

Rebel Justice

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[Note: No Chapter 4]

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Names, characters, places, brands, media and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously.



Chapter 1

Welcome to Loomis.

It was the "yipping" of the coyotes that brought him fully awake. Until then, he thought he knew where he was. He was, his addled, half-conscious dream had told him, lying on the battlefield at Antietam. There was the familiar, searing pain of a bullet wound in his shoulder; the same leaden certainty of death in his heaving chest.

"If only the field medics find me, before I bleed to death," he thought. But there were so many others, blue and gray, lying on that field with him. He could hear them, screaming their anguish and pain into the cold, hollow night.

But, it wasn't the cries of dying men, he now realized. It was the "yipping" of coyotes. And, it wasn't the grassy battlefield at Antietam he felt beneath his back. It was the sandy, dried earth of a Texas prairie. The sickening stench of death; the throbbing in his head from the pounding roar of field artillery, these had crept in from his memory. The bullet wound, though, was real enough.

Wayland Brice gritted his teeth and forced himself to concentrate through the pain. He had to put it all together, and he had to do it fast. He was riding... where? When the memory came back to him, it caused a surge of a adrenalin to rush through him. Loomis, Texas! For the first time in fifteen years, he was headed somewhere with a purpose, instead of drifting aimlessly.

"Loomis", the puncher in the saloon had said. "Little town in south Texas. Named after some yankee cavalry officer."

He had lost six months wages there, he went on to say, but Wayland wasn't listening to that. His mind just kept repeating that name... "Loomis". It wrenched Wayland's gut in a mixture of hope and hatred. All those years spent searching. So many towns, so many people. Wayland had all but given up. And now, across a poker table in an Oklahoma saloon, some drunk cow puncher had laid Colonel John Loomis right in Wayland's lap.

Wayland had ridden hard for four exhausting days. He ate and slept in the saddle. When his bay needed rest, Wayland walked her. She had proved her heart

and stamina many times in the past, and he was able to judge her limitations against his own. So, they pushed on. And, he was almost there. Just a few miles from his destination. What happened?

The sun had just disappeared below the horizon, he recalled, and the sweltering desert was alive with silhouettes. Rocks, cactus... anything that protruded above ground, stood out as a dark mass against the pastoral glow of the dying sun. The desert would cool, some, and it was best to stay in the saddle and take advantage of the remaining rays of light. The slow, hypnotic plodding of the bay allowed Wayland to sway in sync on her back, while he dozed intermittently.

Then, with a frightening suddenness, a rider on a powerful, steel-black horse had thundered down on him from out of nowhere. Wayland's own bay had skittered, and nearly thrown him. All those hours in the saddle must have really muddled his senses, he reasoned, not to have heard that monster horse pounding the dry earth ahead of him.

As abruptly as the rider had appeared, he was gone, the black stallion's hooves drumming a strong, steady rhythm that quickly faded. No worse for wear, but wide awake, Wayland had paused but briefly to ponder the urgency of the rider's mission. Bent low over the neck of the heavily lathered stallion, he had never acknowledged his near accident with Wayland, or even Wayland's presence. No pause, no nod, no tip of the hat. Downright un-neighborly.

Wayland wondered to himself if the stranger had even noticed the Colt in Wayland's hand as he stampeded past. A more hair-triggered type might have shot on instinct, having been startled so. But Wayland Brice was not the hair triggered type. In fact, he hated to clear leather, even choosing, more often than not, to give wide berth to a rattler, instead of shooting it. When he had to shoot, though, he was highly likely to hit his target. He was no gunfighter, but he was better than the average cowhand.

The odd encounter behind him, Wayland had ridden on, to the crest of a small, sandy hill. It never occurred to him what a nice, inviting target he must have made, silhouetted as he was against the blood-red horizon. Of course, it never occurred to him that someone was out to kill him, until the bullet slammed into his shoulder, and drove him from his horse.

And what now? How long had he been out? It was pitch black. The sun was gone, and the night was moonless. It could have been a few minutes, or a few hours. Wayland reached his right hand to the wound in his left shoulder. His shirt was soggy with blood. He felt the ground beneath the wound, digging his hand into the sand. He was bleeding freely, but hadn't lost a critical amount of it yet. Only minutes, he figured. He probably wouldn't have lasted hours. He only hoped he'd be able to move, without blacking out. He was still alive, though, and that would obviously be a disappointment to someone. Wayland figured to do his best to disappoint him even more, whoever he was.

Could it be the rider on the black stallion? Wayland didn't think so. The bullet had come from the front. Too soon for the stranger to have circled back and drawn a bead on him.

Then who? And why? For such a big, wide-open state, this little patch of Texas was getting pretty damned crowded.

Wayland took several deep, shaky breaths, then used his good right arm to push himself to a sitting position. A wave of numbing pain shot through his wounded shoulder, and his head throbbed. As his body trembled in weakness, Wayland steadied himself, gulping air and fighting back the nausea. He clumsily snagged his bandana from his neck and bound it tightly around the wound, and was suddenly gripped by a sense of panic.

"Even if I find the bay and make it to a doctor," he thought, "I could still lose the arm."

Visions of gangrene infested arms and legs, unceremoniously hacked off by sweaty, stone-faced army surgeons flashed in Wayland's mind. He shuddered and shook it off. No, by God. Not him. Not ever. Better to die, first.

That possibility reared its ugly head at just that moment, as Wayland heard the soft crunching of boot leather against sand. Two men approaching. Slow, and cautious. Whoever put the hot lead in him apparently wasn't finished. Wayland quickly laid back down, his back turned to the approaching footsteps. He eased his Colt from its holster and held it against his stomach to muffle the "click" of the hammer as he thumbed it back. Maybe he could get both of them. For damn sure, he'd get one. He wasn't about to be the only poor bastard to die out here this night.

The footsteps drew closer, and Wayland stifled his breathing. Perfectly still and noiseless. Dead, by all accounts. At least, he hoped his attackers would see it that way, and not put another slug in him for insurance.

"Mister...?" a husky, hesitant voice uttered, "You hear me?"

Wayland forced himself to remain motionless. It was pretty dark, and he wanted to make sure of his target. Just a bit closer. The shooters accommodated, and Wayland heard the footsteps ease forward. He could hear their labored breathing. Almost... almost close enough.

"Mister?", the husky voice snapped again.

Wayland wrenched his body around with a mighty heave, searching for a target. As he laid the sights of his Colt dead center on the dark figure of a man, there was a startled "yelp", and four hands shot up in instant surrender.

"Don't shoot!" the second man cried, "We're the law!"

Wayland kept the Colt leveled on his target, but paused, just long enough to make out the dull glint of a badge on the man's shirt. The hands of the men were still in the air, and they stood rock steady. Like a dog who shows his belly, they were his for the taking. He wasn't the hair-triggered type, it's true, but the temptation to shoot was almost unbearable.

"Look! Here! Can't you see the badge?" the second man pointed to his chest.

"A man puts a bullet in me, it don't much matter if he's wearin' the crown jewels of by-God England!" Wayland snarled.

"It was a mistake! Honest-to-God," the first man pleaded.

Even in the dark, Wayland could see the fervent nod of the second man's head. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and he strained to focus on the two men. Number one was small and stocky, probably the older of the two, from the sound of his voice. The second man was tall, muscular and probably in his twenties. Wayland couldn't make out their features, but he could sense the fear emanating from them. He relished it.

"It wasn't you we were after," number one explained.

"It was me you shot," Wayland grunted.

"Now look-a-here, you gotta let us help you, or you're gonna bleed to death," number two announced sternly. "Killin' us only kills you."

It was a logic that Wayland couldn't argue. Still, he kept the Colt centered on the bigger man's chest. "If it wasn't me, then who?"

"Horse thief," said the small, squattish one. "Ridin' a coal black stallion. Maybe you seen him. You were dead on his trail."

Wayland grunted. It made sense. It didn't, however, make the pain of his wound go away. His shoulder was pumping blood from beneath the flimsy bandana, and Wayland's vision was beginning to blur as he weakened.

"One of you itchy-fingered bucks tore up my shoulder pretty bad. Now, you just want to say "oops," and let it go by, that it?"

There was a long pause, then the short man drew a sharp, impatient breath. "Well, dammit, are you gonna kill us, or not?"

Wayland was glad it was dark enough to mask the flickering smile of amusement that crossed his face. "Maybe later," Wayland announced, and promptly sagged into unconsciousness.

Wayland drifted in-and-out on the ride back. The pain from his bullet wound and his loss of blood drove him into a merciful state of unconsciousness most of the way. Through the haze of delirium, he had only one rational thought: He had to stay alive long enough to look into the eyes of the man he intended to kill. Colonel John Loomis. After that, it didn't much matter.

When Wayland regained consciousness, he found himself lying on a hard cot. The room had damp feel, and a musky odor. He quickly took stock of his condition. His body was stiff and sore, his mouth was dry, and his shoulder hurt like hell fire. On top of that, he realized, he was in jail!

That startling revelation got his attention, and he tried to sit up. His aching body rebelled, and he groaned loudly at the flash of pain that gripped him. In an instant, he discovered a short, stocky bearded man hovering over him. There was a badge on the man's denim shirt.

"Here, now... don't try to get up. It's too soon," the man urged, and helped Wayland lie back down. Wayland looked up at the craggy, tanned face of a man in his late-forties. Old, for the times, and looked even older, except for the clear, sharp brown eyes.

"Water," Wayland croaked.

"Harley, bring some water here," the man shot over his shoulder.

The large-framed, younger lawman appeared, holding a dipper of clear, cold well water. This was the one Wayland almost killed, out on the desert. He was a rock-jawed, handsome fellow with dark, curly hair, and Wayland decided that a lot of pretty, heartbroken young women would have shown up for the funeral. The older man put the dipper to Wayland's lips. Wayland gratefully gulped it down, then flopped back weakly on the cot.

"You the one that shot me?" Wayland asked.

"No, that was Harley," the older one replied, nodding toward the younger lawman. Rather than remorse for his deed, Harley actually appeared somewhat pleased with himself.

"I'm Elmo Duncan. Most folks just call me Shorty. Town Sheriff."

"Which town?" Wayland asked.

"Loomis", came the reply, and Wayland's chapped lips stretched into a thin smile. He made it!

"This here's my deputy, Harley Stiles," Shorty added. The younger man gave a stone faced nod.

"How long?" Wayland asked.

"Two days," Shorty responded. "More'n once, we thought we lost you."

"My horse?" Wayland queried.

"Over at the livery. I'm holdin' your saddlebags and personals in a safe place. You had sixteen dollars and forty-two cents."

"What the hell am I doing in jail?" asked Wayland.

Shorty smiled sheepishly. "Didn't have no other bed to put you in. Hope you don't mind."

Wayland gave a little grunt. "Just don't shut the door."

Shorty grinned at this one. He seemed relieved. "We made a hell of a mistake, mister, and I surely do apologize. We thought you was Irish Dan, for certain."

"You must have wanted him pretty bad," Wayland added.

Deputy Stiles gave a hint of a wry smile. "You don't steal from John Loomis and live long to talk about it. Especially not a prize like that horse."

"We didn't get him," the Sheriff added, "but you can bet your buttons Loomis will. He'll pay some bounty hunter to chase old Irish Dan to the ends of the earth. When it's done, Dan'll be dead, and Loomis will have his horse back."

"Guess he's pretty powerful in this town," Wayland mused.

"Mister," the deputy replied, "John Loomis *is* this town."

"Then, he should be easy to find," Wayland said, unable to hide the edge of urgency in his voice. Shorty's brow jerked up, and he looked like Wayland had just slapped him. Deputy Stiles remained deadpan.

"Loomis? What the hell you want with Loomis?" Shorty asked.

Wayland noted the strong reaction, and tried to make his tone sound more casual.

"Just a job", he answered.

"Punchin' cows?" Shorty asked. Wayland nodded, and Shorty frowned suspiciously. "Well, I don't guess he needs any cowpunchers," came the terse reply. "See, he don't have any cows. Loomis raises horses."

Wayland cursed his loose lips. He had four days on the trail to think up a good story. He should have done it. Shorty didn't seem nearly as amiable as he did a few moments ago.

"First off, John Loomis wouldn't hire, fire nor spit on a Reb, and you're a Reb, for sure," Shorty said. "That twang in your talk ain't Texas. More like Alabama, I'd say."

"Georgia", Wayland corrected.

