the mad hound worrying my employer's cattle. I had never been a very good shot, and the bullet passed through its shoulder without killing it outright. It fell to the ground and squirmed its life away in the dust. Took about an hour, maybe more. The noises it made—squeals of pain, growls of disbelief—ensured that I did not move closer to finish the job.

The sound that came from Temple's mouth was ten times worse.

I fell to my knees and covered my ears, dropping the shotgun, closing my eyes, as if being blind would detract from the noise. I felt Gabriel grab my coat as he tried to haul himself up, but all my attention was focussed on the dark shape of Temple, rolling and squirming in the mud. I had hit him. I had shot him! And now mud and horse shit was mixing into his wounds, his blood was pouring out, and the terrifying thing he had been was little more than a gut-shot dog.

Gabriel had stood by leaning against my braced back, and now he tried to whisper in my ears

I could not hear him. Temple was screaming.

Gabriel's leaned closer, the stench of decay rich on his breath, and for the first time I actually wondered just what in Hell he was.

"It's all..." I did not hear the full sentence. Temple's scream changed so quickly into a wild, mocking laugh that I stood and looked around, expecting to see someone else watching us from the shadows.

"It's all a game," Gabriel said.

I fell to the ground and reached for the shotgun, but something struck me across the side of the head, stamped on my chest, grabbed my arms, lifted me and crashed me into the hotel wall. Timber splintered and tore through my clothes and

into my flesh. Temple twisted and crushed me there, pinning me like a buffalo skin hung out to dry. Shock held the pain at bay but I knew it would flood in soon.

The laughter continued. The shadow of Temple turned away as if I was as much threat as a fly.

Gabriel stood. His bones were broken—I saw shiny white protuberances on his leg and beneath his long coat—and his one eye was squinted with the pain. But still he stood to face Temple, one muddied Peacemaker in his hand. He raised it quickly, faster than anyone I had ever seen, only to have it knocked from his hand. With his back to me Temple punched down on Gabriel once, hard, and drove him back into the mud.

“I don’t need to ask what scares you,” I heard the Twin say, his voice both gentle and filled with rage.

Hanging there, shattered timber cladding sinking slowly into my flesh as weight pulled me down, I watched the fight begin. I saw the tall demon that had invaded our town drive his fists down onto Gabriel’s upturned face again and again, again and again, until it seemed that the one-eyed man was sinking into the ground. Each time I looked away from Temple and then back again, something about him seemed to change. His arms were longer, his fists smaller, his shoulders broader than they were before, and then they would change back. I closed my eyes briefly and the effect was the same. The only consistency lay in my own pain, and Gabriel’s obvious defeat. He was being crushed down, each blow seemingly hard enough to kill any normal man. I heard bones crunching; Gabriel’s cheeks, or Temple’s knuckles. I heard crying, or laughing. I saw two grinning faces and they belonged to the same impossible man. Neither of them was Jack and I thought back to what I had seen that evening, the body rising in the coffin, wondering whether I could have been mistaken.

I coughed and fell further onto the wooden stakes. They would kill me. I felt their sharp points probing towards my organs, reaching for my heart, pricking my lungs and bringing blood to my breath. Pain clouded my vision, but then disbelief cleared my view.

A gunshot. Temple staggered back towards me, and before him Gabriel was rising to his knees, pistol in one hand, the other hand working its hammer again and again. Each shot lit the scene briefly like the sun blinking its eye. And each shot found its mark. Blood and bone splattered across my chest. Temple fell back until he was leaning at an impossible angle, so far over that I looked down at his upturned face. Gabriel stood fully and emptied his last chamber into his enemy’s stomach... and then the demon rose upright, winking at me as he went.

He shrugged. Coughed. Six bullets sprang from his flesh and splatted into the mud. I looked at Gabriel and saw no surprise in his expression. He returned my gaze, and in his eye I saw sad resignation.

*How many times before? I wondered. How many fights to give him so many scars?*

As pain finally took me away to somewhere safer, the last thing I saw was Temple adding a new scar to Gabriel’s body, and another, and another. I could not tell whether the scream that followed me into those darkened depths was my own.