"Second," Shorty continued, "you may be a cow puncher, from time-to-time, but you ain't done so in awhile. Got no rope calluses on your hands. And third, you rode long and hard to get here. Got what looks like red Oklahoma dust in the cuffs of your pants, and that poor ol' horse of yours was wore near to death."

"She can take it," Wayland answered shortly.

"You see, Mr..." he hesitated. "What the hell is your name, anyway?"

"Wayland Brice."

"Well, Mr. Brice, there's two things you should know," Shorty expounded, "One, I'm a whole lot smarter than I look, and two, trouble with John Loomis is trouble you can't handle."

"Wayland feigned innocent surprise. "Who said anything about trouble?"

"I can smell trouble," Shorty growled, "and you stink of it. Now, I'm an honest law man, and I'm not takin' sides, but if you push too hard, I may not be able to help you. Remember, the name of the town is Loomis, not Shorty."

Shorty straightened, and he and Deputy Stiles walked from the cell. Shorty turned, and gave a nod toward the cell door. "You want that to stay open, you heed my words."

With that, they were gone. Wayland took a long, slow breath. He'd already tipped his hand, and sensed that he'd have to be more than a little careful. That decided, he promptly fell asleep. It was sometime late in the night, when Wayland was awakened by the feel of cold steel pressed against his neck. His eyes opened, but there was only darkness. There was no doubt, though, that someone was holding a knife to his throat. He started to move his hand, and felt it restrained by an iron grip. Then, a low, guttural voice whispered from the darkness.

"Don't you make a move, boy."

Wayland's body tensed, but he held himself motionless. A match flared behind him, and was set to a lantern that bathed the room in a reddish glow. Whoever was in the cell with him was behind him, out of his line of vision.

"Recognize him?" the guttural voice asked.

There was a soft, whispered "No," from another man, and the lantern was quickly extinguished. At that instant, the blade of the knife relaxed slightly against Wayland's throat.

With a surge of gathered strength, Wayland wrenched his arm free and grabbed the knife arm, twisting it back. The knife man was startled and caught off guard as Wayland struck out blindly with his wounded left arm. His fist made contact with the knife man's jaw, and brought a gasp of pain and surprise from him. Then, something crashed hard into Wayland's skull, and he blacked out.

Chapter 2

Angel of Mercy.

When he woke again, it was late morning, and a stunningly pretty young woman was leaning over him. Her skin was as smooth and white as alabaster, her face punctuated by sparkling blue eyes and framed in flowing, flame-red hair. She smiled at him. "Good morning", she said, in a voice as silky as her skin. Wayland's eyebrows raised in pleasant surprise.

"Well... if I'm dead," he mumbled, "at least I wound up in the right place."

The comment brought a smile of amusement to her face. It was a bright, honest smile, and Wayland liked it. "I'm Cassie," she said, "and I'm about as far from an angel as you'll ever get. You're very much alive, Mr. Brice, I promise you."

Wayland thought about the event from the previous night, and considered asking for the sheriff to tell him. Then, he thought better of it. Even if Shorty wasn't a party to it, there wouldn't be much he could do. Besides, Wayland already knew who his visitors had been. At least one of them. Obviously, Colonel Loomis had heard about Wayland, and wanted a look at him.

Of course, Loomis had no idea who he was. That was Wayland's advantage, and had probably kept him alive last night. Anyway, Wayland had something more interesting on his mind, at the moment. Her name, she had said, was Cassie.

"It's time to dress that wound," she said, "and I thought, maybe you'd like a shave."

Wayland nodded. "I'd be obliged."

Cassie gently began removing his bandages, her touch cool and easy against his skin. As Wayland gazed up at her, he found himself wishing he was in better shape. Dirty, unshaved and peaked, he must have presented an unGodly sight to Cassie, and he wanted it otherwise.

"You the one who took the bullet out?" he asked.

"Lord, no," she laughed, "I'm just a saloon girl, Mr. Brice. I'm hardly qualified to perform surgery." There was a pause, then she added casually, "The blacksmith did it."

Wayland frowned, and she seemed to take a playful satisfaction in his reaction.

"Doc Murphy is up north, at the stage depot. One of the hands got kicked in the head by a horse. Doc should be back tomorrow. I'll have him take a look at your wound."

"If it's all the same," Wayland said, "I'd just as soon you tended me."

"I'm honored," she said, as she finished up his bandage. She reached over and picked up a bowl of water and a straight razor. "I don't do this much, so I'll apologize in advance if I cut you."

She proceeded to lather up a brush, and apply the soap to Wayland's face. Carefully, she began to shave him. As he gazed up at her, he wondered to himself what she thought of him. He was a passably handsome man, he thought. Nearly six feet tall, a blond tint to his hair and deep blue eyes. He could turn a woman's head, but had never been anything like a lady-killer. This lady's face revealed nothing.

Wayland relaxed, and enjoyed the attention. After she had shaved him, she offered to wash the trail dust from his face, and upper body. Wayland happily accepted. When she revealed his bare, muscular chest, Wayland sensed a brief stirring of admiration in her eyes. Just a flicker that probably would have gone unnoticed had he not been studying her face so intently. Maybe it was just his imagination, but Wayland drifted off to sleep feeling a sense of satisfaction.

Cassie came frequently over the next several days, and her presence seemed to quicken Wayland's healing. She told him about the town, its residents, and their little quirks. From the sound of it, Loomis was pretty much an average Texas cowtown. To its credit, it did have a school. John Loomis was responsible for that,

Cassie said. He had it built at his own expense. And, of course, Loomis owned interest in nearly every business in town.

Wayland countered her stories with a few of his own exploits. He talked of cattle stampedes and range wars, always embellishing his own role just a bit, but not enough to cause doubt as to his credibility. They never allowed the conversation to become too personal, beyond the few coy flirtations that occasionally surfaced. At the end of all the hours of conversation, they still knew little of significance about each other. They did know that they liked one another. For now, that was enough. At the end of a week, Wayland was sitting up in his bunk and feeling much stronger.

"It's time you got up," Cassie announced.

Wayland was eager to oblige, and allowed her to help him up. He wavered on unsteady legs for a moment, but quickly found his balance again. Cassie held to his good arm as they walked from the cell, into the front of the Sheriff's Office. There, Deputy Stiles looked up from the crude, wooden desk with that carved-stone expression of his. He was a hard one to read, and Wayland promised himself not to play poker with Stiles. Cassie nudged Wayland toward the door, but Wayland suddenly pulled up.

"My gun," he said, simply. Deputy Stiles seemed reluctant to oblige. He didn't respond immediately, but under Wayland's determined stare, finally retrieved Wayland's Colt from the gun closet, and handed it to him.

"Best keep it in the holster," Deputy Stiles said tersely.

"Well, I'll try," Wayland responded dryly, "but I hear there's a lot of snakes in Texas."

The deputy definitely frowned at that, but said nothing as he turned his attention to a stack of wanted posters on the desk. Wayland and Cassie walked out.

The day was a broiler, but the sun felt good to Wayland. He spent most of his life outside, and always felt claustrophobic when he slept indoors for any length of time. Loomis was, indeed, a pretty typical cowtown. A lot of the wooden buildings were relatively new, though, and implied a period of growth. Aside from the usual, like a general store, livery and the like, there were two churches and two saloons. Saints and sinners split right down the middle. Wayland approved of such a balance.

The saloon that Cassie took him to was called "The Texas Crown", and it, too was nothing unusual. A couple of glass chandeliers and a painting of a European Castle that hung behind the bar lent a twinge of elegance to an otherwise drab decor. The painting had several bullet holes in it. Wayland wondered if the bullet holes were put there in fun, during some cowboy's drunken revelry, or under more serious circumstances. There were few people in the bar. Cassie and Wayland drew mild attention as they entered. Only the bartender, a barrel-chested, mustached man, showed more than casual interest at their presence. He excused himself from his conversation and lumbered down the bar, his focus on Cassie.

"There you are," he said with a tone of relief. "I need you to help me with the end-of-the-month tally."

Cassie gave him an stern look. "Dave, if I'm going to keep doing your paperwork, you're going to have to give me a raise."

Dave looked sheepish, and a little bit desperate. "C'mon, Cassie. You know I ain't no good with all them damn numbers."

Cassie sighed with impatience, but Wayland knew she would oblige, even before she said it. She turned to him. "Rest here for a few minutes, then I'll get us something to eat."

Wayland gave a nod in reply, and Cassie moved behind the bar and disappeared into the back room. Wayland surveyed the room. A couple of cowboys, still dusty from the trail, shared a bottle with a hard-looking saloon girl at a corner table. Huddled at one end of the bar were two more men, older and more settled looking. Locals, sipping warm beer and telling stories. A younger man sat alone at a table, a bottle and glass in front of him, idly flipping through a deck of cards. His stetson set at a cocky angle on his head and he looked to be in his early twenties. His clothes, Wayland noted, were clean and well-fitted. That, coupled with the man's low-slung gun belt, told Wayland that this was no cowhand. As if connecting with Wayland's thoughts, the man looked up from the cards, and he gave Wayland an easy smile. Wayland nodded back.

"You're that fella the deputy shot, out on the prairie," the young man said.

"I'm the one," Wayland confirmed.

The young man shook his head. "I lost two dollars on you," he chuckled.

Wayland's brow furrowed in confusion. "I don't follow," he said.

"I was bettin' you'd die. Hell, the whole town had money on it, one way or the other."

Wayland flashed an amused smile. If nothing else, at least he had provided a few days of entertainment for a bored, sleepy Texas town.

"Well, I had a considerable stake riding on it, myself," Wayland responded, "though I don't know if it amounted to two dollars."

The young man let go a gentle laugh. He held up the deck of cards in his hand. "How about, I'll buy you a drink, and you give me a chance to win my two dollars back?" he offered.

Wayland considered it, then gave a nod of agreement. "Fair enough," he said, and crossed to the table. He slid into a chair across from the younger man, who extended his hand.

"Will Burdett," he announced, and Wayland shook the outstretched hand. The grip was firm, but the flesh of the man's hand was smooth and uncalloused.

Will poured a drink, and slid the glass to Wayland, who tipped it in a toast of thanks before he downed it in one gulp. The whisky sent an instant glow of warmth through him, from the inside out, and Wayland savored it.

"Draw poker?" Will asked, but he was already dealing, so Wayland didn't bother to respond. They played a few quiet, uneventful hands, with only the slapping of the cards to break the silence.

"You're a Reb, hey?" Will said casually, his eyes on the cards in his hand. Wayland took a moment to reply. These days, the question often implied that trouble was at hand, though Wayland didn't see that attitude in Will's behavior.

"I was," he said simply.

"Don't really matter, mind you. I wasn't in it, myself," he said. "Got no loyalties to anybody but me... and my boss."

Wayland inwardly tensed. Will's manner was so casual, so non-threatening that Wayland had ignored the signs. But now, it was clear to him what was coming. Wayland maintained his own amiable appearance, but his right hand dropped easily to his leg, nearer his holster

"And, who might your boss be?" Wayland asked.

"That'd be John Loomis," Will answered, with a wide smile, "And you'd be smart to keep your hands up on the table, where I can see them." His eyes locked on Wayland, cold and threatening. Wayland gently raised his right hand to the table.

"Your deal", Will said flatly, and shoved the cards to Wayland.

Wayland maintained his subdued nature, but inside, his mind was racing. He knew now that Will was a hired gunman. Wayland was handy enough for most occasions, but he was no match for a professional. To allow himself to be lured into a gunfight would be suicide. Wayland forced his hands to remain steady as he picked up the deck of cards and began to shuffle.

"I heard you were asking about Mr. Loomis. That right?" Will pressed.

"That's right," Wayland answered. He kept shuffling, but with one eye on Will.

"And what would you be wanting with him?" Will asked.

Wayland stopped shuffling. He put down the deck of cards and rested both hands on the rim of the table before him. He kept the move subtle, hoping Burdett wouldn't detect it.

"Well, that's kind of personal," Wayland replied, "but I'll be glad to state my business to Loomis, himself."

Will let out a gentle sigh. "I don't guess you're going to get that chance, mister," he said evenly, "See, I think maybe I'm gonna win that bet, after all. You know, about you dyin'."

As Will slid his chair back to rise to his feet, Wayland exploded into action. Will Burdett's hand was streaking for his gun, as Wayland gripped the edge of the card table firmly and thrust it up and out at him. The gunfighter got off a shot, just as the table slammed into him and the bullet ripped through the wood and passed an inch from Wayland's neck. The force of the table knocked Will to the floor and gave Wayland valuable seconds to clear leather. Will rolled to one side, aimed for another shot and was just squeezing the trigger when Wayland's bullet slammed into his chest. Will's last shot went wild and into the castle painting behind the bar.

It had happened so quickly that the stunned patrons had no time to even dive for cover, and Cassie was just bursting from the back room. Wayland kept his Colt fixed on Will, until he was certain that his bullet had done the job, then looked around at the frozen, shocked faces of the bar's inhabitants. His gaze rested on Cassie.

"What happened?" she asked in a half-whispered voice.

"He lost two dollars," Wayland replied, "I guess he wanted to get it back."

Just then, the saloon doors crashed open. A startled Wayland spun, to find himself staring into the barrels of a twelve-gauge shotgun. Deputy Stiles was behind the shotgun and Sheriff Duncan was with him. Shorty quickly surveyed the scene, and gave a glaring look at Wayland.

"I'd recommend you drop you're gun, Mr. Brice, before Harley here spreads you halfway across Texas," Shorty said.

Wayland responded immediately, dropping his gun to the floor. "I don't guess you'd care to hear what happened?" Wayland retorted.

"You bet your buttons I would. Right after I put you in a jail cell," Shorty answered, and gave a nod to the door. Wayland walked out, hands up, under the watchful eye of the shotgun-wielding deputy.

Chapter 3

Nothing to Lose.

Wayland paced the now-familiar jail cell like a caged cat. Out in the front office, Cassie and Shorty were having a loud discussion concerning Wayland's future.

"You can't just keep him in jail!" Cassie demanded, "You've got no reason!"

"I got a dead man, Cassie! That's reason enough for me!" came the reply.

"The other man drew first! Dave saw it!"

"Dang it, woman, there's more to it than that!"

Wayland couldn't help but see the humor in it. These two people, who only a few days ago were total strangers to him, now discussed his fate as though he were the object of a land dispute. Naturally, he was pulling for Cassie. He'd never attempted a jail-break before, and wasn't relishing the thought. Soon, Shorty appeared at Wayland's cell door.

"I liked you better when you was shot," he grumbled.

"You gonna let me go?" Wayland asked.

"I'm debatin' it," Shorty answered. "See, the thing is, I figure keepin' you in jail might be doin' you a favor."

Wayland smiled wryly. "You'll understand if I disagree."

Shorty looked sorely put-out, and frustrated by Wayland's attitude. "You know, there's plenty of towns in Texas you can get yourself killed in. Why'd you have to pick mine?" Shorty snapped.

Wayland gave him a serious look. "Shorty, if I was the one dead, would Will Burdett be locked up?"

Shorty's eyes narrowed. His instinct was toward anger, but he knew Wayland was right. It was John Loomis' town, and he likely wouldn't have arrested Will Burdett, knowing he worked for Loomis. Without a word of reply, Shorty took out his keys and unlocked Wayland's cell. Wayland heaved a breath of relief and satisfaction, and walked out. Shorty gave him a stern look.

"I ain't comin' to your funeral."

"Don't plan to be there, myself," Wayland replied, as he walked past Shorty. When Wayland entered the front office, Cassie looked instantly relieved. Harley looked disappointed. Shorty still seemed reluctant about the whole thing as he strode in behind Wayland.

Wayland looked at Harley. "My gun," he said. Harley gave him a cold look. As before, he made no sudden move to comply.

"Dammit, Harley, give him his gun!" Shorty snapped.

Harley retrieved the Colt, and handed it over. His eyes bored into Wayland, and even Harley's sphinx-like face couldn't hide his dislike of Wayland. "Next time, maybe it'll be me on the other side," he said.

"Well, deputy, we can always hope," Wayland replied. Wayland opened the door for Cassie, then followed her out.

Out in the street, Wayland surprised Cassie when he gently turned her to him, gripped her shoulders and kissed her. Her eyes went wide in startlement.

"That's for standing up for me," he announced.

"Kissing on main street, in broad daylight. Imagine what people will think of us!" she laughed.

"I guess they'll think we like each other," he said, suddenly feeling sheepish.

"I guess they'll be right," she said softly. She took his arm, and they walked. "Wayland... what's going on?" she asked, her face studying him intently.

Wayland feigned innocence. "What do you mean?"

"That business with Shorty. What's it about?"

He stopped walking, and took a long pause before he spoke. "It doesn't concern you, Cassie. Maybe it's best you don't know."

She quickly angered at his remark. "Doesn't concern me? Aren't you forgetting who nursed you back to life? I spoon fed you, like a baby... sat at your side... and now, you say it doesn't concern me?"

Wayland shuffled uncomfortably. He was beginning to recall stories of redheads with hot tempers, and felt that there might be some truth to them. "Cassie, it isn't that I'm not grateful. I just don't want you hurt. Now please, just let it go."

She stared at him for a moment longer, struggling within herself. Finally, she shrugged in resignation. "Fine," she said, but without much conviction.

"Fine," Wayland said firmly, with all the conviction he could muster. He started walking again, assuming the subject was closed. He was wrong.

"Will Burdett worked for John Loomis," she said suddenly, "Does it have something to do with him?"

Wayland's reaction was too strong and too quick for him to hide. It confirmed her suspicions, and he knew it. "Come on," he said, "I'll buy you dinner."

He latched onto her arm and guided her firmly down the street. At the cafe, they ordered and were well into their meal before the subject arose again. This time, it was Wayland who initiated it.

"You were right," he admitted, "My business is with Loomis."

"What kind of business?" she demanded.

He took a long pause, wondering how to explain, or even if he should. Finally, he just gave in, and blurted it out. "I came to kill him," he answered bluntly.

Cassie gave a shocked reaction. She froze, her eyes wide, and said nothing for a time. Finally, she recovered.

"Kill John Loomis? But... why?" she asked in astonishment.

"It's an old score that needs settling, and that's all I'll say about it."

Cassie shook her head in disbelief, her meal now forgotten. "Wayland, you don't understand the way things are, here. You'll be dead before you get within a mile of John Loomis."

"Well, he's already tried," he responded.

She nodded firmly. "And he'll try again... and again, until he's done the job. I know him, Wayland. I know what he's capable of!"

This time, it was Wayland who looked back in surprise. "What do you mean, you know him?"

Cassie suddenly seemed uncomfortable and averted her eyes. "I mean... everybody knows what he's like."

Wayland shook his head. "No, it's more than that, isn't it?"

Finally, she nodded. "Four years ago, John Loomis brought me out here from San Francisco... to marry him."

Wayland reacted in shock, and stared at her in astonishment.

"I was working as a dance-hall hostess," she continued. "He was in San Francisco on business. I don't know... he was charming and funny. It was so impulsive. The next thing I knew, we were engaged and I was in Texas. Then..." she hesitated, reluctant to go on.

"What?" Wayland urged.

"I was on my way back to the hotel one night. There were these men... from a cattle drive. They were drunk, and... they..." her voice began to tremble. She took a long breath, and gathered herself. "When they were caught, they didn't even remember raping me."

Wayland sat in stunned silence for several moments. She had caught him completely off guard, and he suddenly felt unsure of himself. "The law caught them?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, John Loomis caught them. Or, at least his hired killers did. John had them hanged, to preserve his precious honor. Of course, my honor was beyond repair."

There was more than a little bitterness in her voice, and her own composure was dangerously close to the breaking point. "He couldn't marry me. Not after that."

"Then, you must hate him, too." Wayland said.

"Yes. Enough to wish him dead, sometimes. But not enough to kill him, Wayland. There's a difference."

"Maybe it isn't the same kind of hate, Cassie," he replied. "All I know is, it's eating me up, and there's only one way I can stop it."

She reached across the table and gripped his hand firmly between hers. Her face showed urgency, and concern. "Don't you see, he's too strong. He doesn't like to fight his own battles. He won't come out for you, Wayland."

"Then I'll go to him," Wayland insisted.

"And play right into his hands? You'll never get out alive," she argued.

"I'm not worried about getting out. Just getting in."

Cassie released his hand, and leaned back in her chair. She regarded him with a grim, steady look. Wayland could again see the anger in her eyes.

"I guess I was wrong about you. You seemed different. I had hoped, maybe you and I..." her voice trailed off into silence.

Wayland wasn't prepared for this tact. He had worked hard within himself to quell the growing feelings he had for her. The last thing he needed was to complicate matters with a female relationship. His plan to even the score with Loomis demanded that he have nothing to lose. He couldn't sacrifice that, not even

for Cassie. Wayland wasn't good at expressing his deepest feelings, but he knew that now was the time to try.

"Cassie, I sure want to care for you. I just can't. Not now. Maybe, when this is over..."

She interrupted with a bitter laugh. "When this is over, you'll be dead, Wayland Brice. That's the only thing that will change."

With that, she rose stiffly and marched out of the restaurant. Wayland felt a twinge of frustration, and disappointment, but convinced himself that this was the best thing. This was the way it had to be. He had a sudden compulsion to get it over with and put Loomis, Texas behind him... or have six feet of Loomis, Texas laid on top of him. Tonight, he would ride out to the Loomis ranch, and look for his opening. Once again, he had nothing to lose, except his life.

Chapter 5

Hot Lead and a Cold Reception.

It felt good to be astride the bay again, thundering across the prairie with the dry desert wind in his face. The riding did cause his shoulder wound to throb some, but he was alive with anticipation that quickly put the pain from his mind. There were still a couple of hours of daylight left. It should give him plenty of time, he figured, to have a look at the ranch before darkness gave him the cover he needed.

He reflected on the past few hours, and his preparation. Having retrieved his horse and belongings, he had checked into the "Loomis House" hotel. There, he left everything he had of value, along with a note that willed his possessions to Cassie in the event of his demise. At least, that way, she would know that he had feelings for her. If he came back alive, he would express them to her personally.

An hour in the saddle at a gentle lope brought him in range of the Loomis spread. Wayland rode to the crest of a small rise to survey the ranch below. It was a large, sprawling place with corrals, a bunkhouse, barn and a variety of out-buildings. The main house, the centerpiece of the spread, was a big, two-story affair. It was surrounded by fence, and Wayland could see several men lounging near the bunkhouse. A couple more, armed with rifles, patrolled the perimeter of the fence. By his count, there were eight of them visible. A heavy-set Mexican woman drew water from the well, and a couple of barefoot, bronze-skinned Mexican children played with a lariat near the corral. It all looked pretty quiet, and serene.

Wayland took stock of the surrounding landscape. The ranch sat in a large clearing, flanked on three sides by rocky, scrub-covered hills. If Wayland was careful, he figured he could get within shouting distance of the place by sticking to those hills and using darkness to mask his approach. He and walked the bay to a small hollow between two hills, and tied her off. He slipped his Winchester from the scabbard, and eased his way down through the rugged terrain, toward the

ranch. Wayland moved quietly, choosing his footing carefully. When he had moved as close as he dared in daylight, he settled in to wait. For the next hour, as the sun slowly set, Wayland carefully watched the house, hoping for a glimpse of Loomis. Though he'd never seen the man before, Wayland was certain he would recognize him.

No one came or went from the main house, though. Most of the activity occurred in front, so Wayland figured to slip in from the back, when the time came. No doubt there was a guard posted back there, out of Wayland's sight. Wayland figured he could handle him easy enough, as long as he maintained the element of surprise.

Once the sun was gone, darkness set in fast. The sky was moonless, and only the few lanterns from around the ranch provided any outside light. However, it was the lights inside the house that interested Wayland the most. The downstairs was almost completely illuminated, but the upstairs windows were still dark. Over-and-over in his mind, Wayland traced the path he would take to the house. Each step he visualized, and imagined his body to be light and graceful, as if walking on air. It was a trick the Indians used, in preparing to stalk game. Wayland's grandfather had taught the techniques to him, and many times, they were able to creep up on deer and game hens, nearly close enough to touch them. It was a rare moment that Wayland reflected on any member of his family. Now, it seemed proper, since he was about to kill the man who had murdered them.

Wayland had been in a yankee prison camp, when Sherman launched his march on Atlanta. The orders were to confiscate all food and burn the fields and houses in their path. Nothing was said about killing innocent civilians. That was a task Colonel Loomis had taken on his own. The Brice farm was hardly a threat to the Union victory. Just a small, family run spread. They owned no slaves. Wayland's grandfather had, himself, been an indentured servant in Europe, and wouldn't allow it. In the end, it made no difference.