Someone had lifted me from the broken hotel wall and dropped me into the mud. It had dried around my body and held me fast. It was still daylight, and the sun blazed down like liquid gold. My body was a map of pain, each district hurting in a slightly different way. My limbs ached; my head roared; my torso was on fire, each movement stoking the flames of agony. I cried out for unconsciousness, but it seemed my body had had enough of hiding away from the truth.

Everything was silent.

I opened my eyes and slowly, slowly sat up. Mud crackled as I pulled away from its embrace. My shirt was caked with dried muck. The blood was also dry; that was a good sign. No fresh bleeding might just mean that the wounds weren't as bad as they could have been... *should* have been. I looked up at the side of the hotel and saw where I had been impaled like some sad collected insect. The shattered wood was black with my blood.

I looked around, missing someone, knowing that I should not have been alone but taking several precious, innocent seconds to remember who had been here when I was last awake. And then I remembered Gabriel battered down into the mud, the demon Temple raging and roaring as he slashed and tore at his hunter's body, and I looked around for Gabriel's corpse. For some reason I did not expect to find it—my memory of the last couple of days was of strangeness, impossibilities, things that should not be—but when I caught sight of the coat buried in the mud I knew that it would contain Gabriel's cooling corpse.

"Oh, no," I said, more because Temple was still alive than because the one-eyed man was dead. I crawled across the ground, hands cracking the hardened surface and sinking down into still-moist mud. And as I reached the body and saw that he had been driven down deep, saw the blood and scraps of ruptured flesh scattered around, saw his face turned sideways, his empty eye socket staring at the sun, it dawned on me for the first time that Temple had left me alive.

The main street was not as busy as it should have been. A couple of prospectors wandered around, mourning another empty day. They glanced at me and away again when they saw the wounds, the blood sticking my clothes to my skin. One gash on my back had opened and I felt the coolness of blood running down my legs, leaving a speckled trace on the ground behind me. I moved slowly, keeping a lookout for shadows that might have been Temple, a stranger watching me from across the street, anything that could have been that demon in one of his guises.

A dog trotted by and glanced up at me, snuffling and hurrying on as if I stank of death. I leaned against the front of the hotel and heat soaked into me from the timber cladding, soothing aches, carrying pain away. I could stay here in the sun forever, letting its gentle glow calm the violence of my wounds. Dizziness threatened to spill me to the sidewalk so I opened my eyes and stood upright again... and then I remembered Jack. Poor weak Jack, no trouble to anyone but himself, and now he was in the most terrible danger...

It was already midafternoon. I must have been unconscious behind the hotel for eight hours; long enough certainly for the ground to dry around me. Temple had

been gone for that long, and whatever he had come to Deadwood to do must surely be over now.

The streets were all but silent.

*He's killed so often before, Gabriel had said, but now he's changed his approach. Now he does it for pay. Death on commission.*

Where had everybody gone?

Another dog passed by and I could not help checking its muzzle for blood. Surely one man could never kill a whole town, monster or not? Surely there were those here that could stop him? But then I remembered the flashes of gunshots that morning as Gabriel emptied his revolver into Temple, and then Temple's wink at me as he stood and faced Gabriel down once more.

I stumbled on, quickening my pace, eager to find evidence of life and not death. I walked through pain but fear almost stopped me in my tracks.

I did not have far to go. As I drew close to the saloon I became aware of the sounds of rustling and movement, the unmistakable noise of a crowd trying to remain silent. I tried to quiet my footfalls. Behind me, bloody footsteps marked my route along the sidewalk, the blood smeared where I had shuffled and leaned against walls for support. I slumped down and crawled the final few steps on my hands and knees, kneeling at the last moment to look in the saloon window.

The place was full. Farmhands and prospectors, townsfolk and strangers, and all of them seemed to be looking in the same direction. I followed their gaze and tried to make out what was so special about the four men playing cards.