Wayland could see in his mind's eye the row of graves behind the burnt ruins of his home. Now, he was prepared to render justice. Rebel justice. The painful memory urged Wayland into action. It was time. It took several agonizing minutes for him to reach the base of the hill. There was a stretch of open land, thirty yards or so to the fence, and another twenty to the house itself. Wayland paused at the base of the rocks, his eyes groping in the darkness for the movement of the guard he knew was there. The man showed himself within seconds, circling from one side of the house. He carried his rifle slung casually over one arm, and appeared bored.

Wayland guessed that few men had posed any serious threat to Loomis. Likely the guards were just there for effect, or maybe for Wayland's benefit. The guard disappeared around the house. In a minute or so, Wayland knew he'd be back. Wayland sprinted across the open area, dived to the ground and rolled under the bottom strand of barbed-wire. He scurried to the back of the house, and flattened himself against the building, at the corner. Then, he slid his pistol from the holster. He held the gun by the barrel, and raised it. No sooner had he done so, than the guard appeared from around the corner, and presented an easy target for Wayland, who slammed the gun-butt into the back of the man's head. Wayland

caught him as he sagged to the ground. He moved quickly to strip him of his guns, then knelt to tie the man's hands.

Then, suddenly, more footsteps! They were quick, and light as they approached from around the building. Wayland was still on his knees beside the unconscious guard, and was caught by surprise at the sudden intrusion. He grabbed his pistol, and thumbed back the hammer, just as a small, tow-haired Mexican boy came running around the corner!

Wayland drew a sharp breath, horrified that he had nearly shot the boy, who now stood frozen, his eyes wide in fright. Wayland gently raised a hand to him, urging him to stay quiet. But, the boy spun and ran, shouting in alarm!

Wayland cursed to himself, and sprinted for the fence. As he dived under the wire, he could hear voices, and footsteps pounding the ground around the house. Shouts went up, and gunshots cracked through the darkness. Wayland rolled under the wire, with bullets kicking the dirt around him. He spun toward the house, laying on his belly, and sent several rounds from his Winchester toward them.

The silhouettes in the darkness scattered and dived in every direction. There was a howl of pain from one man, as Wayland's bullet found its mark. Wayland didn't stay around to see any more. He charged at a dead run for the cover of the rocks, as the men regrouped behind him. Wayland reached the hill, and scrambled up the rugged slope, his legs pumping madly. Below, more men had joined the chase. Lanterns were coming out, and horses were being quickly saddled. They meant to mount a concerted effort to take him, he knew. If he could make it to the bay, though, he'd have a jump on them.

Wayland clawed his way up the rough, sloping hill. His chest heaved for air, and he damned his weakened condition for slowing him down. He paused for a second to take a glance back toward the ranch. Riders were mounting horses, and a group of men on foot, aided by lantern light, were crossing the flat stretch to the hill.

"Too far behind," Wayland thought. "They'll never catch me!"

It took only a precious few seconds to reach the crest of the hill, but it felt like an eternity. Wayland sprinted over the ridge, and stumbled down the hill to the small valley where he had left his horse. He charged blindly for the horse... and discovered a guard, holding the reins of the bay in one hand. In the other, he had a pistol, with Wayland dead in his sights!

"Drop it, mister!" he commanded. The man was tense, and Wayland felt the edge of uncertainty in his voice. Obviously not one of Loomis' hard core killers.

Wayland dropped the rifle. From behind, he heard the urgent voices and movements of the approaching mob. They would be here in seconds, and the odds would be insurmountable. It had to be now.

"The pistol. Shuck it!" the guard ordered.

Instead, Wayland suddenly dived to one side, looking for cover. The guard shot at Wayland's first motion, and the bullet screamed by Wayland's ear. The guard frantically readied to get off another shot, but Wayland's bay, as though sensing the need, suddenly reared. It jerked the man sideways, throwing the shot wild, as Wayland's Colt roared. Two slugs, dead center, killed the man.

Wayland sprinted for the bay, just as the group of men reached the crest of the hill behind him. Shots boomed, as Wayland leaped into the saddle, and spurred

the bay forward. She responded instantly, and stretched herself in long, powerful strides. The bullets plinked and whined around them as they thundered through the darkness, putting distance between them and the footbound gunmen. But, there were still the horsemen to contend with. Two of them appeared from a nearby hillside and angled to cut them off. Wayland turned the bay away from them, leaned low over her neck, and let her have free reign. It was up to her, now.

The chasing riders were astride bigger, longer legged horses, and closed the gap to nearly within shooting distance, early on. But the bay had heart, and stamina. Soon, she widened the distance between them and eventually, the pursuers dropped off and gave up.

When he was sure the chase was finished, Wayland pulled up the bay and got off. He checked her for bullet wounds, but found nothing. He walked her for a ways to allow her a well deserved rest. As he walked, he grimly realized that he had prepared himself to die, tonight, but was mighty glad to still be among the living.

Chapter 6

The Loomis Brand.

It was quiet when Wayland plodded into town on the bay. Even the atmosphere from within the saloons was subdued. He rode in the back way, in case his escapades at Loomis' ranch had caused any commotion in town. All was peaceful, though, so he took his horse to the livery, brushed her down and fed her before returning to the hotel.

When he entered his hotel room, his attention was drawn to the note he had left for Cassie, willing his possessions to her. He took pleasure in wadding it up and throwing it away. Wayland unstrapped his gunbelt, pulled off his boots and stretched out on the bed. For the first time that day, he allowed himself to relax, and was suddenly consumed by a wave of exhaustion. His body was still weak, not fully recovered from his gunshot wound. Wayland realized that he'd have to be aware of his limitations. He slipped into a deep, uninterrupted sleep.

The next morning, Wayland awoke feeling refreshed. Though the activity from the night before had taken its toll on him physically, it had also served to bolster his spirits. He had taken his first action against Loomis, and it felt like a minor victory. Wayland got up, shaved and left the hotel for the restaurant, where he wolfed down a plate of steak and eggs. He was on his third cup of coffee, when Shorty entered and made a beeline for him. It was obvious that something serious was on his mind. Shorty yanked a chair out, directly across from Wayland, dropped heavily into it, and planted his elbows firmly on the table.

"Join me, Sheriff?" he calmly asked.

"You're just a plain, damn fool, aren't you?" Shorty growled.

Wayland shrugged. "Did they make a law against that, too?"

"No, they didn't, but they did make a law against trespassing and murder, and by damn, you're guilty of both!" Shorty thundered, and slammed his fist on the table for emphasis.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Shorty," Wayland lied.

"What I'm talkin' about is one man dead and two wounded at the Loomis place last night. What I'm talkin' about is, you're under arrest!"

Wayland's eyebrows raised in surprise, as he casually sipped his coffee.

"You got witnesses that saw me there?" he asked.

"No, I ain't. You got witnesses that say you wasn't there?" Shorty responded.

Wayland shook his head. "No".

"Well, then, I'm takin' you in," Shorty insisted.

"You'll never prove it, Shorty. Leastways, not in a fair trial."

Shorty's head bobbed in a nod of agreement. "I know that. In two weeks, the circuit Judge will come around, and he'll drop the charges. I'll apologize, and you can go. Meanwhile, you can cool your heels in jail. It'll give you time to think. It appears to me, you need it."

Wayland frowned. Shorty was making this tougher than he expected. Whatever happened, Wayland wasn't about to spend two weeks behind bars. Still, the thought of swapping lead with Shorty didn't appeal to him, much, either.

"You can't do this, Shorty," Wayland argued.

"Oh? And why can't I?" Shorty replied.

"Because, he was with me last night," came Cassie's voice.

Shorty and Wayland turned, to see her approaching the table. Fortunately, Shorty didn't see the look of surprise and astonishment on Wayland's face.

"Cassie..." he started, but she quickly interrupted.

"He didn't want to say anything out of consideration for me," she added.

Shorty's mouth turned downward in a frown. "I know that ain't so, Cassie," he said.

"I'll testify to it, Shorty," she threatened, "You can explain to the Judge why you arrested a man who had a perfect alibi."

Shorty was outgunned, and he knew it. He looked at Cassie, then at Wayland, gave a shrug of grudging defeat, rose and stomped out.

Wayland looked at Cassie, and smiled. "Looks like I'm beholdin' to you again," he said.

She glared at him as she sat down. "I knew you were crazy, Wayland, but I didn't think you were stupid! How could you do something like that?"

Wayland looked mildly insulted. "That's a fine way to talk. Here I was going to leave you the best quarter-horse this side of the Mississippi, and you treat me this way."

"I don't want your horse, you fool," she blurted, "I want you!"

Wayland reeled inwardly from the impact of the words. His jaw hung slack as he mentally groped for a reply. Cassie took a deep breath, calming visibly, as though the admission had released the pressure from her.

"Alive, Wayland," she said. "I want you alive. Please, let's just get away from here. I have some money saved.."

He reached over and laid his hand on hers, to stop her. "Not 'till it's over between me and Loomis. I can't."

Her look turned cold, and the disappointment showed strongly on her face. She raised her head defiantly, and squared her shoulders. "If it's that important to you, then go ahead," she said in a calm, controlled voice. "But even if you come back alive, don't come back for me, Wayland." She rose, and walked out, holding her head proud and strong.

Damn, but he admired her! Wayland fought the overwhelming urge to go after her, and stop her. He bit blood from his lip as he watched her walk away, but he let her go. It was better this way.

The day passed quietly. Wayland spent a few minutes at the blacksmith's, to thank the man for taking the bullet out of him. His name was Joseph, and he was a bald, heavily muscled man in his thirties. When Wayland first laid eyes on him, Joseph was hammering away over a glowing, hot anvil. Shirtless, and glistening with perspiration, a bandana tied around his head, he presented an ominous figure. Wayland would later learn that Joseph's frightening appearance was tempered by a gentle, almost shy, personality. Joseph had, ironically, been a field medic in the Union army. He made no reference to "the cause", either Union or Confederate. For him, the war was over. Wayland envied him the feeling. He offered to pay Joseph, but the burly, good-natured blacksmith wouldn't hear of it.

From the blacksmith shop, Wayland went to the hardware store. The heavy-set, bearded proprietor didn't speak much, but eyed Wayland warily when he ordered two boxes of ammunition. One for his rifle, and one for his Colt. Later, Wayland ventured into the saloon, for a beer. Secretly, he hoped he'd run into Cassie, and be able to say something that would soothe the bad feelings between them. She wasn't there, though, and even Dave seemed reluctant to engage him in conversation. No one, it seemed, wanted to be seen with Wayland. It was as though he carried some sort of plague, and they might catch it if they got too close. They didn't speak to him, or even acknowledge him when they met him in the street. Yet, he could feel the eyes on him when he passed, and heard the whispered gossip going on behind his back. He felt like a side-show attraction, with everyone looking at him, betting on when and how he would die. Feeling itchy, Wayland saddled the bay and took her out for a ride. Not that she, or he, needed the exercise, but Wayland needed the ride to release his pent-up anxiety.

He stayed out until dark, then built a small camp and ate jerky and beans by an open fire. He was feeling a lot better when he returned to town, well after dark. Wayland purchased a bottle of whiskey at the saloon and went straight to his room. He had several drinks, unusual for him, and contemplated his next move.

It occurred to him that all of a sudden, he was trying to find a way to accomplish his task without sacrificing his own life. It made him uneasy. His willingness to die had always been, he felt, his best advantage against Loomis. Was he losing his edge? He found no answers in the whiskey, but it numbed his senses enough to eventually drag him into a heavy sleep.

It was very late that night, when all hell broke loose. Wayland's awakening was abrupt, as he was dragged roughly from his bed. The whiskey and his weariness had dulled his senses and rendered him helpless against the three hooded men who brutally attacked him in the darkness. They pounded him with fists, until he crumbled to the floor, then they kicked him violently in the ribs and back. He had never completely regained consciousness before he blacked out again.

When he came to, he was stretched out spraddled on the ground, with his wrists and ankles tied to stakes. It took a long moment for Wayland to get his bearings. There were stars in the night sky above him, and he knew he was somewhere on the open prairie. A yellowish glow flickered from a campfire nearby, and he could hear the snorts and shuffling of horses.

He vaguely remembered the altercation in his hotel room. His jaw felt swollen, and he had a split lip. His ribs also throbbed painfully, but didn't feel broken. Wayland tried to speak, but all that came out was a pained groan. It was enough to bring the three hooded men to him. They stared down at him, the hoods giving them a particularly menacing appearance.

"Thought we'd killed you," one of the hooded men said. The voice was muffled beneath the hood, but Wayland thought he recognized it. He strained his memory to pinpoint it.

"You sure enough tried," Wayland mumbled through puffy lips. At that, the man standing over him reached up, and pulled off his hood. It was Deputy Harley Stiles!

"I'm letting you see my face, Reb. Know why?" Harley asked.

Wayland knew. It was because Harley had no intention of letting Wayland leave here alive. But, why hadn't they killed him already? As if reading his mind, Harley answered the question.

"Mr. Loomis wants some answers from you. He wants to know why you're trying to kill him," Harley said.

"Let him ask me to my face, if he's got the guts," Wayland replied sarcastically.

Harley grinned. It was the first time Wayland had seen him do it, and it really worried him. "I was hoping you'd say something like that," he said.

Harley lowered down on his haunches, over Wayland. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully as he studied Wayland. Hovering there, Harley reminded Wayland of a vulture, patiently waiting for a wounded animal to die. He was obviously enjoying the sense of power he was feeling. Wayland determined to take as much fun out of it as he could for Harley. Harley turned to one of the other hooded men and gave a questioning look. The hooded man nodded.

"It's ready, Harley," he said. This voice also sounded familiar to Wayland, and this time, he nailed it down immediately. This was the knife-man who had visited his cell with Loomis, when Wayland was laid up. Wayland was beginning to think that everyone in Texas worked for John Loomis.

The hooded knife-man walked to the fire, leaned down, and picked up something. Wayland's heart sank as he saw the man approach with a branding iron. The end of it glowed red-hot. To add insult to injury, it was the Loomis brand. Harley took the hot iron from the knife man. He casually waved it several passes over Wayland's face and eyes, so Wayland could feel the heat from it. Inside, Wayland struggled to hide the fear that welled up in him.

"Now, then," Harley said, "you got something to tell me?"

Wayland steeled himself for the inevitable, took a deep breath, and in a course, raspy voice...began to sing! "*Wish I was in the land of cotton...*"

Harley looked dumbfounded, momentarily stunned. The second hooded man let out an involuntary chuckle.

"*Old times there...*"

Enraged, Harley jammed the hot iron against Wayland's neck. Wayland's heart jumped nearly out of his chest, and his body tensed and shuddered against his bonds as he choked back a scream. No, by God! He wouldn't give the bastard the pleasure!

The searing hot iron sent a sick odor of scorched flesh into the air. Wayland fought the all-consuming river of pain that surged through his body, but he didn't utter a sound. When Harley pulled back the iron, Wayland's body went slack. He was panting hard and his face dripped sweat. Harley stared coldly down at him.

"I'm not foolin' with you, Reb. This could be a long night. Up to you. What do you say?"

Wayland's voice came weak, and strained. "...*are not forgotten*," he sang, "*look away*..."

"Damn your eyes!" Harley snarled. He raised the branding iron over Wayland's face, his mouth twisted in a grimace. Wayland sucked in his breath and braced himself... just as a gunshot boomed through the night, freezing Harley!

The bullet hit the campfire and showered sparks and burning bits of wood everywhere. Harley bolted to his feet and dropped the branding iron. All three men went for their guns, their eyes searching the darkness for the shooter's location. Another shot cracked, and the knife-man's hooded partner went down, dead instantly from a bullet in the head! Harley and the knife man fired blindly into the darkness. A third shot from the sniper kicked up dirt near Harley's boot and sent Harley and the knife-man running for their horses. The sniper kept firing, until the two men had mounted and stampeded off into the darkness.

There were several moments of silence, as Wayland lay there wondering who his savior could be. Or was it a savior? The possibility of outlaws or renegade Indians could not be ruled out. Either way, he figured he'd be no worse off than he was a few minutes ago. It wasn't long before he heard the footsteps approaching. As the sniper neared, Wayland could hear his labored breathing, along with an uneven walk. He was dragging a leg, Wayland decided. Whoever he was, Wayland knew he was hurt. The footsteps stopped, and a face loomed over Wayland. The man was thin and wiry, with black, unkempt hair and leathery, sun-darkened skin. He grinned, and Wayland noted a front tooth missing.

"Howdy," the man said, simply.

"Howdy," Wayland croaked.

The man rose to his feet, and, favoring his right leg, limped to the dead man he'd shot. He pulled the hood from the man's face, and gave a little grunt of recognition. "Hello, Squint," he said to the dead man, "Never did much like you, anyways."

With that, the stranger searched the dead body, and chuckled triumphantly at the discovery of a whiskey flask in Squint's boot. He walked away from the body, sat down near Wayland and took a healthy pull from the flask. He swallowed, let out a long "ahhh" of approval, and eyed Wayland.

"Nice night," he said.

Wayland was mystified, and anxious to learn his fate. He was in no mood for idle chatter, even from a man who had saved his life. "A bit warm," Wayland answered tersely.

"You got a name?" the stranger asked.

"Wayland Brice," Wayland responded.

"Who you got mad at you, Wayland Brice?"

Wayland considered lying, but was just sick-and-tired enough of the whole mess that it no longer mattered. "John Loomis," he said.

The man merely grunted, noncommittally. "And what's got him so riled?"

"I aim to kill him," Wayland replied.

The stranger broke into a wide smile. "Is that a fact?"

"Wouldn't make much of a lie," Wayland answered dryly.

The stranger laughed. "No, sir, that it wouldn't."

The man rose to his feet and walked to Wayland. He reached to his side and pulled a hunting knife from his belt. Wayland sucked in his breath, preparing for the worst, but the man deftly slit the ropes that bound Wayland's hands and legs, freeing him. Wayland gave out a long breath of relief. He sat up stiffly and fought off a wave of nausea that swept over him. He took several long, deep breaths to stifle it, then rubbed the circulation back into his wrists. The stranger offered him the whiskey flask and Wayland accepted it, took a drink and handed it back. The stranger sat back down, and watched him with a leisurely eye. Wayland reached gingerly to his neck, and examined the burn wound. It was swollen and tender, and would leave quite a scar, but it wasn't life-threatening.

"Whoever you are," Wayland said, "I'm obliged."

The man toasted him with the flask. "Name's Dan Barker. They call me Irish Dan."

Irish Dan, the horse thief. So, that was it! No wonder Dan had come to Wayland's aid. He was probably the only man within a hundred miles that was squarely on Wayland's side of the fight. But, what was he doing here?

"We met," Wayland said. "Couple weeks ago, out on the prairie," Wayland continued. "You were riding a big, black horse."

Dan nodded, "So, that was you?" he said. "That horse was mine, by rights. Bastard Loomis swindled me out of my ranch. Claimed he bought the place on back taxes. Hell, I homesteaded that place!"

"So, the horse really belonged to you?" Wayland asked.

"Hell, no. The horse was his. I just figgered to get back at him. I knew he loved that horse, so I tuk it!"

Wayland smiled. He liked Dan's brass, for sure. "I imagine he's as bent on killing you as me," Wayland said.

Dan laughed. "You ain't heard the best of it. Blamed nag stepped in a prairie dog hole and broke her leg. Mine, too, I think. Left me stranded out here on the desert. Lucky for you, I was camped near here, and saw the fire."

"Hard enough for a man afoot to be on the run," Wayland said, "much less a man with a busted leg."

Irish Dan nodded affirmatively. "That's a fact," he replied. "Been eatin' rattlers and jackrabbits for food. Run out of water yesterday. Couldn't go back and couldn't get away. Ain't that a bother? 'Course, now I got me a horse." He motioned to the dead-man's pony.

"That mean you're going to leave me stranded out here?" Wayland asked.

"You can ride with me to the next town, if you've a mind," Dan answered.

Wayland shook his head. "I gotta go back, even if I have to walk," he said, firmly.

"Gotta be ten, twelve miles back to Loomis," Dan said.

"Just the same, I'm going," Wayland insisted.

Dan regarded him with strong curiosity. "He must've done you a mighty wrong," he mused.

"He did," Wayland responded, "and now I've got another grudge to settle, as well. Harley Stiles."

"The Deputy?" Dan asked, incredulous.

"That's who you were shooting at," Wayland explained.

"Now, what in tarnation...?" Dan started, obviously confused. His brow furrowed, and his face contorted as he tried to piece together the puzzle. Then, his face blossomed into a look of revelation, as he figured it out.

"Deputy Stiles is a Loomis man!" he blurted in triumph.

Wayland confirmed it with a nod. "Tried and true," Wayland said, "and I don't reckon even Shorty knows about it."

Dan squinted at him. "And, you're goin' after him and Loomis?"

He asked it with a strong flavor of disbelief. Wayland frowned slightly. "I guess you're going to tell me what a damn fool I am, too. Go on. Everybody else has. Won't make any difference."

Irish Dan shook his head vehemently. "No, I wasn't thinkin' that. I was thinkin' how much I'd like to see it!" He burst into a wide grin, the gap from his missing tooth giving him a near comical look.

Wayland laughed heartily with him, then turned more serious, as he gave Dan a steady gaze. "How'd you like to be in on it?" Wayland asked.

Dan's grin faded, and he looked thoughtful for a moment, then gave a little shake of his head. "I said I'd like to see it. Didn't say I'd die to see it," he said, flatly.

Wayland was disappointed. He was in no shape to walk back to Loomis, and he needed the horse. "Well, I won't argue the point," he said, "You earned it, right enough. I'm grateful to you."

Wayland rose stiffly to his feet, and extended his hand to Dan. They shook, then Dan handed Wayland the dead man's revolver and gunbelt. "Here. I got plenty guns," he said.

Wayland thanked him, strapped on the gun, and set out walking, out into the desert.

Chapter 7

A New Score to Settle.

Wayland judged his bearing by the stars. His grandfather had been a sailing man, in his youth, and this was among the many things Wayland had learned from him. He had walked two miles, he guessed, when he came upon a wagon

road. It would make the walk easier, at least. He set a comfortable pace for himself, and fell into a rhythm. As he moved along the narrow trail, his mind was filled with the events of the past days. He had boldly blundered his way into the middle of a pretty dangerous situation, giving no thought to a plan. Now, it was time to come up with one. Otherwise, he'd never have a prayer of getting to Loomis. First, though, Wayland had to settle the score with Harley Stiles. Once Shorty learned the truth about Stiles, maybe he'd lean a bit more favorably in Wayland's direction.

Soon, Wayland found his thoughts turning to Cassie. It awakened a yearning in him that made his stomach churn. He had never met a woman who stirred him up so, and he cursed the timing of their meeting. He wanted her; wanted to take her away and spend his life with her. Almost as much as he wanted John Loomis dead. Almost.

Wayland was shaken from his internal thoughts by the drumming of hooves, coming up the road in his direction. He quickly moved from the road to a small patch of scrub-brush nearby, and hunkered behind it. Six riders, and the one in the lead appeared to be Harley. Wayland wasn't surprised that Harley would come back. He had revealed himself to Wayland, and was no doubt nervous about it. If not that, then Loomis had likely ordered him back, to determine Wayland's fate. They rode past, and Wayland came out of hiding. It would be light, soon, and Wayland picked up his pace, hoping to reach the cover of town before the mob returned. If they caught him in the open, on foot, and in daylight, he was as good as dead. He walked for another hour at this brisk pace. As he'd guessed, the horizon was beginning to show the first colors of sunrise and the darkness was melting away. Wayland began to feel uncomfortably vulnerable, and wished the buildings of Loomis would hurry into view. Wayland's heart skipped, when he heard another horse, coming up from behind him. Only one rider. Was it one of the posse, returning to town?

Wayland searched the barren terrain for a place to hide. He found a small depression in the sand. It wouldn't completely shield him from view, but the light wasn't good yet. Maybe the rider wouldn't spot him. Wayland flattened himself as the horse and rider drew near. He kept his face low to the ground, not daring to raise his head even to identify the horseman. He grew concerned, when the steps of the horse slowed, now very close to him. To a walk... then a standstill. He'd been spotted!

Wayland bolted upright, his gun in his hand, hoping there was not one already honed in on him. He found his target, and readied to fire... at the grinning figure of Irish Dan! Without flinching, Dan swept his hat from his head and gave a little bow. Wayland pulled down the gun, and relaxed.

"You're headed the wrong way, aren't you, Dan?" Wayland asked.

"Reckon that's so," he answered jovially. "Got to thinkin' about all them odds you're buckin'. You may be a damn fool, mister, but I'll vow you just might get the job done, with a little help."

"A little help?" Wayland queried.

"Let's set up camp someplace, have a cup of coffee and talk about it," Dan grinned. He offered his arm, and helped hoist Wayland to the back of the horse.