And then I realised: One of them was Wild Bill Hickok. Killed a bear with his bare hands, so it was said. Killed five men with one bullet. To me he looked like just another gambler. A bit more refined than most, perhaps—although the riverboat captain sitting across from him would surely win in the best-dressed stakes—and more confident in his movements, but a gambler nonetheless. A bottle of whiskey sat by his side. He had his back to the door. And everyone in Nuttall & Mann's No. 10 saloon was fascinated by this famous gunslinger.

I searched the faces for Jack but I could not see him. I looked for Temple as well, but perhaps he had gone. Maybe it was over now that Gabriel was dead. I turned and looked up at the sun and prayed that to be the case.

"Need to borrow this, Doug," Jack whispered. He grabbed me from behind, slipped his hand inside my bloodied jacket and pulled out my single-shot pistol. The sun blinded me to his face but I already knew the truth. I could hear it in his voice.

"You're not Jack."

He moved his head to shield the sun so that I could see his eyes, and he smiled. He looked like Jack, but I knew I was right, and he confirmed it by leaning forward and whispering into my ear: "Wouldn't want to be that poor boy right now." And then he marched into the saloon.

I knew instantly why he was here. It was not to kill Gabriel, or me, or even Jack, but someone more famous, someone who was a true challenge. I watched that demon, that Twin stride across to the men playing cards, my own pistol grasped in his right hand. I raised my hand to rap on the glass of the window, warn them, get Hickok to turn around and kill that son of a bitch! But my hand kept going—the

window was open, the crowd almost completely silent—and I heard the final words that Hickok would ever hear.

“Damn you, take that,” Temple said. And then he shot the Prince of Pistoliers in the back of the head.

The man fell, a set of cards still clasped in his hand. I only caught a quick glimpse before someone snatched them away, but I knew that Hickok would have won.

Temple burst through the saloon’s swinging doors and grinned at me with my friend’s face. For an instant his skin was flushed with the heat of the kill, and then he turned and ran. I never saw him again.

I sat slumped outside the saloon and tried to absorb what I had just witnessed. As Temple had loped off along the street, casting aside all pretence of being Jack, a sense of utter sadness had flooded me. It left me drained and weakened, not only from my wounds but by the reality of the days just past, the realisation that there were far more things in the world than I could ever hope to imagine, and that many of them were very, very bad.

There was shouting inside the saloon, chairs falling over, someone crying out in pain, and then the doors burst open and several men stumbled out after Temple. One of them saw me, spun around and knelt by my side, but once he realised that my blood was dry he stood and joined in the chase without a backward glance. Only new wounds interested him at present. I might have been bleeding to death, but I was not a part of this current excitement.

People passed into and out of the saloon, almost all of them ignoring me. There was more famous blood on the floor inside, I guessed, and I could understand what drove them. “He’s dead!” someone shouted. “He’s dead and gone!” A glass smashed, a table tumbled, and I thought I heard someone else say, “Good riddance.”

The sun blasted down into my upturned eyes. I hoped that it would burn the image of Temple from my mind but he remained there still, that demon Twin that looked like Jack and other men, a face like leather Jack had said, face smooth as a baby’s Mrs. Harrison had gushed. He winked at me as I closed my eyes, or maybe it was a bird passing before the sun. I remembered Gabriel being crushed down into the ground and wondered how long it would be before someone found his corpse. He was a drifter, a stranger, and no one would mourn his passing. Not when there was much larger sport to be had.

When they caught Jack, I knew, they would hang him.

There was little I could do. Slowly, wincing with the pain, I pushed myself into a standing position. It took an hour for me to make my way cautiously along the street to my shop. Many people dashed by. None of them stopped. Wheeler hobbled past as if he had a purpose for the first time in many years. Mrs. Harrison breezed by without sparing me a glance. And when I finally reached the store’s front door, I was more than happy to fall inside and let the shadows welcome me in.

Jack was there. I guess I knew he would be, and the sound of his sobbing came as no great surprise. He was down behind the counter clutching a shotgun that

looked older than some of the gold mined from the hills. If he pulled the trigger it would likely explode in his face. I tried not to get too close.