"You know, there's something I've been wondering," Wayland said, as they plodded along. "You sure don't look Irish. How come they call you Irish Dan?"

"I got this real fondness for Irish whiskey," he replied.

"When this is over, I'll buy you a bottle," Wayland offered.

Dan chuckled. "Let's just hope it don't all leak out from the bullet holes I'll have in me."

Wayland laughed, as Dan picked up the horses clip to a gentle trot, out across the prairie. Wayland and Irish Dan camped in a small arroyo. There, they talked for more than an hour. Dan provided good information concerning access into the Loomis ranch. There was a small gully, Dan said, that ran out from the the west of the ranch. It provided good cover, and passed within a few feet of the back of the barn. Dan also confirmed Wayland's suspicion that Loomis had posted extra guards for Wayland's benefit. Somehow, he'd have to get some of those gunmen away from the place. With this valuable information, Wayland began to devise a plan. It included Dan, but with as little risk to him as possible.

Later, they rode double to the edge of town, where Dan left Wayland to go in on foot. Dan returned to camp to await word from him. Wayland came into town behind the hotel. He edged his way along the back of the buildings to the "Texas Crown" saloon, then used some discarded barrels and boxes to aid his climb to the upstairs hall window. Wayland climbed through the hall window and slipped down to Cassie's room. He tapped on the door, but there was no answer. He tried the handle, found it unlocked, and went in.

Her room was as he imagined it would be. Wherever possible, she had covered the drab walls with paintings and curtains. It was bright and comfortable. Wayland sat on the bed to wait. Soon, he began getting drowsy, and decided to stretch out on the bed. Within seconds, he was asleep.

It was early evening when he woke up. He jerked upright suddenly, and found Cassie sitting in a chair, beside the bed. She regarded him with a mildly interested, but otherwise non-committal look.

"How long you been here?" he asked.

"About three hours," she replied, and reached to her dresser, where she picked up a plate of food from the restaurant. Lamb chops and fried potatoes, and the gentle aroma of it made Wayland's mouth water. She placed the food on the bed, beside him.

"It's cold, but I didn't know when you'd wake up," she said.

Famished, Wayland ate ravenously while she watched.

"When you turned up missing today, I figured they'd killed you," she said, finally.

Wayland nodded. "They tried," he answered, "But I got lucky."

"And still, you came back," she said flatly. There was an edge of weariness to her voice.

He nodded. "Hope you don't mind that I came here, Cassie. I had no place else."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter much, really. You've been a dead man since you came to this town. I'm through fooling myself over it. When the time comes, I'll cry at your funeral. That's all I can offer."

He gave a somber nod. "I guess that's more than most," he said.

He finished his meal, got up, and moved to the wash basin. He splashed some water on his face, then gingerly loosened the bandana from his neck. He heard a sharp intake of breath from Cassie, as she saw the wound on his neck for the first time. She was instantly on her feet, and at his side. She soaked a clean cloth, and carefully began to wash the wound.

"My God," she whispered, "Who did this?"

"Harley Stiles," he replied. "He's working for Loomis."

Her eyebrows raised in surprise, but she said nothing. Once she finished cleaning the wound, she fashioned a crude bandage for it. Then, silently, she returned to her chair. Wayland turned to her. She looked away, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm not aiming to kill him," he said, and saw a slight reaction, relief he thought, slip across her face. She quickly masked it, and said nothing. He moved to her chair, leaned in and kissed her gently on the lips, then was out the door and gone.

Wayland stepped into the hall. Below, he could hear the rinky-tink sounds of the piano, and a mingling of voices. He moved to the top of the stairs, then down a couple of steps, until he could see into the saloon below. Harley wasn't there among the crowd of drinkers and card-players. Wayland moved back to the hall window. After climbing down the back of the saloon, Wayland worked his way to Main Street, keeping to the shadows, moving toward the sheriff's office. He hoped to find Harley out in the open, where he could get the drop on him.

"Let him answer to Shorty," he thought, "that's good enough for me."

He knew he would have to catch Harley off guard. The deputy had proved his proficiency with a gun, and his willingness to use it. Wayland posted himself in the shadows of an alley, across the street from the Sheriff's Office, and waited. Nearly an hour went by. Finally, Shorty emerged from the office. He was headed for home, Wayland figured. That meant Harley would be making rounds soon. That would be Wayland's chance to take him by surprise. As Wayland watched Shorty stomp his way down the wooden sidewalk, he mentally apologized in advance to him. Wayland figured to be rousing him out of bed later on, and no doubt the Sheriff would be in a grouchy mood over it.

Wayland checked the load in his pistol, for the third time that day, and settled in to wait. Nearly two hours later, by his estimate, Harley came out of the Sheriff's Office and made his way up the street. Wayland tagged him from the opposite side of the street, slightly behind and in the darkness. The Deputy mechanically performed his routine duties, checking for unlocked doors along the street. At the end of the street, Harley arrived at the livery stable. When he went in, Wayland seized his chance. He darted across the street, and flattened himself against the wall, next to the large double doors of the stable. He cautiously pushed one of the big doors, just enough to provide a crack between them that would allow him to look in. The hinges on the stable door gave just the faintest creaking noise as it opened.

Wayland peered in. Though he could only see a small area inside the stable, Harley was within his view. He was sitting on a wooden box, his hat cocked back on his head, taking a pull from a pint bottle of whiskey.

Harley had the bottle to his lips, when Wayland burst through the doors, gun in hand! The startled deputy sputtered whiskey all over his shirt, as he bolted to his feet!

"I'll kill you if you move, Deputy!" Wayland shouted. It was then he realized that there was another man in the room! He had been out of Wayland's sight, but was sitting across from Harley. As soon as Wayland saw him, out the corner of his eye, he knew the man was going for his gun. Wayland had no choice but to shift his aim to the man.

Wayland fired, and the gunman jerked backward from a bullet in the chest. As he slumped to the ground, Wayland instinctively knew that Harley was drawing, without even seeing him. Knowing he couldn't get a shot off ahead of the deputy, Wayland chose another tact. He dived for cover!

A shot roared, just as Wayland rolled behind partition of an empty stall. Three more shots ripped through the wood above Wayland's head. Wayland stabbed his gun around the corner and banged two shots blindly in Harley's general direction. He wasn't about to poke his head out and get it shot off. The sound of his bullets slapping into the back wall of the building told Wayland that he hadn't hit anything of importance. The horses whinnied and shuffled nervously within the restraints of their stalls. Wayland figured the shots would draw attention from the people in town. Maybe they'd pass it off, at first, to a couple of rambunctious, drunk cowboys. Eventually, though, someone would show up.

Wayland reloaded the spent rounds from his gun, then peered slowly up over the partition. Within a second, three shots boomed, and bullets ripped so close to his head that the splinters stung his face. Wayland ducked back down. He had gotten just enough of a look to pinpoint Harley's location. He was in a back corner of the stable, behind a pile of feed sacks. Wayland heard him chuckle.

"Hey, Reb, what say we holster these guns and face each other like real men?" he called, in a taunting voice.

Wayland knew that Harley was a seasoned gunfighter, and wasn't about to risk it. His mind worked quickly to formulate a better idea. The double doors of the stable were nearly obliterated from Harley's viewpoint. He would be able to hear the doors open, and close, but not see them. Wayland slipped along the floor to the double doors, and gave one a mighty shove. He scurried back to his hiding place before the door slammed shut. It was more than loud enough, he knew, for Harley to have heard it.

"Hey, Reb?" Harley called out.

Wayland remained motionless, holding even his breathing in check. There were several seconds of silence, and Wayland could feel Harley's indecision. Finally, he heard a mumbled curse from Harley's position.

"Yellow-bellied coward!" he swore, and Wayland heard his footsteps fast approaching, heading for the doors. Harley ran by so fast, he didn't even see Wayland, hunkered in the stall. As Harley reached the doors, Wayland stepped out behind him.

"Harley!" he shouted.

Harley spun and lifted his revolver to shoot, but Wayland already had him in his sights, and blasted a shot that slammed into Harley's forehead, snapping it back like a rag doll. That was the trouble with gunslingers, Wayland later decided. They

were so good, they thought they could overcome any odds. It was Harley's arrogance, among other things, that got him killed. Wayland didn't bother to check for signs of life. The location of the wound dictated instant death. He honestly hadn't intended to kill Harley, but found regret hard to come by in his heart of hearts. It would have serious consequences, though, and Wayland knew it. He had no case to present to Shorty, regarding Harley's connection to Loomis. Wayland figured that his only option was to cut and run, until another plan could be decided.

Wayland moved quickly to his bay, well rested and berthed in one of the stalls. He saddled her in smooth, liquid motions borne from repetition. Within seconds, he was mounted and riding her straight for the double doors of the livery. He shoved the doors open from atop her and swung her head through the doors and outside. He was readying himself to turn the bay loose in a dead run, when his path was blocked by Shorty, who held a shotgun on him. In his eyes, Wayland saw his serious intent, and reined the bay in. He took a deep breath, and gave out a little laugh.

"Thought you'd gone to bed, Shorty," he said, simply.

"Went home for supper. Came back ten minutes ago," he replied, and kept the shotgun trained on Wayland.

"Should've had seconds," Wayland said, in a wry tone. Wayland carefully lifted his gun from the holster with his thumb and forefinger, and dropped it on the ground. He dismounted, and raised his hands in compliance.

"I can explain, Shorty," he said.

"You'll have time," Shorty answered back. He motioned with the shotgun for Wayland to move on down the street. As they did, Wayland noticed for the first time, that the handful of residents who were still awake were all out on the street, watching in silence. The eyes followed them down the middle of the street. Framed in the light of the doorway, at the "Texas Crown", Wayland could see Cassie, also watching. He didn't look at her face, but kept his eyes straight ahead as he walked. He already knew what her expression would say.

The cell door slammed with a harsh "clang" behind Wayland as Shorty locked him up. Shorty stood there, the keys in his hand, and studied Wayland.

"I gotta hand you one thing," he said solemnly, "I figured it'd be Harley walking out of that stable, and you layin' dead."

"Harley was working for John Loomis, Shorty," Wayland anxiously explained. "He tried to kill me, out on the desert last night."

Shorty gave a derisive snort. "Boy, every drunk and horse thief I ever locked up lied he was innocent."

"I'm telling you the truth," Wayland urged. "Look at me, Shorty!"

With that, Wayland yanked the bandana down, revealing the brand on his neck. Shorty grimaced a bit at the sight of the wound. He appeared to weaken to Wayland's argument, briefly, but caught himself.

"Well, somebody did a Godawful thing to you, sure enough," he conceded, "But I got no proof it was Harley. Just your say-so."

Wayland flushed in anger. "Are you scared of Loomis? Is that it, Shorty?"

As soon as he said it, Wayland regretted it. The sheriff glowered at Wayland. "You shut your damn mouth, mister! The only one responsible for the spot you're

in is you. You started this commotion the day you pointed your pony towards Texas. Don't anybody here owe you anything. Least of all, me!"

With that, Shorty spun on his heel and stomped out the door.

Wayland felt frustrated, as he fell back on the bunk. He futilely searched his mind for a way out. He could think of none. He regretted his failure to bring down Loomis. He had come so close. Oddly, though, he was finding that the raging fire of hatred against Loomis that had tormented him all these years was beginning to lose its intensity. He was giving more thought to staying alive...and to Cassie. Wayland inwardly cursed himself for the fool he was. He'd had his chance with her, and had discarded it. Now, he would have to live with that, along with his failure to render justice on Colonel John Loomis.

He was pulled from deep thought by the sound of voices, coming from outside. Wayland rose to the window and peered out. His cell was in back of the building, but the tiny window was in a side wall, and he was able to see part of the street in front of the Sheriff's office.

He saw a mob of men, coming up the sidewalk. Some of them, he recognized as town citizens. There was a sprinkle of cowboys and farmers among them, but the core of the group, which led the procession, appeared to be guns-for-hire. Loomis men. The man at the front was a dark-haired, rangy fellow with a craggy, hard-looking face.

The voices grew louder as they approached, and Wayland could detect the slur and bravado of whiskey talking in many of them. They passed out of his sight, as they gathered at the front of the Sheriff's office, but Wayland could still hear them well.

"Sheriff!" A man called, and Wayland recognized the voice of the knife-man. This must be the craggy-faced leader. Wayland heard Shorty break down the shotgun and load it, then the front door opened and closed as Shorty went out.

"Been expecting you fellas," Shorty said calmly. "This your idea, Brady?"