"You've met him!" he said, looking me up and down. "He didn't kill you!"

"He didn't quite let me die, no," I whispered. "Not the same thing."

"Where is he?"

"Gone." I sat down a few paces away from Jack.

"He can't be. He wouldn't!"

"What did he promise you? What did he say you could have if you just hid yourself away for a day, Jack?"

"He said I'd be a famous gunfighter," Jack said. "Said they'd breathe my name in the same breath as John Hardin and Wild Bill Hickok."

I sighed and rested my head back against the timber counter, closing my eyes. "Well, they might at that."

"He can't be gone," Jack said.

I wondered at the things Gabriel had told me about Temple, mused on the few brief moments I had watched him in action, and I shook my head. "He hasn't gone. He never will be. He's just moved on somewhere different."

"I don't understand!"

They were going to hang him. When they found Jack they'd hang him, no questions asked. I knew that he was innocent, but really, what could I say? Just what?

"Put the gun down, Jack," I said. "You won't see Temple again."

His face crumpled like a baby's. Tears squeezed out from his screwed-up eyes and dripped onto his shirt, reminding me of the blood from Gabriel's empty eye socket.

I could have warned him. But running would not have saved him. So I remained there with my eyes closed and tried to shut out the agonies still writhing through my body. Jack cried beside me like a kid that's lost his dog.

It didn't take them long. They smashed the door from its hinges kicking it open, stormed in, knocking over my wares and trampling them into the floor, hauling Jack up by his lapels and hair, snatching the shotgun from his hands and beating him around the head with its rusted barrel, kicking him when he was down, ignoring his shouts his cries his screams for mercy, dismissing his pleas to just tell him what the hell was going on!

I never opened my eyes. And after making sure I was not dead the men left me alone, dragging the screaming Jack behind them.

Eventually, somehow, I drifted off to sleep. I lay that night where Gabriel had slept before, leaning against my counter with wounds that may have imitated his own, and perhaps his nightmares had been the same as well. Dreams of failure, fear and guilt, and of not belonging anywhere anymore.

I left the store the following morning and made my way slowly back to the hotel. I was aware that Jack was probably going to be hanged that day, but I heard or saw no sign of him or his captors. The guilt bit in hard. But there was nothing I could do, and I hoped that Jack would understand. Though I knew the truth, it was not a tale that could be told.

Gabriel had gone. There was a depression in the ground as if something had hauled itself out, and a trail of crumbled, bloodied mud led away from the hotel, past the funeral parlour and out of town. *Someone dragged him away to bury him*, I thought. Maybe, maybe not. Either way that was the last I saw of Gabriel or Temple, the Twin.

But not the last I thought of them. They haunted me.  
They haunt me still.

They didn't hang Jack until spring of the next year.

Even through his fear and confusion, he managed to fabricate a story that got him off the hook in Deadwood. Faced with the certain knowledge that the truth could not save him, he launched into a series of lies about what had happened. He admitted the killing because there was no real alternative, but he claimed that it was in revenge for Hickok slaying his brother. And set free with this lie in his head he expanded upon it, revelling in the growing notoriety his non-crime garnered, until in the end his own misplaced arrogance proved to be his downfall. I guess in a way, that demon's promise to him came true. I heard he was screaming as they put the noose around his neck, begging for something called Temple to come to his aid. Jack died a convicted killer, having never killed a man in his life.

What I knew could have saved him. But I took a small amount of comfort in something Gabriel said when I asked him if he was going to kill Jack.

*He's already dead.*

I grew old in South Dakota. Things changed for me again and I found myself taking over from Old Man Newman, providing a service to the inhabitants of the town that could not be done without. Trouble seemed drawn to Deadwood. Business was good.

I was nothing to those men—those *things*—that used Deadwood as one of their battlegrounds. I knew that there was a whole world for them to fight over, and that we innocents were little more than pawns.

And yet each night before going home, I made sure that every single coffin was nailed shut.