Wayland grunted in grim satisfaction that he finally had the knife-man's name. They had met twice in conflict, and Wayland was glad to have him identified, for future reference.

"He killed Harley," Brady shouted, and the mob rumbled words of angry agreement.

"Well, yes, it appears he did," Shorty confirmed in a reasonable tone. "But, we still don't have all the facts as to why. That's how come we have Judges and lawyers and the like. Now, be sensible, men. Hell, if he's guilty, he'll hang, right enough. No sense you breakin' the law, just to hang him a little sooner."

A few in the crowd began to bend to Shorty's reasoning, cooling down some. Brady responded without hesitation.

"You're just trying to protect him, Shorty. You've been doing it all along!" Brady growled, and got the strong response from the mob that he wanted.

Wayland knew that Brady and the other Loomis men in the crowd were instigating this. No doubt, they'd been over in the saloon, buying drinks and riling up the citizens.

"We got no truck with you, Sheriff, but that murderin' Reb is gonna hang tonight" Brady threatened, "whether you turn him over easy or not. You think on it. We'll be back!"

The crowd rallied to him, as the angry shouts and drunken threats re-surfaced. They did move away, but without an attitude of retreat. And they didn't disperse, they went together. These were bad signs, as Wayland saw it. He heard Shorty enter the front office, and heard his heavy footsteps as he came back to the cell. The shotgun was still slung over one arm, and Shorty's mood was grim.

"They'll do it, Shorty," Wayland insisted, "Some of them are Loomis men. He's putting them up to it."

"Aw, you and Loomis both be damned!" Shorty snapped angrily.

"No sense you dying over this," Wayland pressed.

Shorty shot an angry glare at him. "What I should do is put a bullet between your no-account eyes, and save everybody a lot of trouble. Now, you shut up while I'm thinkin'."

He began to pace in front of the cell, deep in thought, stroking the back of his neck with one hand. Wayland stifled his impatience. He had to let Shorty make the first move. Finally, Shorty turned to him, with a steady look.

"If I let you go, swear you'll forget about Loomis and get out of Texas," he demanded.

Wayland remained silent. He wouldn't make that promise.

Shorty gave a flustered, irritated snarl. "Aww, to hell with it! Maybe I'll get lucky, and you and Loomis'll kill each other!"

Shorty quickly unlocked the cell door. Wayland couldn't get out fast enough. He followed Shorty into the front office, where Shorty handed him his gunbelt and gun. He strapped it on, then reached out his hand to shake. Shorty just glared back at him, and made no move to respond.

"If I ever see your face in my town again, I'll shoot you on sight," he warned.

Wayland smiled wryly. "Been a pleasure knowing you, too, Shorty."

Shorty scowled, then poked out his jaw and pointed at it. "Now," he said, "hit me. Make it a good one. I want this to look like an escape. That way, if they catch you, I'm off the hook."

Wayland looked amused. "I'm touched by your loyalty, Shorty."

"Like you said," he grumbled, "No sense in me dyin', too."

He closed his eyes. Wayland drew back, and threw a solid fist to Shorty's jaw. His head snapped to one side, and Wayland caught him as he fell, and laid him gently on the floor. He checked, to make certain he hadn't done any serious damage. It looked like a clean knockout. With that, Wayland tipped his hat to the unconscious Sheriff and slipped out the side door, into the alley.

Chapter 8

The Sins of the Father.

Outside, Wayland moved back down the alley, and took his former route behind the buildings, headed for the livery and his horse. His path took him behind the "Texas Crown," and he couldn't keep himself from looking up at Cassie's window.

A light shone there. Wayland figured that Cassie was staying out of the way of the angry lynch mob, and was glad for it. He started to move off, but found himself rooted to the ground, below her window. He struggled inwardly against it, but finally began to climb up the back wall. Wayland climbed through the hall window. The voices of the drunken mob below were reaching fever-pitch, and he smiled to himself at how they'd feel if they knew where he was right now. He hurried to Cassie's door, and tapped lightly. It opened, and Cassie appeared. Her eyes were red from crying, and she gaped at him in shock.

"Cassie..." he began, but she grabbed his arm and tugged him into the room, then shut the door. She threw her arms around him, and pressed her head to his chest. He held her there, for a long moment.

"I thought I was rid of you," she sniffled, half jokingly.

"I guess you just aren't that lucky," he teased.

She raised her face to him and they kissed. When they parted, she abruptly pushed away and gave him a questioning look. "How did you get out of jail?" she asked.

"Shorty. Too honest for his own good," he answered.

"You're still going after Loomis?" she asked hesitantly.

He nodded. "I am, Cassie. Then, I'm coming back for you."

She shook her head firmly. "No, Wayland. You can't come back here."

His heart sank. He couldn't give her up. He wouldn't! "Damn it, Cassie," he said firmly, "I said I'm coming back for you, and I mean it."

Again, she shook her head negatively. "No, it's too dangerous."

He started to speak again, to argue, but she interrupted him. "Kansas City," she said. "I'll meet you in Kansas City."

Her words sank in after a second, and Wayland broke into a wide grin. She smiled with him. He grabbed her and kissed her hard. Wayland suddenly realized that the crowd below was shifting to the street. It brought his attention back to his more urgent concerns. Cassie saw the change in his expression and knew he would be leaving. She looked sad and fearful, and clutched eagerly to his hand.

"Stay alive, Wayland," she whispered, and kissed him again. He turned from her, and went out the door.

By the time he reached the ground below, the mob was headed up the street toward the Sheriff's Office. Wayland didn't bother to hide his movements, now. His enemies were headed the other way. Wayland jogged to the livery stable, and quickly ducked inside. He hurried to his horse, still saddled from his earlier escape attempt. He mounted up, and spurred her through the doors. They thundered out into the open, and Wayland turned the bay loose. Back down the street, he heard a shout of alarm.

"He's gettin' away!" the voice yelled.

Wayland glanced back over his shoulder to see the group of men flood from the Sheriff's Office, into the street. There was mayhem, as several of the men ran to the horses that were already saddled. A couple of men popped shots in his direction, but Wayland knew they'd never hit him. Not with pistols, at that distance, and in the dark. He leaned over the bay, and gave a loud "yahh!" into her ear, as he had done many times before. It seemed to tell her that the need was urgent, and she stretched herself to go faster.

Wayland knew that the mounted vigilantes would be coming, but felt good about his chances. He had a healthy jump on them, and his horse was well rested. He intended to give them the chase of their lives. When they gave up on him, he'd double back. He rode, hell-bent, for several minutes, staying on the road to allow him more speed. He didn't even hear the shot that raked his skull, and drove him from his horse! Wayland hit the ground hard, stunned, the breath knocked out of him. He heard a "whoop" of joy from a group of rocks, some twenty yards away.

"By damn, I got him," a man yelled.

"And here, I thought we were gonna miss all the fun out here," another man shouted.

Wayland fought to clear his head, then cursed to himself for not realizing that the roads would be guarded. Loomis was a former military man, with a knack for strategy. There was no time to waste, and he knew it. The mounted lynch mob would be riding up within seconds. He listened for the footsteps of his two assailants. When they came, they came at a trot. They weren't being very cautious, Wayland realized, and must be assuming that Wayland was dead. Without hesitating, Wayland dug out his gun, rolled to his belly and fired. One man, struck by Wayland's bullet, screamed and dropped to the ground, clutching his stomach. The healthy one got off a shot, but missed, and Wayland blasted two rounds into him.

Wayland leapt to his feet, and charged for the bay. By the time he was mounted, the posse was within view of him. There were triumphant shouts and guns blazed as Wayland kicked the bay into action. He managed to stretch the distance between them, but not enough to shake them, he knew. Wayland studied the surrounding terrain. To his right, two or three miles away, was a stand of barren, rocky hills. His only chance would be to lose them there. He streamlined himself along the neck of the bay, and willed her to go faster.

By the time they reached the hills, the bay was grunting for air, but showed not a twinge of slowing. He couldn't run her this hard for much longer. His eyes searched the darkness for an escape, and he located an opening in the rocks. He went for it. Wayland boldly chose twists and turns in the rocks, not knowing where they would lead. His luck ran out, when he found himself barreling full tilt into a small box canyon! The only way out was the way he had come in, and no doubt he'd run right into the mob if he went back.

Wayland searched for an escape, and his eyes caught something out-of-kilter within the wall of rock. He moved closer, and discovered a boarded up, dilapidated mine shaft. Wayland dismounted, grabbed his saddlebags and rifle from the bay, then slapped her rump to send her back out the canyon. He made for the mine shaft, and struggled to tear the boards from the opening, just as he heard the posse ride into the canyon.

"There he is!" someone shouted, and guns blazed.

Wayland pushed through the boards, into the shaft, as bullets ricocheted all around him. He crouched in the opening and returned fire with the Winchester. One man went down, and the rest scattered, but kept firing at him. Wayland leaned back in the tunnel. No use wasting ammunition. He couldn't hit them, and they sure couldn't hit him. The problem was, they had him trapped. He knew they could wait him out. There was no telling where the maze of tunnels behind him

would lead, and the chances of him finding his way out, especially without light, were not good. To risk it would be an act of pure foolishness... or sheer desperation. This was not a patient bunch, though, and their alcohol induced bravery was bound to evaporate as the heat of day set in. Wayland had a hunch they'd try something soon.

After that, Wayland settled in, straining to listen for sounds of movement. He heard a murmuring of voices from his attackers, and figured they were talking it over. Before long, there was a pounding of hooves as one rider left the canyon. For reinforcements? Wayland wondered.

The better part of two hours had passed, when Wayland once more heard the drumming of hooves. Again, it was only one rider. Maybe he'd just gone back for food, or whiskey. Before long, though, things took a dramatic turn. It came suddenly and with a vengeance as the silence of the night was shattered by gunfire. Every man in the bunch seemed to be unloading his gun at the mine entrance. Wayland pulled back from the opening to avoid catching a ricochet. After several moments, the shooting stopped, but Wayland heard a "thump" near the mine entrance. Someone was coming in!

Wayland spun out, to confront the assailant, but there was no one there. What he saw, though, made his heart stop. Dynamite! Several sticks of it were tied together, and the short fuse was burning fast! Wayland charged back into the dark shaft. He ran several feet, then dived to the floor of the shaft and covered his head.

The explosion was tremendous, and rocked the innards of the mountain. The ground beneath and around Wayland shuddered at the impact of the charge. Loose rock and dirt showered down over him, and support timbers groaned within the tunnel. It finally fell quiet, and Wayland felt the relief of surviving a near miss. His relief quickly turned to dismay, though, when he realized that the entrance to the tunnel was blocked by tons of rock and dirt. They had sealed him in a living tomb!

Wayland sat down, and took stock of his situation. He had his saddlebags, and in those were a full canteen and some venison jerky, so he wouldn't starve or dehydrate any time soon. He also had flint, for a fire, though he doubted it would do him much good in here, except to smother him. He didn't relish the thought of venturing back into these mine shafts in darkness, but he saw no choice. With a hand to the wall to guide him, Wayland started walking.

The shaft twisted and turned, and often he stumbled into loose support timbers, and piles of rock and debris in his path. He mentally kept track of the minutes that passed, and tried to get a sense of direction. The latter was nearly impossible. Wayland picked his way slowly along for hours, trying to quell the growing feeling of desperation within him. He realized that the shaft was slowly turning, and he was starting to move back the way he had come. He wondered if he wouldn't soon wind up back where he had started, at the closed entrance. Then, Wayland discovered an adjoining shaft that branched off to his left. Should he take it? He paused there, trying to find some reasoning that would help him choose. He stepped into the branch tunnel, just a few feet, then tried to sense what lay ahead. He neither heard nor felt any movement. He drew in a deep breath through his nose, to see if he could detect fresh air. He couldn't. Wayland decided to rest briefly, before making his choice. He was beginning to tire, and his thoughts were

getting muddled. He squatted there, at the branch of the two tunnels, and dug the food and canteen from his saddlebags. His hand touched on the piece of flint, and it gave him pause.

"Why not?" he thought to himself. "Just a little fire. Plenty of dry timber I can strip for wood. If the smoke gets too bad, I can put it out."

He wanted to talk himself into the fire, because the mounting hours of pitch darkness were putting a strain on him, mentally. If he was to die soon, anyway, he wanted to see light before it happened. Wayland rose, and felt his way to a rotting support timber. With his knife, he skinned several strips of wood from it. He knelt to the ground and whittled a small pile of kindling, then went to work with his flint and steel. Even the sparks from the flint came as an uplifting sight to him. When the dried shavings began to catch, Wayland blew softly on them, until a tiny flame appeared. He moved more shavings onto the flame, and it grew steadily until he was able to place the larger pieces of wood on it. It was a piddling little fire, by most accounts, but it warmed Wayland's mood.

He sat back and surveyed the tunnel in the dim light. It revealed nothing of any help to him. He relaxed, resting his back against the wall of the shaft, and ate two pieces of jerky. When he tilted the canteen to his lips, to wash down the dried meat, something caught his eye. Wayland realized that the smoke from his little fire was being pulled steadily into the adjoining shaft. There was an opening down there, somewhere, that was taking the smoke to the surface! Wayland jumped to his feet with renewed vigor. He headed into the new shaft, his pace quickened. He moved away from the little fire, and was quickly plunged into complete darkness again. He moved further into the shaft, and could still smell the lingering aroma of smoke that was being drawn through the tunnel. It gave him, in a small way, something of a trail to follow. He only hoped that the opening, if it was there, would be large enough to get through.

Suddenly, Wayland felt a tiny, almost imperceptible change in the air. The stale dampness of the tunnel was permeated by cool, fresh air, coming from above him. Wayland built another small fire. It provided just enough light, and smoke from it rapidly ascended straight up. Above, Wayland could now see a narrow vent-shaft, and his heart raced when he realized that it was large enough, just barely, to accommodate him. Frantically, Wayland built up the fire, to give him more time. Then, he scavenged the tunnel for loose timbers and rock. It took nearly an hour for him to gather enough debris for him to stand on and gain a hand hold into the vent shaft. He threw his saddlebags over his shoulders, but was forced to leave the rifle. He'd never make the climb burdened by it. With that, he began a painful, torturous climb, splaying his arms and legs against the curved rock walls and pushing his way up. He couldn't see to the end of the vent shaft, but Wayland prayed he'd reach it before his arms and legs gave out, and plunged him to the rock floor below. One slip, and he'd be certain to die here.

His shoulder wound caused him the most trouble. Mentally, he could overcome the pain, but the strain against his damaged, weakened muscles was intense. Slowly, though, he inched his way to the top. The shaft had been covered by loose boards, but they had mostly rotted away. Wayland was able to easily push through them, get a handhold on the lip of the opening, and with a powerful final lunge, thrust himself out on the open ground. He was free!

Wayland lay there for awhile, gulping the clean, fresh air and revelling in his success. He vaguely realized that he was lying in a small dip, between two boulders. The air was crisp, and the night sky clear. He judged it to be just past midnight. As Wayland began recovering, he started laughing to himself at his good fortune. It was a laughter of sheer relief; a giddy explosion of pent up feelings. With a surge of strength-giving adrenalin pouring through him, Wayland rose to his feet, stretched his arms to the sky, and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"I'm coming for you, John Loomis! I'm coming!" he screamed.

And caught in the echo of his words, he thought he heard a shrill, chilling scream in reply! Wayland froze. Had he been too rash? Were they out there, still, waiting by the mine shaft? The sound came again, and Wayland recognized it as the high-pitched whinny of a horse, coming from the other side of the rocks. He pulled his gun and made a running climb up the hill. When he reached the top, he was met with a wonderful sight. There, back down in the box canyon, was his bay! Either the posse was too caught up in their business, and had left her, or she had waited to come back on her own. He moved quickly down into the canyon to retrieve her, and rode out.

Wayland could smell the smoke of Irish Dan's campfire, well before he rode into the small arroyo. The fire was there, along with Dan's horse and saddle, but Dan was nowhere in sight. Wayland had expected it to be that way.

"Irish Dan!" Wayland called out. "It's Wayland Brice!"

"Near about give up on you," Dan replied from the darkness, then walked into the light of the fire.

Wayland dismounted, and joined Dan by the fire.

"Anything happen?" Dan asked.

Wayland laughed to himself. Had anything happened?! To catch him up on all of it would take the rest of the night, so he decided to just give Dan the important part.

"I killed Harley Stiles," he replied, simply.

"That's good," Dan said.

"No, it isn't," Wayland answered. "I didn't want him dead."

Dan gave him a skeptical look.

"Well, not much, anyway," Wayland corrected.

"So, now it's Loomis?" Dan asked.

"Now, it's Loomis," Wayland confirmed.

"You look pretty done-in. Maybe you better get some sleep, first," Dan said.

Wayland shook his head firmly. "I'll rest a bit, and have some coffee. Then, we're going. I'm not waiting any longer."

Without reply, Dan rose and began to break camp. By the time Wayland had finished his coffee, Dan had his horse saddled. They mounted up, and rode toward the Loomis ranch. Two hours later found Wayland in the hills that surrounded the ranch. It took him awhile, in the dark, to locate the gully that Dan had told him about, but he found it. He dismounted, and climbed down into the gully. He was silently counting to himself as he snaked along on his belly. The timing between him and Dan would be important, and they had to get it done by sunup. By Wayland's estimation, that was less than two hours.

Wayland moved steadily through the wash under the fence, and eventually found himself behind the large barn, just as Dan had said he would. He scooted to the back of the barn, and peered around it. There were guards there, caught in the dim glow of lanterns, but they seemed relaxed and at ease. And, Wayland noted, there weren't as many of them as there had been during his last visit. Wayland spotted four, but figured there were likely more of them asleep in the bunkhouse.

Irish Dan timed his attack almost perfectly. Wayland had only been in position for seconds, when he heard the "boom" of Dan's rifle. He was firing from the hills, against the opposite side of the ranch, away from Wayland. Dan peppered the ranch with rifle fire, as the guards were suddenly snapped from the doldrums into frenetic activity. They shouted, ducked for cover, and searched for the gunman. Wayland watched as the bunkhouse doors burst open, and a half-dozen men, in various states of undress, poured from it. They were jabbering excitedly, pulling on boots and pants and guns, trying to answer the call. Wayland figured that Irish Dan was laughing his head off at their antics, from his position in the rocks. Finally, a couple of men returned fire. Dan gave them a few more rounds, just to make sure they had a direction to follow, then his gunfire fell silent. Wayland figured that he was mounting up, about now, to give himself a lead on those who would surely follow.

And they did, just as Wayland figured. He wondered if they thought it was him or his ghost, firing down at them. Whatever their thinking, horses were quickly saddled and a group of the men stampeded off in Dan's direction. Wayland silently bid Dan farewell and thanks.

Three men were left behind. They were gathered near the bunkhouse, talking excitedly. He couldn't make them out, but he could easily see their silhouettes. Now was the time to move, while he had them together. Wayland readied his colt, then darted through the darkness, circling behind them. As he crept closer, he could begin to make out their conversation.

"...tell ya, it couldn't be him. We blowed him to kingdom-come with that dynamite!" One excited fellow was saying.

"Did you see the body? I didn't," a voice replied, and Wayland recognized it as Brady's.

They were still talking when he moved in on them, his gun aimed, the hammer back.

"It was him, all right," Wayland said evenly. The three men spun, startled. He had them well-covered. "Just stand easy, boys," he told them. "Unbuckle those gunbelts, and get your hands up."

The other two looked at Brady, who made no move to comply.

"Don't look to him," Wayland snarled, "He'll just get you killed."

The light from the surrounding lanterns was poor, but Wayland knew that Brady was staring in cold hatred at him. The other two men, to Wayland's relief, unbuckled their belts and let them drop to the ground.

"Wouldn't hurt my sleep to drill you one, Brady," Wayland said. Evidently, Brady believed him, because he finally responded, and allowed his gunbelt to drop to the ground. "Good enough," Wayland said. "Now, stand flat against the bunkhouse, there. Face to the wall."

They moved to comply. When they were in position, Wayland stepped up behind one of them. Keeping an eye on the others, he tied the first man's wrists with a piece of rope he'd brought along for the occasion. That done, he moved to the second man. Wayland was tying his hands, as well, when he caught the sudden movement from Brady, just to his right. A steel blade flashed in his hand. Wayland had forgotten about the knife!

Wayland jerked his head to one side, as the knife sailed by his ear. At that same instant, a snarling Brady was leaping at him. Wayland fired, but not before Brady slammed into him, grabbing for the gun! The shot missed, and the two men tumbled to the ground. Brady was a tough one, made stronger by a fight for his life. He kned Wayland viciously in the ribs, and clawed at his face. The gun came loose and skidded away from them, across the ground. Brady increased the intensity of his attack, sensing victory.

But Wayland fought back, just as determined. It was as if the anger and pain of fifteen years surfaced all at once, and Wayland directed it at Brady. He wrenched free one hand, and drove it viciously into Brady's chin. The blow weakened Brady for a split second, and Wayland took his opening. He hit Brady again, catching him along the ear, then drove his knees into the man's mid-section and heaved Brady's body off him.

Brady scrambled to get up, but Wayland was up first, and launched a kick at Brady's head. He caught the man square in the jaw, lifting his entire body several inches from the ground. He flopped back down with a heavy "thud", and was still. Wayland retrieved his gun. The other two men, still with hands bound, had not budged. Probably, they had hoped Brady would win the tussle. Since he didn't, they saw no reason to risk their lives. Considering Wayland's current mood, it was a good choice. Wayland tied the unconscious Brady, hands and feet. Then, he tied all three men together, in a manner that would take them hours to squirm out of. By the time they did, he'd be long gone. Or dead.

Finished, Wayland turned his attention to the house. There were no lights visible from the outside, but he knew that Loomis had to be in there. Wayland's heart surged, as he covered the yards to the house. With all that had happened, he had come to believe that it was fated to be this way. He had managed to stay alive, somehow, because his destiny was for this moment. He reached the house without incident, and cautiously tried the front door. It was unlocked.

It was dark, but Wayland could make out the large, opulently furnished rooms inside. He crept silently through the house, and was about to go upstairs, when he detected light from under a door, down the hall. He silently moved to it. Wayland put his hand on the door bar and ever-so-gently lifted it. He detected no sound, as it moved smoothly in his grip. His Colt held ready, Wayland pressed his shoulder to the door, and gave a mighty shove.

The man inside the office had his back to Wayland, peering timidly out the nearby window. His gun lay on the big oak desk, and there was no chance for him to get to it. He whirled at the noise of Wayland's entrance, and Wayland saw before him a young man in his mid-twenties. He was pale with fear, his eyes wide, as he stared down the barrel of Wayland's gun. He glanced hesitantly at his own weapon, on the desk. Wayland shook his head.

"Never make it," he said, simply, and saw in the young man's eyes that he knew it was so. He was a handsome young fellow, with dark, curly hair and fine, almost delicate features. He licked his lips nervously.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked.

"Depends," Wayland replied. "Where is he?"

The young man's brow furrowed. "Who?" he asked.

"John Loomis," Wayland spat back, impatiently.

The man shook his head in puzzlement. "I'm John Loomis," he answered.

Wayland reacted with shock, then skepticism. "Don't fool with me," he warned.

"But... it's true. I'm John Loomis, Junior," he insisted.

"The Colonel, damn you!" Wayland shouted. "Where is he?"

John Loomis, Jr. gave him a dumbfounded look. "He's dead," he answered.

It hit Wayland like a shot. He stood, speechless for several seconds, as he watched a look of revelation come over the young man's face.

"You mean, that's what this was all about?" Loomis asked in astonishment. "My father? I thought it was me you were after. I couldn't..."

"How?" Wayland interrupted.

Loomis understood the meaning of Wayland's question, and turned grim.

"He was on a stage coach. They were attacked by renegade Indians," he answered, then paused, and swallowed hard. "He... was alive, when they took him. The cavalry officer who found him said... it probably took him two days to die."

"When?" Wayland asked.

"Five years ago," came the reply.

Wayland felt all emotion drain from his insides. He stood there, his gun aimed at the younger Loomis, but lost in the swirling confusion of his own thoughts. Five years! He had wasted five years hating a man who was already dead. A man who had died a more horrible death than even Wayland would have wished him!

As a combination of relief and confusion enveloped him, Wayland suddenly heard himself laughing. Just a chuckle, at first. Bitter, and empty. Then, a hearty, boisterous laugh. John Loomis, Jr. looked at him in dumbfounded amazement, not understanding. He was immensely relieved, though, when Wayland holstered his gun, turned, and walked out.

He made his way back into the hills to his horse. As Wayland mounted up and spurred the bay for Kansas City, his laughter drifted out across the dark, empty Texas prairie.

